

The Intentionality of the Human Act: Good and Evil from a Moral Perspective

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The Two Fundamental Components of Voluntary Action

Every moral action is always a voluntary action, and it is a moral action on account of being—and to the extent that it is—a voluntary action. A voluntary act has two essential components: formal knowledge of the end and voluntariness or intentionality.¹

Formal knowledge of the end means that the acting person knows “what he or she is doing,” and expressly understands it as the object of his or her act, as this person considers the opportune nature of this act. In the words of Saint Thomas, the act reflects a good “*apprehensum et ordinatum per rationem*.”² If, for example, unbeknownst to me someone places a bank check for five hundred dollars among some old papers of mine, later when I rip up those papers and throw them away I voluntarily perform the action of ripping up and throwing the paper in the trash (because this is what I was aware of doing). I do not voluntarily perform the action of ripping up and throwing away the check for five hundred dollars even if it is true that they were my very hands that ripped the check and they did so without the slightest hint of coercion. Without the formal knowledge of what one is doing, and to the extent such knowledge is lacking, there can be no such thing as a free, or voluntary, act.

Voluntariness or intentionality is the knowing and deliberate movement of the personal will toward its object, the act of “reflecting upon” incarnated in any act of the will. Every theory of moral action presupposes a proper understanding of voluntariness or intentionality. This is so not only because without voluntariness there is no such thing as a voluntary act, but also and above all because whereas the faculty of hearing confronted with sound can only hear, and likewise sight confronted with illumined color can only see, a person can voluntarily approach one single reality in many different ways—one might approve or disapprove of something, love it or hate it, desire to buy it or steal it, etc. For this reason such reality inasmuch as it is the object or good to which the will moves cannot be defined in a moral sense without indicating the manner in which the person is reflecting. That is to say, it cannot be defined independently of the voluntariness of the person that turns toward that reality.

For this reason, the end or good as object of the will is not properly a *thing*—a wristwatch, for example. Rather, it is an action that uses or in some way touches upon a thing. The wristwatch is a practical good (an end of the will) insofar as it is an object that is desired, or insofar as it is an object of a sale or theft, or object that is given to someone as a gift in a gesture of friendship, etc. The good or end of one’s willing is therefore to use a wristwatch, to buy a wristwatch, steal a wristwatch or gift a wristwatch, etc.

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¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 6, a. 1 (henceforth this will be cited as *ST*).

² *ST*, I-II, q. 20, a. 1, ad 1.

Given that formal knowledge of the end and voluntariness or intentionality are essential elements of the moral act, to describe or understand the moral act merely from an external point of view (as if it were a material occurrence and nothing more) would be a serious error inasmuch as in doing so one does not consider the interior purpose (voluntariness) from which the act follows and by which the act is informed. A moral act is not a simple external act that then gives off certain effects. This is emphasized in the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*: “By the object of a given moral act, then, one cannot mean a process or an event of the merely physical order, to be assessed on the basis of its ability to bring about a given state of affairs in the outside world.”³ It goes on to say that even methodology in observation is important “in order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*. The object of the act of willing is in fact a freely chosen kind of behaviour.”⁴ This indication of the place of methodology highlights the proper perspective in any virtue ethics.

First and Third Person Ethics

Many ethics scholars make a distinction between ethics approached from the perspective of the third person and that from the perspective of the first person, also called virtue ethics.⁵ Ethics elaborated from the perspective of the third person characteristically appears as follows: “So-and-so performs action x. Is this action licit or illicit?” The act performed by a third person is observed from the outside, as a judge might see it, and it is thereby easily described as an event of the physical order. The voluntariness necessary for one to be able to come to a moral judgment is, then, often erroneously obtained from the intention (that is, the *finis operantis*). In reality the intention is intentionality of the second level that is added to an action that is already defined and determined by voluntariness or basic intentionality of the first level (*finis operis*). The encyclical *Veritatis splendor* refers to these second level intentions with the expression “ulterior intentions”⁶ precisely because they represent a further level of intentionality that is not responsible for the act when this act is considered in itself.

Ethics approached from a first person perspective virtue ethics is undertaken from the point of view of the acting person. It is a reflection that is born of and maintains footing in the realm of human action seen from the inside of the acting subject, and therefore considered in the subject’s intrinsic intentional dynamism. The external act, which often constitutes the “body” or “material” of behavior is never separated from the interior purpose that makes up the “soul” behind said act.⁷

³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, n. 78. *AAS* 1993: 1196. Hereafter cited as *VS*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See A. Rodríguez Luño and A. Bellocq, *Ética General*. EUNSA: Pamplona, 2014, seventh edition, pgs. 50–56. For a broader study see G. Abbà, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale? Ricerche di filosofia morale*. Las: Rome, 1996, pgs. 33–203; E. Tugendhat, *Problemas de Ética, Crítica*: Barcelona, 1988: 39–65.

⁶ *VS*, n. 80. On the distinction between the two levels of willful intention, see E. Colom and A. Rodríguez Luño, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi. I: Morale fondamentale*. Edusc: Rome, 2013, pgs. 188–202; J. G. Kern, “L’object de l’acte moral. Réflexions autour d’un paragraphe méconnu de l’encyclique *Veritatis Splendor* et de sa difficile réception,” in *Revue Thomiste* 2004 (104):355–394.

⁷ Thomas distinguishes this by identifying an element in the object that is almost material and another element that is almost formal. *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 1, d. 48, q. 1, a. 2, c. “Species autem

An example might serve to clarify. If a person riding a scooter in front of a car raises his right arm third person ethics would give an account of the action taken in itself, considered as “raising one’s right arm,” and would further note that the action cannot be morally evaluated if the intention (that is, the *finis operantis*) is not known, which is the reason this act was performed. If the intention is to indicate a right turn this would be considered a good act. If, rather, the intention is to insult the driver of another car the action is inappropriate. Ethics of a first person perspective tackles the question in quite a different way in that it distinguishes between two possible actions that considered in themselves and with no need to rely on intention (the *finis operantis*) are completely different. The act of “indicating that one is turning right by raising one’s arm” and the act of “insulting someone by raising one’s arm” are different actions by the fact of their voluntariness or intentionality of the first level, without which one has to invoke the intention to distinguish them, just as the act of “buying a wristwatch” is different than “stealing a wristwatch” and with no connection to the intention behind buying or stealing a wristwatch.

Let us now take as an example the kind of behavior described in numbers 14 and 15 of *Humane vitae*. In number 14, “any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means,”⁸ is said to be intrinsically evil. In number 15, however, one reads that “the Church does not consider at all illicit the use of those therapeutic means necessary to cure bodily diseases, even if a foreseeable impediment to procreation should result there from—provided such impediment is not directly intended for any motive whatsoever.”⁹ Third person ethics tends to see the act of taking a pill with a glass of water as an act of contraception, not taking into account that in *Humane vitae* states “as end or as a means to block procreation” is an essential element of a contracepting act. If one takes a pill otherwise used to contracept but in her case she needs it to treat a certain illness third person ethics would likely say that *Humanae vitae* number 15 is talking about a contracepting act justified by the principle of double effect or by therapeutic purposes. Yet in reality, according to *Humanae vitae* contraception is an intrinsically evil act from a moral perspective and it cannot therefore be justified morally either by the principle of double effect or by therapeutic intention. Third person ethics sustains heavy damage after *Humanae vitae* number 15, and the only way it avoids this would be to claim that the encyclical is an imperfect and sometimes contradictory text.

First person ethics in turn holds that the actions appearing in numbers 14 and 15 of *Humane vitae* when considered in themselves—and this without reference to the principle of double effect or intention (*finis operantis*)—are actions that are essentially different in that the underlying voluntariness or intentionality of the first level is different. This is true even if the material element remains the same in each case, that is to say taking the drug with a glass of water. In one case the object *apprehensum et ordinatum per rationem* is to block procreation, whereas in the other case it is instead a medical cure of sorts. Only after one clarifies that the action described in *Humanae vitae* number 15 is in itself therapeutic and not contraceptive

cujuslibet actus voluntarii trahitur ex objecto, quod est forma voluntatis producentis actum. Ad objectum autem alicujus actus duo concurrunt: unum quod se habet quasi materialiter, et alterum quod est sicut formale, complens rationem objecti; sicut ad visibile concurrunt lux et color. Illud autem quod se habet materialiter ad objectum voluntatis, est quaecumque res volita: sed ratio objecti completur ex ratione boni.”

⁸ Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humane vitae*, 25 July 1968, n. 14. *AAS* 1968: 490.

⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 15.

ones can a person apply the principle of double effect to justify the inevitable event of a collateral effect that is not desired.

These two examples serve to illustrate how the perspectives of third person ethics and that of first person are two different ways of understanding the object of a moral act. In the third person perspective the object of choice is a thing or action described in material terms (i.e. a certain kind of drug, raising one's right arm). A first person perspective instead holds that the object of choice is an action (block procreation, make an indication of a right turn) with intelligible content—as Saint Thomas says, *apprehensum et ordinatum per rationem*—that as such can be the object of a reasonable choice.

In *Veritatis splendor* number 78 one reads that it is necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the agent and the text recalls, “the insightful analysis, still valid today, made by Saint Thomas.”¹⁰ It is therefore necessary to briefly explain what Aquinas means by the object of the moral act.

The object of the moral act in Aquinas

Saint Thomas does not propose to advance a theory of action *per se*. Rather, he poses certain moral questions like whether it is the object to morally specify a moral act.¹¹ The answer to this question presupposes that Thomas has an idea of what the object of a moral act is. The theory is only implicit and the terminology often shifts back and forth.¹² For example, when Thomas says that “the first badness in moral actions is something that comes from the object, e.g., taking what belongs to another”¹³ he does not say whether the object is “that which belongs to some other” (the *res aliena*) or the act of “taking that which belongs to some other.” There are some expressions that lead one to think that it would be the thing on which the external act¹⁴ that morally determines the moral act falls back on, for example when he says “*id autem circa quod est actio exterior, est obiectum eius.*”¹⁵

There are nevertheless good reasons to believe that such a position is untenable. It is enough to think that that which belongs to some other, the *res aliena*, in itself is neither good nor bad. We meet with the *res aliena* both in the action of “taking the *res aliena*” as well as in the action of “protecting the *res aliena*,” for example the action of an officer of the law to restore the *res aliena*. Then: either the three actions mentioned above are identical, because the object is the same, or the *res aliena* is not the object that morally specifies those actions. In the past some moral theorists have concluded that an act is morally distinguished on the basis of a

¹⁰ *VS*, n. 78.

¹¹ In my presentation of the Thomistic notion of the moral object I am keeping in mind M. Rhonheimer's laudable study, “La prospettiva della persona agente e la natura della ragione pratica. L'oggetto dell'atto umano nell'antropologia tomista dell'azione,” in J. Noriega – L. Melina (eds.). *Camminare nella luce. Prospettive della Teologia morale a partire da Veritatis splendor*. Pontificia Università Lateranense: Roma, 2004, pgs. 169– 224.

¹² For a good synthesis of Thomistic vocabulary and its shifts throughout his work, see Sousa-Lara, D., *A especificação moral dos actos humanos segundo são Tomás de Aquino*. Edusc: Dissertationes, Series Theologica, 24, Roma; 2008.

¹³ *ST.*, I-II, 18, 2: “primum malum in actionibus moralibus est quod est ex obiecto, sicut accipere aliena.”

¹⁴ For an external action what is intended is a commanded act, that is an act of any operative human faculty that is not the will rather commanded by it. An internal act means an act elicited by the will.

¹⁵ *ST*, I-II, q. 18, a.6.

“transcendental relation” between the physical object and moral norm. But this is unsatisfactory insofar as morality *ex obiecto* then becomes something utterly extrinsic: an act would be bad because it is contrary to a moral norm, not vice versa.

In my view, the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas presents a different position. This can be illustrated summarily in the following three points:

- 1) The voluntary will and the voluntary act is the realm of moral good and evil. The question regarding the object of the moral act is a question of the object of the choice and therefore on the chosen action. The person who steals an x has deliberately chosen to steal an x. The person who gifts an x has deliberately chosen to gift an x. The external act of stealing an x and gifting an x are each the object of voluntary choice.
- 2) External actions are the objects of choice, a choice considered in its intelligible meaning beyond its material aspect. “An external act is an object of the will inasmuch as it is a reason to the will, that it is a perceived good and so ordered by reason.”¹⁶
- 3) One can now pose the question, if the goodness or badness of an internal act depends on an external act, on what does the goodness or badness of an external act depend? Perhaps one might expect a response like the following: just as the morality of the act of voluntary choice depends on its object (the external act), so too does the morality of the external act depend on its object, or the material toward which it moves (for example, the *res aliena*). But Saint Thomas does not reason in this manner. In question twenty of the Prima Secundae dedicated to the study of the goodness and badness of external acts the expression “object of the external act” does not appear. Thomas instead writes the following: “The goodness or badness that the exterior act has in its own right (*secundum se*)—because of the right sort of manner and circumstances—is derived not from the will but rather from reason.”¹⁷ He then adds, for this “if one thinks of the exterior act’s goodness insofar as it exists in reason’s ordering and apprehension, then this goodness is prior to the goodness of the act of willing.”¹⁸ In other words, the goodness or badness of an act of choice depends on its object, which is the exterior act. Yet the goodness or badness of the latter, again, does not depend on its proper object but upon an *ordinatio at apprehensio rationis* according to which the external act is good or bad.

Summary: the goodness or badness of the will is caused by the goodness or badness of the exterior act. The exterior act is the cause of the goodness or badness of a choice not inasmuch as it is the act executed (its material aspect), rather inasmuch as it is the intelligible object of a choice, object of the voluntary will *apprehensum et ordinatum a ratione*. Once again using *Humanae vitae* as an example, the identification of the act of contraception does not rely on what is involved in the external act (the contraceptive drug) or the action in its material aspect (taking that drug with a glass of water). Rather, it relies on the intelligible purpose understood as what is desired by a person (eliminate the procreativity of a conjugal act by way of ingesting a

¹⁶ *ST.*, I-II, q. 20, a. 1, ad 1: “Actus exterior est obiectum voluntatis, in quantum proponitur voluntati a ratione ut quoddam bonum apprehensum et ordinatum per rationem.”

¹⁷ *ST.*, I-II, 20, 1: “Bonitas autem vel malitia quam habet actus exterior secundum se, propter debitam materiam et debitas circumstantias, non derivatur a voluntate, sed magis a ratione.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, “Unde si consideretur bonitas exterioris actus secundum quod est in ordinatione et apprehensione rationis, prior est quam bonitas actus voluntatis.”

pharmaceutical drug).

Here another important objection emerges: does Thomas hereby reduce the objective meaning of the exterior act to that which is time and again desired? Does he separate the intelligible meaning of the act from its material component? This position, at its heart the position of Abelard and something that quietly troubles some of my colleagues, does not correspond to the thought of Thomas Aquinas. For Thomas, the exterior act is already an object understood and ordered by reason. Because of this he affirms that exterior act receives its goodness not from the will but "*ex circumstantiarum commensuratione, secundum quam proportionatus est ad finem hominis consequendum.*"¹⁹

It is therefore not possible to define and re-define the meaning of our actions according to the intentions that we have repeatedly. Indeed, what an agent in a given situation might reasonably decide and subsequently choose is identified by reason and not on account of "intentions" that can be freely acquired and arranged, but because of objective criteria of reasonableness inherent to practical reason through natural law.

The moral virtues occupy a role of fundamental importance among these criteria of reasonableness. The conformity to or contradiction of the fundamental exigencies of the moral virtues is what determines the goodness or badness of the external act chosen by the will. If behavior communicated is here and now taken to be a falsehood it cannot be taken into consideration if not in light of what the virtue of truthfulness requires or prohibits. If an object entrusted to someone's care must or must not be presented and restored to its owner who asks for it is something that can only be decided if here and now its restoration conforms to the virtue of justice. If certain behavior in the context of a marital relationship is to be considered proper or out of line it must be evaluated in light of the virtue of conjugal chastity. And so it is in any area of human behavior. What determines the goodness or badness of choices is not the thing or material circumstance described, rather the intelligible moral sense of the chosen action in relation to the virtues. Yet one must always keep in mind that there are nevertheless some cases wherein the material behavior described possesses an intelligible moral sense that is quite unequivocal, and in other cases there may be a plethora of possible interpretations. "Raising one's right arm" can be the material element of two very different moral actions. The stable criteria for reasonableness, however, does not permit one to accept as an interpretation for a person punching another's teeth out that this was merely a display of affection.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. II, d. 40, q.1, a.3.