

# Aquinas on Interior and Exterior Acts: Clarifying a Key Aspect of His Action Theory

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***Abstract:** This essay attempts to clarify an important aspect of St. Thomas Aquinas's action theory, namely his understanding of, and distinction between, interior and exterior acts. The essay proceeds by considering key primary texts, the way they have been understood by classical commentators, and how they have been seen by some leading contemporary interpreters to argue for a new interpretation. Whereas most interpreters have read the distinction between interior and exterior acts in light the distinction between elicited acts of the will (i.e., intending and choosing) and acts commanded by the will of other powers, the author presents a series of arguments that a correct interpretation will understand the interior act as the intention and the exterior act as the choice plus the commanded act. The resulting interpretation further disproves a revisionist reading of Aquinas, and contributes to a more coherent overall theory.*

In this essay, I offer to English language readers an additional component of my broader work toward the recovery of St. Thomas's teaching on "the specification of human acts."<sup>1</sup> I do so by addressing one of the central topics requiring clarification in the contemporary debate in Thomistic action theory, namely Aquinas's understanding of the meaning of, and relation between, interior and exterior acts. In particular, the present essay seeks to clarify the different senses in which Thomas uses the expressions *actus interioris* (interior act) and *actus*

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1. My initial and broader contribution is my doctoral dissertation, *A especificação moral dos actos humanos segundo são Tomás de Aquino* (Edizioni Università Santa Croce: Rome, 2008). The first selection from this work to be made available to English language readers is my "Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act: A Reading in Light of the Texts and Commentators" in the *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15:2 (August 2008), which was the fourth chapter of the original study. The present essay originated as the eighth chapter of the dissertation. I offer special thanks to Dr. Joseph T. Papa for his excellent translation, and to Dr. William F. Murphy, Jr., who arranged for the translation and helped to edit it for the present context.

*exterioris* (exterior act),<sup>2</sup> which – as it turns out – is more important than one might expect.<sup>3</sup> As I will argue below, it seems that both classical and contemporary interpreters have often misunderstood Thomas's distinction between interior and exterior acts, which partially explains the lack of consensus among recent scholars. It is my hope, therefore, that the present study can contribute to a clarification of Aquinas's action theory such that its coherence can be more readily grasped.

I will proceed in three major steps: (1) a consideration of the most important primary texts; (2) a review of how they have been read by both classical and recent interpreters; and (3) some final comments, including the implications of our study for the interpretation of the crucial questions 19 and 20 of the *Prima Secundae* (i.e., I-II) of Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*. Whereas essentially all other interpreters have identified Thomas's binomial interior act/exterior act with the binomial elicited/commanded, in this section I will offer several arguments in support of my conclusion that it should instead be identified with the binomial intention/choice. Finally, (4) I will offer a few remarks regarding the relevance of this conclusion to contemporary work in Thomistic action theory.

## 1. The Important Texts

For Aquinas, "exterior acts belong to the *genus moris* (the moral genus or kind) only insofar as they are voluntary."<sup>4</sup> This statement presumes that it is possible to consider exterior acts in a way that prescind from their voluntariness, i.e., considering them only as the *materia ex qua* (literally, "matter out of which") of the human act.<sup>5</sup> Along these lines, when speaking of sin, St. Thomas says that "the

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2. In this essay, I will use the binomial interior/exterior rather than internal/external, although they can be used interchangeably. Because this essay generally (but not exclusively) follows the English Dominican translation of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* (Christian Classics, Westminster 1981), and since this translation often uses "external," I have substituted "exterior" in passages taken from it for consistency. Unless otherwise noted, other translations from the Latin were originally done by the author into Portuguese, and then rendered into English with an eye to the original Latin.
  3. In my broader study (i.e., the above dissertation), the eighth chapter builds upon chapter three, which considers Thomas's teaching – mainly in the *Summa Theologiae* I-II, qq. 18 to 21 – regarding the *moralitas* of interior and exterior acts (while leaving their precise specification for the eighth chapter).
  4. T. AQUINAS (ST.), *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, in "Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita," t. 23, Commissio Leonina - J. Vrin, Rome - Paris 1982, q. 2, a. 2, ad 13: "actus exteriores non pertinent ad genus moris nisi secundum quod sunt voluntarii." English translations from the *De Malo* generally follow that of *On Evil: St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. John A. and Jean T. Oesterle (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1995), but are sometimes modified.
  5. In especially chapter VI of my dissertation I argue that, for St. Thomas, the *materia circa quam* (literally, the matter concerning which) corresponds to the proximate end and to the moral object of the act – that is, to the object of the *electio*. In the moral context, Thomas does not use *materia circa quam* to refer to the material element of the object – which is the *materia ex qua* – but to the material element of the human act that is the object chosen in view of the realization of a specific intention of the

deformity of sin consists in both acts, namely, the interior act and the exterior act, and yet there is one and the same deformity of both. And this is so because one causes the deformity in the other.”<sup>6</sup> For example, between a choice to steal and an act of theft that is actually executed externally, there exists a single formal rationale of sin – the will to commit a theft. The exterior act as commanded by the will is thus related to the will as a material element, and not only accidentally. In fact,

[i]n the acts of the soul, when one thing remains despite the displacing or removal of another thing, this other thing is not always related accidentally to that one thing but sometimes materially. *For that which is the reason for the other is always related to it as formal to material* (emphasis added). For example, in the act of vision, color is seen by means of light and is related as material to that light, which can be seen even without color, although color cannot be seen without light. And similarly in the act of the will, the end is the reason for willing the means (literally, “that which is for the sake of the end”). Hence, the end is desirable even without the means, and yet the mean is materially, not accidentally, related to the desirable end. [...] Since then, the act of the will is the reason why the exterior act is blameworthy, in regard to the sin being culpable, the act of the will is related as the formal element to the exterior act, and the exterior act is not related accidentally but materially to such a sin.<sup>7</sup>

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agent. In my reading of Aquinas, the *materia circa quam* joins, as it were, the concept of *materia ex qua* (the “body” of the act) to its “soul,” i.e., the *finis proximus* to which the deliberate will directs itself. Therefore, *the materia circa quam always corresponds to an act which proceeds from the reason and the will*, which is to say that it always corresponds to a human act. I am therefore substantially in agreement with Martin Rhonheimer’s understanding of the *materia circa quam*, which for him, already includes a formal element, a *ratio boni* capable of moving the will. My position differs from Kevin Flannery and Stephen Brock, both of whom tend to identify the *materia circa quam* with the material element of the object of the human act. Brock sees the *materia circa quam* as the essential co-principle of the act; it “determines” or “conditions” the form, thus indirectly influencing the act’s specification. For Joseph Pilsner, the *materia circa quam* would be related to the object of the human act as the human body is to the soul. The *materia circa quam* is thus necessarily a material proportioned to receiving a given form, just as the human body is a material proportioned to be “informed” by a human soul. The *materia ex qua*, on the other hand, is understood along the lines of *materia prima*. Despite this tendency to “materialize” the *materia circa quam*, Pilsner does recognize that Thomas “frequently uses *materia* as a term synonymous with object,” a recognition that leads to some incoherence in his treatment of the question.

6. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 12: “in utroque actu, interiori et exteriori, consistit deformitas peccati; sed tamen una deformitas est utriusque: quod ideo est, quia in uno eorum causatur deformitas ex alio.”
7. *Ibidem*, ad 5: “in actibus animae illud, quo posito vel remoto nihilominus alterum manet, non semper se habet accidentaliter, sed materialiter quandoque. Semper enim

It is interesting to note that Aquinas in this passage uses the expression “act of the will,” and not simply “interior act” or “exterior act,” so as to avoid any possible ambiguity. The exterior act is understood here *only* as the commanded act as the *materia ex qua*, that is to say as the ‘body’ of the action, whereas the interior act is understood as the elicited act of the will, i.e., as the *electio* or choice. In this sense it may be said that “the act of the will is related as the formal element to the exterior act,”<sup>8</sup> not, however, in the sense in which the *intentio* (i.e., the intention) is the form of the *electio* – which is also true, as we have already seen – but in the sense in which the *electio* is the form of the commanded act. In this sense it can also be said that “the act of the will is the cause of the exterior act,”<sup>9</sup> and “exterior acts do not belong to the *genus moris* except to the extent that they are voluntary. Therefore, if the act of the will is good the exterior act is said to be good, but it will be evil if the act of the will is evil.”<sup>10</sup>

It thus becomes clearer that “[n]ot only the interior act which the will elicits but also the exterior act which the will commands is caused by the will; and therefore even the sin itself that is committed by the exterior act is also committed by the will.”<sup>11</sup> The interior act which is generated by and issues from the will is the *electio*, whereas the exterior act which the will commands is the *materia ex qua*.<sup>12</sup>

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illud quod est ratio alterius, se habet ad illud sicut formale ad materiale; puta, in actu sensus color videtur per lumen, et se habet ut materiale ad lumen, quod potest videri etiam sine colore, licet color non possit videri sine lumine. Et similiter in actu voluntatis finis est ratio volendi id quod est ad finem; unde finis est appetibilis etiam sine eo quod est ad finem, non accidentaliter se habet ad appetibile, sed materialiter. Et similiter est intelligendum de principio et conclusione; quia principium potest intelligi sine conclusione, sed non e converso. Quia ergo actus voluntatis est ratio quare actus exterior sit culpabilis, quantum ad hoc quod est esse peccatum culpabile, actus voluntatis se habet ut formale ad actum exteriorem, et actus exterior se habet non accidentaliter sed materialiter ad tale peccatum.”

8. *Ibidem*: “actus voluntatis se habet ut formale ad actum exteriorem.”

9. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 11: “actus voluntatis est actus exterioris causa.”

10. T. AQUINAS (ST.), *Liber de veritate catholicae Fidei contra errores infidelium seu Summa contra Gentiles*, in P. Marc - C. Pera - P. Caramello (eds.), “Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita,” t. 2-3 (Marietti: Torino - Rome, 1961), lib. 3, cap. 10, n. 13: “Non enim ad mores huiusmodi actus exteriores pertinent nisi secundum quod sunt voluntarii. Unde, si voluntatis sit actus bonus, et actus exterior bonus dicitur: malus autem, si ille sit malus”; cf. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 8: “actus exterior habet rationem culpae ab actu voluntatis” (exterior acts derive their character of moral wrong from acts of the will); *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 11: “cum actus exterior habet rationem peccati ab actu voluntatis, idem peccatum est actus voluntatis et actus exterior coniunctus” (since the exterior act has the nature of sin from the act of the will, the act of the will and the conjoined exterior act are the same sin).

11. *Ibidem*, a. 2, ad 1: “voluntate producitur non solum actus interior quem voluntas elicit, sed etiam actus exterior quem voluntas imperat; et ita etiam hoc ipsum quod exteriore actu peccatur, voluntate peccatur.”

12. Cf. T. AQUINAS (ST.), *Scriptum super Sententiis magistri Petri Lombardi*, in “S. Tommaso d’Aquino, Commento alle Sentenze di Pietro Lombardo,” vols. 1-10 (Edizioni Studio Domenicano: Bologna 1999-2002), lib. 2, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4, ad 3: “actus exterior

In this sense, “speaking [...] of that goodness which the will confers on the exterior act, the exterior act does not add any goodness [to the interior act], assuming an equal intensity in the will. I say this because there are some pleasurable acts in which the will cannot be as intense prior to the act as it is during the act [...]. [On the other hand,] there are some acts which are difficult, in which the will weakens during the act, and in these the will can be more perfect before the act than during it.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, if the intensity of the act of the will varies, the goodness of the exterior act, considered as voluntary, also varies.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it is from the interior act of the will that the commanded exterior act derives all of its goodness in the *genus moris*.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, claims St. Thomas, “if a man’s exterior

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sequitur actum interiorem voluntatis: et ideo ratio culpae, quae primo in actu voluntatis est, transit ex voluntate in actum exteriorem” (the exterior act follows the interior act of the will, and therefore the guilt, which is first in the act of will, flows from the will to the exterior act); IDEM, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, in “Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita,” t. 22, Editori di San Tommaso, Rome 1970-1976, q. 27, a. 5, ad 2: “ex ipso actu volendi causatur exterior actus” (from the act of the will itself proceeds the exterior act).

13. *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 3, c.: “Loquendo igitur de illa bonitate quam voluntas actui exteriori praebet, actus exterior nihil bonitatis addit, dummodo voluntas aequaliter intensa sit. Hoc pro tanto dico, quia quidam actus sunt delectabiles, in quibus voluntas non potest esse ita intensa ante actum sicut est in actu, ut patet in actu fornicationis; unde non aequaliter demeretur qui vult fornicari, et qui actu fornicatur: quia voluntas non potest esse adeo perfecta ante actum sicut est in actu. Quidam vero actus sunt difficiles, in quibus voluntas remittitur in actu; et in istis voluntas potest esse magis perfecta ante actum quam in actu.”
14. Cf. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, c.: “peccatum consistit et in interiori actu voluntatis et in exteriori actu” ([S]in consists in both the interior act of the will and the exterior act); *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 24, q. 3, a. 4, c.: “ratio virtutis vel peccati mortalis non potest esse sine electione rationis consiliantis et deliberantis; et ideo quidquid fornicationis ante hoc invenitur per accidens, peccatum mortale non est; ubi autem ad hoc pervenitur, statim peccatum mortale esse incipit: unde etiamsi usus exteriorum membrorum et delectatio eorum esset, sine voluntate tali, peccatum non esset, sicut beata Lucia dixit: *si invitam me violari feceris, castitas mihi duplicabitur ad coronam*. Sed consensus adveniens actui exteriori facit peccatum mortale” (the virtuousness or mortal sinfulness cannot exist without the choice of the counseled and deliberate reason, and therefore any fornication that preceeds choice happens accidentally, and isn’t a mortal sin. Where this happens, what seems the beginning of mortal sin, that starts with the use of the external members and the pleasure in these, without such a will isn’t really a sin, as blessed Lucia said: ‘if you rape me, you will double my crown of chastity.’ Therefore the consent to the exterior act makes the mortal sin).
15. Cf. *ibidem*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4, ad 5: “per actus exteriores manifestantur interiores, sicut causae per effectus; unde sicut effectus participant similitudinem suarum causarum quantum possunt; ita etiam actus exteriores rationem culpae consequuntur, quae primo in actibus interioribus invenitur” (interior acts are manifested by exterior acts, as a cause by its effects. Therefore, as effects participate by similitude in their causes to the extent they can, so exterior acts receive their guiltiness, which first existed in the interior acts); *De veritate*, q. 25, a. 5, ad 10: “actus exterior est materialis respectu interioris actus, qui est formale in peccato mortali, cum actus exterior et interior sint unum peccatum” (the exterior act is material in respect to the interior act, which is the formal element in mortal sin. The exterior and the interior act form a single sin).

actions were to be inordinate, without any disorder in his will, they would not be sinful, for instance, if he were to kill a man, through ignorance or out of zeal for justice.”<sup>16</sup> This is so because “[t]he will causes acts to be praiseworthy (i.e., meritorious and virtuous) or blameworthy (i.e., demeritorious and vicious). And so we call every virtue and vice a habit of the mind and the will because there are virtuous and vicious acts only insofar as the mind’s will commands them.”<sup>17</sup> “If, on the other hand, we speak of the goodness of the act that the exterior act has in itself, then the exterior act completes the interior in goodness and in malice, just as the termination of a movement completes the movement.”<sup>18</sup>

Is the goodness of the choice, then, sufficient for the exterior act to be good? No; according to St. Thomas “it is necessary that the goodness of the will which chooses concur with the goodness of the end and the goodness of that which is ordered to the end; if this is the case, then the exterior act will without a doubt be good. If, on the other hand, one of these two things is lacking, the will is evil and the [exterior] act evil.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, “the exterior act is said to be good or evil according to the will, but not only according to the intention of the will, but also according to the choice of the will.”<sup>20</sup> This is true because “for the goodness of the thing is required not only the goodness of the final end, which refers to the act of the will in the intention, but also the goodness of the proximate end, which refers to the act of the will in the choice.”<sup>21</sup> All this means that the exterior act is evil when it proceeds

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16. T. AQUINAS (ST.), *Summa theologiae*, in “Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita,” t. 4-12, (Typographia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide: Rome 1888-1907), II-II, q. 34, a. 4, c.: “si exteriores actus inordinati essent absque inordinatione voluntatis, non essent peccata, puta cum aliquis ignoranter vel zelo iustitiae hominem occidit.”
17. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3: “ex voluntate est quod aliquis actus sit laudabilis seu meritorius et virtuosus, vel culpabilis et demeritorius et vitiosus. Et ideo quaelibet virtus et vitium dicitur esse habitus mentis et voluntatis; non quia ad actum virtutis et vitii pertineant etiam exteriores actus, sed quia non sunt actus virtutis et vitii nisi secundum quod a voluntate mentis imperantur”; cf. T. AQUINAS (ST.), *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, in “Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita,” t. 47 (Ad Sanctae Sabinae: Rome 1969), lib. 2, lect. 5, n. 13: “exteriores actus virtutum ab interiori electione procedunt” (exterior acts of virtue proceed from the interior choice).
18. *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 3, c.: “Si autem loquamur de bonitate actus quam actus exterior secundum se habet, sic actus exterior complet interiorum in bonitate vel malitia, sicut terminus motus complet motum.”
19. *Ibidem*, a. 2, c.: “oportet quod ad bonitatem voluntatis eligentis concurrat bonitas finis, et bonitas ejus quod ad finem ordinatur; et si hoc sit, proculdubio actus exterior bonus erit; si autem alterum desit, erit voluntas mala, et actus malus.”
20. *Ibidem*, ad 2: “secundum voluntatem dicitur actus exterior bonus vel malus; sed non secundum voluntatem intendentem solum, sed secundum voluntatem eligentem.”
21. *Ibidem*, ad 3: “ad bonitatem rei non solum exigitur bonitas finis ultimi quem respicit voluntas intendens, sed etiam bonitas finis proximi, quem respicit voluntas eligens.” Another aspect of Aquinas’s action theory requiring clarification concerns the *finis* or end, which I discuss most explicitly in chapter III of my dissertation. In my reading of Aquinas, the *finis remotus* (which I treat as equivalent to the *finis operantis* because I find it less ambiguous) is understood as the end of the *intentio/intention*, while the *finis*

from a disordered will, even if it has the appearance of goodness to an external observer. For the goodness of the exterior act it is necessary to will both the goodness of the *intentio* and that of the *electio*; these “goodnesses” can be distinguished, but not separated. In fact, “in the exterior action a twofold goodness or malice may be considered: one with respect to the *debitam materiam* (the due or appropriate matter) and circumstances; the other with respect to the order to the end.”<sup>22</sup>

St. Thomas also says that “we need to consider that we can note two objects, namely, the object of the exterior act and the object of the interior act, since an exterior act belongs to the *genus moris* insofar as it is voluntary. And the two objects sometimes coincide, as, for example, if one willing to go somewhere goes there. And sometimes the two objects are different, and one may be good, and the other evil, as, for example, if one gives alms wanting to please people, the object of the exterior act is good, and the object of the interior act evil. And because the exterior act is constituted in the *genus moris* insofar as it is voluntary, we need to consider the moral species of the act formally according to the object of the interior act. And so the Philosopher says in the *Ethics* that one who steals in order to commit adultery is more adulterer than thief.”<sup>23</sup> The object of the exterior act is associated in this passage with the object of the *electio*, and the object of the interior act with the object of the *intentio*. Thomas begins by pointing out that there are cases in which the *intentio* and the *electio* coincide, and in these cases there is only one object. But there are other cases in which the *intentio* (interior act) and *electio* (exterior act) are intentionally ordered with respect to each other in such a way that the object of each can be morally evaluated independently of the other. “To steal” can be morally evaluated based on its object, as can “to commit adultery.” In these texts, Aquinas identifies the *materia*

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*proximus* is the end of the *electio*/choice. Without denying the differences in their readings of Aquinas’s action theory, recent interpreters, consistent with no. 78 of *Veritatis splendor*, reflect the retrieval of Thomas’s teaching on the centrality of the proximate end in determining the object and species of the human act. It may be helpful to note that the terminology of *finis operis/finis operantis*, which becomes popular in the later tradition, can be understood consistently with, and corresponding to, Aquinas’s binomial *finis proximus/finis remotus* (or *operantis*). If, on the other hand, the *finis operis* were understood differently, i.e., as the natural end (*finis naturalis*), the resulting theory would not be that of Aquinas.

22. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 20, a. 2, c.: “actu exteriori potest considerari duplex bonitas vel malitia, una secundum debitam materiam et circumstantias; alia secundum ordinem ad finem.”
23. *De malo*, q. 7, a. 3, c.: “actus exterior pertineat ad genus moris secundum quod est voluntarius, in actu morali possunt considerari duo obiecta; scilicet obiectum exterioris actus, et obiectum interioris. Quae quidem quandoque sunt unum; puta cum aliquis volens ire ad aliquem locum vadit illuc: quandoque vero sunt diversa, et contingit quod alterum est bonum et alterum malum; sicut cum aliquis dat eleemosynam volens placere hominibus, obiectum exterioris actus est bonum; obiectum autem interioris actus est malum; et quia actus exterior constituitur in genere moris in quantum est voluntarius, oportet quod formaliter consideretur species moralis actus secundum obiectum interioris actus; nam species actus consideratur secundum obiectum; unde philosophus dicit in V Ethic. quod ille qui ut moechetur furatur, magis est moechus quam fur.”

*circa quam* (literally, “matter concerning which”) with the object of the exterior act, and the *finis operantis* (i.e., remote end)<sup>24</sup> with the object of the interior act.<sup>25</sup>

In q. 2, a. 3 of *De malo*, St. Thomas places the question of knowing whether a sin consists principally in the act of the will. Here is his response:

There are some sins in which the exterior acts are not in themselves evil, but only according as they proceed from a perverted intention or will, for instance when a person wills to give an alms for the sake of vainglory; and in sins of this kind it is clear that in every case the sin consists principally in the will. But there are other sins in which the exterior acts are in themselves evil, as clearly is the case for theft, adultery, murder, and the like; and in these it seems a twofold distinction needs to be made, of which the first is that “principally” is taken in two ways, namely, originally and completely. The other distinction is that the exterior act can be considered in two ways: in one way as it is grasped by the mind according to its nature, in another way as it is in the execution of the work. If then we consider an act evil in itself, theft or homicide for instance, as it is apprehended according to its nature, thus the nature of evil is found in it originally because the act is not vested with due circumstances; and from the very fact that it is an evil act, i.e., deprived of due measure, species and order, it has the nature of sin: for in this way considered in itself it is compared to the will as its object according as it is willed. But just as acts are prior to potencies, so also objects are prior to acts; consequently the nature of evil and sin is found originally in the exterior act so considered rather than in the act of the will, but the nature of fault and moral evil is completed according as the act of the will accedes to it, and thus the evil

24. As I discuss in my “Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act: A Reading in Light of the Texts and Commentators” in the *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15:2 (August 2008), although Thomas makes little reference to the concept of *finis operantis* – mainly in his earlier writings – I prefer *finis operantis* over *finis remotus* because I find it less ambiguous when referring to the object of *intentio*. In fact, the *finis remotus* can assume several senses, and can be used to refer to the object of *intentio*, to a virtuous end, or even to the last end. In this essay, I will frequently and parenthetically indicate *finis remotus* after my references to *finis operantis* in order to refer to what Thomas would normally call the *finis remotus*, but in the sense of the end of the *intentio*. Thus, I will speak of the *finis proximus* of the *electio* and the *finis operantis* (or *remotus*) of the *intentio*.

25. Cf. *Sententia Ethic.*, lib. 3, lect. 3, n. 18: “dicit quod principalissimae circumstantiae esse videntur in quibus est *operatio*, idest obiectum sive materia actus. Et *cuius gratia*, idest finis. Quia actus specificantur secundum obiecta. Sicut autem materia est obiectum exterioris actus, ita finis est obiectum interioris actus voluntatis” (it is said that ‘what thing’ is viewed as the most principle ‘circumstance’ in which consists the action, that is the object or the matter of the action. And that ‘for what reason,’ refers to the end. Because acts are specified according to their objects. As the matter is the object of the exterior act, so the end is the object of the interior act of the will).

of fault is found in a complete manner in the act of the will. However if the act of sin be taken according as it is in the execution of the work, thus originally and more fundamentally fault is in the will. And the reason we have said evil is more fundamentally in the exterior act rather than in the will if the exterior act is considered according as it is apprehended, but the reverse if it be considered in the execution of the work, is that the exterior act is compared to the act of the will as its object which has the nature of an end or goal; and the end is posterior in being, i.e., in existence, but prior in intention.<sup>26</sup>

There are, therefore, exterior acts which are disordered in themselves, they are *materia indebita* or “inappropriate matter” by the fact that they are contrary to the order of reason;<sup>27</sup> they lack due measure, species and order. When these exterior acts are voluntarily desired, they cause a disorder in the act of the will, as for example with theft or homicide.

It is interesting to note that Aquinas also distinguishes two perspectives according to which the exterior act can be considered: the order of intention and the order of execution. In this line of reasoning, he says that “the exterior act and

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26. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 3, c.: “quaedam peccata sunt in quibus actus exteriores non sunt secundum se mali, sed secundum quod ex corrupta intentione vel voluntate procedunt: puta, cum quis vult dare eleemosynam propter inanem gloriam; et in huiusmodi peccatis manifestum est quod omnibus modis peccatum principaliter consistit in voluntate. Quaedam autem peccata sunt in quibus exteriores actus sunt secundum se mali, sicut patet in furto, adulterio, homicidio et similibus; et in istis duplici distinctione opus esse videtur. Quarum prima est, quod principaliter dicitur, scil. primordialiter et complete. Altera distinctio est, quod actus exterior dupliciter considerari potest: uno modo secundum quod est in apprehensione secundum suam rationem; alio modo secundum quod est in operis executione. Si ergo consideretur actus secundum se malus, puta furtum vel homicidium, prout est in apprehensione secundum suam rationem, sic primordialiter in ipso invenitur ratio mali, quia non est vestitus debitis circumstantiis; et ex hoc ipso quod est actus malus, id est privatus debito modo, specie et ordine, habet rationem peccati. Sic enim in se consideratur comparatur ad voluntatem ut obiectum, prout est volitus. Sicut autem actus sunt praevisi potentiis, ita et obiecta actibus: unde primordialiter invenitur ratio mali et peccati in actu exteriori sic considerato, quam in actu voluntatis; sed ratio culpae et moralis mali completur secundum quod accedit actus voluntatis; et sic complete malum culpae est in actu voluntatis. Sed si accipiatur actus peccati secundum quod est in executione operis, sic primordialiter et per prius est culpa in voluntate. Ideo autem diximus per prius esse malum in actu exteriori quam in voluntate, si actus exterior in apprehensione consideretur: e converso autem si consideretur in executione operis: quia actus exterior comparatur ad actum voluntatis ut obiectum quod habet rationem finis. Finis autem est posterior in esse, sed prior in intentione.”

27. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 20, a. 1, c.: “Bonitas autem vel malitia quam habet actus exterior secundum se, propter debitam materiam et debitas circumstantias, non derivatur a voluntate, sed magis a ratione.” (“The goodness or malice which the exterior action has of itself, on account of its being about *debitam materiam* and *debitas circumstantias*, is not derived from the will, but rather from the reason”).

the interior act of the will are mutually related to one another in such a way that each, in its own way, is the cause of the goodness of the other; and both possess a certain goodness which, since they have it in themselves, they give to the other. In fact, the exterior act has goodness on the basis of its adequation to the circumstances, according to which it is proportioned to the attaining of the end of the agent. And given that the exterior act is related to the will as an object, the result is that the interior act of the will possesses this goodness of the exterior act – not as realized, of course, but as understood and desired [...]. However, a certain quality of goodness is found in the interior act of the will in itself, given that the will is lord of its acts, [...] and this goodness proceeds from the interior act to the exterior.”<sup>28</sup>

In summary, “exterior acts differ generically by reason of their objects. Hence it is commonly said that an act bearing on due or proper matter (*debitam materiam*) is good generically (*bonum in genere*) and an act bearing on undue matter (*indebitam materiam*) is evil generically (*malum in genere*).”<sup>29</sup> In fact “[o]bjects, in relation to exterior acts, have the character of matter ‘about which’ (*materia circa quam*); but, in relation to the interior act of the will, they have the character of end.”<sup>30</sup>

## 2. Interpretation

### a) *The classical commentators*

In *ST I-II*, q. 20, St. Thomas treats of the morality of the exterior act. Cajetan makes some important conceptual distinctions in commenting on the first article of this question, in which Aquinas asks if the goodness or malice of the act is first in the act of the will or in the exterior act. Here is the part of his commentary that interests us:

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28. *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 3, c.: “actus exterior et actus interior voluntatis hoc modo comparantur ad invicem, quod uterque quodammodo est alteri bonitatis causa; et uterque, quantum in se est, quamdam bonitatem habet quam alteri dat. Actus enim exterior bonitatem habet ex circumstantiarum commensuratione, secundum quam proportionatus est ad finem hominis consequendum. Et quia actus exterior comparatur ad voluntatem sicut objectum, inde est quod hanc bonitatem voluntatis actus interior ab exteriori habet, non quidem ex eo secundum quod est exercitus, sed secundum quod est intentus et volitus; quia secundum quod est exercitus, sequitur actum voluntatis. Sed quaedam ratio bonitatis consistit in actu interioris voluntatis secundum se, secundum quod voluntas est domina suorum actuum, secundum quam bonitatem actus habet rationem meriti vel laudabilis: et haec bonitas ex actu interiori in exteriorem procedit.”

29. *De malo*, q. 7, a. 1, c.: “exteriore actus differunt genere per sua obiecta; unde dicitur communiter, quod bonum in genere est actus cadens supra debitam materiam, et malum in genere est actus cadens supra indebitam materiam.”

30. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 72, a. 3, ad 2: “obiecta, secundum quod comparantur ad actus exteriores, habent rationem materiae circa quam, sed secundum quod comparantur ad actum interiorem voluntatis, habent rationem finium.”

Regarding the first article of the twentieth question, one must carefully consider the terms contained in the title: i.e., “act of the will,” “exterior act,” and “priority of the moral goodness.” The term “act of the will” can be understood in two ways: one, in itself, and the other as it is the form or condition of exterior human acts. Here it is considered in the first way. Similarly, the term “exterior act” can be understood in three ways. First, as it concerns the executive power and things, time and place, considered separately from obedience to the will. This first way of understanding, in that it is not capable of moral goodness or malice (given that these are attributed only with respect to voluntary realities), is not used here. Another way the term is used is as a composite of the first way and the act of the will, because from these two a single act is formed. Nor is this the sense in which it is used here, because this in fact would be a comparison of the part with the whole and vice-versa. In the third way, it is used in reference to that which it has in itself, and which participates in the act of the will, and for this reason the voluntary exterior act is distinguished from the proper act of the will in itself, whatever the meaning of “voluntary” may be in this case. This is the way it is used here, where the exterior human act is compared with the interior act of the will in itself, the latter being that with which moral goodness is primarily concerned. It treats of the question of the priority of nature, and of the exterior act of the will. Indeed, the act of the intellect is here called the exterior act, because it in fact follows along with the other acts of the will.<sup>31</sup>

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31. CAJETAN (Cardinal), *Commentary on the “Summa theologiae,”* in “Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita,” t. 4-12 (Typografia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide: Rome, 1888-1907) I-II, q. 20, a. 1, cit., t. 6, p. 154: “Circa quaestionis vigesimae articulum primum, diligenter notato terminos tituli: scilicet *actum voluntatis, actum exteriorem, et prioritatem bonitatis moralis. Actus voluntatis* sumi potest dupliciter: uno modo, secundo se; alio modo, ut est forma seu conditio actuum exteriorum humanorum. Hic sumitur primo modo. – Similiter *actus exterior* sumitur tripliciter. Primo, secundum id praecise quod habet a potentia executiva et re, tempore, loco, seclusa obedientia voluntatis. Et sic, cum non sit capax bonitatis vel malitiae moralis (quoniam haec circa voluntaria tantum fiunt), non sumitur. Alio modo sumitur ut est compositum ex supradictis et actu voluntatis, ita quod ex ipso et voluntatis actu fit unus numero actus. Et sic etiam non sumitur hic: esset enim comparatio, partis ad totum, et e converso. Tertio modo sumitur secundum id quod habet ex se, et quod participat ex actu voluntatis: ita quod distinguatur actus exterior voluntarius contra ipsum actum voluntatis in se, quidquid sit illud quod significat *ly voluntarius*. Et hoc modo sumitur in proposito, ubi comparatur actus exterior humanus actui interiori voluntatis in se, cui prius conveniat bonitas moralis. – Et est sermo de prioritare *naturae*: et exteriori *a voluntate*; actus enim intellectus hoc in loco actus exterior vocatur, currit enim cursu aliorum a voluntate.”

To summarize, Cardinal Cajetan identifies three different senses in which Aquinas uses the expression *actus exterior*. The first meaning which *actus exterior* can assume is that of the act which concerns the executive powers distinct from the will. This does not *per se* belong to the *genus moris*, because it is considered prescinding from the elicited act of the will. The second meaning that *actus exterior* can assume is broader, because it includes both the elicited act of the will and the act of the executive powers which are commanded by the will. In this sense, the *actus exterior* is found in the *genus moris*, and is thus susceptible of moral evaluation. The third and final sense in which, according to Cajetan, St. Thomas uses the expression *actus exterior* is when it is referred to as an intentional reality which, as present in practical reason, subsequently causes the goodness of the elicited act of the will. This third way of conceiving of the *actus exterior* is also susceptible of moral evaluation, because it is conceived of as an object of the will, as a *forma a ratione concepta* (form conceived by reason), capable of being freely chosen by the will. For the interpretation of the expression *actus interioris*, the Dominican cardinal tends to prefer a broad concept roughly synonymous with the concept of the elicited act of the will, even when Aquinas's statements pose objective difficulties that seem to point to a more restricted meaning of *actus interioris*, more identified with the concept of *intentio*.<sup>32</sup> Cajetan, rather, frequently uses *actus interioris* as a synonym for *electio*.<sup>33</sup>

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32. Cf. *ibidem*, q. 18, a. 6, cit., t. 6, p. 133: "In sexto articulo eiusdem questionis decima octavae, dubium est circa illa verba in corpore articuli: *Finis proprie est obiectum interioris actus voluntarii*. Videtur enim hoc esse falsum. Nam obiectum electionis manifeste est id quod est ad finem: immo in hoc distinguitur a volitione et intentione, ut superius [q. 8, a. 2; q. 12, a. 4, ad 3; q. 13, a. 3] patet [...]. Ad hoc dicitur quod obiectum formale omnis actus voluntatis est finis: eo quod est etiam ratio eorum quae sunt ad finem. Unde Auctor, ad insinuandam hanc formalitatem obiecti, apposuit *ly proprie*, dicens: *Finis autem proprie*. Et hoc in sequentibus prae oculis habendum est." (In a. 6 of q. 18, there is a doubt regarding the words in the body of the article: 'properly speaking the end is the object of the interior act of the will.' That seems to be false. Clearly the object of the choice is that which is for the sake of the end, and by this we distinguish volition from intention as was shown before. For this [reason], we say that the formal object of any act of the will is the end, which is also the reason for which those things that are for the sake of the end are willed. Therefore the author, to insinuate this formality of the object, added 'properly speaking' saying: 'the end properly speaking.' And this is to be born in mind in the following arguments).

33. Cf. *ibidem*, q. 20, a. 3, cit., t. 6, p. 158: "actus interior voluntatis dicitur bonus ex actu exteriori, in ordine ad ipsum: dicitur enim velle furari malum, quia est ad malum. Et similiter actus exterior dicitur ex actus interiori malus, in ordine ad ipsum: dicitur enim actio manus, qua furatur, mala, quia ordinatur a mala voluntate" (the interior act of the will is called good from the exterior act, and to this end it is said, in fact, that to will to steal is evil, because it is oriented to an evil action. Likewise the exterior act that proceeds from an evil interior act is called evil. In fact, the action of the hand that steals is evil because it is ordained by an evil will).

For Francisco Suárez, “the exterior act, which is not intrinsically voluntary but only by extrinsic designation, can only in this way be good or evil,”<sup>34</sup> and in this sense “the exterior act is only human by the extrinsic designation of the interior, and thus, similarly, it only possesses moral differences, i.e., the properties of human acts, namely formal goodness or evil, by designation of the interior act.”<sup>35</sup> The theologian from Granada seems to identify the exterior act with the act commanded by the will, while identifying the interior act with elicited acts of the will. Along these lines he says that “the exterior act is good, because it derives from a good interior act,”<sup>36</sup> and “regarding formal goodness and malice, this is said with respect to the interior act and is only applied analogously to the exterior, because in fact it only applies to the exterior through the extrinsic designation of the interior.”<sup>37</sup>

John of St. Thomas seems to have a different interpretation. For him “the moving and prior act is called interior. The moved and posterior act is called exterior, because it issues from the interior and is moved by it.”<sup>38</sup> The interior act is therefore associated with the moving and prior act, while the exterior act is associated with the moved and posterior act; the Dominican thus emphasizes the causal connection between the two. For him, “the *finis [operantis]* is also an object, in relation to the interior or commanding act, and therefore in the exterior act is derived and participated.”<sup>39</sup> The exterior act, therefore, receives the goodness that derives from the *finis operantis* (or *remotus*). This is so because “with respect to the interior act (which is the moving and commanding act) the end is the object, and as such, gives the interior act its species, good or evil. On the other hand, exterior acts depend on the interior act, and are called human and voluntary because it is precisely the will that moves them; other acts also issue from the will which are voluntary and which receive their goodness from the object of the will, which is the end.”<sup>40</sup> It is the *intentio* which gives origin to other voluntary acts that are ordered to it, and which participate in its morality.

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34. F. SUÁREZ, *De bonitate et malitia humanorum actuum*, in “Opera omnia,” t. 4 (Vivès: Paris, 1856), p. 426: “actus [...] exterior, qui non est intrinsece voluntarius, sed tantum per denominationem extrinsecam, solum eodem modo potest esse bonus, vel malus.”

35. *Ibidem*, p. 426: “actus exterior solum est humanus per denominationem extrinsecam ad interiori: ergo similiter solum habet differentias, seu proprietates actus humani quae sunt formalis bonitas et malitia, per denominationem ab actu interiori.”

36. *Ibidem*, p. 291: “actus externus est bonus, quia est est interiori bono.”

37. *Ibidem*, p. 305: “quod attinet ad bonitatem et malitiam moralem formalem, actus interior et exterior solum analogice conveniunt, ita ut interior intrinsece talis sit, exterior vero solum per denominationem extrinsecam ad interiori.”

38. J. DE SÃO TOMÁS, *Cursus theologicus*, Opera et studio monachorum quorundam solesmensium, o.s.b. editus (Desclée & Co: Paris, 1931-1964), t. 1, p. 167: “actus movens et prior, dicitur interior: actus vero motus et posterior dicitur exterior, quia extra illum primum exit, et ab illo movetur.”

39. *Ibidem*, t. 5, p. 561: “finis [operantis] etiam est objectum, respectu actus interioris seu imperantis, et inde derivatur et participatur ad actum exteriorem.”

40. *Ibidem*, p. 468: “respectu actus interioris (qui est actus movens et imperans) finis est objectum, et sic dat illi speciem boni vel mali. Maxime autem ab actu interiori

In another passage which speaks of the object of the exterior act, he says “in treating of the morality of interior, or prior, acts, it was necessary to discover the principle, or a cause of their regulation and morality, given that it is not due to their *a priori* participation in any moving act, inasmuch as they themselves are prior; rather, they only receive it from their object, which is the end.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, if the end is considered the object of the interior act in a strict sense, it means that for John of St. Thomas the interior act coincides with the *intentio*, which is the act of the will which has for its object the end, wanted for itself. The interior act would then be precisely the *intentio*, which is characterized as moving and commanding in relation to the exterior acts which depend on it, in view of the realization of the desired end. Is the exterior act, then, associated with the *electio*? According to the Portuguese Dominican “St. Thomas holds that exterior acts, i.e., those which are moved and commanded by other, prior acts, do not depend solely on their proper object and on the circumstances, but also on the prior act and on the intention of the end by which they are commanded and moved.”<sup>42</sup> It is clear, therefore, that John of St. Thomas here uses exterior act in the sense of *electio*, i.e., the act commanded by the *intentio* which has as its proper object *ea quae sunt ad finem* (literally “that which is towards the end,” i.e., a means).

For the Salamancans, the exterior act, with respect to its exercise, derives from the interior act and morally constitutes a single act with it.<sup>43</sup> What meaning, however, is given to the interior act? Referring to the questions in *ST* I-II where Aquinas addresses these concepts, they state that “in fact in q. 19, he speaks of elicited and interior acts, and in q. 20, of exterior and commanded acts.”<sup>44</sup> It seems therefore that they understand the interior act to be the elicited act of the will (*intentio*, *electio*, etc.), and the exterior act as the act commanded by the will to the other executive powers. Along these lines they assert that “with respect to the exterior act, moral goodness and malice are completely accidental and extrinsic

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reliqui exteriores, humani et voluntarii dicuntur: quia voluntas est quae proprie movet, et ex illa habent alii actus, quod sint voluntarii; et ex objecto voluntatis, quod est finis, bonitatem habent.”

41. *Ibidem*, t. 1, p. 167: “tractando de moralitate actuum interiorum, seu primorum, fuit necessarium agere de principio, seu motivo regulationis et moralitatis eorum: quia non habent illam participative a priori aliquo actu movente, cum ipsi sint primi, sed a solo objecto eorum qui est finis.”
42. *Ibidem*, p. 167: “actus exteriorum, id est, eorum qui moventur et imperantur ex aliis prioribus, considerat D. Thomas quod non solum habent dependentiam a suo proprio objecto et circumstantiis, sed etiam ab actu priori et intentioni finis a qua imperatur et movetur.”
43. Cf. SALMANTICENSES, *Cursus theologicus*, (V. Palmé - Libreria S. Congregationis de Propaganda Fide: Paris - Rome 1870-1883) t. 6, p. 69: “etsi actus exterior, prout in exercitio oritur ab interiori constituit moraliter unum numero actum cum illo; non tamen ut consideratur secundum se antecederet ad ipsum actum interiorum” (though the exterior act, while in exercise is generated from the interior and constitutes morally a unity with it, this is not so if it is considered by itself as prior to the interior act).
44. *Ibidem*, p. 1: “Quest. vero 19, disputat determinate de actibus elicitis et internis. Et quaest. 20, de externis et imperatis.”

forms, related to the act accidentally when considered in its physical being; they can therefore be more or less involved in the act, not only intellectually, but also with respect to things, without the substance of the referred-to act being destroyed. Indeed, up to a certain point, the act itself can pass from one form to another, though remaining the same entity.”<sup>45</sup> In this passage the use of exterior act is applied exclusively to the act of the executive powers commanded by the will.

There are statements by St. Thomas, however, that would seem to challenge this interpretation, with the consequence that the Salamancans at times have to be “flexible” in the use they make of these terms. For example, when they claim that “the exterior act receives the species of the object to which it refers, and also [that] the interior act of the will receives the species of the end as its proper object,”<sup>46</sup> they seem to want to associate the interior act with the *intentio*, given that this has the end as its proper object, and the exterior act with the *electio*, given that it is only to this that the expression *materia circa quam* can be applied in reference to its proper object.

In another passage, they offer a particularly illuminating analysis, asserting that “in giving alms for the expiation of sins, at least three acts coincide. The first is the intention and the will to expiate sins, which is an act elicited by the virtue of penitence. The second is the will to give alms in light of this end, which is an act elicited by the virtue of mercy and commanded by the virtue of penitence in light of this intention. The third is the exterior gift itself, which is an act elicited by the executive power under the command of both the preceding acts. The first intention, of expiation, is here called *actus interior voluntatis* (interior act of the will) and has the quality of a commanding act. The other two acts are in fact included in that act which St. Thomas calls exterior, from which the execution of any exterior act has the quality of a commanded act. In fact the will to give alms participates in both qualities, because in relation to the first intention it is said to be a commanded act, and in relation to the exterior execution it has the quality of commanding.”<sup>47</sup> This differentiation into three acts is interesting, and can be synthesized as the

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45. *Ibidem*, p. 139: “bonitas et malitia moralis respectu actus externi sunt formae omnino accidentales, et aesternae, quae per accidens se habent ad illum consideratum in esse physico: ergo possunt abesse, et adesse non solum per intellectum, sed etiam a parte rei, sine eo quod destruat substantia praedicti actus: atque adeo poterit ipse actus, manens idem numero entitative, transire ad una in alteram.”

46. *Ibidem*, p. 154: “actus exterior accipit speciem ab objecto circa quod est, ita actus interior voluntatis accipit speciem a fine sicut a proprio objecto.”

47. *Ibidem*, p. 151: “dandi eleemosynam in satisfactionem pro peccatis, saltem tres actus concurrere. Primus est intentio, et volitio satisfaciendi: quae est actus immediate elicited a virtute poenitentiae. Secundus est volitio dandi eleemosynam propter praedictum finem: quae elicited a misericordia, et imperatur a poenitentiae per illam intentionem. Tertius est ipsa exterior largitio: quae elicited a potentia executiva ex imperio utriusque actus praecedentis. Ex his prima intentio satisfaciendi appellatur a D. Thom. in praesenti *actus interior voluntatis*: habetque rationem dumtaxat actus imperantis. Duo vero alii actus comprehenduntur a D. Thom. sub actu quem appellat *exteriorem*. Ex quibus executio omnino exterior praecise habet rationem actus imperati, volitio vero dandi

*intentio* to expiate one's sins, the *electio* to give alms, and the act of the motor faculty to move the members in the exterior realization of the gift. In this example, contrary to their initial position, the interior act is explicitly associated with the *intentio* and the exterior act is associated, not only with the act of the motor faculty, but this together with the *electio* that commands it. This implies that, when considered with respect to the *genus moris*, the morality of the interior act depends on the goodness or malice of the object of the *intentio*, whereas the morality of the exterior act depends on the goodness or malice of the object of the *electio*.

In summary, we can say that for the Salamancans there are two principle ways of interpreting the expressions interior act and exterior act. Either they can be associated with the concepts of elicited act and act commanded by the will, or with the concepts of *intentio* and *electio*, the latter joined with the other executive powers.

Billuart seems to accept only one interpretation of the expressions interior act and exterior act. According to the Dominican, "after St. Thomas treated in q. 18 of the goodness and malice of human acts in general, in q. 19 he treats of the goodness and malice of interior, or commanding, acts elicited by the will, and in q. 20 of the goodness and malice of exterior, or commanded, acts."<sup>48</sup> With this he quite clearly associates the interior act with elicited acts of the will, and the exterior act with acts of the other executive powers commanded by the will. Consequently, "the exterior act as effected and executed precisely by the interior act has no intrinsic goodness or malice, but is good or evil only by extrinsic designation derived from the goodness or malice of the interior act; as such, it does not add any distinct goodness or malice."<sup>49</sup>

### b) Contemporary interpretations

According to Santiago Ramírez, "there are three principles or sources of morality, which are clearly the object, the end and the circumstances, of which the first and principal is the object [...]. However, the human act is twofold, i.e., interior or commanding, and exterior or commanded; of these, the interior is the first and principal. The first of the acts, therefore, corresponds to the first principle of morality, that is, the interior act corresponds only to the object."<sup>50</sup> Consequently,

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eleemosynam participat rationem utriusque: nam in collatione ad primam intentionem dicitur *actus imperatus*; et respectu exterioris executionis habet rationem *imperantis*."

48. C.-R. BILLUART, *Summa Sancti Thomae bodiennis academiaram moribus accommodata*, (Letouzey et Ané: Paris, 1880, t. 2, p. 316: "Postquam Summa theologiae Egit q. 18 de bonitate et malitia actu humanorum in communi, agit q. 19 de bonitate et malitia actus interioris seu imperantis a voluntate elicti, et q. 20 de bonitate et malitia actus exterioris seu imperati."

49. *Ibidem*, p. 321: "actus exterior ut effectus et executio interioris praecise, nullam habet bonitatem vel malitiam moralem intrinsecam, sed est bonus vel malus denominative extrinsece tantum a bonitate vel malitiam actus interioris: ergo non addit interiori nullam bonitatem vel malitiam distinctam."

50. S. RAMÍREZ, *De actibus humanis*, in "Edición de las Obras Completas di Santiago Ramírez, O.P.," t. 4, V. Rodríguez (ed.) (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas: Madrid,

“the moral species of the interior act of the will depends fundamentally on the moral object.”<sup>51</sup> For Ramírez, therefore, the interior act is the elicited act of the will, which focuses on the moral object, whereas according to him Aquinas “understands by the expression exterior act the commanded act properly speaking, as distinguished from elicited acts or acts interior to the will itself”<sup>52</sup> – which is to say it is the act of the other executive powers distinct from the will. “The object, therefore, as presented by the practical intellect, is thus the principle of the morality of the interior act of the will, and with the same kind of causality the intellect moves and specifies the will.”<sup>53</sup> This being the case, according to the Spanish Dominican, *ST* I-II, q. 19 deals with the morality of elicited acts of the will, specifically of those which have as their object the moral object, while q. 20 deals with the morality of commanded acts.<sup>54</sup> This position is not new, and is in continuity with a number of the classical commentators whom we referred to briefly above.

Servais Pinckaers offers a unique interpretation. For him, “the interior act is the act of the will, whose term, and therefore its proper object, is the end. The exterior act already has for its object the material of the action that is exterior to the person, such as a thing belonging to another. Recall that we are dealing with two parts or dimensions of a concrete action, and not with two separate actions, the first being interior to the second.”<sup>55</sup> The interior act seems therefore to refer to the *intentio*, given that it is this that has the end as its proper object. Less clear in this passage is the nature of the exterior act. Elsewhere, Pinckaers states more clearly that “nothing prevents the exterior action from being studied in itself to determine its own moral quality, its contribution to the total morality of the action. That, then, would be considered the exterior act (and would refer to the act “as

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1972), p. 560: “tria sunt principia seu fontes moralitatis, nempe obiectum, finis et circumstantiae, quorum primum et principale est obiectum [...]; actus autem humanus est duplex, scilicet interior seu imperans et exterior seu imperatus, quorum interior est primus et principalis. Ergo primo actui respondet primum principium moralitatis, scilicet actui interiori correspondet solum obiectum.”

51. *Ibidem*, p. 559: “species moralitatis actus interioris voluntatis [q. 19] fundamentaliter pendet ab obiecto morali.”
52. *Ibidem*, p. 573: “nomine actus exterioris [S. Doctor] intelligit actus imperatus proprie loquendo, prout distinguuntur ad actibus elicitis seu interioribus ipsius voluntatis.”
53. *Ibidem*, p. 562: “Obiectum ergo ut praesentatum ab intellectu practico, est principium moralitatis actus interioris voluntatis, et in eodem genere causae intellectus movet et specificat actum voluntatis.”
54. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 549: “S. Doctor aggreditur considerationem de moralitate in specie, nempe de bonitate et malitia actus interioris seu imperantis, de qua in hac q. 19; et de bonitate et malitia actus exterioris seu imperati, de qua in q. 20” (the Holy Doctor addresses considerations of specific morality, certainly on the goodness and badness of the interior or imperative act, in q. 19; and the goodness or badness of the exterior or commanded act, in q. 20); *ibidem*, p. 470: “de moralitate actuum *interiorum seu elicitorum* (q. 19) et de moralitate actuum *exteriorum seu imperatorum* (q. 20)” (on the morality of interior or elicited acts (q. 19) and the morality of exterior or commanded acts (q. 20)).
55. S.-Th. PINCKAERS, *Notas ao tratado sobre os actos humanos*, cit., note i, p. 248.

such”), which is [e.g.] the theft. This act has an object: another’s good, considered as desirable. Based on that object, the action would receive a first moral specification which constitutes its essence on the moral plane. From this perspective, the end can be treated as a circumstance, especially when it is materially distinguished from the object of the exterior act, as occurs when theft is committed so as to commit adultery.<sup>56</sup> Here the exterior act is identified with the theft, which is done with the *intentio* of adultery. In this way Pinckaers equates the concept of exterior act with the *electio*, then says that “St. Thomas does not confer a moral value on the object of the exterior or commanded act, except when it has been established as an end by the will, an immediate end which is eventually ordered to a subsequent end by the intention of the person.”<sup>57</sup> Here the classification of the exterior act as “commanded” can be understood in two ways, either in the sense in which the *electio* (exterior act) is commanded by the *intentio* (interior act), or in the sense of act commanded by the will as opposed to elicited act. Pinckaers’s meaning can only be that of the first sense, given that the use of the second would imply an intrinsic contradiction in his statement, since an exterior act not elicited by the will is *per se* outside of the *genus moris*. For him the exterior act is the *electio*; if this were not so, it would not make sense to say that “the *finis operis* is the proximate, immediate end of the exterior act, and has the function of a means in relation to the ulterior ends that the agent subject proposes.”<sup>58</sup> It is also true that in his earlier writings, Pinckaers defended a different thesis, identifying the interior act with the elicited act of the will and the exterior act with the elicited acts of the other faculties under the will’s command.<sup>59</sup>

56. IDEM, *Le renouveau de la morale: études pour une morale fidèle à ses sources et à sa mission présente*, Casterman, Tournai 1964, p. 135: “Il n’empêche que l’on peut étudier l’action extérieure en elle-même pour dégager sa qualité morale propre, sa contribution à la moralité de l’action totale. On se penchera donc sur cet acte extérieur (et on parlera d’acte sans plus) qu’est le vol. Cet acte a un objet : le bien d’autrui apparu comme désirable. Concentré sur cet objet, il en recevra une spécification morale première, qui le constitue en son essence sur le plan morale. De ce point de vue, la fin peut être traitée comme une circonstance, spécialement quand elle se distingue même matériellement de l’objet de l’acte extérieur, comme c’est le cas du vol commis en vue d’un d’adultère.”

57. *Ibidem*, p. 136: “saint Thomas n’accorde une valeur morale à l’objet de l’acte extérieur ou impéré que parce qu’il est établi comme fin par la volonté, fin immédiate éventuellement ordonnée à une fin ultérieure par l’intention de l’homme.”

58. *Ibidem*, p. 139: “La *finis operis* sera la fin prochaine, immédiate, de l’acte extérieur, et jouera le rôle de moyen à l’égard des fins ultérieures que se propose le sujet agissant.”

59. Cf. IDEM, *Le rôle de la fin dans l’action morale selon saint Thomas*, in “Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques” 45 (1961), p. 398: “S. Thomas distingue en effet deux zones dans l’action morale, celle de l’acte intérieur, produit immédiatement par la volonté, et celle de l’acte extérieur, élicite par d’autres facultés, sous le commandement de la volonté. Ces actes impérés n’appartiennent à l’ordre moral que dans la mesure où ils sont volontaires; d’eux-mêmes, ils n’entrent pas dans cet ordre; il y faut l’intervention de ce facteur extérieur à eux qu’est la volonté; ils n’ont qualité morale que *per accidens*.” (St. Thomas, in effect, distinguishes two zones within moral

Belmans emphasizes that “the distinction between the interior act and the exterior act allows the cited thesis to be made even more precise: the latter constitutes the object of the former, and each of these two components communicates to the other its proper good, the interior act from the point of view of execution, and the exterior act from the point of view of specification.”<sup>60</sup> He understands the exterior act as the object of the interior act according to the order of specification, and as commanded by the interior act in the order of execution. This means that the interior act is identified with the elicited act of the *electio*, which on the one hand is specified by the exterior act as an intentional proposal, and on the other hand commands the realization of the exterior act to the other executive powers. If Ramírez conceives of the exterior act as commanded and Pinckaers tends to identify it with the *electio*, Belmans sees in it above all an intentional proposal.

As I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>61</sup> Louis Janssens offers a proportionalist reading of St. Thomas’s texts. He asserts that “we should always follow the maxim: *non sunt facienda mala ut eveniant bona*, on the condition that *mala* refers to morally wrong actions and not to premoral disvalues.”<sup>62</sup> This statement would be true if Janssens did not include in “premorale disvalues” the object of the *electio*, or the *materia circa quam*, but only and exclusively the *materia ex qua*. The Belgian theologian states that “[as St. Thomas] sees it, an exterior action considered as nothing but the material event [...] is an abstraction to which a moral evaluation cannot be applied. This object-event becomes a concrete *human* act only insofar as it is directed towards an end within the inner act of the will. Only this concrete totality has a moral meaning. It is the end of the inner act of the will which specifies the malice or the goodness of the act.”<sup>63</sup> Janssens then claims that the exterior act considered in itself is outside of the *genus moris* and only becomes morally relevant when it is ordered to an end by the interior act of the will. What end is he referring

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action, that of the interior act, produced immediately by the will, and that of the exterior act, elicited by the other faculties, under the command of the will. These commanded acts do not pertain to the moral order except to the extent that they are voluntary; of themselves, they do not pertain to that order; this exterior factor needs the intervention of the will on its behalf; it does not have a moral quality except *per accidens*.)

60. T.G. BELMANS, *Le sens objectif de l’agir humain. Pour relire la morale conjugale de Saint Thomas*, Studi Tomistici 8, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Vatican City, 1980), p. 44: “la distinction entre l’acte interne et l’acte externe permet de préciser la thèse citée : le dernier constituant l’objet du premier, chacun des deux communique à l’autre sa propre bonté, l’acte interne au point de vue de l’exécution, l’acte externe à celui de la spécification.”
61. I refer to chapter IV of my previously cited *A especificação moral dos actos humanos segundo são Tomás de Aquino*, in English as “Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act: A Reading in Light of the Texts and Commentators” in the *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15:2 (August 2008).
62. L. JANSSENS, *Norms and Priorities in a Love Ethics*, in *Louvain Studies* 6 (1977), p. 229. The Latin expresses the classical maxim that “evils should not be done in order to bring about good.”
63. IDEM, *Ontic Evil and Moral Evil*, in *Louvain Studies* 4 (1972), p. 123.

to here – to the *finis operantis* (or *remotus*) or to the *finis proximus*? Every indication is that he is referring to the *finis* in the proper sense, i.e., to the *finis operantis*, since he says that “the human act is only one act but at the same time a composite unity of which, on the one hand, the interior act of the will is the formal element and, on the other hand, the exterior act is the material element. In other words, the end which is the proper object of the inner act of the will is the formal element; the exterior act, as means to this end, is the material element of the very same human act.”<sup>64</sup>

Here it is quite clear that Janssens associates the interior act of the will with the *intentio*, because it is only this which has the end as its proper object. At the same time, he emphasizes that the exterior act is the material element which has the character of a means to the end, but does not possess an intrinsic morality, because “as the soul is the *forma* of the human subject which specifies the being, so the end is the formal and specifying element of the structure and the morality of the action: the end of the agent or of the inner act of the will makes the exterior action into a means [...] and at the moral level it determines the *species moris* (the moral goodness or the malice) of the entire action.”<sup>65</sup> The moral species of the act therefore derives from the end of the agent, and not from the exterior action. In this sense, Janssens considers that “it is impossible to make a moral judgment about a material content of an action, without considering the whole act: material content (*actus externus*, what is done), the situation, or, classically, the circumstances and the foreseeable consequences. A judgment about moral rightness or wrongness is only possible with respect to that totality, because only concerning that whole is it possible to argue whether or not it expresses the priority of the lesser premoral disvalue or the higher premoral value.”<sup>66</sup> The comparison between premoral values and disvalues is not how St. Thomas justifies the goodness or malice of human actions. At this point Janssens clearly distances himself from the Angelic Doctor’s thought.<sup>67</sup>

64. *Ibidem*, pp. 120-121.

65. *Ibidem*, p. 121, note 34.

66. IDEM, *Norms and Priorities in a Love Ethics*, cit., p. 231.

67. Cf. G. ABBÀ, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale? Ricerche di filosofia morale* (LAS: Rome, 1996), p. 200: “i moralisti teleologi suppongono come ovvio che l’azione vada intesa esclusivamente come una modificazione d’uno stato di cose nel mondo, in quanto essa produce valori o disvalori, beni o mali premorali per i coinvolti. Essi trascurano che, sia per Aristotele sia per Tommaso, principale è, rispetto all’azione così intesa (cioè come *póiesis, facere*), la *praxis* o l’*agere (vivere)* e che la prassi può essere eccellente o difettosa, virtuosa o viziosa, a seconda che realizza i fini che restano immanenti ad essa, e che consistono in certi modi o misure del desiderare e del volere (*finis virtutum*). Mentre l’etica tomista concerne principalmente la cura dell’anima, l’etica teleologica è tutta centrata sulla formazione d’uno stato di cose nel mondo.” (“Moral theologians assume as obvious that an action must be understood exclusively as a modification of a state of affairs in the world, i.e., inasmuch as it produces values or disvalues, premoral goods or evils for those involved. They ignore the fact that, for both Aristotle and Thomas, the primary thing regarding action understood in this way (i.e., as *póiesis, facere*) is *praxis* or *agere (to act)*, and that praxis can be excellent or

Janssens considers that “according to Thomas, a human act is morally good when the exterior act (material element, means) has a *debita proportio* (or due proportion) within the measure of reason to the morally good end (formal element).”<sup>68</sup> “[S]uppose that the good at which the agent aims as the end of his inner act of the will is a good which is sanctioned by reason [...]. In this case the entire action is necessarily good if it is not a mere *velleitas* but rather the very will to bring about an end, or in other words, if it concerns a real *intentio finis* which involves the effective will to realise an end for its own sake and is also the reason and cause of the action.”<sup>69</sup> The goodness of the act depends exclusively on the *intentio finis*, on the interior act, while the exterior act is the premoral material element which has to do with the means by which the end is realized.<sup>70</sup>

What can be said of Janssens’s proposal? It seems to us that the problem arises here from the mixture of the two different senses in which Aquinas uses the expressions “interior act” and “exterior act.” There are texts in which he clearly uses “interior act” to refer to the elicited act of the will and “exterior act” to refer to the act commanded by the will to the other executive powers. There are other passages, however, in which he uses “interior act” and “exterior act” to speak of the relation between the *intentio* and the *electio*, both of which are elicited acts of the will susceptible to a moral evaluation in themselves, as can be seen, for example, in the case where one steals to commit adultery. Janssens confuses these two different ways of using this binomial. He speaks of the exterior act in the sense of the act commanded by the will to the other operative powers, and in this sense he is correct when he says that this act, as such, falls outside of the *genus moris*. The problem is that he counterposes, to the exterior act understood in this way, not the elicited act of the will, which has the *finis proximus* as its object – and which would be correct – but the interior act of the will, understood as the *intentio* of a *finis* wanted for itself. This seems to be the root of all the confusion. Using the example of stealing so as to commit adultery, Janssens seems to conceive of the human act as a composite of the *materia ex qua* of the theft – i.e.,

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defective, virtuous or vicious, according to whether it accomplishes the ends which are immanent to it, and which consist in certain ways or measures of desiring and willing (*finis virtutum*). While Thomistic ethics is primarily concerned with the care of souls, theological ethics is entirely focused on the creation of a state of affairs in the world.”)

68. L. JANSSENS, *Ontic Evil and Moral Evil*, cit., p. 139.

69. *Ibidem*, p. 126.

70. Cf. S. PINCKAERS, *La question des actes intrinsèquement mauvais et le “proportionnalisme”*, in “Reveu thomiste” 82 (1982), p. 206: “Sans doute l’acte intérieur qu’évoque au départ L. Janssens nous place-t-il du côté du sujet agissant, trop négligé par la morale casuistique, mais tout le jugement et la problématique vont ensuite se replacer au niveau de l’acte extérieur, considéré comme prémoral ou ontologique” (Undoubtedly the interior act that is invoked by L. Janssens places us in the perspective of the acting person, which was too much ignored by casuistic morality; but all of the judgments and the problems found in the latter are moved to the level of the exterior act, considered as premoral or ontological).

the commanded act of moving one's members to take something that belongs to another, prescindendo from the intrinsic voluntariness such a human act possesses – and the *finis* of committing adultery. Such a position would lead, however, to the conclusion that one only commits adultery. With this conception of the human act, Janssens neutralizes the intrinsic morality of the *electio*.

For Giuseppe Abbà, “the terms *exterior* and *interior* refer to the act of choice: the act of choice and what prepares it are interior; the execution of the choice by means of the exercise of any human faculty, even when this exercise is not observable, is exterior (unobservable, for example, as with the action of thinking about a philosophical problem).”<sup>71</sup> Abbà essentially identifies the interior act with the elicited act of the *electio*, and the exterior act with the act commanded by it to the other faculties. Stephen Brock seems to share this interpretation. He explicitly states that “Aquinas identifies interior acts with ‘elicited’ [acts]”<sup>72</sup> of the will, while exterior acts are identified with acts commanded by the will.<sup>73</sup> According to the American philosopher “an ‘interior’ act is something which *essentially* constitutes a volitional relation with something; if it constitutes any other sort of relation as well, it does not so in virtue of its volitional element. Such acts are intention, choice, consent, and so forth. An exterior act also constitutes a volitional relation, but it does so in virtue of constituting some other relation; that is, it merely mediates a volitional relation, and somehow shares in the relation that it mediates. For instance, my sitting down may be a voluntary act, an exterior act; through it, my being seated is related to my will (i.e., to me *qua* capable of volitional relations) as its (my) effect. But it establishes this relation only through being an act of muscles, nerves and so forth, i.e., through being the very sitting down that I wanted to perform.”<sup>74</sup> The interior act therefore has to do with elicited acts of the will such as intention, choice and consent, whereas the exterior act has to do with the act commanded by the will, such as the acts of muscles, nerves, etc.

Considering the binomial in question from another perspective, David Gallagher states that “Thomas’s distinction of interior and exterior act in a way corresponds to that of end and object.”<sup>75</sup> That is, the interior act refers to the end and thus to the *intentio*, and the exterior act refers to the object and thus to the *electio*. Wolfgang Kluxen, along these same lines, says that “the exterior act has a moral

71. G. ABBÀ, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù. Saggio di filosofia morale*, (LAS: Rome, 1995), 2nd Ed, p. 168: “i termini *estereiore* e *interiore* si riferiscono all’atto di scelta: interiore è l’atto di scelta e ciò che lo prepara; estereiore è l’esecuzione della scelta mediante l’esercizio di qualsiasi facoltà umana, anche quando questo esercizio non è osservabile (come, per esempio, l’azione di pensare a qualche problema filosofico).”

72. S.L. BROCK, *Action and Conduct. Thomas Aquinas and the Theory of Action* (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1998), p. 174.

73. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 175: “the will’s commanded or ‘exterior’ acts.”

74. *Ibidem*, p. 174.

75. Cf. D. GALLAGHER, “Aquinas on Moral Action: Interior and Exterior Acts,” in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 64 (1990), p. 119.

significance only insofar as it is also voluntary, is moved by a willing, and is thus also always inserted in an order relative to an end.<sup>76</sup> This would mean that the exterior act is in the *genus moris* to the extent that it is “animated” by a particular *electio*.

Carlo Caffarra more explicitly recognizes a plurality of senses in which Aquinas uses this binomial. He thus says that “the human interior act is that which emanates directly from the will, i.e., the *elicited* act of the will [...]. Interior act is therefore synonymous with an act of the will,<sup>77</sup> whereas “the human exterior act must not be confused with an act knowable by the senses, i.e., with an externally perceivable act. The exterior act is every act which is not of the will [...]. Nevertheless, the exterior act is moved by the interior act of the will.”<sup>78</sup> Caffarra associates the binomial interior/exterior with the binomial elicited/commanded, in continuity with a large number of interpreters, as we have already seen. When he refers to *ST* I-II, q. 20, Caffarra explicitly says that “here exterior act is equivalent, generally speaking, to act commanded by the will; it is therefore not elicited – caused – immediately by the will.”<sup>79</sup> “The exterior act for Thomas is the way through which the will attains what it wants”,<sup>80</sup> however, “when Thomas speaks formally of the exterior act, he means every activity that is not elicited by the will, but always as passing from the one to the other and carried out by the *choice*.”<sup>81</sup> The interior act, for its part, seems to be a broader reality in terms of its content. “We can ask ourselves to which act [Thomas] refers when he speaks of *actus interior*? In fact, he does not follow an overly precise scheme, but moves with a certain freedom; at times by interior act he means the act of the will, at other times the intention, and at still other times the choice (*electio*).”<sup>82</sup> The interior act is therefore one of the various elicited acts of the will.

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76. W. KLUXEN, *L'etica filosofica di Tommaso d'Aquino* (V&P: Milan, 2005), p. 282: “l'atto esteriore ha un significato morale solo in quanto è anch'esso volontario, viene mosso da un volere e in tal modo è anche sempre inserito in un ordine rispetto a un fine.”

77. C. CAFFARRA, *Concetti fondamentali dell'etica di S. Tommaso D'Aquino*, (Dispensa ad uso degli studenti del Pontificio Istituto Giovanni Paolo II per gli studi su Matrimonio e Famiglia: Rome, 1996), p. 27: “Atto umano interno. È quello che emana direttamente dalla volontà, ossia l'atto *elicito* dalla volontà [...]. Atto interno quindi è sinonimo di atto della volontà.”

78. *Ibidem*, p. 25: “Atto umano esterno. Da non confondere con atto conoscibile con i sensi, ossia con un atto sensibile; l'atto esterno è ogni atto che non è della volontà [...]. Tuttavia l'atto esterno è mosso dall'atto interno della volontà.”

79. *Ibidem*, p. 29: “Qui [*Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 20] atto esterno equivale, generalmente parlando, a atto imperato dalla volontà, quindi che non è elicito – causato – immediatamente dalla volontà.”

80. *Ibidem*, p. 28: “L'atto esterno per Tommaso è il modo attraverso il quale la volontà raggiunge ciò che vuole.”

81. *Ibidem*: “Quando Tommaso dunque parla dell'atto esterno formalmente intende ogni attività che non è elicita dalla volontà, ma sempre in quanto in passaggio dall'uno all'altro è compiuto dalla *scelta*.”

82. *Ibidem*: “Tornando a Tommaso, ci possiamo chiedere a quale atto si riferisce quando parla di *actus interior*? Per la verità non è che egli si attenga ad uno schema troppo preciso, ma si muove con una certa libertà: a volte con atto interno intende la volizione, altre l'intenzione, altre ancora la scelta (*electio*).”

When confronted with other texts of the Angelic Doctor, however, Caffarra tends to propose a second use of the binomial interior/exterior. In this sense, he speaks of “the relationship between the exterior act and the interior act, which we can translate, into a language having more meaning for us, as the relationship between choice and intention.”<sup>83</sup> Here he explicitly associates the binomial interior/exterior with the binomial *intentio/electio*, and no longer with elicited/commanded. In this line of reasoning, he recognizes that “when Thomas speaks of exterior act he means the choice of the will,”<sup>84</sup> the reason for which “it is [...] not possible to prescind from the subjectivity of the person, which is present in the exterior act,”<sup>85</sup> because if we were to do so we could no longer identify which is the *electio* in question.

For Martin Rhonheimer, “The Thomistic theory concerning the will and its object can be found in questions 19 and 20 of the *Prima secundae*, which treat of the goodness and evil, respectively, of the interior act of the will (intention, choice) and of the exterior act commanded by it (acts of other powers or organs, or bodily movements, chosen and carried out under the rule of the will).”<sup>86</sup> It is thus clear that he also associates the binomial interior/exterior with the binomial elicited/commanded. He nevertheless recognizes that it is not simple to read q. 20 on this basis; specifically, the expression “object of the exterior act,” which Aquinas uses at times, becomes problematic from the moral point of view. The Swiss philosopher admits that “to call the moral object ‘the object of the exterior act,’ as Thomas himself at times does, can therefore cause confusion; it seems to be inconsistent with the exposition provided in *ST* I-II, qq. 19-20. According to that exposition, the exterior act does not properly ‘have’ an ‘object’ (in the moral sense),

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83. *Ibidem*, p. 30: “il rapporto fra l’atto esterno e l’atto interno, che potremmo tradurre, in un linguaggio per noi più significativo, come rapporto tra scelta e intenzione.”

84. *Ibidem*, p. 31: “Quando Tommaso parla di atto esterno intende la scelta della volontà.”

85. *Ibidem*, pp. 36-37: “Non è [...] possibile prescindere dalla soggettività della persona, che è presente nell’atto esterno.”

86. M. RHONHEIMER, *La prospettiva della persona agente e la natura della ragione pratica. L’“oggetto dell’atto umano” nell’antropologia tomistica dell’azione*, in L. Melina, J. Noriega (eds.), *Camminare nella Luce. Prospettive della Teologia morale a 10 anni da Veritatis splendor*, (Lateran University Press, Rome, 2005), p. 174: “La teoria tommasiana sulla volontà si trova negli articoli 19 e 20 della *Prima secundae*, che trattano della bontà e malizia, rispettivamente, dell’atto interiore della volontà (intenzione, scelta) e dell’atto esteriore, imperato da essa (atti di altre potenze o organi, movimenti corporali, scelti ed eseguiti sotto l’impero della volontà).” We have translated “articles” here as “questions” to correct an obvious error on the part of the author that he later corrected in the English translation – there are no articles 19 and 20 in the *Prima secundae* in which the theme of the morality of human acts is treated. Rather, in questions 19 and 20 of the *Prima secundae*, St. Thomas treats explicitly of the morality of the interior act (q. 19) and of the exterior act (q. 20). It is nevertheless obvious that here we have a small error, *prater intentionem*, by the author. The English version was published as “The Perspective of the Acting Person and the Nature of Practical Reason: The ‘Object of the Human Act’ in Thomistic Anthropology of Action,” *Nova et Vetera* 2.2 (Fall 2004): 461-516.

but itself *is* morally considered the object, the *finis proximus* of the interior act of the will (here: the *electio*), and as such morally specifies the human act.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, “to look for an ‘object of the exterior act’ *as an external, observable behavior*, is to finish by reducing the human act to its non-moral elements, i.e., to a crude physicalism which forgets the regulating and morally ordering role of reason.”<sup>88</sup> It is important, according to Rhonheimer, to bear in mind that “the object is not [...] ‘material’ in the sense of a material element of an act which, considered in itself, would still lack any finalization on the part of the subject.”<sup>89</sup> “‘The object of a human act’ is precisely the exterior act itself, or, put more exactly: it is the content, the intelligible meaning of the exterior act of the will,”<sup>90</sup> and therefore “the exterior act cannot, as such, have an ‘object’ from which it receives its moral species.”<sup>91</sup> Morally speaking, “the object is the exterior act, as the object of the interior act of the will.”<sup>92</sup> Rhonheimer does not mean by these statements to exclude the material dimension of the exterior act, but only to underscore the fact that this is insufficient, from the moral point of view, for determining the moral species of the act. “The object of an act is not, therefore, only ‘that which I want’ or ‘that which I propose to myself to do’; but in the object itself there is also present a materiality proper to the ‘physical’ nature of the act, which enters into the constitution of that which is the object.”<sup>93</sup>

Angel Rodríguez Luño also seems to follow exclusively the most common thesis, which simply identifies the interior act and the exterior act, respectively, with the elicited act and the act commanded by the will. He states that “St. Thomas,

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87. *Ibidem*, p. 184: “Chiamare l’oggetto morale ‘oggetto dell’atto esteriore,’ come lo stesso Tommaso a volte fa, può dunque causare confusioni; sembra non essere coerente con l’esposizione fornita nelle questioni II, q. 19-20. Secondo essa, l’atto esteriore non ‘ha’ propriamente un ‘oggetto’ (in senso morale), ma esso stesso, appunto, è moralmente considerato l’oggetto, il *finis proximus* dell’atto interiore della volontà (qui: la *electio*), in quanto tale specifica moralmente l’atto umano.” G. Grisez seems to implicitly refer to this same apparent incoherence in the concept of the “object of the exterior act” understood as the object of the act commanded by the will, when he says, “I do not think his [Thomas Aquinas] distinction between the exterior act and the act of will is altogether clear or coherent” [G. GRISEZ, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 1, (Franciscan Herald Press: Quincy, 1983), p. 247].

88. *Ibidem*, p. 188: “Chi cerca un ‘oggetto dell’atto esteriore’ *in quanto comportamento esterno, osservabile*, finisce col ridurre l’atto umano ai suoi elementi non-morali, cioè in un crudo fisicismo che dimentica il ruolo regolante e moralmente ordinativo della ragione.”

89. *Ibidem*, pp. 201-202: “L’oggetto non è, però, ‘materia’ nel senso di un elemento materiale di un atto che, in sé considerato, sarebbe ancora privo d’ogni finalizzazione da parte del soggetto.”

90. *Ibidem*, p. 176: “‘l’oggetto di un atto umano’ è proprio lo stesso atto esteriore, o, detto con più precisione: è il contenuto, il significato intelligibile dell’atto esteriore della volontà.”

91. *Ibidem*, p. 186: “l’atto esteriore non può, in quanto tale, avere un ‘oggetto’ da cui ricevere la sua specie morale.”

92. *Ibidem*, p. 191: “L’oggetto è l’atto esteriore in quanto oggetto dell’atto interiore della volontà.”

93. *Ibidem*, p. 216: “L’oggetto di un atto non è dunque soltanto ‘ciò che io voglio’ o ‘ciò che mi propongo di fare’; ma in esso stesso è anche presente una materialità propria alla natura “fisica” dell’atto che entra nella costituzione di ciò che è l’oggetto.”

and with him many other theologians, calls elicited acts of the will *interior acts*, and commanded acts *exterior acts*. The terms ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ are thus used in reference to the will, with the consequence that a thought or a voluntary memory (which are acts commanded by the will but carried out by a faculty exterior to it) are considered exterior acts.”<sup>94</sup>

### 3. Final considerations

It seems clear to us that, generally speaking, there are two different ways in which St. Thomas uses the expressions “interior act” and “exterior act.” The first is in the sense of “act elicited” and “act commanded” by the will, and in this case we think it is possible to be even more specific, stating that the elicited act in question is the *electio* and the commanded act corresponds to the *materia ex qua*.<sup>95</sup> The second way in which Aquinas uses these expressions is in the sense of *intentio* and *electio*. It is important to specify here, however, that the exterior act is used not only to refer to the elicited act of the *electio*, but also to the act commanded by it. Which is to say that the exterior act, in this second sense, is the *electio* “incarnated” in a concrete action; it is not merely an intentional proposition, but a *materia circa quam* that includes a dimension commanded by the will, a *materia ex qua*.

There is a third sense in which Thomas uses the expression “exterior act” – when referring, in the intentional order, to the object which morally specifies the *electio*. In this sense, the exterior act is still only an intentional reality: an immediately realizable plan of action, a proximate end proposed by the practical reason to the will, a *forma a ratione concepta* (form conceived by reason), not yet “incarnated” in an action exterior to the will. St. Thomas calls this “exterior act,” because it will become with the *electio* the “soul” of a concrete act exterior to the will. For example, the intentional proposal “to steal this apple” only becomes real with the *electio* and the command to the other faculties – but it is not without sense to call it the *actus exterior*, as St. Thomas does. In any case, this usage helps us to some extent to bear in mind that the objects of the *voluntas eligens* (the choosing will) are properly actions, and not simply things.

At this point, a delicate question arises. In what sense does Aquinas use interior act and exterior act in *ST I-II*, qq. 19 and 20? The answer does not seem as clear to us as it does to the great majority of interpreters who, as we have seen,

94. E. COLOM - A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi. Elementi di Teologia Morale Fondamentale*, (Edizioni Università della Santa Croce: Rome, 2003), 3rd Ed, p. 181: “San Tommaso, e con lui molti altri teologi, chiama gli atti eliciti della volontà *atti interni*, e gli atti imperati *atti esterni*. I termini ‘interno’ e ‘esterno’ si utilizzano allora con riferimento alla volontà, e così un pensiero o ricordo volontario (che sono atti imperati dalla volontà ma compiuti da una facoltà esterna ad essa) vengono considerati atti esterni.”

95. In chapter VI of my dissertation I treat in greater detail the concepts of *materia ex qua* and *materia circa quam*. Here is sufficient to state that Thomas uses the relation of *materia ex qua* and *materia circa quam* as the relation of a dead body with the living unity of body and soul. The *materia ex qua* would therefore be the ‘body’ of one action without the act of will which would be the ‘soul’ of that action.

associate elicited acts of the will with q. 19 and the act commanded by the will with q. 20. In fact, this understanding has difficulty explaining why Thomas – at the point when he is treating of the goodness and malice of *human* acts – would insert q. 20, in which the theme is acts commanded by the will, which do not *per se* belong to the moral order and therefore increase neither the goodness nor the malice of elicited acts of the will.

Our proposal offers a different interpretation. We think that in q. 19, on the interior act, Thomas is treating of the goodness and malice of the *intentio*, and in q. 20, in which he addresses the exterior act, he is treating of the goodness and malice of the *electio*, together with the commanded act that this “animates” and commands. Our thesis is based on five arguments, which we will now examine.

#### a) Reasonableness

Above all, it seems to us much more reasonable in the context of qq. 18-21, in which the *morality* of *human* acts is treated, to study separately the morality of the *intentio*, of the *electio* and of their reciprocal implications, than to study the morality of the elicited act of the will in a general way in q. 19, without distinguishing between the *intentio* and the *electio*, and in q. 20 the commanded act, which does not *per se* belong to the *genus moris*, but derives its morality exclusively from the voluntariness with which it is commanded. It makes much more sense to consider the exterior act, not only as a commanded act, but as the concrete realization of an *electio* which includes both an elicited act of the will and the acts commanded by the will to the other powers for the act’s realization. Moreover, St. Thomas asserts that the commanded act partakes of the *same* moral species as the commanding (elicited) act of the will, i.e., as the *electio*.<sup>96</sup> It would be redundant to evaluate the morality of the elicited act of the will in q. 19, so as to then analyze the morality of the commanded act in q. 20 and arrive at the conclusion that it is the same as that of the *electio* that commands it. As an example, it would be strange to analyze the morality of the elicited act of the will “to want to steal an apple,” so as to then analyze the morality of “the execution of the theft of an apple,” because there is no substantial difference between these two acts from the point of view of *morality*.

On the other hand, it seems to us that it would make complete sense to *separately* analyze the morality of the *intentio*, the interior act elicited by the will which has the *finis* as its proper object, and the morality of the *electio*, an exterior act because it is immediately realizable, but at the same time elicited by the will. As we have seen,<sup>97</sup> the morality of the *intentio* and of the *electio* can be different,

96. Cf. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 8: “actus exterior habet rationem culpae ab actu voluntatis. Quod vero dicitur: quantum intendis, tantum facis” (exterior acts derive their character of moral wrong from acts of the will. And the statement ‘you do as much as you intend to do’ holds true...); *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, prol.: “actus exteriores ex voluntate bonos vel malos esse” (exterior acts are good or bad depending on the will).

97. I refer here to chapters III and VII of my dissertation, where I treat human action and its morality, and the concepts of choice and intention.

with the existence of a different relation with the *ordo rationis* being sufficient to establish this difference. Is it possible that St. Thomas was not aware of this? We believe that he was. On various occasions, he studies the influence that the morality of the *intentio* has on the *electio*, and vice-versa. Indeed, the various examples that he uses in this regard are especially illuminating.

### b) Continuity

The second argument that would seem to confirm our thesis would be the continuity of this position with other writings of St. Thomas. He not only identifies the binomial interior act/exterior act with the binomial *intentio/electio* in qq. 19-20, but, as we have shown above, he also uses the expressions “interior act” and “exterior act” in the sense of *intentio* and *electio* elsewhere in his writings. This does not deny, as we have also seen, that in some passages he understands the binomial interior act/exterior act in the sense of *electio/commanded act*. And, probably, Thomas’s freedom in the use of these concepts is what led to a certain amount of confusion among some of his prominent interpreters. We will cite again some of the passages in which Aquinas clearly uses “interior act” to refer to the *intentio*, and “exterior act” to refer to the *electio*. He says:

[Since] an exterior act belongs to the *genus moris* inasmuch as it is voluntary, two objects can be considered in the moral act, namely, the object of the external act and the object of the interior act, which sometimes are one, namely, when a person wills to go to a particular place and goes there; but sometimes the two objects are diverse, and one may be good, and the other evil, for instance when a person gives alms wishing to please men, the object of the exterior act is good, and the object of the interior act is evil. And because the exterior act is constituted in the *genus moris* inasmuch as it is voluntary, the moral species of an act is considered formally according to the object of the interior act. And so the Philosopher says in Book V of the *Ethics* that a person who steals in order to commit adultery is more adulterer than thief.<sup>98</sup>

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98. *De malo*, q. 7, a. 3, c.: “actus exterior pertineat ad genus moris secundum quod est voluntarius, in actu morali possunt considerari duo obiecta; scilicet obiectum exterioris actus, et obiectum interioris. Quae quidem quandoque sunt unum; puta cum aliquis volens ire ad aliquem locum vadit illuc: quandoque vero sunt diversa, et contingit quod alterum est bonum et alterum malum; sicut cum aliquis dat elemosynam volens placere hominibus, obiectum exterioris actus est bonum; obiectum autem interioris actus est malum; et quia actus exterior constituitur in genere moris in quantum est voluntarius, oportet quod formaliter consideretur species moralis actus secundum obiectum interioris actus; nam species actus consideratur secundum obiectum; unde philosophus dicit in V Ethic. quod ille qui ut moechetur furatur, magis est moechus quam fur.”

First, it must be emphasized that Aquinas states at the outset that the exterior act that he is considering here is the exterior act as belonging to the *genus moris*, i.e., as voluntary. He then says that two objects can be distinguished in the moral act, *each having its own morality*. This statement would make no sense if it concerned the morality of the *electio* and of the commanded act, because the latter derives *all* of its moral goodness from the former, i.e., it always has the same moral species, because it always has the same voluntariness. The examples which Thomas offers here, however, are decisive for resolving any ambiguity. “To give alms wishing to please men,” can in no instance be *only* analyzed, morally, as an *electio* and a commanded act. “To give alms” *is* an exterior act with its own moral goodness, because it is the concrete realization of an *electio*, to which is joined an act commanded by the will to the other faculties. The object of the interior act “to please men” is not then the object of the *electio*, and in fact it is not even wanted as *ea quae sunt ad finem* (i.e., as a means), but it is precisely the object of the *intentio*, it is the *finis* which the agent seeks for himself.

As if this weren't enough, St. Thomas offers yet another example in this context, citing Aristotle: “to steal so as to commit adultery.” Again it is clear that “to steal” cannot be considered simply as a commanded act, but simultaneously as an *electio*; it consequently has its own morality. The moral species of theft is *essentially* different from the moral species of adultery, but the morality of the commanded act of theft is not essentially different than the morality of the *electio* of theft. In this context, as well, it is clear that the interior act “to commit adultery” cannot be referred to any other reality than the *intentio* of the agent to his *finis operantis*. With this scheme in mind, expressions of St. Thomas like the following become particularly clear: “[o]bjects, in relation to exterior acts, have the character of matter ‘about which’ (*materia circa quam*); but, in relation to the interior act of the will, they have the character of end”;<sup>99</sup> which is to say the *materia circa quam* is the object of the *electio*, whereas the *finis* – in the proper sense – is the object of the *intentio*.

In another particularly clear passage, also cited above, we read:

There are some sins in which the exterior acts are not in themselves evil, but only according as they proceed from a perverted intention or will, for instance when a person wills to give alms for the sake of vainglory; and in sins of this kind it is clear that in every case the sin consists principally in the will. But there are other sins in which the exterior acts are in themselves evil, as clearly is the case in theft, adultery, murder, and the like.<sup>100</sup>

99. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 72, a. 3, ad 2: “obiecta, secundum quod comparantur ad actus exteriores, habent rationem materiae circa quam, sed secundum quod comparantur ad actum interiorem voluntatis, habent rationem finium.”

100. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 3, c.: “quaedam peccata sunt in quibus actus exteriores non sunt secundum se mali, sed secundum quod ex corrupta intentione vel voluntate procedunt:

In this passage Aquinas argues that the exterior act, the *electio* that is carried out, might not be evil in itself – as in the case of “to give alms” – but is so by the simple fact that it is commanded by an evil will, by a disordered *intentio*, such as “for vainglory.” At the same time, however, he says that there are exterior acts which are evil in themselves, such as theft, adultery or homicide. Once again it is clear that he is using “exterior act” in the sense of the realization of a concrete *electio*, and not simply of the act commanded by the will to the other human powers.

*c) Structure of the questions*

The third argument which we believe confirms our proposal is the fact that the articles that Aquinas proposes to develop, both in q. 19 and in q. 20, make more sense when applied to the morality of the *intentio* and the *electio* than to the morality of the elicited act and the commanded act. Here is the structure of q. 19, dedicated to a consideration of the goodness of the interior act of the will. The question is divided into ten articles:

1. Does the goodness of the will depend on the object?
2. Does it depend on the object alone?
3. Does it depend on reason?
4. Does it depend on the eternal law?
5. Does erring reason bind?
6. Is the will evil if it follows the erring reason against the law of God?
7. Does the goodness of the will in regard to the means, depend on the intention of the end?
8. Does the degree of goodness or malice in the will depend on the degree of good or evil in the intention?
9. Does the goodness of the will depend on its conformity to the Divine will?
10. Is it necessary for the human will, in order to be good, to be conformed to the Divine will, as regards the thing willed?<sup>101</sup>

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puta, cum quis vult dare eleemosynam propter inanem gloriam; et in huiusmodi peccatis manifestum est quod omnibus modis peccatum principaliter consistit in voluntate. Quaedam autem peccata sunt in quibus exteriores actus sunt secundum se mali, sicut patet in furto, adulterio, homicidio et similibus.”

101. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 19, prol.: “Deinde considerandum est de bonitate actus interioris voluntatis. Et circa hoc quaeruntur decem. Primo, utrum bonitas voluntatis dependeat ex obiecto. Secundo, utrum ex solo obiecto dependeat. Tertio, utrum dependeat ex ratione. Quarto, utrum dependeat ex lege aeterna. Quinto, utrum ratio errans obliget. Sexto, utrum voluntas contra legem Dei sequens rationem errantem, sit mala. Septimo, utrum bonitas voluntatis in his quae sunt ad finem, dependeat ex intentione finis. Octavo, utrum quantitas bonitatis vel malitiae in voluntate, sequatur quantitatem boni vel mali in intentione. Nono, utrum bonitas voluntatis dependeat ex conformitate ad voluntatem divinam. Decimo, utrum necesse sit voluntatem humanam conformari divinae voluntati in volito, ad hoc quod sit bona.”

Q. 20 considers goodness and malice with respect to exterior acts, and is divided into six articles:

1. Is goodness and malice first in the act of the will, or in the exterior action?
2. Does the whole goodness or malice of the exterior action depend on the goodness of the will?
3. Are the goodness or malice of the interior act the same as those of the exterior action?
4. Does the exterior action add any goodness or malice to that of the interior act?
5. Do the consequences of an exterior action increase its goodness or malice?
6. Can one and the same exterior action be both good and evil?<sup>102</sup>

It is important to remember that the object of the *intentio*, the *finis operantis*, is the end of the act and therefore must possess, in itself, a specific *ratio boni*, given that if it did not possess a specific goodness, it would not be capable of attracting the will. Conversely, the object of the *electio* (i.e., the object of a choice like “walking” or “starting the car”) does not *necessarily* have to possess an intrinsic moral goodness; it could be a purely instrumental means to an end. In this case, its *ratio boni* is totally derived from the end, as occurs with moral objects that are morally indifferent.

It is interesting to note that in aa. 1-3 of q. 19 Aquinas claims that “the goodness of the will [of the interior act] depends properly on the object.”<sup>103</sup> This statement is true if applied to the object of the *intentio*; in the case of the *electio*, however, Aquinas continually emphasizes that the goodness of the object is not sufficient, but also *necessary* are the goodness of that end in view of which the choice is realized, and of the circumstances, ideas which he curiously develops in aa. 3-4 of q. 20. It therefore seems more reasonable to think that, in q. 19, Aquinas is referring to precisely the object of the *intentio*, i.e., to the *finis operantis*, and not indiscriminately to any end of an elicited act of the will. If this latter were the case, one could also not understand the sense of q. 18, in which he proposes to treat of the goodness and malice of human acts in general. Q. 19 would seem a bit like *déjà vu*.

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102. Cf. *ibidem*, q. 20, prol.: “Deinde considerandum est de bonitate et malitia quantum ad exteriores actus. Et circa hoc quaeruntur sex. Primo, utrum bonitas et malitia per prius sit in actu voluntatis, vel in actu exteriori secundo, utrum tota bonitas vel malitia actus exterioris dependeat ex bonitate voluntatis. Tertio, utrum sit eadem bonitas et malitia interioris et exterioris actus. Quarto, utrum actus exterior aliquid addat de bonitate vel malitia supra actum interiorem. Quinto, utrum eventus sequens aliquid addat de bonitate vel malitia ad actum interiorem. Sexto, utrum idem actus exterior possit esse bonus et malus.”

103. *Ibidem*, q. 19, a. 3, c.: “bonitas voluntatis proprie ex obiecto dependet.”

In aa. 4-6 and 10 of q. 19, Aquinas considers the relation of the object of the interior act with the *lex aeterna* and the *ordo rationis*. As we have just pointed out, only the object of the *intentio necessarily* has an intrinsic *ratio boni*, while the object of the *electio* may or may not have its own intrinsic goodness. From this it follows that only the object of the *intentio* is always either consistent or inconsistent with the order of reason and with the eternal law. This is why Thomas never spoke of morally indifferent objects of the *intentio*, whereas the same cannot be said of the object of the *electio* (cases which will once again be examined in q. 20). Consequently, these articles are *always* concerned with the object of the *intentio*, but not always with the object of the *electio*. For this reason it is more reasonable to think that Aquinas was here referring to the interior act as the *intentio finis*.

In aa. 7 and 8, it is Pinckaers who explicitly recognizes that Aquinas is treating of the *intentio*. He states that “articles 7 and 8 study more precisely the role of the intention in the morality of acts”;<sup>104</sup> in other words Pinckaers recognizes that here Thomas is focusing his study on the *intentio*. From one who thinks that in q. 19, Thomas understands by “interior act” precisely the *intentio*, no other conclusion would be expected.

With respect to q. 20, the first two articles would seem, at first sight, to support the idea that Aquinas is treating of the act commanded by the will, given that at the beginning of one of these articles he opposes the act of the will to the exterior act.<sup>105</sup> A close analysis shows, however, that by the goodness or malice of the “act of the will,” Aquinas means the goodness or malice that derives from the object of the *intentio*. In fact he says that

[Some] exterior actions may be said to be good or bad in two ways. First, in regard to their genus, and the circumstances connected with them: thus the giving of alms, if the required conditions be observed, is said to be good. Secondly, a thing is said to be good or evil, from its relation to the end: thus the giving of alms for vainglory is said to be evil. Now, since the end is the will's proper object, it is evident that this aspect of good or evil, which the exterior action derives from its relation to the end, is to be found first of all in the act of the will, whence it passes to the exterior action. On the other hand, the goodness or malice which the exterior action has of itself, on account of its being about due matter and its being attended by due circumstances, is not derived from the will, but rather from the reason.<sup>106</sup>

104. S.-Th. PINCKAERS, *Notas ao tratado sobre os actos humanos*, cit., note j, p. 271.

105. Thomas's “opposing act of will” to “exterior act” could give the impression that he is using “exterior act” as *materia ex qua* and not as *materia circa quam*, which he usually does.

106. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 20, a. 1, c.: “aliqui actus exteriores possunt dici boni vel mali dupliciter. Uno modo, secundum genus suum, et secundum circumstantias in ipsis consideratas, sicut dare eleemosynam, servatis debitis circumstantiis, dicitur esse

Here Thomas directly correlates the exterior act to “giving alms,” and claims that this is morally good in itself because it accords with reason (moral goodness *ex genere*). It is not possible that he would be referring here to the commanded act, because this possesses no intrinsic moral goodness, nor is it susceptible – as a simple commanded act – of being correlated to the *ordo rationis*. Therefore, one must *necessarily* conclude that the exterior act “to give alms” refers to the concrete realization of an *electio*, which undoubtedly also includes a commanded act. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that Aquinas also says that such an exterior act could become evil, from being ordered to an evil end such as “vainglory.” In this case the malice of the referred-to *electio* does not derive from its object, which is according to reason, but from the fact of its being commanded by an *intentio* that is disordered due to its *finis* (“vainglory” being opposed to the order of reason), and it is in this sense that Aquinas says that this disorder first appears in the act of the will (the *intentio* of vainglory), and from it derives, through the command of the will, to the exterior act (the *electio* of giving alms). Reading these texts according to the binomial elicited/commanded is only possible either by doing a certain violence to the text – because Thomas’s example is of the type *intentio/electio* –, or by reaching conclusions which are opposed to Aquinas’s thought, such as: “acts commanded by the will to the other operative powers possess an intrinsic moral goodness,” which is clearly false.

In a. 2, ad 3 Aquinas asserts that “[v]oluntariness applies not only to the interior act of the will, but also to exterior actions, inasmuch as they proceed from the will and the reason. Consequently the difference of good and evil is applicable to both the interior and the exterior act.”<sup>107</sup> As we have already seen above, in this statement only the object of the *intentio* and the object of the *electio* can be different from the moral point of view; thus, here, St. Thomas is referring to these. Articles 3 and 4, by the questions they pose, presuppose in some way that the moral goodness and malice of the interior and exterior act are distinct; if not, it would not make much sense to examine these questions. Thus, it is once again more reasonable to be working within the scheme *intentio/electio*, because only in this scheme is there a place for objects with a different morality. Articles 5 and 6, by their titles, presuppose that the exterior act is in itself susceptible of moral goodness, a fact that would only make sense, as we have already emphasized several

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bonum. Alio modo dicitur aliquid esse bonum vel malum ex ordine ad finem, sicut dare eleemosynam propter inanem gloriam, dicitur esse malum. Cum autem finis sit proprium obiectum voluntatis, manifestum est quod ista ratio boni vel mali quam habet actus exterior ex ordine ad finem, per prius invenitur in actu voluntatis, et ex eo derivatur ad actum exteriorem. Bonitas autem vel malitia quam habet actus exterior secundum se, propter debitam materiam et debitas circumstantias, non derivatur a voluntate, sed magis a ratione.”

107. *Ibidem*, a. 2, ad 3: “voluntarium dicitur non solum actus interior voluntatis, sed etiam actus exteriores, prout a voluntate procedunt et ratione. Et ideo circa utrosque actus potest esse differentia boni et mali.”

times, in reference to the *electio*, and not to the simple act commanded to the other operative powers. The arm movements of a thief are not in themselves morally good or evil, but the choice of “stealing this watch” is. It is therefore more reasonable that Aquinas would be referring here to the morality of the exterior act as including a specific *electio*.

*d) Incomprehensibility of some statements*

If we adopt the scheme elicited/commanded, some statements – and especially some examples – of St. Thomas become incomprehensible, if not contradictory. We have already mentioned some of these in our preceding arguments; here we will examine a few more. In q. 18, for example, which treats of the goodness and malice of human acts in general, Aquinas in a. 6 speaks directly of the interior act and the exterior act:

[I]n a voluntary action, there is a twofold action, viz. the interior act of the will, and the exterior action: and each of these actions has its object. The end is properly the object of the interior act of the will: while the object of the exterior action is that on which the action is brought to bear. Therefore just as the exterior action takes its species from the object on which it bears; so the interior act of the will takes its species from the end, as from its own proper object. Now that which is on the part of the will is formal in regard to that which is on the part of the exterior action: because the will uses limbs to act as instruments; nor have exterior actions any measure of morality, save in so far as they are voluntary. Consequently the species of a human act is considered formally with regard to the end, but materially with regard to the object of the exterior action. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. v, 2) that ‘he who steals that he may commit adultery, is strictly speaking, more adulterer than thief.’<sup>108</sup>

The first point to be emphasized is that, as we have seen, the statement “the exterior act takes its moral species from its object” only makes sense if, for exterior act, we understand an *electio*. The object of the commanded act gives no moral

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108. *Ibidem*, q. 18, a. 6, c.: “In actu autem voluntario invenitur duplex actus, scilicet actus interior voluntatis, et actus exterior, et uterque horum actuum habet suum obiectum. Finis autem proprie est obiectum interioris actus voluntarii, id autem circa quod est actio exterior, est obiectum eius. Sicut igitur actus exterior accipit speciem ab obiecto circa quod est; ita actus interior voluntatis accipit speciem a fine, sicut a proprio obiecto. Ita autem quod est ex parte voluntatis, se habet ut formale ad id quod est ex parte exterioris actus, quia voluntas utitur membris ad agendum, sicut instrumentis; neque actus exteriores habent rationem moralitatis, nisi in quantum sunt voluntarii. Et ideo actus humani species formaliter consideratur secundum finem, materialiter autem secundum obiectum exterioris actus. Unde philosophus dicit, in V Ethic., quod *ille qui furatur ut committat adulterium, est, per se loquendo, magis adulter quam fur.*”

species to the human act as *human*, i.e., as it depends on reason and will. The *electio*, however, *does* have an object which is properly a moral object, capable of determining the movement of the will that tends toward it.

The words “the will uses limbs to act as instruments” could introduce some confusion, because they refer directly to the relation between the elicited act and the act commanded by the will. It should be noted, however, that these words arise as the terms of a comparison. Aquinas is comparing the material/formal relationship that exists between the interior act (*intentio*) and the exterior act (*electio*) with the material/formal relation that exists between the will (elicited acts) and the members employed (commanded operative powers) as instruments. This comparison is valid. Aquinas is *not* claiming here that the interior act corresponds to elicited acts of the will and that the exterior act corresponds to acts commanded by the other faculties. Nevertheless, it is true that the expressions St. Thomas uses here do admit of some ambiguity.

This ambiguity might be unresolvable if Thomas had not offered us a final, clear example. Citing Aristotle, in a passage from *De Malo* which we have already commented on above, he states that one who steals to commit adultery is more adulterer than thief. To want to read this example according to the binomial elicited/commanded is simply incorrect. It is obvious that what Aquinas wants to emphasize here is the matter/form relationship that exists between the *electio* and the *intentio*. One who steals *so as* to commit adultery is *more* adulterer than thief, because the *intentio* is more formal than the *electio*. The theft is willed, not for itself, but as a means for realizing the adultery, the latter being sought as an end in the sense of the final end of the act. Other statements of Aquinas also gain more clarity in this context, such as: “the end is properly the object of the interior act of the will,” which is used to refer to the fact that the *finis operantis* is properly the object of the *intentio*.

Still in question q. 18, in a. 7 we encounter a very significant statement. St. Thomas says that “[t]he object of the exterior act can stand in a twofold relation to the end of the will: first, as being of itself ordained thereto; thus to fight well is of itself ordained to victory; secondly, as being ordained thereto accidentally; thus to take what belongs to another is ordained accidentally to the giving of alms.”<sup>109</sup> Here Thomas explicitly associates the concept of the object of the exterior act with “to fight well” and with “to take what belongs to another,” and the end (*finis operantis*) of the will with “victory [in war]” and “to give alms.” The only reasonable way to read this passage is to identify the object of the exterior act with the object of the *electio*, and the end of the will with the object of the *intentio*. In this case, the application of the binomial elicited/commanded would be unintelligible.

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109. *Ibidem*, a. 7, c.: “obiectum exterioris actus dupliciter potest se habere ad finem voluntatis, uno modo, sicut per se ordinatum ad ipsum, sicut bene pugnare per se ordinatur ad victoriam; alio modo, per accidens, sicut accipere rem alienam per accidens ordinatur ad dandum eleemosynam.”

In a. 3 of q. 20, Aquinas says that “sometimes the goodness or malice of the interior act is the same as that of the exterior action, and sometimes not.”<sup>110</sup> But according to Aquinas, is it possible that the moral goodness of the elicited act of the will be different than that of the commanded act? No, it seems to me. This statement only makes sense, therefore, if it refers to the binomial *intentio/electio*, which in fact can have two different goodnesses or malices, as in the case of one who steals so as to commit adultery. Shortly thereafter – still in the body of the same response – Thomas says that “when the exterior action has goodness or malice of itself, i.e., in regard to its matter and circumstances, then the goodness of the exterior action is distinct from the goodness of the will regarding the end.”<sup>111</sup> Here he explicitly states that the exterior act can receive a specific goodness because of its matter or its circumstances. What matter is this, capable of conferring a moral goodness on the act? It can only be the *materia circa quam*, which has the character of object of the *electio*. And as if this weren’t enough, Aquinas then associates the goodness of the interior act with the goodness of the act of the will that derives from the end. To what end does he refer here, the *finis proximus* or the *finis operantis (remotus)*? He could only be referring to the *finis operantis*, because he had just referred previously to the *materia* that is the moral object, i.e., to the *finis proximus* of the act. In fact the expression “end,” when not further qualified, normally refers to the end wanted for itself, i.e., to the *finis operantis*. Other examples could be cited, but I believe that those offered are sufficient to confirm our thesis.

#### e) Greater clarity

A fifth argument concerns a comprehensive vision that is obtained by reading qq. 18-21, identifying the binomial interior act/exterior act first with the binomial *intentio/electio*, and then with the binomial elicited/commanded. It must be said that greater clarity is gained with a reading according to the binomial *intentio/electio* than according to the binomial elicited/commanded. Everything makes much more sense, many ambiguities are avoided and the interior coherence of St. Thomas’s exposition is enhanced.

In a. 7 of q. 19, for example, Thomas tries to show how the morality of the *intentio* influences the morality of the *electio*, saying that “[t]he act of the will cannot be said to be good, if an evil intention is the cause of the willing. For when a man wills to give alms for the sake of vainglory, he wills that which is good in itself, under a species of evil; and therefore, as willed by him, it is evil.”<sup>112</sup> In a. 8 he continues to

110. *Ibidem*, q. 20, a. 3, c.: “quandoque est eadem bonitas vel malitia interioris et exterioris actus; quandoque alia et alia.”

111. *Ibidem*: “Quando autem actus exterior habet bonitatem vel malitiam secundum se, scilicet secundum materiam vel circumstantias, tunc bonitas exterioris actus est una, et bonitas voluntatis quae est ex fine, est alia.”

112. *Ibidem*, q. 19, a. 7, ad 2: “voluntas non potest dici bona, si sit intentio mala causa volendi. Qui enim vult dare eleemosynam propter inanem gloriam consequendam, vult

focus on the role of the *intentio*, and not on elicited acts of the will considered more generally, something which becomes evident when he states the question to be resolved. He says that “[i]t would seem that the degree of goodness in the will depends on the degree of good in the intention,”<sup>113</sup> and he begins the response by saying “[i]n regard to both the act, and the intention of the end...”<sup>114</sup> Pinckaers, therefore, has no doubts when he explicitly states that “articles 7 and 8 study more precisely the role of the intention in the morality of acts.”<sup>115</sup>

If the exterior act is simply identified *only* with the commanded act, then the interpretation, for example, of q. 20, a. 6, in which Thomas places the question of knowing whether the same exterior act can be both good and evil, becomes more difficult. How could we speak of morally different exterior acts if the commanded act remains the same? If the exterior act coincides only with the commanded act, then it would be necessary to admit that to each commanded act corresponds an exterior act. This, however, is not Aquinas’s position. He states, for example, that “continuous walking is one action, considered in the natural order: but it may resolve itself into many actions, considered in the moral order,”<sup>116</sup> according to the various voluntary purposes that might motivate the walking. In this case, “[t]his continual movement which proceeds from various intentions, although it is one in the natural order, is not one in the point of moral unity.”<sup>117</sup>

It seems clear to us that Thomas’s examples here presuppose that the same commanded act could be the origin of different exterior acts *morally speaking*, when they are animated by different voluntary purposes. The exterior act is not only a commanded act, but a commanded act animated by a concrete *electio*, a deliberate purpose, and it is only as such that it makes sense to study its morality. It seems unreasonable to us to think that Aquinas would have dedicated a question with six articles to the study of the *morality* of the act commanded by the will. It makes much more sense – and the facts seem to bear us out – to study the morality of the exterior act conceived of as a unity of the *electio* and the commanded act.

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Finally, before concluding with this theme, it would be fair to try to understand why the majority of interpreters have opted for the binomial elicited/commanded,

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id quod de se est bonum, sub ratione mali, et ideo, prout est volitum ab ipso, est malum. Unde voluntas eius est mala.”

113. *Ibidem*, q. 19, a. 8, arg. 1: “Videtur quod quantitas bonitatis in voluntate, dependeat ex quantitate bonitatis in intentione.”

114. *Ibidem*, c.: “circa actum et intentionem finis.”

115. S.-Th. PINCKAERS, *Notas ao tratado sobre os actos humanos*, cit., note j, p. 271.

116. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 20, a. 6, c.: “Ambulatio enim continua est unus actus secundum genus naturae: potest tamen contingere quod sit plures secundum genus moris.”

117. *Ibidem*, ad 1: “dicendum quod ille motus continuus qui procedit ex diversa intentione, licet sit unus unitate naturae, non est tamen unus unitate moris.”

even if, as we have tried to show, this option involves objective difficulties. This is not an easy question to answer. It seems to us, however, that there are several elements which, taken together, could give an apparent viability to this solution as a hermeneutical key to the questions we have been examining.

In the first place it must be said that the concept of elicited act is broader than the concept of *intentio*. The *intentio* is in fact one of the various elicited acts of the will of which St. Thomas speaks; specifically, it is an elicited act of the will that has as its proper object the *finis* taken in a strict sense, i.e., that which has the character of the term of the act, the *finis operantis (remotus)*. If this is true, then it is not surprising that the statements St. Thomas makes concerning the interior act (*intentio*) would also be valid for elicited acts of the will considered generically,<sup>118</sup> given that the *intentio* is itself one of the elicited acts of the will. It is then possible to read q. 19 understanding elicited acts for the interior act of the will, and to find in Thomas's statements a certain logic which seems to confirm this initial presupposition – at least it more or less works.

Secondly, it must also be said that there is a certain affinity between the concepts of exterior act and act commanded by the will, and therefore their association is not entirely inappropriate. Normally acts commanded by the will are acts that are externally observable; for example, the movements commanded to the motor faculty to execute a theft are “exterior.” Moreover, there are various authors who claim that “exterior” refers to the will, in the sense of an act not immediately realizable by the will, i.e., not elicited. This idea that commanded acts are acts exterior to the will taken generically is certainly true, but this fact alone does not guarantee that this is the sense in which Aquinas uses the expression “exterior act.” One must always examine the texts. As we have already shown, by “exterior act” Thomas understands the composite of the *electio* and the act commanded by the will to the other operative powers. In this sense, the association of the exterior act *only* with the commanded act is not entirely untrue. The limits of this reading emerge above all when certain statements arise, for example when Thomas makes the claim that “the object of the exterior act gives the moral species to the act.” With these cases, as we have seen, there are two main possible solutions: either to “force” the texts and claim that St. Thomas has expressed himself poorly – since the object of the commanded act cannot *per se* give the species to the act – or to accept Aquinas's words and assert that the object of the commanded act gives the species to the exterior act, thus falling into physicalism, with the inherent necessity of admitting a major incoherence in Thomas's thought. This entire problem disappears if, as we have shown above, by object of the exterior act one understands the object of the *electio*.

Thirdly, it must be admitted that St. Thomas uses the terms “*finis*,” “interior act” and “exterior act” with a certain flexibility in the course of his writings on

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118. Most authors who follow the binomial elicited/commanded, when thinking in these questions of acts elicited by the will, have in mind above all the *intentio* and the *electio*.

moral questions – something that is also true for many other concepts in his thought. Aquinas does not give only a univocal meaning to many of the concepts he uses, but also an analogical one. It is very important to bear this in mind, especially when trying to interpret particular expressions with conceptual precision. A consciousness of this freedom in the use of concepts should lead us to use heightened prudence, and not to make assumptions lightly, without an adequate foundation in the facts. Fourth, it is only fair to acknowledge that the response to a. 6 of q. 18, which we examined above, lends itself to confusion and misinterpretation, and by its proximity to qq. 19 and 20 might lead the reader to identify the binomial interior act/exterior act with the binomial elicited/commanded. It seems that here St. Thomas expressed himself in a less than satisfactory manner. Finally, another factor which leads to opting for the binomial elicited/commanded is the weight of the interpretation of previous authors, especially those with great prestige who, as we have seen, normally follow the binomial elicited/commanded. This case is a good example where the force of the interpretive tradition of Aquinas's texts does not help in reaching a correct interpretation. Rather, it generates a kind of inertia that leads us, almost automatically, to uncritically assume the presuppositions assumed by others when they approach the texts.

It would also be remiss to not mention the fact that there are scholars, as we have also had occasion to see, who insist in theory on the binomial elicited/commanded, but who then in practice interpret the texts with good sense and critical sensibility, and who end up implicitly adhering to the binomial *intentio/electio* when interpreting the various passages.

#### **4. The Relevance of this Conclusion to Contemporary Work in Thomistic Action Theory**

The assumption, unanimously accepted by contemporary scholars, that in q. 20 of the *Summa Theologiae* I-II Aquinas is treating of the morality of the exterior act in the sense of the commanded act, is mistaken, as we have tried to demonstrate with various arguments. In q. 20 of the I-II Aquinas is studying the morality of the *actus exterior* as the concrete realization of an *electio*, in which he also includes an act commanded by the will. In q. 19 Thomas does not intend to study the morality of acts elicited by the will indistinctly. For him, the *actus interioris* of q. 19 refers to the *finis* in the sense of *finis operantis*. In other words, in q. 19 he is studying the morality of the *intentio*, and in q. 20 he is studying the morality of the *electio*, together with the commanded act that emanates from this.

This question has important consequences for contemporary work in Thomistic action theory. The first is a more well-founded rejection of the proportionalist reading of St. Thomas. In fact, if the exterior act is only the commanded act, then the proportionalist proposal seems to have some reasonableness, given that commanded acts are *per se* outside of the *genus moris* – they are premoral, and enter the *genus moris* only as commanded by the will.

The second important consequence is – as we have seen – that the expression “object of the exterior act” gains new meaning. In fact this expression is no longer understood as a simple “object of the act commanded by the will,” which could perfectly be a *res physica*, but as the “object of an *electio*,” which is never simply a *res physica*, but a deliberate proposal susceptible of being evaluated for its morality, independently of the morality of the *finis operantis* (or remote end) to which it is ordered. This means that the *actus exterior*, because it is *per se* found in the *genus moris*, is capable of a *commensuratio* with the *ordo virtutis* and thus can already introduce a quality of agreement or disagreement with the latter, independently of the *finis operantis* to which it is ordered.

A third consequence which derives from the conception of the *actus exterior* as the concrete realization of an *electio*, which also includes the act commanded by the will, seems to us to be that the term “basic intentional action” proposed by Rhonheimer proves to be unnecessary. Rhonheimer, parting from the erroneous presupposition that the *actus exterior* was identified with the commanded act, rightly felt the need to invent a concept to refer to the human act of the realization of a deliberate choice, and it was this that led him to formulate his concept of basic intentional action. Added to this fact is that it is not easy to explain the reason for the non-formulation of such a fundamental concept by Aquinas himself. Now everything makes much more sense. St. Thomas did effectively formulate such a concept: the concept of *actus exterior*, which is frequently, though not always, used by Aquinas in the sense of basic intentional action.

If this is the case, then qq. 18-21 of the I-II gain much greater clarity when read with a correct concept of *actus exterior*. Q. 20 is not a superfluous repetition of what is said in qq. 18 and 19, even if it is organically related to them. It makes complete sense to study, in q. 19, the morality of the *actus interior* (*finis operantis*) and its necessary relation of agreement or disagreement with the natural law (*ordo virtutis*), so as to then study the *actus exterior* caused/commanded by the *actus interior*, and which simultaneously includes a transitive dimension and an intrinsic intentional dimension. When the *actus exterior* does not have *per se* any particular relation of agreement or disagreement with the *ordo virtutis*, then it remains only in the moral species that is communicated to it by the *finis operantis*. ■