

Reason as the guide in Human action: Aquinas' Ethics

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Abstract: *Morality according to Thomas Aquinas is hinged on reason or the application of reason to discover the proper guide to our human conduct. This arises from the fact that there are competing goods available to man in decision making. Decisions are reached based on choices available. And choices are hinged on two powers of reason that man has. The powers of reason are the intellect and the will. A good will has a very important role in moral knowledge. By the power of a good will, man tries to gather the greatest possible means, to seek the best means and to choose it. These powers both the will and intellect, aid or help us in arriving at choice worthy conduct of behaviour. The good for man has to be rationalized. Aquinas had provided us with a better option in terms of rationality which places emphasis on character with regards to moral human conduct.*

I. Introduction

Morality at the very least, is the effort to guide one's conduct by reason. This means that it is, to do what there are the best reasons for doing. An action is human insofar as it is hinged or based on reason or the application of reason. This is not the end of it, as reason or rational principle possesses powers.

Human person do have impressive intellectual capacities which entail having evolved as rational beings. This further makes us capable of having a morality. It is on this fact of rationality that we are able to take some facts as reasons for behaving one way rather than another. Such an action will help satisfy our desire, needs, because we have a reason in favour of doing it.

We are impelled to act in certain ways as a result of deliberation, as a result of thinking about our behaviour and its consequences. We now use the word ought as a new element. We ought to do what there are the weightiest reasons for doing.

In Aquinas's moral philosophy, human goodness depends on performing acts that are in accord with our human nature. But what sort of acts are those? In other words, what feature or features serve to distinguish human acts from acts of a different kind?

Here we must go beyond the simple claim that an action is human just insofar as it is rational. This claim may no doubt be true, but the nature of rationality itself needs explanation. This work seeks to explore more fully just what rationality or reason consists in according to Aquinas. Only then can we understand the nature of human action and the end at which such action aims.

Morality is the guide to human conduct. Yet morality is viewed from different perspectives such as Kantianism and Consequentialism. These are different approaches to determining conduct and morality that individuals choose from. Morality according to Thomas Aquinas is hinged on reason or the application of rational tendencies to discover the proper guide to human conduct. This arises from the fact that there are competing goods available to man in decision making.

Decisions are reached based on choices available. Decision is crucial for man's moral life because it shapes his life. A man knows that he is the author of his own decisions and that no one can dispense him from this duty. There is no way to escape decisions. Even to refuse to make a decision is a decision. Every decision is made with something in view.

The decision itself is seen as a good, as something worthy of our desire. The object of our decision is always some good that we know and desire. And choices are hinged on two powers of reason that man has. The powers of reason – intellect and will – aid or help us in arriving at choice worthy conduct of behaviour.

Good as a Concept

This work aims at discovering the place of reason on the acts of man with respect to his conduct in Aquinas ethics. It is important to note that the good for man has to be rationalized since there are various competing goals in our life. Aquinas had provided us with a better option in terms of rationality which places emphasis on character with regards to moral conduct.

The importance of this work is that since humanity is endowed with rationality, it follows that all could be subject to a morality that is hinged on reason. The good that appear before us are not equal. Our task is to know what good each thing is and to treat it accordingly. The foundation of ethics is our natural ability to use

our reason and to understand reality, which includes the hierarchy of the good. Three basic kinds of good are coverable in traditional philosophy.

The first good as enumerated by Piotr Jaroszynski and Mathew Anderson, is the pleasurable good (*bonum delectabile*). This is the good that is desired with a view to an activity that is pleasurable in itself. Someone may eat without thinking of nourishment, but because he likes to eat. Even if he has eaten enough, he may continue to eat. *Bonum delectabile* is the major source of corruption in societies. It is in the quest for goods that will give pleasure to someone that tilt him or her to corrupt stances.

The second good is the useful good (*bonum utile*). This is a good that is a means to an end, a good that serves some other good. For example, eating may be a means both of satisfying hunger and of seeking pleasure. The good as a means may serve the third kind of good.

The third kind of good is the authentic good (*bonum honestum*). This is a good which is an end in itself in an objective sense. Its goodness is not merely the result of our inclinations, as is the case with the pleasurable good. *Bonum honestum* is the aim of virtue of prudence and this is the target of this essay.

The three kinds of good overlap one another. The authentic good may be both pleasurable and useful. There are also times when the goods are in conflict, however. This is seen or noticed when corruption arises. Neither the pleasurable good nor the useful good are in themselves evil from the moral point of view.

Intellect and Will in Aquinas Moral Philosophy

Rationality in the medieval period of philosophy was the basis of moral criterion and philosophers then placed it in a prominent position. This was extended to the modern era. They believed that reason really subjugates passion and leads to the development of mature responsible individuals. In this, the society benefits at large. Thus, within this period, reason is the sole determinant of moral behaviour.

Reason is conceptually different, says Aquinas. It is an intellectual virtue, the object of which is truth. The excellence of reason is that it brings man to the knowledge of himself and of things outside of himself. Aquinas like other medieval philosophers believes that it is the lot of reason to guide an individual human person to act properly. This at each circumstance uncover the risky interaction between reason and bodily passion.

Aquinas provides the most comprehensive treatment of this subject in the second part of the *Summa Theologiae* (ST). In this book, Aquinas says reason is the primary ruler and measurement of acts "since it belongs to reason to direct to the end, which is the first principle of all matters of action"¹. Reasoning is important to human because of the great number and variety of acts. In reasoning the human's knowledge is condensed and ordered.

Elsewhere, he explains that reason is comprised of two powers: one cognitive, the other appetitive. The cognitive power is the *intellect*. The intellect has two basic functions:

- (1) It enables us to know and understand, and
- (2) It also enables us to apprehend the goodness a thing has.

The word intellect derives from the Latin word *intelligere*. This Latin word is composed of the two words, *intus* which means within and *legere* which means to read. In other words, intellect etymologically means to read within a thing. This clearly suggests the notion of reading that which cannot be read with the naked eye. The appetitive power of reason is called the *will*. In Aquinas estimation the will is seen as a native desire for the understood good. That is, it is an appetite that is responsive to the intellect's estimations of what is good or choice worthy².

The intellect and will are immaterial powers. The intellect enables us to understand and the will enables us to want and choose. These powers do not any specific material organs. They are spiritual which makes them unlimited. The intellect is not limited in its ability to know. Even if we recognize that something is unknowable, we still know it as unknowable.

To live as a human is to live according to intellect and will. Each human activity demands that we make an effort to understand and make decision. A human being must deliberate before he makes a decision. Each individual seek to live a human live which is according to reason. Man's basic good is to live according to reason. Reason alone tells man what is objectively good and in what measure it is good.

On this view, all acts of will are dependent on antecedent acts of intellect; the intellect must supply the will with the object to which the latter inclines. In turn, that object moves the will as a final cause "because the good understood is the object of the will, and moves it as an end"³.

The will tend towards the end of an action. But when the will tries to achieve the need of other people, it requires virtue. There are two aspects of the will: first, desiring will – *voluntas ut natura*, second, choosing will – *voluntas electura*.

Both are complementary. When the will desires something, there is a goal. When you talk of the will in its selecting, then you are talking of the means to achieve the goal. *Voluntas electura* helps to choose appropriate means.

From the account of intellect and will provided thus far, it may appear that the intellect necessitates the will's acts by its own evaluative portrayals of goodness. Yet Aquinas insists that no single account of the good can necessitate the will's movement. Most goods do not have a necessary connection to happiness. That is, we do not need them in order to be happy; thus the will does not incline to them of necessity⁴. But what of those goods that do have a necessary connection to happiness? What about the goodness of God or those virtues which lead us to God "in whom alone true happiness consists"⁵.

According to Aquinas, the will does not incline necessarily to these goods, either. For in this life we cannot see God in all his goodness, and thus the connection between God, virtue and final happiness will always appear opaque. Aquinas writes: "until through the certitude of the Divine Vision the necessity of such connection be shown, the will does not adhere to God of necessity, nor to those things which are of God"⁶.

In this life, then, our intellectual limitations prevent us from apprehending what is good *simpliciter*. Instead, we are presented with competing goods between which we must choose⁷. Some goods provide immediate gratification but no long-term satisfaction. Other goods may precipitate hardship but eventually make us better people. Indeed, sometimes we must exercise considerable effort in ignoring superficial or petty pleasures while attending to more difficult yet enduring goods.

To employ Aquinas's parlance, the will must exercise efficient causality on the intellect by instructing it to consider some goods rather than others⁸. This happens whenever we, through our own determination, direct our attention away from certain desirable objects and toward those we think are most choice worthy.

Of course, our character will often govern the goods we desire and ultimately choose. Even so, Aquinas does not think that our character wholly determines our choices, as evidenced by the fact that we sometimes make decisions that are contrary to our established habits. This is actually fortunate for us, for it suggests that even people disposed toward evil can manage to make good choices and perhaps begin to correct their more hardened and inordinate inclinations.

Although the will always chooses under the aspect of the good, the only thing that necessitates the will's choice – the only thing, that is, that the will cannot choose – is the beatific vision. This is due to the fact that the various things man chooses in his daily actions are not good without qualification. Each thing is good, under a certain way of considering the act, and not good, under another consideration.

Thus, though the will chooses the good, it chooses the good under a certain aspect; and the aspect has to do with our wilful deliberations. If an individual murders someone, he does so under the aspect of the good – perhaps he considers the things he will gain from the individual's death. But that he chooses to focus on this aspect of the action is itself due to his own deliberation, and his very process of deliberation, importantly, involves the will.

The will chooses under the aspect of the good, and the intellect presents the will with possible causes of action, the will also controls the very deliberation of the intellect. The intellect, through a process of deliberation, presents possible causes of action to the will, but this process is not conducted independently of the will. For the will determines the path the deliberation takes, and directs the deliberation of the intellect towards certain aspects of the action rather than others.

The intimate involvement of the will in human action clarifies Aquinas' assertion that prudence is a moral virtue. Prudence is in the intellect, but that the intellect is even capable of taking counsel, judging, and especially commanding is due to the will. To take counsel at all, let alone good counsel, presupposes certain rectitude of the will, which ultimately controls the path intellectual deliberation follows.

Human Action in Aquinas

Now we are prepared to answer the question posed at the beginning of this work: what actions are those we can designate as human? The answer is this: human actions are those over which one has voluntary control⁹. Unlike non-rational animals, human beings choose their actions according to a reasoned account of what they think are good.

Seen this way, human actions are not products of deterministic causal forces. They are products of our own free judgment (*liberum arbitrium*), the exercise of which is a function of both intellect and will¹⁰. When discussing what it is that makes an action human, then, Aquinas has in mind those capacities whereby one judges and chooses what is good. For it is through one's ability to deliberate and judge in this way that one exercises mastery over one's actions¹¹.

Thus far, we have established that human actions are actions that are governed by a reasoned consideration of what is good. Aquinas also thinks that the good in question functions as an end—the object for the sake of which the agent acts. "For the object of the will is the end and the good"¹². There are two worries that emerge here, both of which can be resolved rather quickly. First, it seems we do not always act for the sake

of an end. Many actions we perform are not products of our own deliberation and voluntary judgment. Yet Aquinas points out that acts of this sort are not properly human acts “since they do not proceed from the deliberation of the reason”¹³. In order for an act to count as a human act, it must be a product of the agent’s reasoned consideration about what is good. Second, it appears that Aquinas is mistaken when he says that the ends for the sake of which we act are good.

Clearly, many things we pursue in life are not good. Aquinas does not deny this. He agrees that cognitive errors and excessive passion can distort our moral views and, in turn, incline us to choose the wrong things. Aquinas’s point, however, is that our actions are done for the sake of what we believe - rightly or wrongly - to be good. Whether the ends we pursue are in fact good is a separate question.

Aquinas does not simply wish to defend the claim that human acts are for the sake of some good. Following Augustine, he insists that our actions are for the sake of a final good—a last end which we desire for its own sake and for the sake of which everything else is chosen¹⁴. If there was no such end, we would have a hard time explaining why anyone chooses to do anything at all. The reason for this is as follows. Aquinas argues that for every action or series of actions, there must be something that is first in “order of intention”¹⁵.

In other words, there must be some end or good that is intrinsically desirable and serves the will’s final cause. According to this view, such a good is a catalyst for desire and is therefore necessary in order for us to act for the sake of what we desire. Scott MacDonald writes, “one can explain [a given action] only by appealing to some end or good that is itself capable of moving the will — that is, by appealing to an end that is viewed desirable in itself”¹⁶. Were you to remove the intrinsically desirable end, then you would remove the very principle that motivates us to act in the first place¹⁷. This account also helps to explain why we cannot postulate an indefinite series of ends when explaining human actions¹⁸.

The existence of an indefinite series of ends would mean that there is no intrinsically desirable good for the sake of which we act. In the absence of any such good, we would not desire anything and thus never have the necessary motivation to act¹⁹. So there must be a last end or final good that we desire for its own sake.

This last claim still does not capture what Aquinas ultimately wishes to show, namely, that there is a single end for the sake of which all of us act²⁰. To put the matter as starkly as possible, Aquinas wants to argue that every human act of every human being is for the sake of a single end that is the same for everyone²¹. The previous argument did not require us to think that the final end for which we act is the same for everyone. Nor did it show that the end at which every human being aims consists in a specific, solitary good (as opposed to a constellation of goods).

What, exactly, is this last end at which we aim? All of us seek after our own perfection²². We do so by performing actions we think will—directly or indirectly—contribute to or facilitate a life that is more complete or fulfilling than it would be otherwise. In other words, the last end—the end or good that we desire for its own sake—is happiness, whereby happiness Aquinas means the sort of perfection or fulfilment.

Admittedly, this claim is fairly abstract and uncontroversial. After all, Aquinas does not say what happiness consists in - the thing in which it is realized. He simply wishes to show that there is something everyone desires and pursues, namely, ultimate fulfilment. He says, everyone “desires the fulfilment of their perfection, and it is precisely this fulfilment in which the last end consists”²³. So construed, the idea of the last end is, as MacDonald Scott explains, a “formal concept...of the complete and perfect good, that which completely satisfies desire”²⁴.

But while everyone acts for the sake of such an end abstractly conceived, Aquinas recognizes that there is considerable disagreement over what it is in which happiness consists²⁵. So there is a difference between the idea of the last end that is an idea for the sake of which everyone acts, and the specific object in which the last end is thought to consist²⁶.

Some people think that the last end consists in the acquisition of external goods, like riches, power, or fame²⁷. Others think it consists in goods of the body, like comeliness or physical pleasure²⁸. And still others think that happiness consists in acquiring goods of the soul such as knowledge, virtue, and friendship²⁹. But as laudable as some of these good are (particularly those of the latter category), they are all beset with unique deficiencies that preclude them from providing the kind of complete fulfilment characteristic of final happiness.

What is it, then, in which our last end really consists or is realized? For Aquinas, the last end of happiness can only consist in that which is perfectly good, which is God. Because God is perfect goodness, he is the only one capable of fulfilling our heart’s deepest longing and facilitating the perfection at which we aim. Thus he says that human beings “attain their last end by knowing and loving God”³⁰.

Aquinas refers to this last end—the state in which perfect happiness consists—as the beatific vision. The beatific vision is a supernatural union with God, the enjoyment of which surpasses the satisfaction afforded by those goods people sometimes associate with the last end. But if perfect happiness consists in the beatific vision, then why do people fail to seek it? Actually, all people do seek it—at least in some sense. As we have already noted, all of us desire our own perfection, which is synonymous with final happiness.

Unfortunately, many of our sanctions are informed by mistaken views of what happiness really consists in. These views may be the result of some intellectual or cognitive error (say if one's views are the result of ignorance or ill-informed deliberation). But more than likely, our mistaken views will be the result of certain appetitive excesses that corrupt our understanding of what is really good. For this reason, good actions require excellences - or virtues - of both mind and appetite.

II. Conclusion

This work sorts to explore the role or place of reason or rationality in Aquinas vis-à-vis human action. For Aquinas, reason or rationality comprise of two powers namely the cognitive and the appetitive. The cognitive power is the intellect, with functions as to know and understand and two, it also enables us to apprehend the goodness a thing has. The appetitive power of reason is called the will. In Aquinas estimation the will is the native desire for the understood good. That is, it is an appetite that is responsive to the intellect's estimations of what is good or choice worthy.

If human actions are those over which one has voluntary control, their actions must be according to a reasoned account of what they think are good. Hence human actions are not products of deterministic causal forces. They are products of our own free judgment, the exercise of which is a function of both intellect and will. It helps us appreciate more the role being played by the virtue of prudence in Aquinas' ethics.

Fostering reasoning aims at acting intelligently instead of swayed away by urges and emotions. In addition, it must take into account the interest and welfare of others. This avoids acting selfishly. Consequently it promotes actions that we are proud of, publicly or privately.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the virtue of prudence depends very much upon the will, both in the initial stage and in its decision stage. A good will, a will that is directed with all its power toward the proper good, has a very important role in moral knowledge. By the power of a good will, man tries to gather the greatest possible means, to seek the best means and to choose it. If the will is not upright but depraved, man will direct the process of moral knowledge to agree with a choice of means that is in harmony with bad will.³¹

Man's moral life drama is chiefly within man. Within himself a man gathers the forces of his will and intellect in order to make decision. His action start within him. Within himself he feels satisfaction for having chosen the good or he feels pain for having chosen evil.

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