

SAINT THOMAS
AQUINAS

Morality and Natural Law

Albert, Ethel. Great Traditions in Ethics. 6th Ed.
(NY: Wadsworth, Inc., 1988).

It has often been remarked that if Saint Augustine is the Plato of the Middle Ages, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) is its Aristotle. The seventh son of the Count of Aquino, Thomas was born at the castle of Rocca Secca in the kingdom of Naples. His parents resolved that he was to be an ecclesiastical dignitary and, to this end, entrusted his education to his uncle, the wise and learned Abbot of Monte Cassino. Thomas showed great promise as a student and was sent to the University of Naples at the age of fourteen. While there he came to admire the religious sincerity and vitality of the Dominicans he chanced to meet on the streets; indeed, he was so impressed by the members of this newly formed evangelical order embracing the ideals of chastity and poverty that he, without consulting his parents, became one in 1244. Distressed—the more so after his mother was debarred by zealous monks from talking to him—his family took drastic action: Some of his brothers forcibly returned him to the castle of Rocca Secca. Aquinas was kept prisoner there for a year. Noting no diminution in his conviction, however, the family finally relented and allowed him to return to Naples.

In 1248, Aquinas went to Cologne to study with Albert of Bollstadt (1205–1280), an impressive scholar with a reputation for originality. Albert (“The Great”) maintained that the theological difficulties besetting Christianity could be solved through a thorough understanding of

the complete works of Aristotle. The master, recognizing that his pupil was a genius who would soon outdo him, openly shared his vision and knowledge. They became an academic team for several years and were sent to Paris to advance the viewpoint of the Dominican and other mendicant orders, a viewpoint to which they were contributing. In simple terms, the dominating clash of viewpoints at the time came to this: In the tradition of Augustine, the Franciscans held that there is no sharp distinction between revealed theology and philosophy while the Dominicans held that there is.

Aquinas’s reputation grew steadily. He became a master of theology at the University of Paris in 1256 and, throughout his remaining eighteen years, responded to invitations to lecture and instruct at many universities and to advise numerous kings, prelates, and scholars. In 1323, he was canonized.

Despite a life responsive to demands placed upon him, Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote prodigiously. His best known systematic treatises are the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (*A Summary Against the Gentiles*) and the *Summa Theologica* (*A Summary of Theology*). The former was composed to provide missionaries with the means to convert “pagans” as well as Moslems and Jews to Christianity; the latter was written in textbook form to give novices a systematic understanding of Christian theology. Both works go well beyond the original purposes and exhibit Aquinas’s ability to use reason in dealing with such profound subjects as God’s existence, the relation of soul to body, and the supreme good for humanity. His writings show that philosophy can provide a framework for theology.

It is a commonplace to observe that Saint Thomas Aquinas offers us a Christianized version of Aristotle’s moral theory. This assessment is instructive in suggesting that Aristotle’s ethics is a *sine qua non* for that of Aquinas. But to conclude from this that Aquinas’s moral theory is merely a Christian reinterpretation of Aristotle is misleading. Even the more magnanimous historical depiction of Aquinas’s moral philosophy as a synthesis of the humanistic tradition of Plato and Aristotle, the Christian tradition of Saint Paul, and the Greco-Roman tradition of natural law underplays its innovations.

Christianity is a revelatory religion, which accounts for one of its perennial and divisive problems. Throughout history, Christian thinkers have recognized that in accepting revelation—accepting that there are occasions when humans have extranatural access to genuine knowledge—they are reducing the authority of natural, reason-guided inquiry. A radical solution to this problem of two sources of knowledge was declared early on. The remark of Tertullian (c. 160–230), “*Credo quia*

absurdum est" (I believe it because it is absurd), which refers to the Christian doctrine of God's sacrifice on the cross, is still echoed by many Christians. He warned that it is prideful to regard the world as ordered in accordance with our finite reason. Tertullian insisted that it is only through faith in Christian revelation (and immediate intuitions in religious experience) that we are afforded glimpses of ultimate truth; again, he stressed that such revelations are not subject to the logical norms governing mundane affairs; and finally, he maintained that the paradoxes and contradictions which finite reason finds in Christian articles of faith are positive signs of their truth.¹

If Tertullian is at the extreme left of the faith-reason controversy, Aquinas is at center-right. He draws a sharp distinction between the domains of theology and philosophy. As Christians recognize, theology begins with the sacred principles that revelation provides, and, as Aristotelians recognize, philosophy begins with the subject-matter that observation provides. But theology, no less than philosophy, uses reason to develop its "given" into a clear and comprehensible body of knowledge.² Furthermore, according to Aquinas, the domains of theology and philosophy overlap. Thus, for example, not only theology but also philosophy includes the judgment that God exists.³ That God is triune, however, is a distinctively theological thesis; that is, it is a revealed truth, the proof of which is beyond the resources of philosophy. The assertion that the sentient faculty never exists without the nutritive, on the other hand, is distinctively philosophical; that is, it is a philosophically disclosed truth which, as it happens, is not among the truths God has made available to human beings by either direct revelation or by the rational development of such revelations.

Aquinas preserves the pattern and most of the detail of Aristotle's ethics. He views Aristotle as having provided the proper philosophical foundation for the study of morality. But he maintains that Aristotle's theory is grievously incomplete; furthermore, he holds that Aristotle's theory is incapable of completion without drawing on Christian insights.

¹This extreme but historically influential reading of Tertullian is not accepted by all scholars.

²"Sacred doctrine also makes use of human reason, not, indeed, to prove faith (for thereby the merit of faith would come to an end), but to make clear other things that are set forth in the doctrine. Since therefore grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith." *Summa Theologica*, A. C. Pegis, ed., in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1945), Pt. I, Quest. 1, Art. 8.

³While it is loosely correct to say that theology and philosophy overlap, Aquinas points out that the occurrence of common judgments means only that there is theological and philosophical agreement about these propositions. It does not mean that, insofar as theology and philosophy overlap, they are identical systems.

Thus, while thoroughly Aristotelian, Aquinas's theory adds the concept of the beatific vision of God as humanity's final goal, a special doctrine of free will, and a theory of natural law as the reflection of divine order.

In its briefest version, the Aristotelian theory, reasserted by Aquinas, is as follows: Human actions are directed toward ends, such ends when achieved becoming means for attaining still other ends. On the basis of this teleological thesis, both argue not only that an individual's activities are related as a succession of ends into means to ends but also that such a succession can occur only if there is a final end. This latter proposition is what people are testifying to when they declare themselves to be seekers of happiness (well-being). But what of their different opinions about the nature of happiness? Aristotle (following Plato and followed by Aquinas) comes to grips with this problem by pointing out that since it is agreed that happiness, the final end, satisfies certain criteria, an analysis of proposed ends may settle the issue. These criteria for the final end are (1) being desirable to us for its own sake, (2) being sufficient of itself to satisfy us, and (3) being attainable by the wise among us. Aristotle's profound and extended analysis in this connection provides the answer that happiness, the final end, can only be the fulfillment of the highest potential of human nature under the direction of reason.

Aquinas maintains, however, that a secular reading restricts this account of happiness. We should understand it as telling us that there is a twofold perfection of the rational or intellectual nature, "that, along with natural happiness, there is a supernatural happiness of coming to 'see God as he is.'" To understand Aquinas's justification of this claim, consider the following: Non-Christians (including Aristotle, of course) have a tacit criterion—being attainable by humans through their *natural power*. Expressed in this way, our final end is related to our being the highest and only animals who can attain philosophical truth. But, according to Aquinas, humans have two sources of truth rather than one—those which human faculties provide and those which God reveals. Furthermore, the proper activity of human reason is the development of both.

Aquinas contends, however, that our direct realization of natural and supernatural happiness in this earthly life is systematically limited, since few among us sustain the intellectual activity of philosophers or the spiritual intensity of saints. Moreover, he notes not only that good character is a necessary condition for the intellectual virtues but also for our social lives. Thus, Aquinas's account of good character, of the moral virtues, is of major importance in his ethical theory.

Aquinas judges that Aristotle's account of the moral virtues—those virtues concerning our habitual choices of conduct—is correct in outline but incomplete in details. At its core, Aristotle's theory tells us that

goodness involves choice, and choice includes both an appetitive and deliberative element: The former focuses on what we seek and the latter on how we attain it. A good character is constituted by habits of choice that are in accordance with appropriate principles, such principles being those that a wise person would find to be self-evident after sifting through and analyzing all relevant facts and opinions. Aquinas supplements and refines this in two ways. In the first, he subsumes the Aristotelian analysis of choice under his own concept of free will. This includes Aristotle's basic corollary that people bear responsibility for their actions unless they are physically compelled to do them or are inadvertently ignorant about what they involve. In the second, he ascribes the source and authority of the principles determining proper choice to the natural laws God makes available to humans.

Identifying will as the agency of choice, Aquinas's analysis of the moral worth of voluntary action is more sharply delineated than Aristotle's. Three components of voluntary acts are morally relevant and, accordingly, bring about different measures of moral worth for nominally identical acts. The first and primary component of an act is the kind of overt act that it is, the second is the kind of motive that prompts it, and the third is its set of consequence-bearing circumstances. To fully understand what these components of a voluntary action are and how they contribute to its "measure of goodness," consider an act in terms of such factors.

Suppose in one case that A is submitting her first paper for publication and acknowledges the helpful comments provided by a relatively unknown colleague B. In this instance, one might describe the kind of overt act as being an author's *honest portrayal of her endeavors*, the kind of motive as being one of *gratitude*, and the set of circumstances as consisting of the author being unpublished and of her colleague being undistinguished. Suppose in a second case that A is submitting her first paper for publication, receives helpful comments from a distinguished colleague, but this time does not acknowledge the aid. In this instance, the assessable features would be different. The act would be one of dishonest portrayal of the author's work, the motive would be one of self-promotion, and the circumstances would include a well-known colleague. The two acts would have different measures of goodness. The first act would be better than the second. Considering only the first component, clearly honest portrayal is superior to dishonest portrayal. Introducing the other two factors allows one to make an even more precise appraisal of both acts.

Aquinas traces the ultimate principles to which we refer in moral judgments back to our intuitive knowledge of the natural law. That is, he traces them back to our experience as rational creatures of the eternal

law, which is God's plan for rationally ordered movements and actions in the created universe. Aquinas's ethical theory, however, gains strength from recognizing the gap between knowing and assenting to the authority of the principles of the natural law and interpreting and applying them to concrete situations. The practical wisdom by which a person's will is directed to its proper choice in a specific circumstance includes a resolution of the relevant problem of interpreting and applying such intuitive knowledge. The foregoing is a composite of the rational endeavors which constitute what Aquinas calls *conscience*. Although he insists on the moral authority of the dictates of conscience, he cannot, and does not, insist on their infallibility. Even as conscientious people, we are still vulnerable to mistakes in reasoning and to severely limited knowledge. Moreover, it is unfortunate that as willful individuals, we do not always abide by the dictates of our conscience.⁴

1. With a theological background, which shows God to be both creator of all things and the determiner of their purposes, Aquinas then details our relationship to God.

We have shown in the preceding books that there is one First Being, possessing the full perfection of all being, Whom we call God, and Who, of the abundance of His Perfection, bestows being on all that exists, so that He is proved to be not only the first of beings, but also the beginning of all. Moreover He bestows being on others, not through natural necessity, but according to the decree of His will. . . . Hence it follows that He is the Lord of the things made by Him, since we are masters over those things that are subject to our will. Now it is a perfect dominion that He exercises over things made by Him, for in making them He needs neither the help of an extrinsic agent, nor matter as the foundation of His work. For He is the universal efficient cause of all being.

Now everything that is produced through the will of an agent is directed to an end by that agent, because the good and the end are the proper object of the will; and therefore whatever proceeds from a will must needs be directed to an end. But each thing attains its end by its own action, which action needs to be directed by him who endowed things with the principles whereby they act. Consequently God, Who in Himself is perfect in every way, and by His power endows all things with

⁴Aquinas accepts the Christian doctrine of original sin. Until human nature is restored by the grace of God to the integrity of innocence it enjoyed before the fall, natural humans can only distantly approach natural happiness.

being, must needs be the Ruler of all, Himself ruled by none; nor is anything to be excepted from His ruling, as neither is there anything that does not owe its being to Him. Therefore, as He is perfect in being and causing, so He is perfect in ruling.

The effect of this ruling is seen to differ in different things, according to the difference of natures. For some things are so produced by God that, being intelligent, they bear a resemblance to Him and reflect His image. Hence, not only are they directed, but they direct themselves to their appointed end by their own actions. And if in thus directing themselves they be subject to the divine ruling, they are admitted by that divine ruling to the attainment of their last end; but they are excluded therefrom if they direct themselves otherwise.^a

2. *Having emphasized that an individual, being made in God's image, has a free will which is directed to distinctive human ends, Aquinas begins with an analysis similar to Aristotle's. He stresses that, in principle, all human ends can be attained.*

We must first show that every agent, by its action, intends an end.

For in those things which clearly act for an end, we declare the end to be that towards which the movement of the agent tends; for when this is reached, the end is said to be reached, and to fail in this is to fail in the end intended. This may be seen in the physician who aims at health, and in a man who runs towards an appointed goal. Nor does it matter, as to this, whether that which tends to an end be endowed with knowledge or not; for just as the target is the end of the archer, so is it the end of the arrow's flight. Now the movement of every agent tends to something determinate, since it is not from any force that any action proceeds, but heating proceeds from heat, and cooling from cold; and therefore actions are differentiated by their active principles. Action sometimes terminates in something made, as for instance building terminates in a house, and healing in health; while sometimes it does not so terminate, as for instance, in the case of understanding and sensation. And if action terminates in something made, the movement of the agent tends by that action towards the thing made; while if it does not terminate in something made, the movement of the agent tends to the action itself. It follows therefore that every agent intends an end while acting, which end is sometimes the action itself, sometimes a thing made by the action.

Again. In all things that act for an end, that is said to be the last end beyond which the agent seeks nothing further; and thus the physician's action goes as far as health, and when this is attained, his efforts cease. But in the action of every agent, a point can be reached beyond which

the agent does not desire to go; or else actions would tend to infinity, which is impossible, for since *it is not possible to pass through an infinite medium*, the agent would never begin to act, because nothing moves towards what it cannot reach. Therefore every agent acts for an end.^b

3. *Having analyzed the ends that are natural and fitting for an agent and having shown that these are good, Aquinas raises the following question: What constitutes our proper end and what determines our proper action? Note that, in outline, his answer appears to be Aristotelian, namely, that the highest end for humanity is contemplation of the truth. However, in detail his answer diverges decisively. In brief, to say that our ultimate happiness depends upon discerning the first principles of nature falls short. Humanity, being God's creation, requires contemplation of the divine.*

We must go on to prove that every agent acts for a good.

For that every agent acts for an end clearly follows from the fact that every agent tends to something definite. Now that to which an agent tends definitely must needs be befitting to that agent, since the agent would not tend to it save because of some fittingness thereto. But that which is befitting to a thing is good for it. Therefore every agent acts for a good.

Further. The end is that wherein the appetite of the agent or mover comes to rest, as also the appetite of that which is moved. Now it is the very notion of good to be the term of appetite, since *good is the object of every appetite*. Therefore all action and movement is for a good.

Again. All action and movement would seem to be directed in some way to being, either for the preservation of being in the species or in the individual, or for the acquisition of being. Now this itself, namely, being, is a good; and for this reason all things desire being. Therefore all action and movement is for a good.

Furthermore. All action and movement is for some perfection. For if the action itself be the end, it is clearly a second perfection of the agent. And if the action consist in the transformation of external matter, clearly the mover intends to induce some perfection into the thing moved, towards which perfection the movable also tends, if the movement be natural. Now we say that this is to be good, namely, to be perfect. Therefore every action and movement is for a good.

Also. Every agent acts according as it is actual. Now by acting it tends to something similar to itself. Therefore it tends to an act. But an act has the nature of good, since evil is not found save in a potentiality lacking act. Therefore every action is for a good.

Moreover. The intellectual agent acts for an end, as determining for itself its end; whereas the natural agent, though it acts for an end . . .

does not determine its end for itself, since it knows not the nature of an end, but is moved to the end determined for it by another. Now an intellectual agent does not determine the end for itself except under the aspect of good; for the intelligible object does not move except it be considered as a good, which is the object of the will. Therefore the natural agent also is not moved, nor does it act for an end, except insofar as this end is a good, since the end is determined for the natural agent by some appetite. Therefore every agent acts for a good.

It is clear that all things are directed to one good as their last end.

For if nothing tends to something as its end, except insofar as this is good, it follows that good, as such, is an end. Consequently that which is the supreme good is supremely the end of all. Now there is but one supreme good, namely God. . . . Therefore all things are directed to the highest good, namely God, as their end.^c

4. Aquinas sees Aristotle's account of our quest for happiness as overly optimistic in two ways: In the first and least important way, our nature makes it difficult for us to achieve the moral and intellectual virtues while trying to avoid corruption; in the second, the higher wisdom cannot be found within the confines of our natural life.

Besides, man is more self-sufficing for this operation, seeing that he stands in little need of the help of external things in order to perform it.

Further. All other human operations seem to be ordered to this as to their end. For perfect contemplation requires that the body should be disencumbered, and to this effect are directed all the products of art that are necessary for life. Moreover, it requires freedom from the disturbance caused by the passions, which is achieved by means of the moral virtues and of prudence; and freedom from external disturbance, to which the whole governance of the civil life is directed. So that, if we consider the matter rightly, we shall see that all human occupations appear to serve those who contemplate the truth.

Now, it is not possible that man's ultimate happiness consist in contemplation based on the understanding of first principles; for this is most imperfect, as being most universal, containing potentially the knowledge of things. Moreover, it is the beginning and not the end of human inquiry, and comes to us from nature, and not through the pursuit of the truth. Nor does it consist in contemplation based on the sciences that have the lowest things for their object, since happiness must consist in an operation of the intellect in relation to the most noble intelligible objects. It follows then that man's ultimate happiness consists in wisdom, based on the consideration of divine things.

It is therefore evident also by way of induction that man's ultimate happiness consists solely in the contemplation of God, which conclusion was proved above by arguments.^d

5. Aquinas provides people with moral guidance. We must recognize that God is the lawgiver and that humans, being in God's image, possess the rational and volitional capacities to comprehend and obey eternal law.

Augustine says: *That Law which is the Supreme Reason cannot be understood to be otherwise than unchangeable and eternal. . . . [A] law is nothing else but a dictate of practical reason emanating from the ruler who governs a perfect community. Now it is evident, granted that the world is ruled by divine providence, as was stated in the First Part, that the whole community of the universe is governed by the divine reason. Therefore the very notion of the government of things in God, the ruler of the universe, has the nature of a law. And since the divine reason's conception of things is not subject to time, but is eternal, . . . therefore it is that this kind of law must be called eternal.*

Law, being a rule and measure, can be in a person in two ways: in one way, as in him that rules and measures; in another way, as in that which is ruled and measured, since a thing is ruled and measured insofar as it partakes of the rule or measure. Therefore, since all things subject to divine providence are ruled and measured by the eternal law, as was stated above, it is evident that all things partake in some way in the eternal law, insofar as, namely, from its being imprinted on them, they derive their respective inclinations to their proper acts and ends. Now among all others, the rational creature is subject to divine providence in a more excellent way, insofar as it itself partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Therefore it has a share of the eternal reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end; and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law. Hence the Psalmist, after saying (Ps. 4:6): *Offer up the sacrifice of justice*, as though someone asked what the works of justice are, adds: *Many say, Who showeth us good things?* in answer to which question he says: *The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us.* He thus implies that the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil, which is the function of the natural law, is nothing else than an imprint on us of the divine light. It is therefore evident that the natural law is nothing else than the rational creature's participation of the eternal law.^e

6. *The eternal law which represents God's idea of an ordered universe preexists and controls all animate and inanimate things in it. In turn, natural law represents "a rational creature's participation in the eternal law." While inanimate objects are completely governed by natural inclinations and tendencies to act and react in certain ways, humans, though subject to natural tendencies to act and react in certain ways, possess a natural inclination to know and choose.*

The precepts of the natural law in man stand in relation to operable matters as first principles do to matters of demonstration. But there are several first indemonstrable principles. Therefore there are also several precepts of the natural law.

*I answer that, as was stated above, the precepts of the natural law are to the practical reason what the first principles of demonstrations are to the speculative reason, because both are self-evident principles. Now a thing is said to be self-evident in two ways: first, in itself; secondly, in relation to us. Any proposition is said to be self-evident in itself, if its predicate is contained in the notion of the subject; even though it may happen that to one who does not know the definition of the subject, such a proposition is not self-evident. For instance, this proposition, *Man is a rational being*, is, in its very nature, self-evident, since he who says *man*, says *a rational being*; and yet to one who does not know what a man is, this proposition is not self-evident. . . .*

Now a certain order is to be found in those things that are apprehended by men. For that which first falls under apprehension is *being*, the understanding of which is included in all things whatsoever a man apprehends. Therefore the first indemonstrable principle is that *the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time*, which is based on the notion of *being* and *not being*: and on this principle all others are based. . . . Now as *being* is the first thing that falls under the apprehension absolutely, so *good* is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action (since every agent acts for an end, which has the nature of good). Consequently, the first principle in the practical reason is one founded on the nature of good, viz., that *good is that which all things seek after*. Hence this is the first precept of law, that *good is to be done and promoted, and evil is to be avoided*. All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this; so that all the things which the practical reason naturally apprehends as man's good belong to the precepts of the natural law under the form of things to be done or avoided.

Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of the contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural

inclination are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Therefore, the order of the precepts of the natural law is according to the order of natural inclinations. For there is in man, first of all, an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances, inasmuch, namely, as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature; and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law. Secondly, there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specially, according to that nature which he has in common with other animals; and in virtue of this inclination, those things are said to belong to the natural law *which nature has taught to all animals*, such as sexual intercourse, the education of offspring and so forth. Thirdly, there is in man an inclination to good according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him. Thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society; and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural law: e.g., to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things regarding the above inclination.^f

7. *Aquinas's analysis of voluntary acts leads to his rejecting the common view that moral responsibility is obviated when one is overcome by fear or overwhelmed by desire. The key features of a voluntary act are that (1) it is initiated by the agent and (2) it is done for a rationally ascertained end.*

There must needs be something voluntary in human acts. In order to make this clear, we must take note that the principle of some acts is within the agent, or in that which is moved; whereas the principle of some movements or acts is outside. For when a stone is moved upwards, the principle of this movement is outside the stone; whereas, when it is moved downwards, the principle of this movement is in the stone. Now of those things that are moved by an intrinsic principle, some move themselves, some not. For since every agent or thing moved acts or is moved for an end . . . those are perfectly moved by an intrinsic principle whose intrinsic principle is one not only of movement but of movement for an end. Now in order that a thing be done for an end, some knowledge of the end is necessary. Therefore, whatever so acts or is so moved by an intrinsic principle that it has some knowledge of the end, has within itself the principle of its act, so that it not only acts, but acts for an end. On the other hand, if a thing has no knowledge of the end, even though it have an intrinsic principle of action or movement, nev-

ertheless, the principle of acting or being moved for an end is not in that thing, but in something else, by which the principle of its action towards an end is imprinted on it. Therefore such things are not said to move themselves, but to be moved by others. But those things which have a knowledge of the end are said to move themselves because there is in them a principle by which they not only act but also act for an end. And, consequently, since both are from an intrinsic principle, *i.e.*, that they act and that they act for an end, the movements and acts of such things are said to be voluntary; for the term *voluntary* signifies that their movements and acts are from their own inclination.

Things done through fear and compulsion differ . . . in this, that the will does not consent, but is moved entirely counter to that which is done through compulsion; whereas what is done through fear becomes voluntary because the will is moved towards it, although not for its own sake, but because of something else, that is, in order to avoid an evil which is feared. For the conditions of a voluntary act are satisfied, if it be done because of something else voluntary; since the voluntary is not only what we will for its own sake as an end, but also what we will for the sake of something else as an end. It is clear therefore that in what is done from compulsion, the will does nothing inwardly, whereas in what is done through fear, the will does something.

Concupiscence does not cause involuntariness, but, on the contrary, makes something to be voluntary. For a thing is said to be voluntary from the fact that the will is moved to it. Now concupiscence inclines the will to desire the object of concupiscence. Therefore the effect of concupiscence is to make something to be voluntary rather than involuntary.

Fear has reference to evil, but concupiscence has reference to good. Now evil of itself is counter to the will, whereas good harmonizes with the will. Therefore fear has a greater tendency than concupiscence to cause involuntariness.

He who acts from fear retains the repugnance of the will to that which he does, considered in itself. But he that acts from concupiscence, *e.g.*, an incontinent man, does not retain his former will whereby he repudiated the object of his concupiscence; rather his will is changed so that he desires that which previously he repudiated. Accordingly, that which is done out of fear is involuntary, to a certain extent, but that which is done from concupiscence is in no way involuntary. For the man who yields to concupiscence acts counter to that which he purposed at first, but not counter to that which he desires now; whereas the timid man acts counter to that which in itself he desires now.

If concupiscence were to destroy knowledge altogether, as happens with those whom concupiscence has rendered mad, it would follow that

concupiscence would take away voluntariness. And yet, properly speaking, it would not make the act involuntary, because in beings bereft of reason there is neither voluntary nor involuntary.⁴

8. In his continued discussion of the range of moral responsibility, Aquinas analyzes the circumstances under which one might or might not disclaim responsibility on grounds of ignorance.

If ignorance cause involuntariness, it is insofar as it deprives one of knowledge, which is a necessary condition of voluntariness, as was declared above. But it is not every ignorance that deprives one of this knowledge. Accordingly, we must take note that ignorance has a three-fold relationship to the act of the will: in one way, *concomitantly*; in another, *consequently*; in a third way, *antecedently*. *Concomitantly*, when there is ignorance of what is done, but so that even if it were known, it would be done. For then ignorance does not induce one to will this to be done, but it just happens that a thing is at the same time done and not known. Thus, . . . [for] example, . . . a man did indeed will to kill his foe, but killed him in ignorance, thinking to kill a stag. And ignorance of this kind, as the philosopher states, does not cause involuntariness, since it is not the cause of anything that is repugnant to the will; but it causes *nonvoluntariness*, since that which is unknown cannot be actually willed.

Ignorance is *consequent* to the act of the will, insofar as ignorance itself is voluntary; and this happens in two ways in accordance with the two aforesaid modes of the voluntary. First, because the act of the will is brought to bear on the ignorance, as when a man wills not to know, that he may have an excuse for sin, or that he may not be withheld from sin, according to Job 21:14: *We desire not the knowledge of Thy ways*. And this is called *affected ignorance*.—Secondly, ignorance is said to be voluntary, when it regards that which one can and ought to know, for in this sense *not to act* and *not to will* are said to be voluntary, as was stated above. And ignorance of this kind happens either when one does not actually consider what one can and ought to consider (this is called *ignorance of evil choice*, and arises from some passion or habit), or when one does not take the trouble to acquire the knowledge which one ought to have; in which sense, ignorance of the general principles of law, which one ought to know, is voluntary, as being due to negligence.

Ignorance is *antecedent* to the act of the will when it is not voluntary, and yet is the cause of man's willing what he would not will otherwise. Thus a man may be ignorant of some circumstance of his act, which he was not bound to know, with the result that he does that which he would

not do if he knew of that circumstance. For instance, a man, after taking proper precaution, may not know that someone is coming along the road, so that he shoots an arrow and slays a passer-by. Such ignorance causes what is involuntary absolutely.^h

9. *The difference between good acts of will and bad acts of will derives from the goodness or badness of the object to which reason directs the will.*

Virtue is a habit through which men wish for good things. But a good will is one which is in accordance with virtue. Therefore the goodness of the will is from the fact that a man wills that which is good.

Good and evil are essential differences of the act of the will. For good and evil pertain essentially to the will; just as truth and falsehood pertain to the reason, the act of which is distinguished essentially by the difference of truth and falsehood. . . . The specific difference in acts is according to objects, as was stated above. Therefore good and evil in the acts of the will is derived properly from the objects.

The will is not always directed to what is truly good, but sometimes to the apparent good; and this has indeed some measure of good, but not of a good that is suitable absolutely to be desired. Hence it is that the act of the will is not always good, but sometimes evil.

Given that the act of the will is fixed on some good, no circumstance can make that act evil. Consequently, when it is said that a man wills a good when he ought not, or where he ought not, this can be understood in two ways. First, so that this circumstance is referred to the thing willed. According to this, the act of the will is not fixed on something good, since to will to do something when it ought not to be done is not to will something good. Secondly, so that the circumstance is referred to the act of willing. According to this, it is impossible to will something good when one ought not to, because one ought always to will what is good; except, perhaps, accidentally, insofar as a man, by willing some particular good, is prevented from willing at the same time another good which he ought to will at that time. And then evil results, not from his willing that particular good, but from his not willing the other. The same applies to the other circumstances.

The will's object is proposed to it by the reason. For the understood good is the proportioned object of the will, while the sensible or imaginary good is proportioned, not to the will, but to the sensitive appetite; for the will can tend to the universal good, which reason apprehends, whereas the sensitive appetite tends only to the particular good, apprehended by a sensitive power. Therefore the goodness of the will depends on the reason in the same way as it depends on its object.ⁱ

10. *Aquinas next moves to undermine a grievous misconception of the relationship between reason (conscience) and will (power of choice). Some may find it plausible, for example, to deny that people are morally reprehensible whenever they willfully follow the dictate of conscience. Aquinas argues otherwise, however: If one's conscience is in fundamental error, that is, one's conscience is mistaken about a moral principle rather than being ignorant of specific facts in a situation, then the will in following errant conscience is evil. Aquinas does, however, distinguish between circumstances of the foregoing sort, which is only accidental evil, and circumstances in which the will is unresponsive to conscience and thus is absolutely evil.*

Since conscience is a kind of dictate of the reason (for it is an application of knowledge to action . . .) to inquire whether the will is evil when it is at variance with erring reason is the same as to inquire whether an erring conscience binds. On this matter, some distinguished three kinds of acts; for some are good of their nature, some are indifferent, some are evil of their nature. And they say that if reason or conscience tell us to do something which is of its nature good, there is no error; and the same thing is true, if it tell us not to do something which is evil of its nature, since it is the same reason that prescribes what is good and forbids what is evil. On the other hand, if a man's reason or conscience tell him that he is bound by precept to do what is in itself evil, or that what is in itself good is forbidden, then his reason or conscience errs. In like manner, if a man's reason or conscience tell him that what is in itself indifferent, for instance, to lift a straw from the ground, is forbidden or commanded, his reason or conscience errs. They say, therefore, that reason or conscience, when erring in matters of indifference, either by commanding or by forbidding them, binds; so that the will which is at variance with that erring reason is evil and sinful. But when reason or conscience errs in commanding what is evil in itself, or in forbidding what is good in itself and necessary for salvation, it does not bind; and so in such cases the will which is at variance with erring reason or conscience is not evil.

But this is unreasonable. For in matters of indifference, the will that is at variance with erring reason or conscience is evil in some way because of the object on which the goodness or malice of the will depends; not indeed because of the object according as it is in its own nature, but according as it is accidentally apprehended by reason as something evil to do or to avoid. And since the object of the will is that which is proposed by the reason, as we have stated above, from the very fact that a thing is proposed by the reason as being evil, the will by tending thereto becomes evil. And this is the case not only in indifferent matters, but also in those

that are good or evil in themselves. For it is not only indifferent matters that can receive the character of goodness or malice accidentally; but likewise that which is good can receive the character of evil, or that which is evil can receive the character of goodness, because of the reason apprehending it as such. For instance, to refrain from fornication is good, and yet the will does not tend to this good except insofar as it is proposed by the reason. If, therefore, the erring reason propose it as an evil, the will tends to it as to something evil. Consequently, the will is evil because it wills evil, not indeed that which is evil in itself, but that which is evil accidentally, through being apprehended as such by the reason. In like manner, to believe in Christ is good in itself, and necessary for salvation; but the will does not tend thereto, except inasmuch as it is proposed by the reason. Consequently, if it be proposed by the reason as something evil, the will tends to it as to something evil; not as if it were evil in itself, but because it is evil accidentally, through the apprehension of the reason. Hence the philosopher says that, *properly speaking, the incontinent man is one who does not follow right reason; but accidentally, he is also one who does not follow false reason.* We must therefore conclude that, absolutely speaking, every will at variance with reason, whether right or erring, is always evil.

. . . Ignorance sometimes causes an act to be involuntary, and sometimes not. And since moral good and evil consist in an act insofar as it is voluntary, as was stated above, it is evident that when ignorance causes an act to be involuntary, it takes away the character of moral good and evil; but not, when it does not cause the act to be involuntary. Again, it has been stated above that when ignorance is in any way willed, either directly or indirectly, it does not cause the act to be involuntary. And I call that ignorance *directly* voluntary to which the act of the will tends, and that, *indirectly* voluntary, which is due to negligence, because a man does not wish to know what he ought to know, as we have stated above.

If, therefore, reason or conscience err with an error that is voluntary, either directly or through negligence, so that one errs about what one ought to know, then such an error of reason or conscience does not excuse the will, which abides by that erring reason or conscience, from being evil. But if the error arise from the ignorance of some circumstance, and without any negligence, so that it cause the act to be involuntary, then that error of reason or conscience excuses the will, which abides by that erring reason, from being evil. For instance, if erring reason tell a man that he should go to another man's wife, the will that abides by that erring reason is evil, since this error arises from ignorance of the divine law, which he is bound to know. But if a man's reason errs in mistaking another for his wife, and if he wish to give her her right

when she asks for it, his will is excused from being evil; for this error arises from ignorance of a circumstance, which ignorance excuses, and causes the act to be involuntary.

11. As a Christian philosopher, Aquinas maintains that what is good or evil about an act is what the agent intends and not the consequences which the act produces. Note, however, that one's intent does include foreseeable consequences by the agent. Aquinas is fully aware of human limitations. Thus those acts leading to consequences which the agent could not possibly foresee do not make one's will bad.

The consequences do not make an act that was evil, to be good; nor one that was good, to be evil. For instance, if a man give an alms to a poor man who makes bad use of the alms by committing a sin, this does not undo the good done by the giver; and, in like manner, if a man bear patiently a wrong done to him, the wrongdoer is not thereby excused. Therefore the consequences of an act do not increase its goodness or malice.

The consequences of an act are either foreseen or not. If they are foreseen, it is evident that they increase the goodness or malice. For when a man foresees that many evils may follow from his act, and yet does not therefore desist from it, this shows his will to be all the more inordinate.

But if the consequences are not foreseen, we must make a distinction. For if they follow from the nature of the action, and in the majority of cases, in this respect the consequences increase the goodness or malice of that action; for it is evident that an action is of its nature better, if better results can follow from it, and of its nature worse, if it is of a nature to produce worse results. On the other hand, if the consequences follow by accident and seldom, then they do not increase the goodness or malice of the act; for we do not judge of a thing according to that which belongs to it by accident, but only according to that which belongs to it essentially.⁴

Questions

1. What does Aquinas mean by an *act*? How does he distinguish *acts* from *movements*?
2. Aquinas and Aristotle both insist that happiness consists in contemplation of the truth. Wherein do they differ and why?
3. Discuss the concepts of eternal and natural law and their significance in Aquinas's ethics.