

Reason and Human Action in Aquinas' Moral Theory

Okoro Edward Ajanwachukwu
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

Abstract

Living morally in Thomas Aquinas' ethics is anchored on reason. This helps man 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. Choices are based on intellect and will that man has. Intellect and will aid us in arriving at choice worthy conduct of behaviour. Good for man has to be rationalized. Critical explanation will be offered in seeking to understand Aquinas' examination of human action. He had provided us with a better option in terms of reason.

Introduction

Good moral living is, at the very least, the effort to guide one's conduct by reason. In other words, to do what there are the best reasons for doing. An action is human insofar as it is hinged on reason. This is not the end of it as reason possesses powers.

A human person does have intellectual capacities which are associated with rationality. This accordingly translates to the ability for living morally. It is on this fact of rationality that man is able to take some facts as reasons for behaving one way rather than the other. Such an action will help satisfy his desires or needs because man had reason in favour of doing it.

Man strongly feels to act in certain ways as a result of deliberation, as a result of thinking about our behaviour and the reactions that follow it. He now uses the word ought as a new element. Man ought to do what there are the weightiest reasons for doing.

In Thomas Aquinas's ethics, human goodness depends on performing acts that are in accord with man's human nature. But what sort of acts are those? In other words, what feature or features serve to distinguish human acts from other acts? The claim that an action is human just insofar as it is rational makes further claim on the nature of rationality and its explanation. This work seeks to explore more fully just what rationality or reason consists in according to Aquinas. Only then can one understand the nature of human action and the end at which such action aims.

Morality is the guide to human conduct. Guiding human conduct has been articulated in ethical theories. For Thomas Aquinas, morality is hinged on rationality or the application of reason to discover the proper guide to one's conduct. In decision making, there are competing goods available to man. Decisions are reached based on choices available. And choices are hinged on two powers of reason that man has. The powers of reason aid or help us in arriving at choice worthy behaviour.

It is important to note that the good for man has to be rationalized since there are competing goals in our life. Aquinas had provided us with a better option in terms of rationality which places emphasis on character formation with regards to moral conduct.

Since humanity is endowed with reason, it follows that all could be subject to a choice based conduct. The goods 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.

Reason and Morality in Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas provided the most comprehensive treatment of reason in the second part of the *Summa Theologiae* (ST). In this book, Aquinas (1981) adduced that 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” (S T I-II, q. 90, a. 1).

The rule and measure of human acts is the reason. It belongs to reason to direct a man’s activity towards his end. It is reason which gives orders, imposes obligation. It should be noted that reason is not the arbitrary source of obligation. It cannot impose any obligations it likes. The primary object of the practical reason is the good. This good has the nature of an end. Practical reason, recognising the good as the end, makes known its first principle: good is to be done and pursued and evil avoided.

Elsewhere in *Quaestiones Disputate de Malo* (1993), Aquinas explains that reason comprises 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 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 worthy (1993, S T I, q. 82, a. 1).

The intellect is the source which generates concepts, judgments and reasonings. Through this faculty, man obtains from the data that experience furnishes universal concepts and judgments.

The will is a faculty or capacity for producing acts and are called desiring, volitional acts, willing and so on. The will’s object is always the known good. This means that nothing is desired that is not first known.

Aquinas (1993) understands intellect and will as faculties or powers one has that in various ways depend on one another and work together to enable the person to perform an intentional action (171-183). Intellect is a cognitive faculty that apprehends particular objects and actions as good and thus provides the information required for action. Will is an appetite for the good that provides the desire for action.

As an appetitive power, the will is an inclination for the good in general. The will is a kind of craving, or bent for goodness, though not for any particular good. (1981, S TI q. 82.a. 1; S TI-II q. 10. a. 1) For Aquinas, the will cannot make its own determinations about the goodness of particular objects. (1981, STI. q. 82,.a. 4) This is the job of the intellect.

The intellect is the knowing power that understands particular objects as good and then presents the objects to will. Once the intellect presents something to the will as good then the will wants it happen. This is because will desires the good.(STI q. 82. a. 4c.) The intellect does not always take the lead from the will rather the two depend on and move one another, though in very different ways.

Supportive of Aquinas, Claudia Eisen-Murphy (2000) in the work “Aquinas on Voluntary Beliefs” sees the intellect, simply put, as the capacity for understanding and thought, or a power of apprehension and knowing. The intellect is “the rational agent’s cognitive power”(p. 576). On the other hand, the will is “an innate positive inclination towards the good. It is that aspect of a rational agent which disposes her to pursue what she considers good” (2000, p. 576).

Thomas Aquinas in his works maintains that the human will is a rational appetite (*appetites rationalis*). This is to say an inclination towards objects that are apprehended by the intellect as good or perfective of rational agent. He says the will can move itself in a qualified sense. He sees it as a passive potency and as a moved mover. In this respect, the will remains in potency until a mover actualizes it. The intellect and the will as powers stand in a

relationship of reciprocal causality. The will is the efficient cause of the intellect. As such the will moves itself and the intellect.

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” (S T I, q.82, a. 4).

The will tends 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*.

Desiring and choosing wills 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.

There is interdependence between intellect and will. The will and the intellect move each other and work together to enable an agent to perform an intentional action. Intellect provides the specific content or information required to pursue a particular course of action. And the will provides the drive required for action. We can see this more clearly by considering Aquinas’s distinctions among the specific operations of the intellect and the will that compose a complete human action. These include, but not only intention, counsel, choice, the act of command and use.

Intention is an act of will that presupposes an act of intellect (ST I-II q. 12 a.1 ad 3.). In intention, the intellect has presented a particular end to the will. In an act of intellect that Aquinas calls counsel, intellect deliberates about possibilities and eventually settles on what is to be done (ST I-II q. 14 a.2; ST I-II q. 14 a.5). This prompts a further act of will that he calls choice. In choice, will elects the particular course of action intellect has presented as the means (see ST I-II q. 13 a.3). Choice is substantially an act of will, though like intention, choice also involves intellect (ST I-II q. 13 a.1). Choice results from intellect providing information about precisely what is to be done, and will beginning to provide the impetus for doing it by indicating what should be done. Intention and choice are distinguished, then, because in forming an intention the agent wills the end through some means generally. Whereas in making a choice the agent wills the end through a particular means (ST I-II q. 12 a.4).

Choice indicates a much greater level of commitment than intention does on the part of the agent towards attaining the desired end for once an agent has chosen, he/she is at the brink of action. Once a bona fide choice has been made, all that remains is to do it. Thus far, intellect and will have worked together to determine what must be done, and have psychologically positioned the agent for action. There is nothing left to do but act.

In Aquinas understanding, once will has chosen, intellect must then command the executive power(s) to act (ST I-II q. 17 a.1). An executive power is whatever body part or other faculty the agent must use in order to execute the desired action (ST I-II q. 16 a.1). So will’s choosing then prompts intellect to issue an order, which in turn prompts will to obey intellect’s command in an operation Aquinas calls use. (ST I-II q. 16 a.1; ST I-II q. 17 a.3)

In use, the will obeys intellect’s command by triggering the executive powers to strive toward possessing the end in reality, thereby enabling the agent to perform the behaviour she thinks will secure the end. Like choice, use involves both intellect and will. Use presupposes that through the act of command, intellect directs will. Aquinas defines use as substantially an act of will that “signifies the application of a thing to an operation; and hence the operation to which we apply a thing is called its use” (ST I-II q. 16 a.1).

When human action is wrong, it involves failure in the choice process. This failure in choice Aquinas attributes to failure on the part of the intellect to command an act completely (S.T. I-

II q.17 a.5 ad 1). When the will fails at the level of the will, it means the will is failing to will something that the intellect is commanding it to will. This arises because the intellect is moved by opposite motives to command or not command with the result that it staggers between the two and thus commands imperfectly.

In the words of Eleonore Stump (2003), the intellect is being moved by opposed desires to represent the thing in question as both good and not good so that the intellect is double-minded (p. 280). In other words, when the intellect is double-minded about the objects it presents to the will, the will is equally double-minded about what to will.

From the account of intellect and will provided thus far, it subsequently follows that the intellect necessitates the will's acts by its own evaluative portrayals of goodness.

Thus according to Anthony Kenny (1993), the will can be understood as a natural appetite or inclination for goodness. The goodness that will seeks is not any particular good thing, but rather goodness in general. The act of determining which particular good to seek is the job of the intellect, which produces evaluative judgments about certain things, events, or states of affairs, and then presents these to the will as good. So with regard to particulars that are judged to be good, "the will is the power to have wants which only the intellect can frame" (p. 59).

On Aquinas' account, the good is the object of the will. For any specific object to be chosen, it must be seen as good in some respect and if the object is apprehended by the intellect.

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 necessity (S T I, q.82, a.2). 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"? (S T I, q.82, a.2). 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 blurred. 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" (S T I, q.82, a.2).

In this life, then, our intellectual limitations prevent us from apprehending what is good *simpliciter*. Instead, we are presented with competing goods among which we must choose (S T I, q.82, a.2 ad 1). 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 others (S T I, q.82, a.4). 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 do 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.

Human Action in Aquinas

What actions are designated as human? The answer is: human actions are those over which one has voluntary control (ST I-II, q.1, a.1). Unlike non-rational animals, human beings

choose their actions according to a reasoned account of what they think is 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 will (S T I, q.83,a.3). When discussing what it is that makes an action human, Aquinas discusses 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 actions. Likewise, human act is a free will act. It is any thought, word, deed, desire or omission which comes from a man by his free, knowing and deliberate choice.

So far, 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" (S T I-II, q.1, a.1).

But, 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. For Aquinas, acts of such sort are not properly human acts "since they do not proceed from the deliberation of the reason" (S T I-II, q.1, a.1ad 3). 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. Also, it appears that Aquinas is mistaken when he says that the ends for the sake of which we act are good.

Understandably, a great percentage of 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 this in turn, inclines us to choose the wrong things. It follows in Aquinas's view that our actions are done for the sake of what we believe - rightly or wrongly - to be good.

Aquinas is not a defender of the claim that human acts are for the sake of some good. Towing the line of 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 chosen (S T I-II, q.1, a.6 *sed contra*). 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" (S T I-II, q.1, a.4).

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 (1991) 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" (44). Were you to remove the intrinsically desirable end, you would remove the principle that motivates one to act in the first place (S T I-II, q.1, a.4). This account also helps to explain why we cannot postulate an indefinite series of ends when explaining human actions.

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 act. So there must be a last end or final good that we desire for its own sake.

What, exactly, is this last end at which we aim? All of us seek after our own perfection (S T I-II, q.1, a.6). 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. By happiness, Aquinas means a sort of perfection or fulfilment.

Admittedly, Aquinas did 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” (S T I-II, q.1, a. 7). 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” (1991, p. 61). 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 consists (S T I-II, q.1, a. 7). So there is a difference between the ideas of the last end (an idea for the sake of which everyone acts) and the specific object in which the last end is thought to consist. Some people think that the last end consists in the acquisition of external goods, like riches, power, or fame (S T I-II, q.2, aa1-4). Others think it consists in goods of the body, like comeliness or physical pleasure (S T I-II, q.2, a.5 and a.6). And still others think that happiness consists in acquiring goods of the soul such as knowledge, virtue, and friendship (S T I-II, q.2, a.7). But as laudable as some of these goods 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 supreme being 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” (S T I-II, q.2, a.7).

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 man’s 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.

Conclusion

This work sorts to explore the role or place of reason in Aquinas with respect to human action. Moral living as seen in Thomas Aquinas’ understanding is hinged on reason to discover the proper guide to our conduct. This arises from the fact that there are competing goods available to man in decision making. Decisions were reached based on choices available. And choices were 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. The good for man has to be rationalized. Critical explanation had been offered in seeking to understand Aquinas’ examination of reason and human action. He provided us with a better option in terms of rationality which places emphasis on character with regards to moral conduct.

The intellect presents moral truth, man’s real good to the will which it must accept. The intellect illuminates the will and demands that will follows its guidance. It, therefore, follows that the obedience of will with the dictates of right reason is essentially the nature of a person. To go against reason is to counter nature’s intent.

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. And

human action is 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.

References

- Aquinas, T. (1993). *Quaestiones Disputate de Malo(QDM)*. In *Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings*. trans., Timothy McDermott, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aquinas, T. (1944). *Summa Theologica (ST)*, In *The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*. vols. I and II, ed., Anton C. Pegis. New York: Random House. All citations from ST I and ST I-II come from this edition.
- Aquinas, T. (1981). *Summa Theologiae*. trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Westminster: Christian Classics.
- Donagan, A. (1988). *Choice: The Essential Element in Human Action*. New York: Metheun Press.
- Donagan, A. (1982). Thomas Aquinas on Human Action. In *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*. ed. Normal Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny & Jan Pinborg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eisen-Murphy, C. (Fall 2000). Aquinas on Voluntary Beliefs. In *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*. 74(4): 569–97.
- Kenny, A. (1993). *Aquinas on Mind*. New York: Routledge.
- MacDonald, S. (1991). Ultimate Ends and Practical Reasoning: Aquinas's Aristotelian Moral Psychology and Anscombe's Fallacy. In *The Philosophical Review*.
- McInerny, R. (1992). *Aquinas on Human Action, A Theory of Practice*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press.
- McInerny, R. (1997). *Ethica Thomistica: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press.
- Stump, E.(2003). *Aquinas*. New York: Routledge.
- Stump, E. (1991). Aquinas on Faith and Goodness. In *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 179–207.