

## HUMAN NATURE ACCORDING TO THOMAS AQUINAS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY'S SOCIAL LIFE

[A NATUREZA HUMANA SEGUNDO TOMÁS DE AQUINO E SUAS IMPLICAÇÕES PARA A  
VIDA SOCIAL DE HOJE]

*Pham Thi Kien*

University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates Thomas Aquinas's conceptualization of human nature, which emerges from a sophisticated synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology, and explores its relevance to contemporary social existence. Aquinas posits humanity as a "rational animal," inherently disposed toward the common good, governed by natural law, and oriented toward ultimate fulfillment in divine communion (Aquinas, 1947). Through an analysis of primary texts and secondary scholarship, this study elucidates how Aquinas's perspective, rooted in reason, virtue, and communal harmony, provides a compelling framework for addressing modern societal dilemmas, including rampant individualism, moral disintegration, and pervasive social inequities. The findings reveal that Aquinas's theoretical construct champions a harmonious equilibrium between individual autonomy and collective obligation, presenting a stark counterpoint to the dominant paradigms of secular liberalism and utilitarianism in today's intellectual landscape. Central implications of this inquiry encompass the revitalization of virtues to foster social solidarity, a nuanced rearticulation of natural law within a pluralistic framework, and the practical application of Aquinas's philosophy to pressing ethical concerns such as social justice and environmental stewardship, with particular resonance for contemporary Vietnam.

**KEYWORDS:** Thomas Aquinas; human nature; natural law; social life; virtue; historical materialism; ethics; Vietnam.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo investiga a conceitualização de natureza humana em Tomás de Aquino — a qual emerge de uma síntese sofisticada entre a filosofia aristotélica e a teologia cristã — e explora sua relevância para a existência social contemporânea. Aquino define o ser humano como um "animal racional", inerentemente inclinado ao bem comum, regido pela lei natural e orientado para a realização plena na comunhão divina (Aquino, 1947). Por meio da análise de fontes primárias e da literatura secundária, o estudo esclarece como a perspectiva de Aquino — fundamentada na razão, na virtude e na harmonia comunitária oferece uma estrutura convincente para abordar dilemas sociais modernos, incluindo o individualismo desenfreado, a desintegração moral e as desigualdades sociais generalizadas. Os resultados revelam que a construção teórica de Aquino defende um equilíbrio harmonioso entre a autonomia individual e a obrigação coletiva, apresentando um contraponto marcante aos paradigmas dominantes do liberalismo secular e do utilitarismo no cenário intelectual atual. As implicações centrais desta investigação abrangem a revitalização das virtudes para promover a solidariedade social, uma rearticulação matizada da lei natural em um contexto pluralista e a aplicação prática da filosofia de Aquino a questões éticas prementes, como a justiça social e a gestão responsável do meio ambiente, com particular relevância para o Vietnã contemporâneo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Tomás de Aquino; natureza humana; lei natural; vida social; virtude; materialismo histórico, ética, Vietnã.

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, PhD. University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City – UEH. Email: [kienpt@ueh.edu.vn](mailto:kienpt@ueh.edu.vn)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), one of the great theologians and philosophers of the Middle Ages, left a profound mark on shaping Western thought about human nature. In his massive *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas combines Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology, describing man as a rational entity capable of perceiving truth and toward the supreme good God. He argues that human nature includes both body and soul, with reason being the distinguishing feature that distinguishes humans from other species, and emphasizes the natural tendency of man to live in harmony with the community through natural law (Aquinas, 1947). This paper explores Aquinas's conception of human nature and examines its implications for solving the problems of today's social life, from personal isolation to social injustice.

The modern context poses many challenges to social life: rampant individualism undermines a sense of community, moral fragmentation makes it difficult to reach consensus on common values, and socioeconomic inequality is increasing. While secular ideas such as John Locke's liberalism or Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism focus on individual rights or collective interests in a pragmatic way, Aquinas's views offer a more balanced approach. He emphasized that man not only lives for himself but also has the responsibility to contribute to the common good, based on reason and virtues such as justice, temperance, and charity (Aquinas, 1947). This perspective could shed new light on contemporary issues where the balance between individual freedom and social responsibility is often overlooked.

The study poses the primary issue: In what ways can contemporary society's worldview integrate traditional values, particularly in the context of modernism's attack, by utilizing Thomas Aquinas' conception of human nature? To answer it, the paper undertakes a text analysis of *Summa Theologica* and Aquinas' other works alongside secondary analyses by Anthony Kenny (1994) and Eleonore Stump (2003). The structure of the paper includes: Part 3 outlines the theories of Aquinas' conception of human nature, natural law, and virtue. Part 4 assesses the repercussions of modern social phenomena like equity, education, and environment on these concepts. Part 5 accounts for Aquinas' modernist relation and his applicability, as well as presents and critiques his divergence with modernity. Part 6 wraps up the discussion with concluding remarks and recommendations for further studies.

The significance of the study lies in restoring the value of Aquinas's thought in today's social context, where ethical solutions are often dominated by short-term interests or individualistic views. Aquinas not only provides a theoretical foundation but also a practical guide to building a more harmonious society. For example, his concept of natural law which humans can perceive through reason can be applied to solve global ethical issues such as climate change, which require cooperation that goes beyond personal interests. The research is supported by reliable sources such as *Aquinas* by Stump (2003) and *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*

(Kretzmann & Stump, 1993), which ensure scholarship and reliability.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research study's review of literature serves to underpin Thomas Aquinas's view of human nature and its modern social implications with research and theory. The reviewed literature is broken down into two categories: (1) works of Aquinas, particularly the *Summa Theologica* written between 1265-1274, and (2) contemporary works of modern intellectuals who specialize in Aquinas' philosophy and theology as well as comparative liberalism and pragmatism. This part explains the criteria for the selection of the literature, its contributions to the research, and how it assists in integrating Aquinas's philosophy into Vietnam.

The principle source of the study is Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* from which I detail a synthesis of his philosophical and theological thought. It was written between 1265 and 1274, and has over 3000 articles queued into three principal sections. The first section (Q. 7583) deals with human nature, the Parts III (Q. 9194) deal with natural law, while Parts IIII (Q. 4758, Q. 23) concern Virtues. The version in English from the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1947, was chosen because of its accuracy and prominence in global scholarship. These works give the primary evidence for understanding Aquinas's thought and how he synthesized the use of reason from Aristotelian christocentric philosophy (Aristotle, 2009).

Works by reputable scholars of Aquinas who help interpret and expand his thought in a modern context are classified under the secondary sources category. In 1993, Anthony Kenny published his book, *Aquinas on Mind*, wherein he examines the function of reason in Aquinas' philosophy. Kenny stresses that reason is not merely an instrument of cognition; it is the essence of social ethics. In her book *Aquinas* of 2003, Eleonore Stump addresses most of Aquinas' thought as part of his philosophy. She examines human nature and its interplay with natural law and virtue and contemporary ethics. John Finnis, in his work *Natural Law and Natural Rights* published in 1980 suggests that Aquinas's natural law can be regarded as a set of assumptions that can be integrated into contemporary public policies, for instance, into the policies on resource distribution. Alasdair MacIntyre published *After Virtue* in 1981, in which he discusses the relevance of Aquinas to contemporary debates on the philosophies of community and virtue. These texts were published by reputable publishers and thus maintain high academic credibility and quality, Routledge and Oxford University Press.

To contrast modern thought, the study uses *Two Treatises of Government* (Locke, 1689) and *A Fragment on Government* (Bentham, 1776) to clarify the difference between Aquinas and liberalism and utilitarianism. Charles Taylor (1989) supports the analysis of the difference between modern individualism and Aquinas's concept of community. Jean Porter (1999) and Josef Pieper (1966) provide additional perspectives on the flexibility of natural law and the role of virtue in pluralistic societies. These documents

help to situate Aquinas's thought in a broader philosophical context, while also highlighting his applicability compared to modern views.

In relation to Vietnam, the study consults empirical documents such as the World Bank report (World Bank, 2016) on economic inequality and studies on Vietnamese education from the Ministry of Education and Training to relate Aquinas's thought to specific issues such as poverty reduction and moral education. Environmental movements such as "planting trees" are cited from reports by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, illustrating how Aquinas' natural law can support ecological responsibility in Vietnam. These documents supplement empirical data, making the study not only theoretical but also closely related to Vietnamese social reality.

The literature review shows the combination of historical origins and modern interpretations, creating a solid foundation for analyzing Aquinas's thought. The documents are explained and used throughout the study to ensure continuity between theory, comparison, and practical application, thereby affirming the value of Aquinas in addressing today's social challenges, including Vietnam.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study aims to explore Thomas Aquinas's conception of human nature and assess its significance for modern social life, especially in the context of challenges such as individualism, moral fragmentation, and social inequality. To achieve this goal, the study uses textual analysis combined with a critical theoretical approach, to deeply explore Aquinas's philosophical and theological ideas and relate them to contemporary social issues, including the practice in Vietnam. This method is chosen because of its suitability for studying classic texts such as *Summa Theologica* (1265/1274) and its ability to apply theory to practical contexts.

Textual analysis is conducted through direct study of Aquinas' original works, especially the *Summa Theologica*, focusing on sections dealing with human nature (Part I, Q. 7583), natural law (Parts III, Q. 9194), and the virtues (Parts III, Q. 4758, Q. 23). Textual passages are cited and analyzed to clarify three core concepts: man as a "rational animal," natural law as the basis of morality, and virtue as a means of living harmoniously in community. To ensure accuracy, the English translation of the *Summa Theologica* by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (published by Benziger Bros, 1947) is used as the primary source, combined with commentaries from scholars such as Anthony Kenny (1994) and Eleonore Stump (2003). This method allows the study to explore the original meaning of Aquinas's thought, while avoiding misinterpretations due to differences in language or historical context.

In addition to textual analysis, the study applies a critical theory approach to compare Aquinas's thought with modern philosophies such as John Locke's liberalism (Locke, 1689) and Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism (Bentham, 1776). This approach not only highlights the differences between

Aquinas and modern views but also assesses his applicability in addressing social problems today. For example, the study analyzes how Aquinas' natural law can guide public policy in Vietnam, such as poverty reduction programs, by comparing it with actual policies and statistical data from reliable sources such as the World Bank's report on inequality in Vietnam (World Bank, 2016).

The data compilation undertaking involves two phases which includes (1) reviewing the primary data which includes *Summa Theologica* and Aquinas's contemporaries as his works and (2) compiling secondary data from Finnis (1980), MacIntyre (1981), and Porter (1999) from modern scholars for the additional context. They are from Oxford University Press and Routledge, which confirms their credibility, so the authors' reputation and the subject matter in which they have published was taken into consideration. Subsequently, the data was categorized using thematic analysis concentrating on social justice as the education and environmental protection spheres. Each of these themes was demonstrated by specific instances to the Vietnamese practice, including the "tree planting" campaign which supports environmental caring.

In addition, contextual analysis is part of the research methodology which transforms Aquinas's thought that stems from the traditional Christian theology and adapts to the pluralistic and secular Vietnam. It involves changing the focus from theistic elements to core logic and moral values like reason and justice. The outcome of the inquiry is presented as a set of qualitative arguments where each argument contains case study and theory, thus enabling the construction of a hypothesis for future empirical verification and elaboration in further research.

#### **4. AQUINAS'S PHILOSOPHICAL NUCLEUS: HUMAN NATURE AND SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS**

In order to understand the significance of Thomas Aquinas's conception of human nature for today's social life, this section presents a theoretical framework based on three core concepts in his philosophy and theology: human nature as "rational animal", natural law as the moral foundation, and virtues as a means of living in harmony in the community. These ideas, mainly drawn from *Summa Theologica* reflect a unique combination of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian thought, offering a holistic approach to the role of man in society. Here are the details:

##### ***4.1. Human nature: "Rational animals" and reason shape society***

Thomas Aquinas identified a human as a composite nature being, that is, a being to whom the terms body and soul apply, possessing a distinguishing feature, which separates him from other beings of creation, that is, a rational being (Aquinas, 1947). He described him as 'rational animal' to show that

reason is not simply the act of thinking, but the ability to understand and move towards the greatest ultimate good, who is God. As to Aquinas, human nature is not something fixed, it is dynamic and teleological, that is, man is made to attain perfection through the use of his natural tendencies (Aquinas, 1947). With this understanding of a human, he is placed at a unique position in the universe because he is part of the material universe and at the same time, through the reason and the soul, he has the ability to rise above it.

‘Rational animal’ is a concept of Aquinas that was deeply rooted in the philosophy of Aristotle, who maintained that reason is the hallmark of human nature (Aristotle, 2009). But Aquinas moved beyond philosophy by adding a theological dimension, linking reason to free will and a supernatural goal – eternal happiness in God. This explains the dual position: humans are physically real through the body but can transcend to higher realms of existence as the soul, spirit, and mind. According to Kenny (1994), Aquinas viewed reason as a central faculty that enables human beings to participate in both intellectual and social life. In his view, reason goes beyond serving the self; it is also the essence of one’s participation and contribution in civic life.

In a social context, this concept is important because reasoning is employed as a means of coordination between personal desires and the needs of the society. Reason permits individuals to formulate and act on generally accepted ethical standards in order to foster social harmony; this was Aquinas’ premise. Because of reason, for example, a selfish individual is able to rise above his egoistic impulses towards altruism which he would later refine in natural law and virtue. This contrasts with the contemporary view that man is, above anything else, an autonomous actor which is characteristic of libertarianism as proposed by Locke, where personal autonomy takes precedent over social responsibility. According to Aquinas, reasoning is not simply logical thinking; it has a moral aspect in which an individual is expected to determine his place in the society and responsibilities for the common good.

The implications of this concept for today’s society are clear. In a world dominated by individualism and moral fragmentation, Aquinas’s concept of “rational animals” reminds us that humans not only live for themselves, but also take responsibility for others. In Vietnam, where community tradition still plays an important role, Aquinasian reason can be applied to balance individual needs and collective interests, such as in public policies on education or social welfare. Moreover, reason as a bridge between humans and the cosmic order suggests that humans need to act responsibly with regard to the natural environmentan urgent issue in the age of climate change. Thereby, Aquinas’s thought is not only an abstract theory but also a practical guideline to orient modern social life.

#### ***4.2. Natural Law: Moral Foundations and Social Order***

Natural law is a central concept in the moral philosophy of Thomas

Aquinas, defined by him as “the participation of human reason in the eternal law of God” (Aquinas, 1947). Aquinas argued that man, by means of reason, can recognize basic moral principles such as the defense of life, living in harmony with others, and seeking truth without relying entirely on divine revelation. Natural law is not a rigid set of rules but an intrinsic tendency, engraved in human nature, directing man towards good and avoiding evil (Aquinas, 1947). This is the key point that connects the rational nature of human beings with social life, turning natural law into the foundation for moral and social order.

Aquinas distinguished natural law from human law, emphasizing that human law is only valid when it is consistent with natural law. For example, he argued that the protection of life is a natural principle, so social laws must respect the right of man to life (Aquinas, 1947). If a law goes against natural law such as allowing exploitation or injustice it is no longer a real law but merely an imposition of power. Finnis (1980) argues that Aquinas’s theory of natural law provides both a moral foundation and a framework for social organization grounded in reason. Natural law, therefore, is not only a theological theory but also a tool for evaluating and guiding social norms, from law to public policy.

In Aquinas’s thought, natural law plays the role of a bridge between human nature and social life. It directs individual behavior to serve the common good, rather than just meeting individual needs. For example, the principle of living in harmony with others motivates people to cooperate and build community, while the search for truth encourages education and intellectual development. This differs from modern perspectives such as Bentham’s utilitarianism, which focuses on the maximum good without regard for universal moral principles. For Aquinas, natural law is the expression of universal reason, which can be applied to all societies, regardless of the era or culture.

The significance of natural law for today’s society is enormous, especially in addressing issues such as inequality and moral fragmentation. In Viet Nam, natural law can be used to evaluate public policies for example, ensuring access to education and health care for all as part of the principle of protecting life. Moreover, in the context of globalization, Aquinas’s natural law provides a common ethical foundation for addressing transnational issues such as climate change, where cooperation is needed beyond personal or national interests. Porter (1999) suggests that Aquinas’s theory of natural law can be interpreted and applied in contemporary social contexts, suggesting that it is not only a historical heritage but also a practical tool for building a just and sustainable society.

#### ***4.3 Virtue: A tool for community harmony and social life***

For Thomas Aquinas, reason was not enough to ensure a moral life; People need virtues to perfect their nature and live in harmony in the community. He classified virtues into two groups: intellectual virtues

(such as *prudentia*, *knowledgescientia*) and moral virtues (such as justice, temperance, couragefortitude, and charity) (Aquinas, 1947). These virtues are not only personal qualities but also tools to build social relationships, help people overcome selfish desires and work towards the common good. For Aquinas, virtue is the concrete implementation of the principles of natural law in everyday life.

Justice, for example, was considered by Aquinas to be the most important virtue in social life, because it ensured that each person received what he or she deserved (Aquinas, 1947). He wrote: “Justice is the steadfast and continuous will to give to each man what belongs to him” (Aquinas, 1947). Pieper (1966) emphasizes that Aquinas understood justice as a virtue that contributes to social order and communal harmony. The virtue of fairness applies not only in law but also in personal and social relationships, ensuring a balance between rights and obligations. In addition, charity, which is considered the highest theological virtue, promotes people to love one another, beyond the usual moral obligation (Aquinas, 1947). Charity, in Aquinas’ thought, is the highest expression of reason and the will towards the good.

Aquinas’s idea of virtue developed in the context of the Middle Ages, when theology and philosophy went hand in hand to explain the social order. He was influenced by Aristotle, who saw virtue as the middle way to happiness, but Aquinas added a Christian dimension by associating virtue with supernatural goals. Stump (2003) highlights the close relationship between Aquinas’s understanding of human nature, reason, virtue, and social life. Virtues, therefore, not only improve the individual but also strengthen the community, creating a society where people live for each other instead of just for themselves.

In today’s society, the meaning of virtue according to Aquinas is very practical. Modern individualism and consumption often lead to indifference to the common good, but virtues such as fairness and charity can restore social cohesion. In Vietnam, Aquinas’s virtue resonates with traditional values such as “a good leaf covers a torn leaf” or “mutual affection”, which can be applied to promote charitable activities and support the disadvantaged. Moreover, temperance can help people control their consumption behavior, contributing to environmental protection in the context of resource depletion. Thereby, Aquinas’s virtue is not only a theory but also a practical tool for building a harmonious and sustainable society.

## 5. APPLICATION OF AQUINAS’S THOUGHT TO MODERN SOCIAL

Thomas Aquina’s thought of human nature as “rational animals,” natural law as the moral foundation, and virtues as the means of harmonious living. Based on the *Summa Theologica* (1265/1274) and secondary studies, the analysis focuses on three main areas: social justice, reasonbased education, and environmental responsibility. Thereby, Aquinas’s thought is proven to be not only a medieval theory but also has practical value in

solving modern problems. Here are the details:

### ***5.1. Social justice: Natural law and the virtue of fairness in modern society***

One of the biggest challenges of modern society is socioeconomic inequality, as the gap between rich and poor is widening and public policies often prioritize individual interests over the common good. Thomas Aquinas, with his conception of natural law and the virtue of justice, offers a profound approach to solving this problem. He argues that natural law, which is known to reason, directs man toward the protection of life, the maintenance of community, and the equitable distribution of resources (Aquinas, 1947). Justice, according to Aquinas, is “the unwavering will to give to each man what belongs to him” (Aquinas, 1947), which requires both the individual and the institution to put the common good above their own. This idea is not only a moral theory but also a guideline for building a more just society in the context of globalization.

In today's society, Aquinas's thought can be applied to critique noncontrolling capitalism, where individual profit often trumps social justice. For example, the exploitation of labor in developing countries such as garment workers in Vietnam who work for low wages in harsh conditions is in direct conflict with Aquinas's principle of fairness. These workers are often not paid for the value they create, which goes against the idea that each person must receive what belongs to him. Finnis (1980) interprets Aquinas's theory of natural law as providing ethical guidance for questions of social justice and resource distribution. This suggests that modern public policies such as progressive taxes, social subsidies, or universal health insurance can be justified and reinforced on the basis of Aquinas's thought, which aims to ensure that basic needs such as education are met by everyone, health, and housing.

In Vietnam, the cultural tradition of promoting community “a good leaf covers a torn leaf” can be closely connected to Aquinas's view of social justice. Poverty alleviation programs, remote assistance, or disaster relief are practical examples that reflect the spirit of justice that he upholds. However, in order to be in line with Aquinas's natural law, these programs need to be expanded and more systematized, ensuring that the right to life and development is not just the prerogative of the few but a fundamental condition for all. For example, inequalities between urban and rural areas in Viet Nam where mountainous people often lack access to education and healthcare can be addressed by applying Aquinas's principle of equity, which requires a more equitable distribution of resources based on actual needs.

Moreover, in the context of globalization, Aquinas's natural law provides a universal moral foundation for criticizing multinational corporations that exploit cheap labor in poor countries. He stopped not only at calling for individual justice but also placed it in a broad social order where everyone is accountable to each other. This is in contrast to modern

liberalism, which often sees fairness as an individual rather than a collective responsibility. Thereby, Aquinas offers not only a moral theory but also a practical guide for building a just society, where inequality is no longer an inevitable consequence of economic development but a problem that needs to be solved by reason and virtue.

### ***5.2. Rationalbased education: Comprehensive human development***

Modern education is facing the crisis of placing too much emphasis on practical skills such as mathematics, science, or technology at the expense of developing a holistic human mind and morality. Thomas Aquinas, with his conception of man as a “rational animal”, emphasized that reason is a tool not only for the perception of truth but also for living a meaningful life (Aquinas, 1947). He argues that the purpose of education is not only to provide technical knowledge but also to cultivate intellectual virtues such as wisdom (*prudentia*) and knowledge (*scientia*) so that people can contribute to the community (Aquinas, 1947). This idea offers a new way of looking at reorienting today’s education system, which is often dominated by economic goals such as workforce training.

In the context of modern society, Aquinas’s conception can overcome the limitations of practical education, where students are trained to serve the market rather than develop themselves. MacIntyre (1981) emphasizes that education should contribute to the development of the whole person rather than merely serving economic objectives. For example, in Western countries, the inclusion of subjects such as philosophy, ethics, and critical thinking in the general education curriculum reflects the spirit of Aquinas, helping students not only learn how to earn a living, but also how to live well, self-knowledge, society, and their responsibilities. This is in contrast to the modern trend, where education is often measured by economic productivity rather than moral or intellectual value.

In Vietnam, the current education system focuses heavily on subjects such as mathematics and science, but less on the development of reason and comprehensive ethics. The curriculum is heavy on theory and exams, making students less likely to practice independent thinking or a sense of community. Applying Aquinas, Vietnam can reform education by integrating humanities such as philosophy, history, and ethics into the curriculum, encouraging students not only to learn knowledge but also to develop reasoning and social responsibility. This is in line with Vietnam’s tradition of “respecting teachers”, where education is not only about imparting knowledge but also about shaping personality.

Aquinas’s idea of reason in education is also significant in solving social problems such as inequality and conflict. A learning society, where people are equipped with reason to perceive truth and act ethically, can minimize conflicts caused by ignorance or selfishness. For example, educating citizens based on reason can help Vietnamese people better understand their rights and obligations, thereby actively participating in

common issues such as protecting the environment or fighting injustice. Thereby, Aquinas not only oriented education but also built the foundation for a harmonious society where reason is used to serve the collective good rather than only individual interests.

### ***5.3. Environmental Responsibility: Natural Law and Creative Order***

Climate change and environmental degradation are pressing issues of the 21st century, requiring global cooperation that goes beyond personal interests. Despite living in the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas's idea of natural law which directs man toward the protection of life and living in harmony with the cosmic order can be interpreted to support environmental responsibility (Aquinas, 1947). He saw the natural world as part of the divine plan, and man, with reason, was responsible for maintaining its balance (Aquinas, 1947). This idea, while not directly referring to the modern environment, provides an ethical foundation for solving today's ecological problems.

In the modern context, Aquinas's natural tendency towards the good can be extended to include environmental protection as a moral obligation. Stump (2003) interprets Aquinas's thought as emphasizing the interconnectedness of human beings and the broader order of creation. This suggests that actions such as reducing carbon emissions, conserving biodiversity, or limiting resource extraction are not only technical but also moral responsibility, in line with the virtues of justice and charity two virtues that Aquinas valued. Unlike modern individualism, which often sees the environment as a resource for exploitation, Aquinas placed man in a harmonious relationship with nature, emphasizing that human life depends on the balance of the creative order.

In Vietnam, where air pollution, forest degradation, and climate change flooding are becoming more severe, Aquinas' thought can promote a sense of shared responsibility. Movements such as "planting trees" or "saying no to plastic bags" are gaining popularity, but often lack a deep moral foundation to sustain in the long term. Tying these movements to Aquinas's natural law a universal principle that goes beyond personal gain can provide a stronger incentive for people to participate. For example, protecting the Mekong River is not only an economic issue but also a moral responsibility to sustain life for future generations, in line with Aquinas's idea of protecting life.

Moreover, on a global scale, Aquinas thought provides a moral basis for calling for international cooperation in the fight against climate change. While agreements such as the Paris Agreement focus on political commitment, Aquinas's natural law adds a moral dimension, emphasizing that protecting the environment is a common obligation of humanity. In Vietnam, this can encourage the government and people to act together from reducing plastic use to developing renewable energy based on reason and

virtue rather than economic benefits alone. In doing so, Aquinas is not only environmentally responsible, but also offers an ethical approach to building a sustainable world that goes beyond mere technical solutions.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The above analysis proves that Thomas Aquinas's thought about human nature based on reason, natural law, and virtue is not only a medieval theological theory but also has practical value in solving modern social challenges such as inequality, education, and environmental protection. Through the *Summa Theologica* (1265-1274), Aquinas provided a balanced approach between individual freedom and collective responsibility, paving the way for building a more harmonious society. This discussion summarizes the findings, compares Aquinas' views with modern ideas such as liberalism and pragmatism, and assesses his relevance in today's pluralistic and technologically diverse context.

Aquinas's thought has striking similarities and differences when compared to popular modern philosophies such as John Locke's liberalism and Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. Locke, in *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), emphasized individual liberty and property rights as the foundation of society, viewing man primarily as an independent subject with inalienable rights. In contrast, Aquinas did not deny individual freedom but placed it in relation to the common good, guided by natural law and virtue (Aquinas, 1947). Taylor (1989) highlights important differences between modern individualism and traditions that emphasize the common good and communal responsibility. This distinction suggests that Aquinas was able to complement liberalism by emphasizing social responsibility, especially in the context of modern individualism undermining a sense of community.

Compared to the pragmatism of Bentham, who proposed "the greatest good for the greatest majority" (Bentham, 1776), Aquinas was also concerned with common happiness but placed it in a deeper moral framework. Bentham measured happiness in terms of pleasure and suffering, while Aquinas considered ultimate happiness to be a union with God, achieved through reason and virtue (Aquinas, 1947). MacIntyre (1981) considers virtue-based ethics to provide a more comprehensive moral framework than approaches that focus primarily on utility or consequences. This suggests that Aquinas's thought could overcome the limitations of pragmatism, which often ignores long-term values in favor of the immediate good.

The analysis shows that Aquinas' thought is not only theoretical but also has application value in modern social life. In terms of social justice, natural law and his virtue of fairness are oriented towards redistributing resources, overcoming economic inequality a problem that modern philosophies such as liberalism have not yet fully addressed. In education, the conception of reason as a tool for cognition of truth encourages a well-rounded education system that goes beyond the economic goal of developing ethical and responsible human beings. In terms of the environment, Aquinas's natural

tendency towards the good extends to the responsibility of protecting the creative order, complementing modern ecological movements that lack a solid moral foundation.

This research contributes to the rediscovery of Aquinas's thought in the context of pluralistic societies, where traditional values are often challenged by moral relativism. Porter (1999) suggests that Aquinas's natural law tradition can be adapted to different historical and cultural contexts. This suggests that his thought can be adapted to fit a multicultural society, where moral consensus is necessary but difficult to achieve. Moreover, Aquinas's approach combining reason and virtue provides an alternative to moral fragmentation in the postmodern era, where values are often reduced to personal preference.

Aquinas' thought retains its value in today's technologically advanced and globalized society. In the context of rampant individualism and consumption, his concept of the common good reminds us that people not only live for themselves but also have a responsibility to the community. For example, the rise of social media and digital technology where individuals often prioritize their own interests can be corrected by adopting Aquinas's temperance, which encourages a balance between personal freedom and social responsibility (Aquinas, 1947).

In Vietnam, where community culture and family traditions still play an important role, Aquinas' thought resonates with values such as "healthy leaves cover torn leaves" or "drink water and remember the source". For example, his charity can be applied to promote charitable activities and support the disadvantaged, while natural law can guide public policies on education and the environment. The challenge, however, lies in adapting Aquinas's thought which is tinged with Christian theology to a multireligious and secular society like Vietnam. This requires flexible reinterpretation, such as focusing on universal reason and ethics rather than supernatural goals.

In a global context, Aquinas' thought can contribute to issues such as climate change and economic inequality. His concept of natural law provides a universal ethical foundation for calling for international cooperation, overcoming cultural and political barriers. Stump (2003) emphasizes the continuing relevance of Aquinas's thought for contemporary philosophical and social discussions. This emphasizes that his ideas are not outdated but remain an inspiration for building a just and sustainable world.

Aquinas's conception of human nature combining reason, natural law, and virtue provides a balanced approach to solving today's social problems. Compared to liberalism and pragmatism, he emphasized collective responsibility and long-term ethics, overcoming the limitations of modern philosophies. Aquinas' thought is not only historically valuable but also a practical tool for navigating social justice, education, and environmental protection in the context of pluralism and technology. This study asserts that the rediscovery of Aquinas can help modern society overcome moral fragmentation, building a more harmonious community based on reason and virtue.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study reveals Thomas Aquinas's vision of human nature made up of reason, natural law, and virtue far beyond its medieval origins. It provides a clear compass for today's complex challenges: inequality, educational drift, and environmental peril. Unlike Locke's solitary individualism or Bentham's fleeting utilitarianism, Aquinas strikes a delicate balance between individual freedom and collective duty, weaving humanity into a timeless ethical tapestry. In our globalized, technology-driven age, where self-interest and excess reign, his voice whispers a powerful truth: we owe our care to our communities and to the earth. In Vietnam, his voice resonates with the pulse of solidarity and family, inspiring ethical learning and green management policies but its Christian tone demands a deft reinterpretation for a pluralistic soul. Aquinas calls us to reclaim virtue in a divided world, to create a just, wise and sustainable society. His legacy invites bold quests to blend with the communal grace of Confucianism or shape global crusades for climate and human rights. Reason and virtue, his twin stars, shine as eternal guides, promising a world where harmony triumphs over discord and morality binds us together.

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