International Journal of Language and Literature
June 2023, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 13-26
ISSN: 2334-234X (Print), 2334-2358 (Online)
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Published by American Research Institute for Policy Development
DOI: 10.15640/ijll.v11n1a2
URL: https://doi.org/10.15640/ijll.v11n1a2

Expanding narratives about economic practices in the Middle Ages from the perspective of Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

Departing from Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* and restricting itself to his observations regarding economic conduct, the purpose of this paper is to verify how the need to suppress the interpretive multiplicity of biblical narratives does not result in perfect correspondence, but creates new dimensions and concepts necessary for the continuity of the narration of the world in which Aquinas sees himself inserted and also as creator (even if he does not describe himself as such). Although he requires interpretive homogeneity, Aquinas inaugurates a different world (with necessary discussions), and the ways of translating this world emerge from living with the interpretive multiplicity of sacred narratives and their commentators. Concentrating on the moral ordering of commerce advocated by Aquinas, it is stated that, as the reverse effect of stanching interpretation, the *Summa Theologica* motivated the Christian imaginary in narratives such as Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, so as to broaden the reflection on the categories of sinners for money, as well as it provided subsidies for the construction of anti-models in part of the framed narratives of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* which are filled with misers, simoniacs and fraudsters.

Keywords: Economic narratives; Thomas Aquinas; Middle Ages; Literature and Economics.

Introduction

Fair price, avarice, prodigality, parsimony, liberality, usury – these terms, stimulated by Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics,* and revisited and expanded by St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica,* not only became key translations for the understanding of economic behaviors, but also served as rhetorical contours for an organization of economic practices in the medieval world that was imbued with a Christian moral order. In this sense, in the interpretive effort of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the design of virtuous (lawful) or sinful (illicit) economic behavior was motivated by the need to display the diversity of opinions regarding the Christian messages and, beyond them and against their interpretations, affirm a unilateral truth capable of shaping man's ethics (also in his commercial exchanges)[3]. Aquinas' rhetorical architecture took advantage of the mechanism of an illustrated correspondence in biblical narratives, in the instructions of ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (seen, beyond his time, as a wise organizer of the Christian faith) and in the writings of Catholic authorities (popes, theologians, bishops, saints etc.). In Aquinas' discursive elaboration, the true (perfect) interpretive equivalence organizes the adequacy of men's customs and, at the same time, subtracts the divergent (vicious and sinful) plurality.

Derived from the Socratic dialectics and improved through the methodology of scholastic debates, this social mechanism of interpretation control in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* allows the exploration of interpretive variables that are later suppressed due to a non-correspondence with the sacred texts or a disavowal through the presentation of argument clippings from authorities recognized by the Church.

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[3] In the European Middle Ages, the correspondence of legality with virtue and illegality with sin derives from the understanding that morality belongs to a greater Law, the law of God, interpretable within the scope of the Holy Scriptures.

The fact is that the search, defense and justification of an interpretive mechanism – which, simultaneously, clarifies the behavior convenient to the precepts of Christian life and puts shadows on dubiousness or deviant interpretations – only apparently take place as processes that reduce the imaginary in the medieval world. On the contrary, the *Summa Theologica* maps interpretive dimensions and encourages a look at multiplicity as a necessary way of revealing the One. Thus, in this moment of searching other understandings, other sources of representation of medieval thought, incited directly or indirectly by Aquinas, sometimes used the description of the multiple nature of vices to elevate the model of Christian conduct, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy,* and some other times used the portrayal of the diverse dimension of vices to mark the distancing or unreality of this same model in relation to everyday social practices, such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Regarding Aquinas' description of economic conduct, it is observed that the attempts to demonstrate exemplary moral knowledge in the midst of the evolution of pecuniary practices forced the philosopher of the Catholic Church to thematize various angles of economic behavior, revitalizing some debates located in Aristotle. The classification of goods, the benefits arising from the handling of money, or the vices and sins stimulated by using money, turn out to be the main theme groups in which Thomas Aquinas' argumentative exercises are developed.

In this sense, the present study maps and comments on the discussion of these theme groups (one for each section) to seek echoes contained in the Thomistic philosophy or reverberations promoted by such philosophy that can present the initial moments of the history of economic thought under a prism of discursive intersection, thus escaping from the simplifying perspective of the doctrinal aim. The understanding that the constitution of Thomas Aquinas' economic thought results from a study of discursive multiplicity – and that it also encourages constitutions of other different and even divergent manifestations of discourse in the medieval period – strengthens the task of investigating economic history through a transdisciplinary and dialogic perspective.

Classification of goods

Thomas Aquinas, throughout the entire *Summa Theologica,* keeps a rhetorical architecture for the production of knowledge (derived from scholastic philosophy) which, in a meticulous way, is structured in the following sequence: a) presentation of the question of debate; b) enumeration of perspectives on the question addressed (usually opposing the final interpretation); c) introduction of a discordant comment to the listed perspectives (or to any of them); d) establishment of a synthesis to solve the debate; and e) closure with responses to each of the listed points of view.

By way of illustration, the following two articles are presented at this point in more detail. The first of them consists of Aquinas' investigation: "Whether man's beatitude consists in riches", the first article of the second question of the Treatise on the beatitude of the *Summa Theologica;* and the second of them, "Whether we can deserve temporal goods", the tenth article of the 114th question of the Treatise on Grace of the *Summa Theologica*.

As for the first, initially three points of view are raised, derived from interpretations of the Holy Bible (Ecclesiastes) or from authors incorporated by Catholic philosophy (Boethius and Aristotle) as opposing perspectives to be fought. The first point of view, based on the following passage from Ecclesiastes 10, 19: "A party is held to have fun; wine makes life happy, and money is good for everything" (Bible, 2019, p.631), argues that man's full satisfaction is achieved through the achievement of his desires, and these are allowed by access to money. The second view cites Boethius' concept of beatitude as a state of perfection by the assemblage of all goods and, when considering Aristotle's argument about the invention of money serving as an efficient means of generalizing exchanges and accumulating possessions, presents the possibility that the feeling of full satisfaction is achievable in money[4]. The third point of view, using a fragment of Ecclesiastes 5, 9: "He who loves money will never be satisfied" (Bible, 2019, p.627), compares the insatiability of the desire to know the highest good with the infinite will of belonging under the pecuniary matter.

In the counterargument to the defense of the related perspectives, an exercise of interpretive correction of the second point of view in relation to Boethius' authority is immediately carried out, stating that this philosopher recognizes the activity of spending as a driver of satisfaction rather than the practice of accumulating wealth.

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[4] Although the works are not cited in the second point of view, it is the passage in which Boethius clarifies the contradictory nature of money in *The Consolation of Philosophy* and the passages in which Aristotle argues about the origin or function of money in *Politics* or in *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Thus, the challenge to the second thesis raised puts it as an incomplete matter of defense by citing the statement of Boethius' authority but without developing his succeeding and contradictory arguments to the thesis itself. The excerpt commented for the contesting moment is found in point nine of book two of *The Consolation of Philosophy:*

Now riches seem to have more value when they are gone than when they are acquired. That is why avarice is the cause of dislike, and generosity of praise. Since it is not possible to keep something that only has value if it is exchanged, money only has value when it changes hands, and we cease to own it. (Boethius, 2016, p.52)

In the synthesis, also called the solution, Aquinas argues that man's beatitude does not come from riches. This is because, when citing the Aristotelian classification of wealth into natural (based on the production of human sustenance in relation to food, clothing, transportation or housing) and artificial (based on the invention of money as a facilitator of exchange and as a measure of venal things), Thomas Aquinas declares that the first class exists in the world for the service of man, according to the Holy Scripture itself in verse seven of chapter eight of the Psalms[5], and that the second class of riches was created to guarantee the conquest of the first class. Therefore, in the reasoning developed by the theologian, natural wealth (derived from satisfaction linked to sustenance) or artificial wealth (generated as a measure of intrinsic value to safeguard the exchange of goods) are to serve man and, therefore, rank below him – which, from Aquinas' perspective, makes it impossible for such wealth to provide man with full satisfaction.

In the objections, Aquinas argues that tangible goods are acquired by money, and that these would be, among fools, the only known form of satisfaction; however, he declares that spiritual goods are not accessible through pecuniary intercourse and cites verse 16 of chapter 17 of Proverbs to justify that wisdom is not a good to be acquired with the money of a fool[6]. Likewise, the theologian states that the desire for natural goods is finite in proportion to its satiety, that the desire for artificial goods is not, but that it differs from infinity by the satisfaction of knowing the highest good. It turns out that, quoting Aristotle's *Politics,* Thomas Aquinas notes the infinity of desire for the temporal good stimulated by inordinate greed and that, while the knowledge of the highest good leads man to a progressive contempt of other goods, material goods become insignificant the more they are possessed. His arguments find illustrative support in verse 29 of chapter 24 of Ecclesiasticus regarding the infinite satisfaction arising from the highest good, and in verse 13 of chapter four of the Gospel of St. John as to the cessation of satisfaction from tangible goods[7].

With the argument of this article of the *Summa Theologica,* Aquinas reinforced the division between temporal goods, grouped into natural and artificial, and spiritual goods, which bring man closer to the supreme and absolute good, giving them a hierarchical meaning based on the Christian moral order and in the equivalence between the mission of understanding the salvation process and the epiphany of satisfaction in a state of completeness resulting from this knowledge.

In "Whether we can deserve temporal goods", tenth article of the 114th question of the Treatise on Grace of the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas investigates three more perspectives and a counterstatement.

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[5] In this Psalm, although men are characterized as children of Adam and unworthy of grace, God's generosity is highlighted by placing the creatures of the world under man's command: "You gave him power over the works of your hands, to him you subdued the whole universe" (Bible, 2019, p.542). Regarding economic practices, this understanding of man's hierarchy in relation to the other creatures and works of God can justify, for example, the exploitative use of resources.

[6] In that chapter of the Book of Proverbs, what spiritual goods bring is judged above the results obtained by material goods. Thus, the absence of spiritual goods, such as wisdom or peace (from God), subtracts the importance of material goods for the construction of human happiness: "Acquiring wisdom is worth more than gold; acquire intelligence rather than silver" (Bible, 2019, p.614).

[7] On the one hand, in the passage of the Book of Ecclesiasticus, food and drink, as metaphors of the Sacred, prefigure the scene of the Last Supper and spiritual salvation through the knowledge of the highest good, never exhausting in satisfaction for the one who experiences it: "Those who eat me will still be hungry, and those who drink me will still be thirsty" (Bible, 2019, p.671). On the other, in the aforementioned chapter of the Gospel according to John, water, understood as a metaphor of the word that leads to knowledge of the Sacred and that provides a spiritual good (salvation) capable of satisfying any human physiological need, is opposed to water that repairs the daily thirst and that never completely satisfies us: "Jesus answered him: Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again / but whoever drinks the water I will give him will never thirst. But the water that I will give him will become in him a fountain of water, welling up to eternal life" (Bible, 2019, p.999).

The first point of view states that, in the Old Testament, temporal goods can be understood as the reward of the righteous. The second point of view, citing verses 20 and 21 of the first chapter of Exodus and verses 17 to 19 of the 29th chapter of Ezekiel, asserts that material goods can serve as God's direct payment for some service rendered to Him[8]. In the third point of view there is the defense that temporal goods correspond to the meritorious, just as temporal punishments belong to the wicked, as illustrated in the case of the city of Sodom in chapters 18 and 19 of Genesis[9]. In the counterargument, by citing the second verse of the ninth chapter of Ecclesiastes, Aquinas comments that temporal goods are accessible indistinctly both for the good and for the evil – as well as the misfortunes that affect them, or death that will take them all[10].

In the solution, Saint Thomas Aquinas divides goods into relative and absolute. Relative goods are valid for the time they last and in the circumstances in which they are needed, however they are not the matter of salvation; the absolute good, on the other hand, is linked to the purpose of redemption of the spirit and of approximation and understanding of the Sacred. Within the explained thought, Aquinas initiates a perspective that tends to justify the destination of the goods (sometimes temporal, sometimes absolute) and seeks to give coherence as to their distribution between the wicked and the righteous, making immediate use of the Book of Psalms in its verse 28 of chapter 72 to justify the concept of absolute good, or verse 25 of chapter 36 and verse ten of chapter 33 to mark the position of divine support to those who act according to his laws[11].

In the objections, specifically in the first contestation, based on St. Augustine's *Christian Doctrine* the theologian declares that the promise of temporal goods as a correspondence to comply with God's designs is in fact a prefiguration of a greater good; temporal goods are, therefore, signs of a good that will only be perceptible from the message contained in the New Testament, that is, the prophetic life of the people of the Old Testament matches the promise of temporal goods while the absolute good becomes knowable with the arrival of the Messiah.

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[8] In this chapter of the Book of Exodus, the respect and fear of God in opposition to the Pharaoh's law on the part of the midwives, who refuse to carry out the infanticide of the Hebrew boys in the act of birth, caused God to reward these midwives with prosperity: "God benefited the midwives: the people continued to multiply and spread. / Because they had feared God, he prospered their families" (Bible, 2019, p.51). In the Book of Ezekiel, God offers the land of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar to be plundered by his armies in order to fulfill the purposes of confrontation against the pharaoh of Egypt: "In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord was addressed to me in these terms: / The son of man, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, imposed on his army the harsh task of fighting Tyre: baldness on all skulls, bruises on all shoulders! However, neither he nor his army will derive any advantage from Tyre, from the oppression directed against it. / This is why the Lord Yahweh says: I will give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; he will plunder its riches; he will make it his prey and divide its spoil; such will be the salary of his army" (Bible, 2019, p.827).

[9] In chapters 18 and 19 of the Book of Genesis, there is the idea of the distribution of prosperity among those who respect God and follow his precepts, like Abraham, who has the promise of a son even after his old age and that of his wife, or that of Lot, who is saved from the destruction of the city of Gomorrah, and who afterwards has his lineage preserved through his daughters who get pregnant with his own semen. On the other hand, punishment is distributed among those who do not follow the divine guidelines: the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is caused by the offensive and sinful behavior of their inhabitants under the gaze of God, or even the turning of the face of Lot's wife to see the destroyed cities, contrary to the divine order, is an act of disobedience that transforms her into a pillar of salt.

[10] In his investigation of the meaning of life and the persistence of death for all without distinction, Cohéllet, king of Israel in Jerusalem, notes an initial lack of logic as to the merit in the destinies of the righteous and the wicked: "One same destiny for all: there is an equal lot for the righteous and for the wicked, for him who is good and for him who is unclean, for him who offers sacrifices and for him who abstains from them. The good man is treated as a sinner and the perjurer as one who respects his oath". (Bible, 2019, p.630).

[11] In chapter 72 of the Book of Psalms, there is, at first, a feeling of indignation at seeing the prosperity of the wicked. Throughout the psalm, there is an interpretation that the goods given to the wicked are illusions that project them into destruction and, at the end of this psalm, the matter of true well-being is revealed: closeness to God: "But for me, happiness is getting closer to God, it is putting my trust in the Lord God, in order to narrate his wonders before the gates of the daughter of Zion" (Bible, 2019, p.571). In chapter 36 of the Book of Psalms, the advice that one should not envy the prosperity of the wicked is accompanied by the idea that God's justice will exterminate those who enjoy temporary well-being and who do not follow his precepts. On the other hand, in that same chapter, a certainty of protection is enunciated for those who are just and preserve God's values in their attitudes: "I was young, and I am old, but I have never seen the righteous abandoned, nor their children begging bread" (Bible, 2019, p.555). In chapter 33 of the Book of Psalms, commented by Aquinas, this position is confirmed even more when the theologian cites the verse that affirms the safeguard of God to those who respect him: "Reverence the Lord, you his faithful, for those who fear him lack nothing" (Bible, 2019, p.553).

In the objection to the second point of view, Aquinas corrects the interpretation of the cited biblical passages denouncing that self-interest cannot be disguised as divine will and complements by stating that, at certain times, God may grant temporal goods to those who serve him circumstantially, however such conduct (because it is an accidental occurrence) does not guarantee them the conquest of the absolute good. In the objection to the third point of view, Saint Thomas Aquinas explains that the temporal adversities of wicked men may be understood as a punishment that moves them further and further away from the absolute good, while the difficulties encountered by the just man serve to prepare him for the salvation of the spirit. Finally, Aquinas also refutes the counterargument raised, and does so by completing its reasoning. Even though he agrees that goods or evils are distributed between the wicked and the righteous without discrimination, Thomas Aquinas comments that the good, whether suffering or having fortune, are prepared for final happiness (the revelation of the highest good), whereas the bad, with temporal misfortune to mark their demerit or with good fortune keeping them away from true happiness, are punished by the continuous distance from the knowledge of the absolute good.

With this article, Saint Thomas Aquinas manages to answer, in the manner of Christian doctrine, a moral question that has been pursued since Classical Antiquity: why the unjust manage to raise fortunes, while the just often suffer the penalties of a life of miseries? As a perfect example of this investigation, Aristophanes' comedy *Plutus,* in IV BC, thematized the inconsistency between the asymmetrical distribution of wealth and respectful behavior towards the gods associated with the practice of honest and correct actions. In Greek mythology, to represent this lack of correspondence between exemplary moral conduct and the guarantee of riches, the god Plutus, an allegory of wealth, is characterized as blind – and the explanation arising from this myth is generally associated with the fact that Zeus, foreshadowing the power attributed to that god, blinds him to prevent his future hegemony over the other gods. That event is recounted by Aristophanes' *Plutus,* demonstrating a criticism in which it is evident that, like men, the deities (Zeus as a major model) do not favor the just, but their own interests, and that they intend to preserve their own privileges.

CHREMYLUS: And how did the misfortune of going blind happen to you? Tell me!

PLUTUS: It was Zeus who did this to me, because of his jealousy of mankind. Long ago I threatened to favor only the just, wise, and honest people. So, he blinded me to stop me from recognizing people. See how far his envy goes against good people! (Aristophanes, 2003, p.627).

Keeping the division between temporal or material goods and those spiritual and revelatory of salvation also explains the issue investigated by the theologian: the apparent lack of logic between moral investment and the result of a good destination of wealth. In this sense, the theologian explains the ways of wealth by defending that, on the one hand, the attribution of temporal goods to the wicked ends up condemning them to the removal of the greater grace of salvation and that the absence of such goods is a divine recognition of the unworthiness of grace for men with reprobate conduct; on the other hand, the life of fortune given to the righteous corresponds to the merit for exemplary behavior (aligned with divine precepts), and the absence of material goods for them serves as an improvement for the spirit in the sense of preparing themselves to receive the gift and happiness of salvation.

In "Whether it is lawful for someone to possess a thing as his own", second article of the 66th question of the Treatise on Grace of the *Summa Theologica,* Thomas Aquinas advocates the lawfulness of the private condition for certain goods and justifies such a position by declaring that administration in a situation of private belonging becomes more effective considering the greater interest in what is proper than in what is common, and in what is more specific for the matter of control than in what is more general and not as clearly determined for the management of the possessor. On the other hand, Aquinas defends that the division of goods, legitimizing them as private, favors the pacification of men in relation to the dispute of what is common and indivisible. In addition to the echoes that emanate from the interpretive corrections made regarding texts by Saint Basil or Saint Ambrose or even from the demonstration of the defense of Saint Augustine on the matter of the possession of goods, Aquinas makes an argument that will resonate in writings of economists from the School of Salamanca such as, for example, Tomás de Mercado.

In this case, explicitly repeating the justifications of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the economist of the School of Salamanca in the 16th century extends the defense of the efficiency of private goods by stating that private farms grow and advance in comparison to those belonging to the city or Council, which are poorly managed. As a cross-narration between the biblical plot and the reasons already discussed by Aquinas, Tomás de Mercado (2020) states that there was an initial stage of paradisiacal condition in which temporal goods were not a reason for scarcity and, therefore, for conflict, nor had the needs multiplied among men. However, especially after the flood narrated in chapter seven of Genesis, the growing scarcity of products and the lack of services led to the inevitable growth of trade.

Based on this scenario, Mercado states that, on the one hand, a greater process of legitimizing private property takes place, in this sense, to harmonize confrontations in the midst of generalized misery; and that, on the other hand, the escalation of the sin of covetousness increasingly distorts the function of commercial exchanges in serving the community and generates a deformity in the accumulation of goods in which the individual disproportionately seeks possession of everything.

The benefits of money management

The discussion of the theme of virtue stimulated by money borders on questions regarding the functionality of the act of almsgiving – "Whether giving alms is an act of charity" (article 1 of question 32 of the Treaty on Charity), "Whether it is precept to give alms " (fifth article of the same question and treaty), "Whether it is lawful for the religious to live on alms" (fourth article of question 187 of the Treatise on the specific acts of certain men) and "Whether it is lawful for the religious to beg" (fifth article of same question and treaty) – and liberality in relation to spending – an investigation carried out in all six articles brought together by question 117 of the Treatise on Justice – "Whether liberality is a virtue", "Whether liberality has money as its object" , "Whether using money is an act of liberality", "Whether the main act of liberality is giving", "Whether liberality is part of justice" and "Whether liberality is the greatest of virtues".

In these first two articles about almsgiving, Saint Thomas Aquinas argues that the act of providing help through material goods, motivated by compassion and associated with charity, becomes a manifestation of God's love, and can, with genuinely felt pity and with the real desire to donate to help others, redeem the one who gives. On the other hand, the act of giving alms is a precept derived from love for one's neighbor, however, whoever gives alms must withdraw from his surplus (the opposite is a sin against the Sacred and violence against himself) and whoever accepts alms must really need them (the reverse is sin).

Based on this consideration made by St. Thomas Aquinas, in the *Divine Comedy* the poet Dante Alighieri places those who squander their own goods in the second round of the seventh circle of Hell – in the same circle as suicides. That is, on the level of those who practice violence to themselves from Alighieri's perspective, suicides and inveterate spenders ruining their financial health are equivalent in the offense against the Sacred and deserve condemnation at the same level. In this sense, it is also necessary to make a distinction between the prodigals, who are found in the fourth circle of Hell alongside the avaricious, and the vicious spenders who put themselves in a situation of penury, being in a circle much further away from God – because their sin is more serious, they bear a much more painful punishment. Those who place themselves in a position of extreme poverty through mismanagement of their own property are continually torn to pieces by dogs – just as in life they were torn apart by self-induced misery.

Behind them now the woods were thick
with bitches, black and ravenous and swift
as hounds loosed from the leash.

On him who had hidden in the tangle
They set their teeth, tore him to pieces,
And carried off those miserable limbs. (Alighieri, 1997-1998, Inferno XIII Lines 124-129)

Regarding the act of begging associated with the life of those who provide religious services, Thomas Aquinas comments that it is licit for some offerings to be made for the sustenance of those who administer and perform sacred cults or even that such priests can be materially protected by richer princes or faithful, even if they do not carry out manual work. However, it becomes illicit to accept such alms if the religious abandons the priestly activity or if the good offered is diverted to encourage idleness and comfort of the ecclesiastical class, subtracting them from the works for the neediest.

This reflection by Thomas Aquinas regarding the sin of those who ask for or accept alms without there being any real need, combined with the condemnation of religious people who collect offerings for their own pleasure and forget the missionary role of preaching and charity to the poor seems to find resonance, as anti-model of Christian conduct in this respect, in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Specifically in "The Summoner's Tale" Chaucer presents a caricature of the ideal Christian behavior – an atmosphere which becomes even more comical when religious authorities inspire the anti-models they so combat. The summoner tells the story of a friar who took advantage of begging and false poverty to ask for donations with a hypocritical speech of utter need. In the plot, the friars set themselves apart from the priests for their humble service to the poorest; however, contradictorily, their actions reveal them as parasites who do not even say prayers for those who offered donations.

In the story, an old man, already irritated by the constant parasitic movement of the friars, asks the one who is now demanding donations to take some money from his back pocket to share among them. However, the salary that the old man donated to the friar turns out to be a noisy and stinking flatulence. At the end of the narration, as an even more acid form of criticism, the summoner tells how a group of friars try, through debate and sophisticated abstract analyses, to unravel the question of dividing what is apparently indivisible – a fierce satire to ecclesiastical intelligentsia (including Aquinas' own model and way of thinking), so far removed from the real problems and thus so useless.

'Well, then, reach down your hand along my back,'
The sick man said, 'and if you grope behind,
Beneath my buttocks you are sure to find
Something I've hidden there for secrecy.'

'Ah!' thought the friar, 'that's the thing for me!'
And down he launched his hand and searched the cleft
In hope of profiting by gift or theft.
When the sick man could feel him here and there
Groping about his fundament with care,
Into that friar's hand he blew a fart.
There never was a farmhorse drawing cart
That farted with a more prodigious sound. (Chaucer, 2003, p.316)

Regarding liberal behavior as to the use of money, Thomas Aquinas follows Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* which states that liberality is the virtue that balances two vices: prodigality, excessive in spending and deficient in receiving, and covetousness, excessive in receiving and deficient in spending. Associated with the moral and balanced conduct that Aristotle attributes to a liberal man who spends his wealth for the benefit of society, Aquinas added other characteristics to liberality concerning the Christian conduct he defended: 1) he who spends liberally frees himself from the sin of covetousness; 2) those who spend liberally help others; 3) those who spend liberally see greater virtue in favoring others than in self-centered spending.

The vices and sins stimulated by the use of money

This theme group includes articles from the *Summa Theologica* that discuss the sins of avarice, prodigality, fraud, usury, simony, and the vices of parsimony and waste. The theme of avarice comprises eight articles of question 118 of the Treatise on Justice – "Whether avarice is a sin", "Whether avarice is a special sin", "Whether avarice is opposed to liberality", "Whether avarice is always a mortal sin", "Whether avarice is the greatest of sins", "Whether avarice is a spiritual sin", "Whether avarice is a capital sin", and "Whether the following vices are children of avarice: treason, fraud, fallacy, perjury, restlessness, violence, and a blinded heart." Regarding the theme of prodigality, there are three articles that make up question 119 of the Treaty on Justice – "Whether prodigality is opposed to avarice", "Whether prodigality is a sin", and "Whether prodigality is more serious than avarice". To a lesser extent, the topic of fraud is discussed in an article in question 55 of the Treatise on Prudence – "Whether fraud belongs to cunning" – and finds further discussion in four articles in question 77 of the Treatise on Justice – "Whether we can sell something for more than it is worth", "Whether the sale becomes unfair and unlawful because of a defect in the thing sold", "Whether the seller is obliged to reveal the defect in the thing sold" and "Whether it is lawful, trading a thing, to sell it for more than it cost." As for the sin of usury, the four most prominent articles appear in question 78 of the Treatise on Justice – "Whether receiving usury for borrowed money is a sin", "Whether we can, for borrowed money, demand another advantage", "Whether we are obliged to return all the money we receive with usury" and "Whether it is licit to receive money by way of loan, under the condition of paying usury". The theme of simony is discussed in six articles of question 100 of the Treatise on Justice – "Whether simony is the deliberate will to buy and sell a spiritual good or a good attached to it", "Whether it is always lawful to give money in exchange for sacraments", "Whether it is lawful to give and receive money in payment for spiritual works", "Whether it is lawful to receive money in payment for goods connected with spiritual goods", "Whether it is lawful to give spiritual goods as payment for a material or oral service", and "Whether it is an adequate penalty to deprive the simoniac of what he acquired by simony". Two articles from the Treatise on Fortitude stand out in the comments on the vices of parsimony and waste in the *Summa Theologica* – "Whether parsimony is a vice" and "Whether there is any vice opposed to parsimony".

Saint Thomas Aquinas argues that avarice is a spiritual sin that feeds on the delight of excessive possession; avarice, therefore, derives from an excess: the immoderate love for possessing material things (almost always associated with pecuniary belonging).

Avarice, as a sin of a specific type, is opposed to spending or retaining wealth in a moderate way, that is, contrary to what is designated as the virtue of liberality already described by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aquinas also comments that avarice is considered a mortal sin when it stands as an obstacle to the love of God, completely impeding the act of charity to the neighbor; when avarice does not serve as a shield for charitable gestures or to the manifestation of divine love, it is considered a forgivable sin. Although not being the maximum of sins, avarice may derive combined sins or vices, such as betrayal, fraud, violence, obsession, or others, which increase the gravity of the action and the distance from the Sacred. In comparison with prodigality, avarice is considered a greater sin even if both sins, in their disorderly attitudes, are diametrically distant from the balance necessary to the moderate and virtuous action of liberality. According to the theologian's explanation, the prodigal man has three advantages over the miser. The first of these consists of the recognition that, although it is also a sin arising from excess, the offering of riches (even in excess) is closer to the virtue of liberality, which is characterized by distribution to benefit the social environment, than withholding them. The second arises from the fact that prodigality benefits the people on whom the sinner spends, unlike avarice, which concentrates all wealth in a single individual. Finally, the third advantage would be the fact that prodigality is a sin that is easier to cure than avarice: according to Aquinas, both poverty and older age can promote more moderate spending and a more prudent attitude of the individual towards money.

Even though in the *Divine Comedy* Dante Alighieri followed many of the guidelines of Saint Thomas Aquinas and also revered him as the wisest character among the theologians who guided him through the fourth sphere of Paradise, there are disagreements regarding the gravity of avarice and prodigality in the representation of sinners in the fourth circle of Hell. Alighieri places both types of sinners on the same level of punishment, on an identical level of deviation from the Sacred and the corresponding scene of torture. Possibly, Dante Alighieri made the equivalence between the sin of avarice and that of prodigality not because of lack of knowledge of the studies by Saint Thomas Aquinas, but because to achieve an aesthetically impressive ornamentation the allegorical construction developed in the *Divine Comedy* required some sacrifice of the theological message.

The punishment devised by Dante for the miserly and the prodigal consists of eternally rolling great weights in opposite directions with their bare chests. As they are on a circular trajectory, the two groups always meet, and the stones collide. When this occurs, the groups exchange insults, amid offensive complaints about why some, on the one hand, save while others, on the opposite side, spend. Starting from the idea that clothing marks a hierarchy and a certain distinction on the social level, the architecture of the scene devised by Dante Alighieri, by conceiving the nakedness of the chest in both groups, renders useless the practice of withholding or spending wealth as a way of displaying social privilege or vanity because it is located in a spiritual context. The poet also recalls an ancient scene from the Greek narrative tradition: the myth of Sisyphus. There is a clear correspondence between the uselessness of the acts of sinners punished in Hell and that of the service of Sisyphus, punished by the Olympic gods to roll to the top of a hill a stone that always falls downwards, keeping him in this eternal work. In fact, Dante Alighieri conceives an even greater degree of complexity regarding the meaning of uselessness: while, in the Greek myth, Sisyphus' task is characterized as fruitless after the imposition of punishment, in the scene of the *Divine Comedy* the uselessness of the stone-rolling work by the avaricious and the prodigal takes place in the time of torture because this uselessness already existed in the time before death. Or even better, the time after death, which must be cultivated with acts useful to the Sacred in the anteriority of earthly life, does not find any use in practices of avarice or prodigality, and, for this very reason such sinners are condemned to an eternity of fruitless tasks.

Here the sinners were more numerous than elsewhere,
and they, with great shouts, from opposite sides
were shoving burdens forward with their chests.

They crashed into each other, turned
and beat retreat, shoving their loads and shouting:
'Why do you hoard?' or 'Why do you squander?'

Thus they proceeded in their dismal round
on both sides toward the opposite point,
taunting each other with the same refrain.

Once at that point, each group turned back
along its semi-circle to the next encounter.
And I, my heart pierced almost through,

said: 'Master, now explain to me
who these people are. Were those with tonsured heads,
the ones there to our left, all clerics?'

'All of them had such squinting minds
in their first lives,' he said,
'they kept no measure in their spending.

Their voices howl this clear enough
just as they reach the twin points on the circle
where opposing sins divide them.

These were clerics who have no lid of hair
Upon their heads, and popes and cardinals,
In whom avarice achieves its excess.' (Alighieri, 1997-1998, Inferno VII Lines 25-48)

Another use of Greek mythological culture under this aspect of wealth was also carried out by Dante Alighieri. At the entrance to the fourth circle of Hell, he meets Plutus, a god who represents wealth in Greek mythology: "There is Plutus, our great enemy" (Alighieri, 2003, p.59). The presentation of Plutus by the poet finds echoes in the strategy of downgrading entities not linked to the Judeo-Christian tradition. This strategy was reinforced in medieval times and justified in biblical passages such as the fourth verse of chapter six of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, which are often interpreted as a process of debasement of the demigods of Ancient Greece: "In those days there lived giants on the earth, as also from then on, when the sons of God were united with the daughters of men and they bore children. These are the heroes, so famous in ancient times" (Bible, 2006, p.7), or even chapter five of the Gospel according to Saint Mark, which comments on a case of possession and exorcism carried out by Christ and which can be understood as a process of debasing the demons of ancient Greek culture – intermediary beings between men and the gods who often walk through the sarcophagi and carry out activities accompanying mortals as if they were mortals themselves (Ménard, 1991b).

In the case of Plutus, it must be understood that he is born of the earth mother Demeter, goddess of the harvest, therefore the understanding of wealth (which Plutus represents) in the ancient Greek and mythological world comes, initially, from the results of agriculture (Ménard, 1991a) – a view very close to Xenophon's book *Oeconomicus* (1999), which reflects the myth and values agricultural services as fundamental to the generation of wealth.

As a variation of the myth, Plutus in Aristophanes' play is already an allegory close to commerce and the high power of money – an allegory that produces a dangerous ambiguity, for if, on the one hand, wealth can combat the evils of poverty and favor the prosperity of men, on the other, according to the god himself, "when men truly possess me and become rich, their wickedness greatly surpasses all the limits of composure" (Aristophanes, 2003, p.628). This is the Plutus of Classical Antiquity that Dante Alighieri highlights, because in this variation wealth (Plutus) encourages excess and, for Christians, sin. The god Plutus in the *Divine Comedy* version is a double enemy: he is a divine entity not belonging to the cult of Christianity, and money that corrupts man, leading him to sin through avarice or prodigality.

Both in Saint Thomas Aquinas and in Dante Alighieri, avarice and prodigality are the fruits of excess, they are excesses that consolidate sins and that can promote eternal torture after earthly life. As for these sins, in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* corresponding forms are perceptible in the vices of parsimony and waste, which are considered deviations from the proportion required by the ratio between expenses and works. As isolated acts, however, these manifestations are considered less serious – they are called addictions. While the disproportionality activated by parsimony reduces the distribution of resources to the social environment, the one that arises from waste results in excessive spending, leading to brief and unnecessary consumption of resources[12] . As far as the *Divine Comedy* is concerned, the sin of prodigality – in the same way as avarice has a lighter form in the fifth circle of Purgatory – has a correspondingly graver variation which entails an even greater punishment in the seventh circle of Hell.

[12] Regarding parsimony, amid the current stress on the scarcity of resources to be allocated, today's emphasis on the concept of Lionel Robbins (2012) for Economic Science ends up recognizing in such an attitude a virtue rather than a vice.

When the sin of prodigality intensifies, ceasing to be stimulated by incontinence and starting to be classified as a sin of violence against oneself, Alighieri envisions that prodigality can present an even worse form of spending: one that completely impoverishes the individual, depriving him of his capacity of reacting and assuming a moderate attitude in the management of his possessions.

Regarding the sin of fraud, Thomas Aquinas states that selling something above the fair price constitutes an illegality and an injustice. A possibility of fraud can be the sale of a defective product (in terms of type, quantity, or quality) without due deduction in value. In this case, Aquinas advocates that, if there is damage to the buyer due to the defect in the product, the seller must indemnify him and fully return the money lost in the transaction.

The conception of fair price in Thomas Aquinas, by incorporating acceptable profit as payment for the trader's work, becomes more flexible than the idea of fair exchange developed by Aristotle. Earlier, Aristotle defended, in *Politics,* that the justice of commerce is preserved if the equality between amounts of cost and work in transactions is maintained; however Saint Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica,* argued that, as a recognition for his effort and for the maintenance of his own livelihood and that of his family, a compensation through a certain profitability (provided moderate) could compose the payment to the seller. According to Oliveira & Gennari (2009, p.25), St. Thomas Aquinas approaches the historical context and brings back the interpretation of Catholic thought on the phenomenon of increased trade.

By considering that the fair price incorporated the merchant's profit, Saint Thomas operated a first displacement in relation to the Aristotelian concept of fair exchange. For Aristotle, the exchange is only fair when it is made between equivalent products. By adding the trader's profit to the fair price of the product, equivalence and the principle of justice are broken. Thinkers linked to scholasticism, prior to Saint Thomas, and developing Aristotle, considered that goods that contained an equal amount of work and costs could be exchanged. The Thomist doctrine went a step further, exposing that the merchant's remuneration for his work, in a proportion that guaranteed his subsistence and that of his family, did not violate justice, establishing for the first time that "unequal exchange" is not necessarily unfair. Here we have the first accommodation of Catholic theology to the impositions of the new historical context.

The creation of fair price and the interpretation regarding its moderate flexibility is not only guided by profit as a matter of livelihood for the trader. On certain occasions, when the buyer's need and advantage are proportional to the damage or suffering of the seller by discarding the good, Thomas Aquinas defends the increase in the value of the product as a form of balance or correction in this type of circumstance. At another point in the *Summa Theologica,* in the fourth article of question 71 of the Treatise on Justice, "Whether it is licit for a lawyer to receive money for his sponsorship", St. Thomas states that a lawyer's payment becomes fair when it is within an acceptable and moderate level in relation to the establishment of values, taking into account the pecuniary conditions of the clients, the types of services provided, the effort employed and the custom of prices in the region.

Contrarily to the Aristotelian idea of fair exchange, the variational dynamics created by the concept of fair price in Aquinas later stimulated a series of debates among mercantilist economists, mainly from the School of Salamanca, which led to the description of the phenomena inherent in the consolidation of capitalist practices. Based on the understanding of the flexibility of the fair price, it can be said that Martín de Azpilcueta (2020) derived the comment about the increase in the value of products and services from the phenomenon of the greater amount of currency; that Tomás de Mercado (2020) described the change in prices based on changes in location, time or the number of buyers and sellers; and that Luís de Molina (2020) added to these variations the risk and skill of the seller, besides pleasure as a subjective value in the buyer to compose the fair price, also generating the concept of margin for the minimum and maximum prices to give a certain elasticity to practiced values (corresponding to the real dynamics of sales) without shunning the idea of justice for commercial exchanges.

Thomas Aquinas' concept of fair price, on the one hand, allowed certain dynamism for subsequent reflections of economic thought that resulted in adjustments of interpretation between moral practice and the daily negotiation of increasingly comprehensive trade in the Middle Ages; on the other, it imposed condemnations on the use of money to carry out loans. For Aquinas, usury consists of an artifice in which there is a separation between the price of use and the fair price, that is, when applying interest, one sells what one does not have and, therefore, one does not use what one pays for.

In this sense, the theologian preserves the Aristotelian idea that money serves as an instrument for exchanging products or employed labor, and is suitable to be spent in this way; the use of money as a source of creation for more money through usury (without the production of materials or their transformation) would therefore be an activity that corrupts the social and original practice assigned to money – which deforms the economic tasks of society in general, making them unproductive, sinful in Aquinas' view, or unnatural in Aristotle's. The disapproval of usury, although prior to Thomas Aquinas, gained, with this theologian, a resonance that would influence other thinkers of Economics for a long period. Such religious tradition in thinking about borrowing associated with immoral and sinful activities would only be significantly challenged 400 years later through economists such as William Petty (1996, p.61), who argues that "if any man give up his money on condition that he cannot demand it back before a certain time, whatever may be his own needs in the meantime, he may certainly receive compensation for this inconvenience which he admits to himself. This benefit is what we commonly call usury."

Not only economists were stimulated by Aquinas' comments on the subject, men of letters were also encouraged by theological discussions regarding unfair trade practices. However, as a tendency, there is a perceptible difference between these two groups: while mercantilist economists found in the concept of fair price the possibility of adapting the dynamics of prices to the real exchanges of commerce, respecting the moral conduct demanded by the theologian, literary scholars highlighted that sinful behavior in relation to the use of money is highly punished in the context of Judeo-Christian morality.

The theme of sin arising from the use of money becomes so important in the Middle Ages that, inevitable in exemplary narratives, it also appears prominently in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Fraudsters are found in the penultimate circle of Hell – which means that, in the eyes of God, injustice practiced in the field of commercial exchanges is more punishable than the act of suicide. Only less serious than the sin of betrayal, fraud, in this sense, installs disorder and harms the morality necessary for harmonious habits that organize society and Christian values. In the tenth and last ditch of the eighth circle, for example, are the counterfeiters of money, made dropsy and tormented by an incessant thirst – that is, like the counterfeit currency, the body of the forger is a deformation in which the accumulated liquids do not quench the organism's thirst as real water would. In Alighieri, if the counterfeit currency gives the economy a deformed liquidity that ultimately sickens it, in Hell, the counterfeiter must pay this cost with his own organism.

This moral correction to money-related crimes is also preached by the friar in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In this character's narrative, the friar tells the story of a summoner who, accustomed to extorting humble people by threatening them under false orders from the inquisitorial authorities of the Church, meets a devil in disguise and tells him all his crimes as if they were practices commendable from the point of view of cunning. In the story, the summoner coerces an old lady with false accusations of marital betrayal and forces her to hand over a pot in the absence of the required money so that he does not hand her over to the Church authorities. At that moment, the old woman sends the summoner to Hell; the devil takes advantage of the situation and takes the evildoer with him.

The link between cunning and fraud also turns out to be a theme explored by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. Contrarily to the praise for astute behavior in the canons of Homeric literature of Classical Antiquity – such as in Book IX of the *Odyssey,* in which Ulysses deceives the Cyclops by giving him the false name of "nobody" to avoid revenge after blinding him (Homer, 2009) –, cunning is pointed out by St. Thomas as a sin, a conduct deviant from Judeo-Christian behaviors. The theologian defines cunning as a practice that, as opposed to prudence, uses false, simulated, and apparent devices to achieve a good or bad purpose. In Aquinas' perspective, even if cunning is motivated to a beneficial goal, the lie of its method contaminates the whole process with sin. Aquinas also declares that, when the guile of cunning reverts to fraud, there is, in this case, a type of malice that can only be reversed in acts. The defense of cunning as a sin by Thomas Aquinas is centered on the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and on the attentive reading of passages such as verse nine of chapter ten of the Book of Proverbs: "Whoever walks in integrity walks safely, but whoever uses cunning will be discovered " (Bible, 2019, p.610), like verse ten of chapter 13 of the Acts of the Apostles: "Son of the devil, full of all deceit and all craftiness, enemy of all righteousness, you do not cease to pervert the straight paths of the Lord!", like the second verse of the fourth chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians: "We put away from us every false and shameful procedure. We do not walk with cunning, nor do we falsify the word of God. By the manifestation of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of all men, before God" (Bible, 2019, p.1083), or even as the third verse of chapter 11 of the same epistle: "But I fear that, as the serpent deceived Eve with her cunning, your thoughts may be corrupted and depart from sincerity towards Christ " (Bible, 2019, p.1087).

Such an interpretation of astuteness, in addition to being far from the Homeric praise of Classical Antiquity, is also dissonant from today's view of economic practice, which, as an image of prosperity, consolidates the figure of the merchant and his advantageous exchanges, praises cleverness of the industrialist regarding the offer of a seductive product and celebrates the decisions of the rentier as to the best investment opportunities in the myriad of speculations.

Another sin arising from the use of money is discussed in the context of the *Summa Theologica:* the buying or selling of sacred goods (simony). In Aquinas' understanding such commerce generates a specific type of reprehensible fraud for three reasons. First, you cannot put a price on sacredness. No earthly objects serve as a reference of exchange, thus sacred objects cannot be sold or bought. Second, you cannot sell what you do not own. As a manifestation of Divinity, such objects are testimonies of His expression to be displayed, not to serve as instruments of possession or accumulation. Third, sacred objects come from grace, freely given. Trading them violates that sacred order and may be considered an act of irreligion.

The theme of simony resonates with both Dante Alighieri and Geoffrey Chaucer. In Canto XIX of the *Divine Comedy*, in the third ditch of the eighth circle of Hell, the traffickers of divine things or the sellers of ecclesiastical titles are found piled up and buried upside down with flames at their feet. Among the represented sinners, Pope Nicholas III appears waiting for many other simoniac popes to come to this circle. Alighieri spares no criticism of Rome and in his allegory places the men who should inspire the rise to the Kingdom of Heaven upside down as a form of punishment. Those most responsible for the elevation of men's spirits, in fact, used their function to sin, therefore their body, directed downwards, both points to the inversion of their sacred position and indicates the movement contrary to the elevation of the spirit. Likewise, the flames at the feet, as a final translation of perdition and punishment, establish the antithesis of the image of water on the head at baptism, a sacrament that allows man to recognize the path of salvation and blessing.

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* at the beginning of the “Pardoner's Tale” there is a stern warning against swearing falsely and using the holy name in vain, although this is what the pardoner does all the time. His cunning tactics for selling sacred objects not only remove the necessary reverence for religious references by distorting their historicity, but also establish fraud as a central element of commercial practice. As an example of this, the pardoner claims that some ram bones he carries belonged to the animal of a holy Hebrew patriarch (a fraud based on falsification of origin), that these have curative and preventive powers for the flock or for human jealousy and that they also have the property of endowing their owner with prosperity (a fraud based on the falsification of the effect). As a way of attracting even more buyers, the pardoner uses embarrassment to force the public's decision, declaring that a person who has committed a horrible and shameful sin cannot be in a state of grace to offer donations for the exposed relics. Within the tale there is a protest against excessive drinking, although the narrator is getting drunk. Precisely because of this state, the pardoner begins to reveal the secret intentions of his preaching and selling of relics: he preaches generosity towards others in order to obtain profit from them; he preaches against avarice and other people's ambition motivated by his own greed. From his own example, the pardoner generalizes: ‘Believe me, many a sermon or devotive / Exordium issues from an evil motive.’ (Chaucer, 2003, p.243). No wonder the pardoner, preserving the same hypocrisy that distances the enunciated message from the messenger, tells a moral backstory in which three friends, motivated by greed, kill each other for a treasure. In the end, the narrator, by justifying the sale of the indulgences authorized by the bishop, ends up demonstrating how forgiveness can be advantageously negotiated if it is based on fear of condemnation of the soul.

Final considerations

The *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas, in addition to being a text of arduous creation and inventiveness, is the result of a gigantic exercise in the interpretation of temporalities, cultural traits and different postures to strengthen the foundations of Christian thought. In this sense, it is not uncommon to state that the *Summa Theologica* is a rereading of some of Aristotle's writings in the Middle Ages. Through intersections with biblical narratives and studies of ecclesiastical authorities, Saint Thomas Aquinas derived a sophisticated and complex manual of instructions for the behavior of Christian believers. It is also notorious for the exercise of juxtaposing a series of very different interpretations and postures regarding the items raised throughout the work so that, in its concluding part, an enlightening synthesis is presented. Moreover, Aquinas' intelligence must deal with responses that adjust the emergencies of his time with those that have long been recorded in the Holy Scriptures without letting such interpretive movements result in contradiction.

In the case of economic phenomena, which grew more and more in Aquinas' time, these answers, in addition to being convincing, should simultaneously be understandings about ordinary commercial spaces, attempts to place a Christian practice in commercial exchanges, and a proposal for regulation based on the ethics of the Catholic religion. The creation of a fair price, for example, was already a reality adjustment in Aquinas' time. This is because such a concept, derived from the study of the surrounding reality, surpassed the Aristotelian idea of equal exchange, and described the possibility of reasonable compensation for the merchant, justifying the condition of his own livelihood and that of his family.

First, the idea of price uncoupled from the exact equivalence of exchange for the product or the work employed to transform the product was already a recognition of the situation of commercial practices in Aquinas' time; second, when observing the merchant's and his family's need for survival, this compensation is validated by Christian principles; third, fair price requires that such compensation does not exceed the reasonable measure of providing the seller with sufficient for the function of his own maintenance and that of his family. As an innovation in economic thought, the notion of a fair price was developed by several later studies by mercantilist economists, such as Martín Azpilcueta, Tomás de Mercado and Luís de Molina. These economists from the School of Salamanca added discussions with new openings for the interpretation of the emerging economic phenomena of the time from the initial idea of fair price. With that, Aquinas, within the tradition of Catholic Christianity and masterfully dealing with interpretive adjustments, favored the bending of certain starting points for the understanding of market phenomena.

If within economic thought Thomas Aquinas was able to create concepts that fostered new ways of presenting and analyzing commercial practices, in the field of literature the Thomist description of the sins arising from money motivated the most frequently discussed moments in the works of Dante Alighieri and Geoffrey Chaucer.

The two narrative illustrations of medieval economic practices (accompanied by their moral assessments as sinful) in Dante Alighieri and Geoffrey Chaucer are close to the lessons of Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. At that time, the importance of the theme for Christian epistemology became increasingly urgent and the approach in the *Summa Theologica* inevitably overflowed to other manifestations of culture, such as literary narration. Although Aquinas' theological studies on the subject are very detailed and motivated an entire architecture for the *Divine Comedy*, it is impossible not to state that the powerful allegories created by Alighieri in the Christian imagination, as a strong illustration and synthesis, influenced the way of thinking Christianity much more through the organization of merit or punishment for the conduct of the believer. In the case of the *Divine Comedy,* many of the sins arising from economic activity are described in the cantos of Hell: avarice and prodigality in the fourth circle of Hell; self-destructive spending and usury in the seventh circle; simony, corruption, robbery, theft, and forgery in the eighth circle. Subtracting only avarice and prodigality, all the others are either equal to the crime of murder (those in the seventh circle), or surpass it, observing the perspective of the gravity of the sin and the offense against the Sacred. In other words, both in Aquinas and in Alighieri, the urgency demanded by a discussion about bad economic practices in the Middle Ages ended up pointing out that the sins related to money are a much greater harm to the spiritual and social fabric of Christianity than the sins arising from the subtraction of life (homicide or suicide).

Regarding Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* it can be said that, however dissonant the comic structure in this work may seem from the discursive organization of Thomas Aquinas' compendiums of moral teaching, the miserly, simoniac or fraudsters are subjected to the same reproach already expressed by the theologian. In choosing the format of the frame story, alternating characters and narratives, the comic appeal arises both from the interaction between the characters-narrators and their explicit rivalries (such as that of the friar and the summoner) as well as from the need to test the narrative in different social groups that, far from inspiring the ideal of Christian moral values, express the caricatural distance in which reality is found.

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