



Metaphors and Leadership Education in the *De Regno* of Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

Metaphors are valuable epistemological tools for understanding leadership. This paper presents a study on the metaphors employed by Thomas Aquinas to conceptualise and educate for leadership, based on the work *De Regno* (ca. 1266) addressed to King Hugh II of Cyprus, following the ‘mirror of prince’ genre. Aquinas employs mainly the metaphor of the pilot guiding a ship to a safe harbour. In addition, he utilises other metaphors (e.g. the divine government, the rational soul, the organization of bees or the armourer), along with verbs associated with leadership that carry implicit metaphorical significance. Thomas Aquinas can be regarded as a pioneering theorist of leadership, *avant la lettre*, whose ideas provide valuable insights into the conceptualisation of leadership. In affinity with the thought of Aquinas, we offer a definition of leadership as guiding others towards a common good. This definition allows us to discuss the nature of leadership and its end, with applications in the field of education, particularly in leadership education and the common good.

Keywords Aquinas · Metaphor · Leadership · Organizational theory · Leadership education

Introduction

Thomas Aquinas was born around 1224 in the castle of Roccasecca located in the Kingdom of Naples. His parents, the Counts of Aquino, were noble figures with close ties to Emperor Frederick II. At the age of fourteen, Thomas was sent to study liberal arts and philosophy at the University of Naples, an institution recently established by Frederick II. In Naples, he had the opportunity to study the thought of Aristotle, whose works had recently been translated into Latin. There he also encountered the Dominican Order, founded in 1215 by Dominic of Guzmán, and decided to join it. As a Dominican, he continued his stud-

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ies in Paris under the tutelage of Albert the Great, whose teaching skillfully synthesised Aristotelian philosophy with the Christian Neoplatonism of Augustine, Boethius, and the Pseudo-Dionysius.

Aquinas had an extensive teaching career in Paris, but more importantly, he produced an extraordinary body of work on a wide range of topics. His writings display a unique blend of scientific rigor, linguistic clarity, and measured sobriety (Brock 2013). During his years in Paris, beginning in 1266, he composed the first two parts of the *Summa Theologiae*, which served as a comprehensive philosophical and theological compendium (cf. Kincaid, in press n.d.). Around the same time (around 1266, although the exact date remains uncertain), he began drafting *De Regno* (1949), a work that reflects his political thought. This text follows the literary genre of the “Mirror for Princes” (*speculum principis*) and was primarily intended for the political education of King Hugo II of Cyprus. However, the work remained unfinished due to the early death of the king at the age of fifteen.

It is important to consider that in 1260, shortly before the composition of *De Regno*, the Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Politics* (330 B.C.E./ (Aristotle. 1988), 1985) was completed by William of Moerbeke, a translation that had a significant influence on Aquinas’s political thought. In *De Regno*, Aquinas develops a theory of the origin of power, drawing philosophy, history, and his own personal experience (Schneider 2003). In the spring of 1272, Aquinas departed from Paris and returned to Naples, where he assumed responsibility for a newly established study center of his order. He continued his work on the third part of the *Summa Theologiae* (Aquinas 1990) during this time. Aquinas passed away on March 7, 1274, in Fossanova, while en route to Lyon to attend a council at the invitation of Pope Gregory X.

Thomas’s work presents a moral and political philosophy that, with his own contributions, synthesises Aristotelian principles with the Christian tradition, especially biblical sources and Patristics (i.e. the early Christian theologians whose writings shaped Christian doctrine). His influence has continued through the centuries, with numerous scholars successfully revisiting and applying his thoughts in a wide range of disciplines, from law to psychology. *De Regno* (1266/1949) aims to address the question of the legitimacy of political power over others. In doing so, it draws upon historical and authoritative arguments, including Sacred Scripture, Isidore, Augustine, Cicero, and others (Schneider 2003). Thomas integrates ideas from classical authors such as Sallust, Ptolemy, Pythagoras, but most notably, he relies heavily on the philosophical frameworks of Aristotle and Plato.

Aquinas recognises that leadership (or governance) is a practical endeavor that must account for its contextual factors. In *De Regno*, his aim is not to present an abstract theory of leadership but rather to provide guidance on the practical exercise of leadership, considering both the recipient and their specific context. By synthesizing high-level speculation (characteristic of the philosopher) with practical application grounded in the particularities of the context (a hallmark of the educator), Aquinas effectively bridges theory and practice. He employs metaphors explicitly as pedagogical tools to facilitate the reader’s understanding of leadership. Ultimately, Aquinas demonstrates a masterful command of language, yet his primary intent is educational; encouraging recipients to reflect critically and make decisions that contribute to the common good of the organizations they serve.

It may initially seem that a medieval work offers limited contributions to modern leadership theory. However, recent research has demonstrated that organizational theory—and the discourse on leadership within it—has deep roots in medieval thought, particularly within

the “mirror of princes” genre (Sutherland et al. 2022). Moreover, leadership education and philosophy of management grounded in virtues, closely tied to Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy, is gaining increasing attention (Kincaid, in press n.d.); López González et al. 2024b, c). Leadership is a service that requires the exercise of virtues such as humility and magnanimity (Greenleaf 1977; Kincaid, in press n.d.).

This paper offers an exploration of the metaphors employed by Thomas Aquinas to conceptualise leadership in his work *De Regno*. This topic has not been extensively studied and is crucial for enhancing our understanding of Aquinas’ political thought, as well as for illuminating contemporary leadership discourse. In *De Regno*, several metaphors are utilised by Aquinas to conceptualise leadership. In this sense, Thomas Aquinas can be regarded as an organizational thinker and a leadership theorist, *avant la lettre*.

This article first presents the theoretical framework, emphasizing the importance of metaphors as epistemological tools that facilitate the understanding of dominant organizational theories. This is followed by a discussion of the metaphors identified in *De Regno*. Finally, the paper concludes with key findings and perspectives for future research.

Metaphors of Leadership in Organizational Theory

Metaphors and Organizational Theory

The significance of metaphors extends beyond their communicative power to their epistemological function. We employ metaphors to interpret texts, drawing on the familiar to understand the unfamiliar. According to the “conceptual metaphor theory,” metaphors are not only used to describe certain aspects of the world but also to think about them. They serve as tools for conceptualizing reality (Kövecses 2017; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). As defined by Kövecses (2017, p. 13), “A conceptual metaphor is understanding one domain of experience (that is typically abstract) in terms of another (that is typically concrete)” (Kövecses 2017, p. 13). As cognitive tools, metaphors aid in organizing knowledge within a specific domain or subject area. The relationship between domains may be based on similarity, but it can also involve correlation, often grounded in metonymy (Kövecses 2013).

This epistemological process is articulated by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, where he notes that we use analogical terms that are related to each other while also distinguishing between them, as when we apply the term “healthy” to both a person and a medicine (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1994, 1003a). However, the use of analogy alone is not enough to ensure accurate results. It is essential not only to recognise the similarities between analogous terms, but also to clearly understand their differences, keeping these distinctions in mind at all times. While analogy can be persuasive, it requires careful discernment to avoid the reductive tendency to equate one analogous term with another (Beuchot 2015). As will be discussed below, Aquinas takes up the use of analogy in his epistemology.

Metaphors, like language in general, are both a product of culture and a force that shapes culture itself, influencing behaviors through the ways we observe and assess the world based on specific linguistic categories (Whorf 1971). In this regard, metaphors play a crucial role in shaping human relationships and organizational culture (López González 1995; Sfez 2020). For instance, if leadership is conceived as a military endeavor, it implies the existence of enemies to overcome and a preference for cultivating certain values, such as

discipline, obedience, and resilience. Consequently, the language employed -and especially the metaphors used - exerts a significant social impact.

Research suggests that conceptual metaphors identified in language are not only present in verbal expressions but also in gestures and visual representations (Forceville 2008; Cienki and Müller 2008). It is important to recognise that the use and meaning of metaphors evolve over time (Kövecses 2002, 2017). This process of metaphor creation and utilization is influenced by the motivations and experiences of individuals or groups (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). It is also essential to note that while some metaphors are explicit, many remain implicit, often embedded in words, particularly verbs. As such, metaphors are frequently used unconsciously, with their impact on our research, creative processes, or conceptualization often going unrecognised. Furthermore, while some metaphors are shared across cultures, others are specific to particular cultural contexts. Metaphors serve as expressions of a universal human condition, shaped by distinct historical, social, and even physical circumstances.

In organizational theory, metaphors play a crucial role in interpreting dominant paradigms, often providing insights into their development and success within academic communities, especially when contrasted with alternative perspectives (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Morgan 1980, 1986; Yanow 1992). Each scientific paradigm reflects a network of related schools of thought, differentiated by their approaches or perspectives, yet all share fundamental assumptions about the nature of the reality they aim to describe (Kuhn 1962). Boyd (1979) argues that metaphors are essential for the formulation of new scientific theories, referring to them as “theory-constitutive”. These metaphors facilitate the articulation of new ideas, of which scientific theories are considered a particular instance. Kuhn (1979) extends this view, suggesting that metaphors are not merely tools but are central to the evolution and dissemination of theories.

Metaphors and Leadership

In the discourse on leadership, closely tied to organizational theory, the presence of certain metaphors can also be identified. Metaphors can be considered a type of imperfect analogy according to Aristotle (350 B.C.E./1982, Top. 139b 32–35). The term “leadership” implies a movement metaphor related to leading a flock or a group (López González 2022a). A diachronic analysis of leadership discourse reveals an evolution in leadership paradigms (Storey 2004). Over time, there has been a shift from viewing leadership primarily as the exercise of power (i.e. a political approach) to conceptualizing it as a personality trait (psychological approach), and more recently, as a virtue (moral approach).

Each of these stages represents a dominant paradigm; the previous conceptions do not disappear entirely, often remaining like “zombies” that refuse to die (Haslam et al. 2024; Parry and Bryman 2006). A synchronic analysis of doctoral dissertations on leadership reveals the coexistence of three competing paradigms: the functionalist, political, and humanist paradigm, which, although distinct, overlap and mutually influence one another (López González 2022b, 2024b). The functionalist paradigm, which has been dominant since the 1940s, conceptualises the organization as a balanced environment of forces, with leadership understood as a form of influence (e.g., Stogdill 1950). In contrast, the political paradigm with old roots and developed in “critical management studies” (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Alvesson and Deetz 1999; Gregoire et al., 2022), views leadership as a

power struggle between individuals, and criticises how leadership theories may contribute to the perpetuation of asymmetrical power relations. The humanist paradigm (e.g., Brooks 2021; Ciulla 1995; Greenleaf 1977; Newstead et al. 2021) conceptualises leadership as the development or flourishing of individuals and communities, with an emphasis on ethics. Each paradigm carries a set of underlying assumptions, as a filter through which information is gathered and interpreted. The functionalist paradigm, for example, employs a conceptual metaphor of mechanics and balance of forces. In the political leadership paradigm, conceived as power, the underlying metaphor is one of struggle and combat between opposing forces. In the humanist leadership paradigm, the underlying metaphor is naturalistic, as exemplified by the use of the term “flourishing”.

Metaphors play a crucial role in shaping leadership within an organization by “framing” the meaning accepted by followers, thus influencing the group’s interpretation of reality (Fairhurst and Sarr 1996; Smircich and Morgan 1982). Leaders frequently employ metaphors - as key elements of a narrative - to communicate ideas, establishing connections with the beliefs, emotions, and cognitive frameworks of their followers. Narrative provides an interpretative framework for addressing injustice and tackling moral issues (Simmons, 2020). The narrative constructed by leaders is so integral to organizational culture that it warrants independent examination (Bryman & Hansen, 2007). A comprehensive analysis of organizational culture reveals that metaphors permeate not only daily conversations but also rituals, artifacts (such as works of art or written documents), and established procedures (López González 2001).

The critical theory of leadership has sought to examine the socially constructed process of leadership, which is embedded in context and culture (Smircich and Morgan 1982; Hosking, 1988; Dachler & Hosking, 1995). From this perspective, leadership is enacted by both leaders and followers as well as by a much broader range of participants (Almeida et al. 2021; Smircich and Morgan 1982; Collinson, 2006). It is also emphasised that leadership cannot be understood apart from its context, including its physical context (Sutherland et al. 2022; Wilson et al. 2017).

Aquinas’ thoughts on leadership can provide valuable insights into contemporary research in this field. Like Aristotle, Aquinas adopts epistemological and metaphysical assumptions, which align him primarily with the humanist paradigm, though his ideas also incorporate elements of the political and even functionalist paradigms. Regarding his epistemology, Aquinas does not deny that human intelligence is constructive (e.g., that concepts are mental constructions), but he asserts that concepts can genuinely, though limitedly, capture reality. Concepts are not merely mental or social constructs detached from the things they represent. While it is true that language shapes our thinking and actions, it does not wholly determine them; humans are educable.

In the social sciences it is quite common to oppose positivism and constructivism, without any possible reconciliation. For Pring (2004; 2016), this is a false dualism, just as it is also false to consider quantitative methodology as characteristic of positivism and opposed to qualitative methodology, the latter being considered proper to the constructivist paradigm: “Qualitative research can enrich the qualitative terrain, and the quantitative can suggest which differences can be analysed in a more interpretative way” (Pring 2016, p. 108).

Metaphors of Leadership in *De Regno*

It is important to clarify that the term “leadership” comes from English and not Latin, which explains its absence in *De Regno*. The conceptualization of leadership in the social sciences is relatively recent. Talcott Parsons (1951) chose to translate the German term “*Herrschaft*” – used by his mentor Max Weber (1921/2007) – as leadership. This translation underscores Weber’s emphasis on legitimacy over coercion (Parsons 1960). For its part, Émile Durkheim did not refer to leadership but rather to government (Durkheim, 1895/1986).

Aquinas did not use the term “leadership”, but he did employ other terms with closely related conceptual content. Specifically, in *De Regno*, he frequently uses the terms “*regimen*” or “*gubernationis*”, which are typically translated into English as “government” with a functional meaning. For some scholars, government is a broader concept than leadership: “what we call leading simply designates a particular form of the act of governing, which, like all acts of government, entails common ends and a certain communication of knowledge, in other words, a form of teaching” (Letelier, 2023, p. 537).

However, from our perspective, leadership is a broader phenomenon than political government, with the latter constituting a specific type of leadership or formal leadership. In political government the relationship between the leader and the followers is formalized as a normative authority that binds them. It is worth noting that leadership can exist without a legal or normative bond, but not without authority. Formal leadership is grounded in normative authority, such as that of political governments, parents or teachers in the educational process; informal leadership has moral authority but not normative authority, as seen in spiritual or educational mentorship (López González, 2025). Formal leadership is a functional notion: the formal leader is a person who has official responsibilities and rights to move the organisation in the right direction. The formal leader exercise leadership *de iure* and often (but not always) *de facto*, while the informal leader always exercises leadership *de facto* (Wilson, 2023).

However, it is essential to recognise that leadership and government are closely related concepts and that the leadership metaphors examined below are metaphors of government. This interpretive approach entails a transfer of meaning that allows us to conclude that Aquinas’s reflections on government, along with the conceptual metaphors he employs, can also be applied to leadership. With these clarifications established, we will now analyse the key conceptual metaphors of leadership found in Aquinas’s work, in particular that of the pilot guiding the ship to harbour.

Certainly, Aquinas’ political-organizational thinking has limitations. It ignores elements of psychology and sociology that today allow us to have a better understanding of the phenomenon of leadership. One can also observe in his thought an over-dependence on the ecclesiastical model. However, Aquinas tries to critically justify his choices, for example in favor of monarchy, by moderating its exercise.

Leadership as Steering a Ship to a Safe Harbour

Aquinas uses a well-known analogy, comparing the role of a king or ruler to guiding a ship safely into harbour. Plato had previously made a similar comparison, portraying the ruler as a pilot and the state as a ship (Republic, 370 B.C.E./1986, 487b–502c). As Aquinas states:

in all things which are ordered towards an end, wherein this or that course may be adopted, some directive principle is needed through which the due end may be reached by the most direct route. A ship, for example, which moves in different directions according to the impulse of the changing winds, would never reach its destination were it not brought to port by the skill of the pilot. Now, man has an end to which his whole life and all his actions are ordered; for man is an intelligent agent, and it is clearly the part of an intelligent agent to act in view of an end. Men also adopt different methods in proceeding towards their proposed end, as the diversity of men's pursuits and actions clearly indicates. Consequently, man needs some directive principle to guide him towards his end (I, 1, 3).

He uses the naval metaphor again in the Chap. 15:

Before going into that, however, we should consider that to govern is to lead the thing governed in a suitable way towards its proper end. Thus a ship is said to be governed when, through the skill of the pilot, it is brought unharmed and by a direct route to harbour. Consequently, if a thing be directed to an end outside itself (as a ship to the harbour), it is the governor's duty, not only to preserve the thing unharmed, but further to guide it towards this end. If, on the contrary, there be a thing whose end is not outside itself, then the governor's endeavours will merely tend to preserve the thing undamaged in its proper perfection (I, 15, 103).

He employs the metaphor of the pilot (or ship's owner), in this chapter, a little later.

For example, the owner, whose business it is to regulate navigation, tells the ship-builder what kind of ship he must construct to be suitable for navigation; and the ruler of a city, who makes use of arms, tells the blacksmith what kind of arms to make. But because a man does not attain his end, which is the possession of God, by human power but by divine according to the words of the Apostle (Rom 6:23): "By the grace of God life everlasting"—therefore the task of leading him to that last end does not pertain to human but to divine government (I, 15, 108).

To explain his political theory of leadership, Aquinas employs a familiar metaphor embedded in the etymology of the term "*gubernationis*". The metaphor that compares the office of the king to that of the pilot of a ship is implicit in the Latin term *gubernatoris*, which, as Aquinas himself notes, comes from the Greek (Aquinas 1949; I, 15c). Just as a pilot is entrusted with steering a ship to a safe harbour, the king is similarly expected to guide a human group toward a successful and prosperous outcome. In this framework, Aquinas aligns with Aristotle's theory of finality (in Greek *telos*) as the driving cause of motion. Indeed, the term "end" (in Latin *finis* or *finem*) appears 41 times throughout *De Regno*. This recurrence to the term "end" indicates that for Aquinas the end is constitutive of leadership.

For Aquinas, the harbour symbolises the ultimate end - a state of rest, happiness, and fulfillment toward which the ship is directed. Drawing on Aristotle, Aquinas argues that the ultimate end functions as the "cause of causes," guiding human action, including leadership. Ultimately this good or *beatitudo* is found in God Himself: the communion with God and others (López González, 2025). The common good, in this context, entails the practice

of virtues (specially instance justice and prudence) and fostering conditions of peace and development within the community (Nebel 2006).

For Aquinas, the common good involves practising virtues and promoting conditions of peace and development within the community, which are ordered towards the end of that community, as a transcendent horizon (Nebel 2006). The ultimate goal – communion with God and others through charity – is not merely an extrinsic objective but also an internal principle that leads to the exercise of leadership and followership among the people who make up the community, (1) fostering good interpersonal relationships, (2) a better understanding of reality, (3) and commitment to the accomplishment of tasks. The exercise of leadership/followership involves a dynamism of human action in synergy with divine action, exercising the cardinal and transcendent virtues (López González 2024a).

It is also important to examine the verbs Aquinas employs to describe the role of the pilot (*gubernatoris*) as helmsman, guiding the ship, as well as their translation into English. Aquinas primarily uses the Latin verb “*dirigere*”, which translates as “to guide,” though he occasionally employs “*gubernare*” as well. In both instances, he establishes a connection between the acts of guiding and governing and the ultimate end or the common good, underscoring that both entails leading toward a safe harbour. Steering a ship toward treacherous waters contradicts the very essence of a true and virtuous pilot; likewise, governing a community toward its downfall represents the negation of genuine and virtuous leadership.

The pilot metaphor remains a significant element in organizational discourse, continuing to serve as a conceptual framework for understanding the role of leaders who must navigate complex and challenging circumstances (Papastephanou 2024). Furthermore, this metaphor extends to those who guide leadership research, drawing inspiration from the practices of early sailors who documented and mapped uncharted waters to facilitate future exploration (Lewis & Smith, 2022; Fairhurst and Grant 2010; Pearce 1995).

At times, Aquinas employs the verb “*praesidere*”, which translates as “to rule,” conveying a meaning similar to “*dirigere*” but with a more juridical connotation. Leadership, in this sense, closely aligns with the concept of “rulership”. The role of the ruler (underpinned by a metaphor) is likened to that of a pilot, as well as to that of an armorer or a house builder, insofar as all these figures share a common purpose: the pursuit of a greater good:

The aim of any ruler should be directed towards securing the welfare of that which he undertakes to rule. The duty of the pilot, for instance, is to preserve his ship amidst the perils of the sea, and to bring it unharmed to the port of safety. Now the welfare and safety of a multitude formed into a society lies in the preservation of its unity, which is called peace (...). Thus, the more efficacious government is in keeping the unity of peace, the more useful it will be. For we call that more useful which leads more directly to the end (I, 3, 17).

Aquinas employs also the verb “*perducere*” nine times, which is translated into English as “to lead.” Given that “to lead” serves as the grammatical root of the noun “leadership,” further examination of this term is warranted. For Aquinas, “*perducere*”, like “*praesidere*” and “*dirigere*”, is associated with the pursuit of a good end or the common good, particularly in relation to determining the most effective means to achieve it. The leader does not define the ultimate goal but rather devises the best course of action to reach it, making strategic and effective decisions to ensure the attainment of the intended objective. Aquinas states in

Latin, “*gubernare est id quod gubernatur convenienter ad debitum finem perducere*”, which translates into English as: “to govern is to lead the thing governed in a suitable way towards its proper end.” (Aquinas 1949; I, 15b).

Paraphrasing this statement, to lead is to guide others (a community) in a suitable way towards its proper end. Leadership can be defined as the act of guiding others toward the common good (López González et al., 2021; 2024b, c). This definition of leadership has three characteristics desirable for a definition (Wilson, 2023): (1) generality: capture the concept at its most general level, without imposing or excluding specific ways of applying it; (2) empirical accuracy: reflect how the concept is manifested in practice; (3) clarity of boundaries: establish necessary and sufficient conditions to determine what is included and what is excluded from the concept. Likewise, in this definition we can identify four key dimensions for an adequate definition of leadership (see Wilson, 2023): (1) the asymmetrical dimension that differentiates the leader from other members of the organisation; (2) the social dimension of leadership; (3) the behavioural dimension referring to the leader’s behaviour; and (4) the teleological dimension concerning the purpose or *telos* of leadership action.

Another verb associated with *to guide* and *to lead* is *to direct*. In this context, Aquinas observes that the title “*rex*” derives from “*regere*”, which translates as “to direct.” According to Aquinas, to govern, to guide, to lead, to direct or to rule others toward the common good is a task that demands the exercise of the highest virtues and results in greater happiness and reward than merely managing individual goods. In this sense, Aquinas elevates both politics and the practice of leadership, viewing it not as a suspect profession, but one requiring significant moral integrity. However, he also cautions against the potential for abuse. He warns the King of Cyprus not to become a tyrant, for such a transformation would undermine the legitimacy of his leadership. Aquinas asserts that the rule of a tyrant represents the worst form of leadership or governance, as the tyrant is the antithesis of the true king. In his educational recommendations, he explains that the fear of the followers enables the rise of tyrants. He further adds, “it is not unjust that the king be deposed or have his power restricted by that same multitude if, becoming a tyrant, he abuses the royal power” (I, 7, 49).

Other Leadership Metaphors

Aquinas employs both explicit and implicit metaphors in *De Regno* to illustrate leadership, drawing inspiration from nature (e.g., the organization of bees), human nature itself (the rational soul governing its faculties), theodicy (divine government), and various professions, including the armourer, the builder, the soldier, and the blacksmith. He seamlessly integrates these metaphors with the communicative expertise inherent in a teacher. Although these are very different metaphors, the concept of leadership is the same: guiding others towards a good or a goal.

Aquinas uses the metaphor of divine government from a philosophical or theodicy perspective, without appealing to revelation, as an example to be followed by rulers or leaders in their exercise of leadership. Divine government can be seen as an educational example for moral emulation of leadership (López González et al. 2024a). He compares divine government with the government of reason, establishing a similarity between theodicy and anthropology:

Since things which are in accordance with art are an imitation of the things which are in accordance with nature (from which we accept the rules to act according to reason), it seems best that we learn about the kingly office from the pattern of nature's regime. In things of nature there is both a universal and a particular government. The former is God's government, whose rule embraces all things and whose providence governs them all. The latter is found in man and it is much like the divine government. Hence man is called a 'microcosm.' Indeed, there is a similitude between both governments in regard to their form: for just as the universe of corporeal creatures and all spiritual powers come under the divine government, in like manner the members of the human body and all the powers of the soul are governed by reason. Thus, in a proportionate manner, reason is to man what God is to the world (I, 13, 93–94).

Aquinas further asserts that the king's mode of governance should emulate God, who has established a natural order to be followed. The metaphor of God as a ruler is not new; it can already be found in Aristotle's writings. It does not refer to theological revelation but to theodicy, that is, natural theology. To support his vision of governance, he employs a rich interplay of metaphors, drawing from legal (rulership), theological (divine authority), philosophical (reason), and biological (bees) frameworks.

Since, however, man is by nature a social animal living in a multitude, as we have pointed out above, the analogy with the divine government is found in him not only in this way that one man governs himself by reason, but also in that the multitude of men is governed by the reason of one man. This is what first of all constitutes the office of a king. True, among certain animals that live socially there is a likeness to the king's rulership; so we say that there are kings among bees. Yet animals exercise rulership not through reason but through their natural instinct which is implanted in them by the Great Ruler the Author of nature (I, 13, 94).

Conclusions and Prospects

This article may contribute to the current debate on the conceptualization and definition of leadership (Wilson, 2017; 2018). Although De Regno specifically refers to government rather than leadership, his ideas can be applied both to government (understood as *de iure* leadership) and to leadership in the broad sense (*de facto* leadership) (Wilson, 2023). Likewise, the article also clarifies the nature of leadership (what it is) and the dynamics of human action inherent in leadership: the act of guiding others towards a common good (López González 2024a; López González & de Ortiz, 2021; López González et al., 2024b). The study of metaphors in Aquinas is an example of how the humanities and ancient philosophy can contribute to the discourse of the social sciences - specifically the discourse on leadership- in current debates, and enlighten their development (Case and VanderWeele 2024; Joullie and Spillane 2015; Milbank 2004).

As an original contribution, this research has identified a key metaphor of leadership in *De Regno*: the pilot guiding a ship to safe harbour or port. Aquinas utilises these metaphors to underpin and explain his political theory, while also providing practical recommendations for governance and education. Furthermore, we have examined several Latin and English

verbs associated with the act of leadership, including *perducere*, *dirigere*, *regere*, and *gubernare*. The use of these verbs, in conjunction with the metaphors, enriches the interpretation of Aquinas's concept of leadership and offers valuable perspectives for contemporary leadership discourse and education.

According to Aquinas "*gubernare est id quod gubernatur convenienter ad debitum finem perducere*" (I, 15b). Following the thought of Aquinas, it is proposed to define leadership as the human act of guiding others towards a common good (López González et al., 2021; 2024b, c). The use of one verb or another to refer to leadership is not indifferent: an instrumentalist conception underlies the verb "to influence," which is the most commonly used verb in definitions of leadership.

This approach and the above definition are useful in contemporary academic debate. Firstly, it is important to also consider the end because academic conversation often focuses on the means—how people are influenced, how resources are used, how wills are bent, etc. However, leadership actions are teleological: the end or *telos* is the cause of human action, to which the means are ordered. Leadership requires not only good means but also a good end, the right direction (Brooks 2021; Ciulla 1995; López González et al. 2024b, c; Newstead et al. 2021). Secondly the above definition indicates that the essence of leadership is guiding others. Leadership involves influence, but not all influence implies leadership: dropping a bomb or inventing a vaccine influences the lives of many people, but these are not acts of leadership because they do not imply guiding others. Influence is an effect of leadership but is not leadership itself. Thirdly, exercising leadership involves a network of intellectual, relational and performative virtues, such as humility or magnanimity (Kincaid, in press n.d.); López González et al. 2024b).

Although Aquinas's proposal aligns more closely with the humanist paradigm, it incorporates elements that enable it to engage with other paradigms. The use of analogy as an epistemological tool serves to affirm that leadership is said in various ways that are related to a principal analogate. It rejects that personal social facts are things or objects like the rest of created nature, which would imply univocity between people and things; or mere social constructs, which would imply equivocity and relativism (Beuchot 2015).

In this regard, we find elements that draw it closer to the functionalist paradigm, particularly in Aquinas's recommendation that the king moderate his government by seeking the advice and involvement of others. Simultaneously, elements related to the political paradigm are evident, especially in his critique of leadership abuse. He observes that tyrants are often replaced by others, with the second emerging from efforts to overthrow the first, only to subject the people to even greater oppression. The experiences of both past and present confirm that the exercise of leadership is frequently confused with manipulation and ideological domination (Gemmil and Oakley 1992; Alvesson and Sveningsson 2012; Tourish 2013; Alvesson & Blom, 2015).

As a prospect for future research, the thought of premodern authors, such as Aquinas, can shed light on organizational theory and, in particular on leadership. While disciplines have evolved independently from moral philosophy and theology, the points of contact remain significant, and they share a common object of study. Furthermore, these works are crucial antecedents without which the thought of modern authors would not be fully understood. Specifically, recovering the contributions of works considered within the literary genre "mirror of princes" (*speculum principis*) would be of great value for leadership education. This literary genre, inherited from antiquity, was highly popular during the Middle Ages,

with parallels found in works from ancient Egypt, India, China, and the Arab world. Books within the “Mirror of princes” genre can be regarded as antecedents to modern leadership literature (Wilson et al. 2017). While the corpus of texts is vast, it remains underexplored, with the notable exception of *Il Principe* by Macchiavello (1971).

The Thomistic reflection on leadership sheds light on the contemporary discourse on the global common good and leadership. The global common good refers to those goods that benefit all of humanity and are characterised by the following: (1) no one can be excluded from their use; (2) their use by one person does not prevent others from using them; (3) they must be available to all without conditions (Ostrom 1990). In *De Regno*, Aquinas asserts that the common good is what orders and causes leadership. It is a central element of the dynamism of human action which, when appreciated, triggers, and orient leadership (López González 2024a). Leadership education models must consider this dynamism and the exercise of cardinal and transcendent virtues for flourishing, such as the EDULID model (López González et al. 2024b, c; López González and Rodríguez Barroso 2025).

Finally, the debate on the concept of education and its aims can also be illuminated by the concept of the common good and leadership education that we have developed in this article. Education is a global common good; it consists of deliberate and intentional learning with a specific purpose and organisation (UNESCO, 2015). The humanistic conceptualisation of the common good that we have offered can help to harmonise the tension between its ends: the creation and dissemination of knowledge, education in competencies for the labour market, the promotion of civic virtues, sustainable human and social development, and human flourishing. According to Aquinas, it is possible to order and harmonise these goods in light of the dynamism of human action that considers psychology (in the field of anthropology), cultural contexts, the educability of human beings and the existence of evil, which hinders but does not prevent piloting the ship to arrive safely at its harbour.

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