

ST. THOMAS AND FREE WILL

The doctrine of will and free choice is said to be central to the ethical theory of St. Thomas and one of its most important and original parts.¹ The unresolved question still seems to be : what is meant by "free choice" and how can it be maintained along with Aquinas's rationalistic approach to ethics ? In this essay I propose to deal with first, Aquinas's reasons as to why we have free will and O'Connor's relevant criticism, and also with (1) the relationship between the intellect and the will, and (2) some results of the theory of volition in their application to the enforcement of law.

Why Man Must Have Free Choice

If we had no free choice, Aquinas states, all commands, prohibitions, rewards and such like would be in vain.² Aquinas intends to reject any obvious version of determinism and assumes that social practices such as praise and blame are incompatible with a deterministic explanation of human action. O'Connor takes a different view, making the point that these very exhortations are initiated because they are believed to act as causal factors which affect human actions. Reward is a spur to further success; punishment is employed to discourage the individual concerned (as well as others) from certain lines of behaviour.³

We might restate and enlarge somewhat upon the issue as follows : if our choices are freely made there should be no influencing factors whatever, either before or after the act in question. Rewards and punishments, if the acts are to be free must remain gratuitous to these acts. When we choose freely, we surely do so not because we are conscious of the extraneous influences which St. Thomas cites as his reason why the will must remain free. On the other hand, if and when human actions are determined, counsels and rewards would become of some importance, not as factors to support an argument for free will, but as making up some part of that determinism. The conclusion, therefore, could be that the exhortations are compatible with human actions both insofar as actions are free and insofar as they are determined. When such actions are freely willed, exhortations are not a determining influence, but simply a

ceremonial gesture; when the actions are determined, the exhortations are themselves determining factors.

Rationality and Freedom

“Freedom of choice is defined as the free judgment of reason” may be taken as representative of Aquinas’s attempt to combine rationality with freedom.⁴ But O’Connor believes that it is a mistake to link the freedom of choice with the free judgment of reason, and the objection appears to be that freedom itself should not be associated with rationality. We might take the example of the computer programmed to give the solution to a problem; it is able to do so by proceeding according to steps which are logically valid. But the machine obviously has no conscious freedom of choice in the human sense of the term ‘freedom’ It operates upon strict mechanical and electrical principles, and on this basis alone is able to produce a valid argument as required.

The popular view might be that calm deliberation prior to choice yields more opportunity for freedom to operate. Yet on closer inspection we find that rational deliberation in itself implies the use of fixed rules which leave little or no freedom, making the deliberative process indicative of strict determinism. Reflection and deliberation suggest the habit of following a ready-made form of argument. And although Aquinas wishes to closely connect the rationality of deliberation with freedom, his theory also requires that a spontaneous act of will may break in at any point or even occur before deliberation has fairly begun. We therefore have voluntary acts which stem from incomplete as well as from completed rational deliberation.

O’Connor suggests that freedom for Aquinas must be a matter of degree, although admittedly this thesis is unsupported textually.⁵ But we have indicated above that “the more rationality the more freedom” concept would seem to take us into a more exacting determinism, and supposing that freedom does follow reasoning, there is nothing to say that it must do so partially. We should add that partialness is suggestive of limitation and hence of that which is unfree. To specify more rationality with less freedom would hardly be in the spirit of the stand for free

will which Aquinas wishes to take. To maintain less rationality with more freedom suggests only licence and a lack of control which Aquinas would want to avoid. Less rationality together with less freedom would not be consistent, so that our conclusion is that degrees of freedom cannot be a ready solution to the problem of rationality and freedom in Aquinas's theory of ethics.

O'Connor's main objection that free will is incompatible with rationality may be met from the text, I think, in two ways. The first is to note that voluntariness is wide enough, as a concept, to include some aspect of the intellect. Aquinas will say that the intellect moves the will because the good that is understood is the object of the will.⁶ Intellect moves the will in presenting its object, which is universal truth and being, to the will.⁷ We also have the assertion that knowledge is a condition of voluntariness,⁸ and that the intellect moves the will as its formal cause.⁹ From these statements it is evident that the will, even though free as an efficient cause in consciousness, is nevertheless in some way under the control of the intellect, whether we are aware of it or not. Something that we have learned, therefore, or something that we should know, or something that we perform habitually or even fail to perform may be subject of voluntariness.

A second way of meeting O'Connor's objection is to note that every act of the will as free choice, where the will moves itself to fulfil either its means or its ends, is also not dissociated from the intellect. For (a) the will as free choice, but not in its other aspects as voluntariness, moves the intellect as efficient cause, (b) the will immediately knows itself to be so moved; and (c) the will thus meets the intellect actually.¹⁰ No matter where or how the will "breaks in," the intellect either as formal cause or as actuality is already there; according to Aquinas the intellect has supplied the will with a first principle as its rational end, and the intellect also makes the self aware of its self-action in actualized knowledge.¹¹

In his discussion of the "interplay" of reason and will O'Connor's further observation that since reason's verdict is admittedly not compelling it makes it impossible for us to know if it is the correct one,¹² would seem not to be well taken. This is

because he blurs the distinction between the verdict of reason which itself may be correct, and the correctness (or perhaps we should say the aptness or the success) of the implementation of reason's conclusions, a matter which is momentarily attended by risk and decidable on a basis which takes us outside of the syllogism. The "freedom of exercise" by which the will moves itself to make a choice or refrain from choosing is never carried out by necessity. Granted that all prior reasoning has been logically correct, such reasoning should be only a guide to the will in the exercise of its freedom and not binding on the outcome.

Application to Law

Where the agent does not act but is required to, that is, where he is negligent (the "not will to act" versus the "will not to act"), the agent is accountable. Where he is responsibly involved and under obligation to act he is accountable for his errors both of commission and omission. Such actions or lack of action count as voluntary acts, even though unaccompanied by conscious awareness. At law, the agent cannot plead ignorance as an excuse, either of the action or the obligation or of the law covering the action.

In view of Aquinas's definition of voluntary acts as acts necessarily accompanied by knowledge,¹³ it might appear that this ethical theory is not able to accommodate voluntariness along with inadvertent error as described in the above paragraph. But such error for Aquinas would be the result of a "consequential" ignorance¹⁴ or, let us term it, the *will of neglect*, because ignorance of the act is relative to and follows upon an obligation to will it. The obligation to act and even the intention to act may both be there; the former implicates the agent but the latter does not excuse him from complicity in the situation. An example is the motorist who does not obey a sign which he failed to see. If he is apprehended he is responsible and at fault because it was within his power "to consider, to will and to act."¹⁵

Aquinas further states that ignorance may cause involuntariness although every ignorance does not cause it.¹⁶ Inattentive ignorance of road signs, however, where there is obligation to

heed them would not deprive an individual of voluntariness. There may quite well be, and sometimes ought to be, voluntariness where there are non-acts not countered by the will.¹⁷ Again, voluntary actions are of greater extension and include more than acts involving deliberation and free choice because acts performed spontaneously and suddenly may also be voluntary.¹⁸ In speaking of acts that are spontaneous, however, it is important to distinguish human acts (*actus humani*) from those acts of man (*actus hominis*) which are reflex acts. It is only the human acts that are moral.¹⁹

Another kind of ignorance dealt with by Aquinas is one that relates "concomitantly" to the act of will.²⁰ This might be referred to as the *will of intent* because of the fact that intent is never obliterated by circumstances that may have become confused. The example is taken of someone who wishes to kill his enemy and actually does so, thinking at the time, however, that he killed a stag. Ignorance in this instance would not cause involuntariness since the result was not contrary to what was originally willed; the act must therefore be counted as voluntary.²¹ In modern parlance we would say that the agent is answerable at law if intent can be shown.

Conclusion

Should Aquinas be classed with those who argue that determinism is consistent with freedom of the will? He would at least claim that rationality and free choice within voluntariness are not altogether inconsistent. Copleston, for example, is convinced, in spite of some problems that may be inherent in Aquinas's ethical theory, that there are pre-eminent claims of the intellect for the will. It would be characteristic of Aquinas to say that whereas the will tends toward its object, the intellect, possesses it in cognition, and possession is better than tending towards.²²

From the foregoing discussion it would seem that (1) there is much that comes under voluntariness that does not come under the direct and immediate will of free choice, (2) there is much that is voluntary of which we are not immediately conscious, and (3) a large part of voluntariness (perhaps most of it) cannot be said to be "free" in the usual sense of the I. P. Q...7

term, or at best only very minutely so, as for example, when we perform from habit something we have learned, or at the other end of the scale, when we willingly but compulsively follow the dictates of desire. Free choice may be only a very small part of voluntariness, and perhaps the familiar term "will" could be made an overall generic term to take in both voluntariness and choice.

Several kinds of volition may be noted: (1) the "passive" will or what may be termed the *will of assent*, which obtains whenever we give conscious consent to (or at least do not actively oppose) any eventuality, (2) the *will of obligation* whereby we are not able to refuse certain inevitable ends, precepts or consequences, (3) the *will of disposition*, when the appetitive nature influences our actions, (4) the *will of intent* where knowledge of action may, however, be concomitantly confused through error, and (5) the *will of neglect* where, closely associated with obligation, ignorance of certain acts performed or left undone is consequent upon our commitment to perform them. Only in (6) the *will of free choice* or "active" will, which is immediate, direct and conscious, is the will free to move itself, but not absolutely, since such action is still accompanied by knowledge actually and is thus in some way an intellectual endeavour, although not one that always follows upon deliberation.

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NOTES

1. O'Connor, D. J., *Aquinas and Natural Law*, London, Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1967, p. 46.
2. *S. T.*, I, 83, 1, in Pegis, A. C., *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, New York, The Modern Library, 1948, p. 369. Also *de Malo*, 6, 1, as referred to by O'Connor.
3. O'Connor, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.
4. Aquinas, C. G., II, 48, as quoted by O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
5. O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
6. *S. T.*, I, 82, 4.
7. *Ibid.*, II, I, 9, 1.

8. *Ibid.*, II, I, 6, 8.
9. O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
10. *C. G.*, XXXVI; also cf. *S. T.*, II, I, 9, 3c.
11. The first thing willed is not the act of will, but the final end which is happiness or *beatitudo*. As such it is essentially an act of the intellect and not the will, because will can desire the good which is only apparent and thus not genuine, cf. *C. G.*, XXVI.
12. O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 55; cf. also p. 51.
13. *S. T.*, II, I, 6, 8.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*; *S. T.*, II, I, 6, 3c.
16. *S. T.*, II, I, 6, 8.
17. *S. T.*, II, I, 6, 3.
18. Cf. Bourke, V. J. ed., *The Pocket Aquinas*, Washington Square Press, Inc., New York, N. Y., 1960, p. 188, quoting Aquinas, *Exposition of Aristotle's Ethics*, III, 5.
19. Aquinas, *S. T.*, I, II, 1, 3, as referred to by Copleston, F. C., *Aquinas*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Eng., 1970, p. 201; cf. also p. 193.
20. *S. T.*, II, I, 6, 8. Cf. also Bourke, *op. cit.*, p. 203, quoting Aquinas, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, III, 12, 17c.
21. Support comes from Aristotle, *Ethics* III, 1110b 25, as given in Pegis, *op. cit.*, p. 493n 45.
22. Copleston, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

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