

'Genus naturae' and 'Genus moris' in Aquinas¹

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The distinction that St. Thomas makes between the *genus naturae* and the *genus moris* is of particular importance for the determination of the moral species of the human act. These represent two different, though related, perspectives on human action. The *genus naturae* of the human act pertains to the metaphysical analysis of action, whereas the *genus moris* considers action as proceeding from a will that follows the deliberation of reason.

1. THE IMPORTANT TEXTS

According to St. Thomas “something pertains to the moral genus because it is voluntary, and thus voluntary acts themselves, which proceed directly from the will, are *per se* in the *genere moris*.”² For Aquinas, then, the *genus moris* is *necessarily* dependent on an action’s voluntariness, and indeed the “*genus moris* begins at the same point where the first dominion of the will begins.”³ Voluntariness is thus essential to, and indissociable from, the concept of the *genus moris*. Along these lines, Aquinas also says that “the act is not in the *genere moris* except because of the will, that is, according to what is emitted or commanded by the will, and therefore one must consider the unity of the will to effect a judgment concerning the unity of what is considered in the *genere moris*, because it can happen that something that is a single reality according to the *genere naturae*, such as a continuous movement, could be different realities according to the *genere moris* if the will varies during the act, as when someone begins [a given action] with a good intention and ends with an evil intention [...]; on the other hand it can also happen that there be various acts according to the *genere naturae* that nonetheless form a single reality when considered according to the *genere moris*, as happens with one who steals, because all of his acts that are ordered to the end of theft are sin, being done with a single evil intention, even if they be very numerous.”⁴ Thus nothing prevents different acts according to the *genus naturae* from constituting a single act according to the *genus moris* and vice-versa, i.e., that a single act according to the *genus naturae* would constitute various acts according to the *genus moris*.⁵ In another similar example St. Thomas points out that “it can happen

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² *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 1, c.: “aliquid ad genus moris pertinet quo voluntarium est; ideo ipsi actus voluntatis, qui per se et immediate ad voluntatem pertinent, per se in genere moris sunt.”

³ *Ibidem*, d. 24, q. 3, a. 2, c.: “ibi incipit genus moris ubi primo dominium voluntatis invenitur.”

⁴ *Ibidem*, d. 42, q. 1, a. 1, c.: “actus non ponitur in genere moris nisi propter voluntatem, scilicet secundum quod est a voluntate elicitus vel imperatus; et ideo secundum unitatem voluntatis est sumendum iudicium de unitate ejus quod in genere moris dicitur; unde contingit aliquid quod est unum in genere naturae consideratum, ut unum motum continuum, esse plures secundum quod ad genus moris retorquetur, si voluntas in actu varietur; ut quando bona intentione quis incipit, et mala terminat, ut supra ostensum est dist. 40, qu. 1, art. 4: et e contrario contingit esse actus plures, secundum quod ad genus naturae referuntur, qui tamen sunt unum secundum quod in genere moris considerantur, ut patet in eo qui furatur: quia omnes actus ejus, qui ad finem furti ordinantur, peccatum sunt, cum mala intentione fiant, qui possunt valde multi esse.”

⁵ Cf. *De malo*, q. 7, a. 3, c.: “Contingit enim quandoque quod actus est unus numero secundum quod est in genere naturae, qui tamen non est unus secundum quod est in genere moris, propter diversitatem voluntatis: puta, si aliquis vadens continue ad Ecclesiam, in prima parte motus intendat inanem gloriam, in secunda vero intendat Deo servire. Sic ergo contingit quidem in uno actu secundum speciem naturae, quod in prima parte sit peccatum veniale, et in secunda peccatum mortale, si voluntas in tantas libidines excreseat, ut faciat opus peccati venialis etiam in contemptum Dei, puta lo-

that some acts are considered in two ways, according to their natural species and according to their moral species, and at times, according to their species, they agree in one of these ways and differ according to the other, as for example to kill an aggressor or an innocent person do not differ according to the natural species, but they do according to the moral species, because one is a vicious act, a homicide, and the other is an act of virtue, i.e. of justice; but to kill a thief and to free an innocent person are different acts according to the natural species, but agree according to the moral species, because they are both acts of justice.”⁶

It is thus quite clear that for St. Thomas, the consideration of a human action from the moral point of view – that is, in its *genus moris* – absolutely cannot prescind from its voluntariness.⁷ He can therefore confidently assert that “[a]ction and passion belong to the *genus moris*, insofar as they are voluntary,”⁸ and also that “external acts belong to the *genus moris* only insofar as they are voluntary.”⁹ And “[w]e ought, seemingly, to apply to passions what has been said in regard to acts – viz. that the species of a passion, as the species of an act, can be considered from two points of view. First, according to its *genere naturae*; and thus moral good and evil have no connection with the species of an act or passion. Secondly, according to its *genus moris*, inasmuch as it is voluntary and controlled by reason. In this way moral good and evil can belong to the species of a passion, insofar as the object to which a passion tends, is, of itself, in harmony or in discord with reason: as is clear in the case of ‘shame’ which is base fear; and of ‘envy’ which is sorrow for another's good: for thus passions belong to the same species as the external act.”¹⁰

There are more ambiguous situations in which “some acts are identical in the natural species and differ in the moral species, such as fornication and the marriage act,”¹¹ because of the different object to which the will tends.¹² According to Aquinas “the sexual act is a particular act commanded

qui verbum otiosum, vel aliquid huiusmodi; sed sic non est unum peccatum sed duo, quia non est unus actus secundum genus moris” (For an act may sometimes be numerically one insofar as it belongs to a physical genus, and not one insofar as it belongs to a moral genus, because of different acts of the will. For example, such would be the case if one on the way to church should initially intend vainglory and later on intend to give service to God. Therefore, in an act that is one regarding physical species there may be a venial sin and a mortal sin later if the will should grow into so immoderate desires as to perform a venially sinful act [e.g., uttering an idle word, or the like] also in contempt of God. And so there are two sins, not one, since there is not one act regarding the moral genus of acts).

⁶ *Super Sent.*, lib. 3, d. 23, q. 3, a. 1, qc. 3, c.: “Contingit autem aliquos actus dupliciter considerari: vel secundum speciem naturae, vel secundum speciem moris: et quandoque conveniunt secundum speciem quantum ad unum dictorum, et differunt secundum aliud; sicut occidere nocentem et innocentem non differunt secundum speciem naturae, sed secundum speciem moris: quia unum est actus vitii, scilicet homicidii, alterum actus virtutis, sive iustitiae: sed occidere latronem et liberare innocentem, sunt actus diversi secundum speciem naturae, et conveniunt secundum speciem moris, quia sunt actus iustitiae”; cf. *Ibidem*, lib. 4, d. 26, q. 1, a. 3, ad 5: “quamvis sint idem specie naturae, tamen differunt in specie moris, quam una circumstantia variat, scilicet accedere ad suam vel non suam; sicut etiam occidere hominem per violentiam vel per iustitiam, facit diversam speciem moris” (although are the same in the natural species, they differ in the moral species, as when one circumstance changes, like sexual union with one owns wife or not; or like killing a man by violence or by justice produce a different moral species).

⁷ Cf. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 8, n. 8: “moralia a voluntate dependent: secundum hoc enim aliquid ad genus moris pertinet, quod est voluntarium” (moral realities depend on the will. According to this something pertains to the *genus moris* because it is willed).

⁸ *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 20, a. 6, ad 2: “actio et passio pertinent ad genus moris, in quantum habent rationem voluntarii.”

⁹ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 13: “actus exteriores non pertinent ad genus moris nisi secundum quod sunt voluntarii.”

¹⁰ *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 24, a. 4, c.: “dicendum quod sicut de actibus dictum est, ita et de passionibus dicendum videtur, quod scilicet species actus vel passionis dupliciter considerari potest. Uno modo, secundum quod est in genere naturae, et sic bonum vel malum morale non pertinet ad speciem actus vel passionis. Alio modo, secundum quod pertinet ad genus moris, prout scilicet participant aliquid de voluntario et de iudicio rationis. Et hoc modo bonum et malum morale possunt pertinere ad speciem passionis, secundum quod accipitur ut obiectum passionis aliquid de se conveniens rationi, vel dissonum a ratione, sicut patet de verecundia, quae est timor turpis; et de invidia, quae est tristitia de bono alterius. Sic enim pertinent ad speciem exterioris actus.”

¹¹ *Super Sent.*, lib. 4, d. 16, q. 3, a. 1, ql. 2, ad 2: “aliqui actus sunt idem in specie naturae qui differunt in specie moris; sicut fornicatio et actus matrimonialis.”

¹² Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 19, a. 1, ad 3: “bonum per rationem repraesentatur voluntati ut obiectum; et in quantum cadit sub ordine rationis, pertinet ad genus moris, et causat bonitatem moralem in actu voluntatis” ([g]ood is presented

by the will through another power, and thus it is in the *genere moris* accidentally, such that it can be considered in two ways: either according to the *genus naturae*, and in this way the conjugal act and fornication do not specifically differ, and also have a specifically identical natural effect; or according as they belong to the *genus moris*, and in this way they have specifically different effects, such as merit or demerit [...], by what specifically differs¹³ due to their object. It is important to emphasize that St. Thomas claims that a single act according to the *genus naturae* can be “animated” by specifically different voluntariness according to the *genus moris*. In these cases it is absolutely necessary to adopt the perspective of the first person, because this is in fact the only mode of access to the *genus moris*. The voluntariness that animates a sexual union is an accidental aspect if the act is considered according to its *genus naturae*, but essential if one puts himself in the perspective of the *genus moris*.¹⁴

Aquinas, considering the case of a person “going to church” whose will changes as he “goes to church,” says that “that action, though it would clearly be one if considered in its *genus naturae*, nevertheless, with respect to the *genus moris*, is one action or another according as it is realized with a different intention and will.”¹⁵ In this case, therefore, there is a single action according to the *genus naturae* that is informed by different wills according to the *genus moris*, and this is possible because “external acts participate in moral goodness and evil as something added to or accidental to them, as those acts are commanded by the will. It can happen that a given act be one when considered in itself, and at the same time multiple when considered according to the *genus moris*.”¹⁶

The human act, by the very fact of being *human*, is in the *genus moris*, given that it is only human if it proceeds from the will. Along these lines Aquinas says: “I call a human act one that proceeds from a deliberate will. For if an act is indeliberate and proceeds only from the power of imagination (e.g., rubbing one’s beard or the like), it is outside the *genus moris* and so does not partake of moral goodness or wickedness.”¹⁷

to the will as its object by the reason: and insofar as it is in accord with reason, it enters the moral order, and causes moral goodness in the act of the will).

¹³ *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 1, ad 4: “concupitus est quidam actus imperatus a voluntate, mediante alia potentia; et ideo per accidens convenit sibi esse in genere moris; unde potest dupliciter considerari: vel secundum genus naturae, et sic concubitus matrimonialis et fornicarius specie non differunt; unde et effectum naturalem eundem specie habent: vel secundum quod pertinent ad genus moris; et sic effectus specie differentes habent, ut mereri vel demereri vel aliquid huiusmodi, et sic in specie differunt.”

¹⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, c.: “simpliciter specie dividuntur interiores actus voluntatis per bonum et malum, sicut per differentias essentielles: actus autem imperati a voluntate, eliciti per alias potentias, pertinent ad genus moris per accidens, secundum scilicet quod sunt a voluntate imperati; et ideo actus illi secundum substantiam non distinguuntur secundum speciem per bonum et malum, sed per accidens, secundum quod ad genus moris pertinent” (in an absolute manner the species are divided in good and evil for the interior act of the will, as an essential difference. On the other hand, the acts commanded by the will and performed by other powers pertain to the *genus moris* accidentally, while they are commanded by the will, and therefore these acts according to their substance are not specifically distinct in good and evil, but accidentally, while they pertain to the *genus moris*); *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 6, ad 1: “aliquid potest esse accidentale alicui prout est in genere naturae, quod est sibi essenziale prout refertur ad genus moris, scilicet ad vitium et virtutem; sicut finis debitus comestioni, vel quaelibet alia circumstantia debita” (something may be accidental to someone while it is in the *genus naturae*, but essential while considered in the *genus moris*, i.e. while referred to vices and virtues, like the due end of eating, or any other due circumstance); *Super Sent.*, lib. 4, d. 17, q. 1, a. 4, qc. 2, c.: “Nec est inconveniens: quia etsi sit aliquo modo idem secundum genus naturae, non tamen est idem secundum genus moris. Contingit enim unum motum secundum genus naturae esse virtutis et vitii secundum genus moris, sicut patet de illo qui eundo ad Ecclesiam mutat intentionem de malo in bonum” (Neither is inconvenient: because although in some way they are the same according to the *genus naturae*, they are not according to the *genus moris*. It happens the one same motion according to the *genus naturae* comes to be virtue and vice according to the *genus moris*, as shone in he that going to church with an evil intention changes into a good one).

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 4, ad 2: “illa actio quamvis sit una in genere naturae considerata, tamen secundum quod ad genus moris refertur, est alia et alia secundum quod diversa intentione et voluntate exercetur.”

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, c.: “actus exteriores participant bonitatem et malitiam moralem, sicut quoddam superveniens et accidentale sibi, in quantum tales actus sunt imperati a voluntate; continget aliquem actum huiusmodi esse unum, secundum se consideratum, et tamen esse multa, secundum quod ad genus moris refertur.”

¹⁷ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 5, c.: “dico actum humanum qui est a voluntate deliberata. Si enim sit aliquis actus sine deliberatione procedens ex sola imaginatione, sicut confricatio barbae, aut aliquid huiusmodi, huiusmodi actus est extra genus moris;

Finally, a last step that should be highlighted for its clarity is the answer St. Thomas gives to the question of knowing whether a single external act can be simultaneously good and evil. Here is his response:

“Nothing hinders a thing from being one, insofar as it is in one genus, and manifold, insofar as it is referred to another genus. Thus a continuous surface is one, considered as in the genus of quantity; and yet it is manifold, considered as to the genus of color, if it be partly white, and partly black. And accordingly, nothing hinders an action from being one, considered in the *genus naturae*; whereas it is not one, considered in the *genus moris*; and vice versa, as we have stated above. For continuous walking is one action, considered in the *genus naturae*: but it may resolve itself into many actions, considered in the moral order, if a change take place in the walker’s will, for the will is the principle of moral actions. If therefore we consider one action in the moral order, it is impossible for it to be morally both good and evil. Whereas if it be one as to natural and not moral unity, it can be both good and evil.”¹⁸

If the will changes then the external act also changes according to the *genus moris*, even if the external act itself remains identical according to the *genus naturae*. In fact, for Aquinas “It is possible [...] that an act which is one in respect of its natural species, be ordained to several ends of the will: thus this act ‘to kill a man,’ which is but one act in respect of its natural species, can be ordained, as to an end, to the safeguarding of justice, and to the satisfying of anger: the result being that there would be several acts in different species of morality: since in one way there will be an act of virtue, in another, an act of vice. For a movement does not receive its species from that which is its terminus *per accidens*, but only from that which is its *per se* terminus. Now moral ends are accidental to a natural thing, and conversely the relation to a natural end is accidental to morality. Consequently there is no reason why acts which are the same considered in their natural species, should not be diverse, considered in their moral species, and conversely.”¹⁹

The goodness and evil of an act considered in its *genus naturae* depend on the intrinsic finality of the operative tendencies to which they are referred, for example, it is considered “good” for an act of the hearing power to hear, and “evil” to be unable to hear. The goodness or malice of acts considered in their *genus moris* depend on the rectitude of the acts of the will, i.e., an act of the will that is according to the order of reason will be good and a voluntary act that opposes the order of reason will be bad.²⁰

unde non participat bonitatem vel malitiam moralem.”

¹⁸ *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 20, a. 6, c.: “nihil prohibet aliquid esse unum, secundum quod est in uno genere; et esse multiplex, secundum quod refertur ad aliud genus. Sicut superficies continua est una, secundum quod consideratur in genere quantitatis, tamen est multiplex, secundum quod refertur ad genus coloris, si partim sit alba, et partim nigra. Et secundum hoc, nihil prohibet aliquem actum esse unum secundum quod refertur ad genus naturae, qui tamen non est unus secundum quod refertur ad genus moris, sicut et e converso, ut dictum est. Ambulatio enim continua est unus actus secundum genus naturae, potest tamen contingere quod sint plures secundum genus moris, si mutetur ambulantis voluntas, quae est principium actuum moralium. Si ergo accipiatur unus actus prout est in genere moris, impossibile est quod sit bonus et malus bonitate et malitia morali. Si tamen sit unus unitate naturae, et non unitate moris, potest esse bonus et malus.”

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3: “Possibile tamen est quod unus actus secundum speciem naturae, ordinetur ad diversos fines voluntatis, sicut hoc ipsum quod est occidere hominem, quod est idem secundum speciem naturae, potest ordinari sicut in finem ad conservationem iustitiae, et ad satisfaciendum irae. Et ex hoc erunt diversi actus secundum speciem moris, quia uno modo erit actus virtutis, alio modo erit actus vitii. Non enim motus recipit speciem ab eo quod est terminus per accidens, sed solum ab eo quod est terminus per se. Fines autem morales accidunt rei naturali; et e converso ratio naturalis finis accidit morali. Et ideo nihil prohibet actus qui sunt iidem secundum speciem naturae, esse diversos secundum speciem moris, et e converso.”

²⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, q. 18, a. 5, ad 1: “in rebus naturalibus bonum et malum, quod est secundum naturam et contra naturam, diversificant speciem naturae, corpus enim mortuum et corpus vivum non sunt eiusdem speciei. Et similiter bonum, in quantum est secundum rationem, et malum, in quantum est praeter rationem, diversificant speciem moris” (in natural

2. INTERPRETATION

The distinction of and the relationship between the *genus naturae* and the *genus moris* is, surprisingly, a theme that has been but little studied. Surprisingly, because it would seem to be a theme that is almost obligatory when proposing to study human action. It is true that St. Thomas does not explicitly use this distinction very often. I think, however, that it is in some way part of those implicit presuppositions that are always present in his reasoning on moral questions.

For the Salamancans the relation between the *genus naturae* and the *genus moris* can be expressed by a comparison: “Just as we consider works of art in two ways, whether according to their natural entity, which has to do with the physical order common to all things in the universe, or as they relate to an art, by which a special genus is added to them, the artificial genus – in the same way human acts proceeding from reason can be considered in two ways, one physically, by which we at a minimum refer to their ontological entity and to the natural conditions common to the other beings in the universe, and the other morally, which refers to their subjection to the rule of reason and to the way in which the acts participate in the latter; for this reason they constitute a particular genus called the *genus moris*.”²¹ To consider the human act according to the *genus naturae* is thus to consider the ontological aspects of the action that are common to all beings. The *genus moris*, on the other hand, presents itself as something constructed “on top of” this dimension (*superaddunt*), and arises from the consideration of the human act as subject to the rule of reason and thus according to another, formerly distinct, perspective.²² “The *genus naturae* and also the *genus moris* in acts of the will are determined by distinct differences, which are based on distinct species.”²³

John of St. Thomas, in continuity with Aquinas’s thought, emphasizes that “differences of moral goodness and evil derive from the act as human, and not as physical,”²⁴ and he can thus say that “morality is an accidental characteristic of the act when considered according to its natural dimension.”²⁵ For John of St. Thomas, therefore, it is clear that “the act, considered according to its physical goodness and its being, is not in a genus according to which moral species are attributed to it; but the human act insofar as it is human, and subject to the moral rule, is in such a genus. This is the proper genus for speaking of the moral species.”²⁶ That is, it is only possible to consider moral species according to the *genus moris*.

For Billuart, “the act in its physical dimension is the foundation of the act as moral: now, the act in its natural dimension is formally constituted by the order and real transcendental tendency for the object considered in its natural or physical dimension, in fact it relates with the object as the movement and way to the end; thus the moral act is formally constituted by the order and real transcendental tendency for the object considered in its moral dimension, that is, as it is under the do-

things, good and evil, inasmuch as something is according to nature, and something against nature, diversify the natural species; for a dead body and a living body are not of the same species. In like manner, good, inasmuch as it is in accord with reason, and evil, inasmuch as it is against reason, diversify the moral species).

²¹ SALMANTICENSIS, *Cursus theologicus*, cit., t. 6, p. 1: “sicut opera artis consideramus dupliciter, vel quantum ad entitatem naturalem, quo pacto spectant ad ordinem physicum communem omnibus rebus Universi, vel secundum modum quem ab arte recipiunt, sicque superaddunt speciale genus, quod est genus artificiale: ita humani actus a ratione procedentes duplicem habent considerationem; aliam physicam, quae dumtaxat attendit eorum entitatem, et naturales conditiones communes cum caeteris entibus Universi; aliam vero moralem, quae respicit subjectionem ad regulam rationis, et modum quem ab ea participant, ratione cujus constituunt sibi peculiare genus, dictum *genus moris*.”

²² Cf. *ibidem*, p. 14: “species physica et moralitas nihil habent, quod formaliter identificetur” (the physical and the moral species don’t have nothing that formally is the same).

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 12: “genus naturae et genus moris etiam in actibus voluntatis contrahuntur per distinctas differentias, et habent sub se distinctas species.”

²⁴ J. DE ST. THOMAS, *Cursus theologicus*, t. 5, cit., p. 492: “differentiae morales boni et mali per se contrahunt actum ut humanum, non ut physicum.”

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 481: “moralitas sit species accidentalis actui considerato in esse naturae.”

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 493: “actus, secundum physicam bonitatem et entitatem actus, non est genus praedicabile de speciebus moralibus; sed actus ut humanus ut sic, et subjectus regulis moris, sic est genus proprie et praedicabiliter ad species morales.”

minion of and regulated by the moral rules.”²⁷ Billuart thus claims that the *genus naturae* of a human act is the foundation of its *genus moris*, and more concretely that the object of the human act according to the *genus naturae* gives origin to the object according to the *genus moris*, insofar as the latter is subject to moral rules.²⁸ It thus seems reasonable to say that Billuart asserts that there is a movement of the will toward the object according to the *genus naturae* that is, as such, outside of the *genus moris*. This would seem to be a point of discontinuity with St. Thomas’s thought which, as we have just seen, conceives of no intentional act of the will outside of the *genus moris*, just as it conceives of no object of the will that is simply a *res physica*. As Belmans astutely points out, for Aquinas “moral values and ontic values constitute properly irreducible categories”²⁹ between them.

For Santiago Ramírez “the physical or psychological order and the moral order refer to different genera, because the physical order refers to the order of entities and has to do principally with the efficient cause or principle, whereas the moral order has to do with the order of goodness and evil, and is principally related to the final cause of life as a whole. They are therefore orders having different ways of being. It is not surprising then that they would also be different with respect to identity and to distinction or multiplicity.”³⁰ Ramírez then emphasizes the different spheres of these two genera. For him, in fact, “the *genus naturae* (or psychological) and the *genus moris* are not really identical. However, freedom belongs per se primarily to the *genus naturae* (or psychological), whereas morality belongs per se principally to the *genus moris*.”³¹ With this Ramírez seems to allow, similar to Billuart, that there is a specification of the will (i.e., freedom) according to the *genus naturae*. Another statement of his seems to be along the same lines: “Freedom, in fact, is always specified by the object; conversely, goodness and evil do not always depend on the object, as is clear with morally indifferent acts, which are nonetheless specified physically.”³² By this Ramírez seems to suppose that if the moral object of the act is indifferent, it is consequently outside the *genus moris*. This is not St. Thomas’s position. For him, the act enters the *genus moris* because it proceeds from a deliberate will, independently of whether it is opposed to or in agreement with right reason. If the act is voluntary it is in the *genus moris*, which also includes the possibility of morally indifferent objects.

Regarding the relationship between psychological goodness and moral goodness, Ramírez thinks that “if these goodnesses and evils are compared with one another, it becomes clear that psychological goodness and evil are naturally antecedent to and determinable by the moral goodness and evil, and therefore are related to the moral as matter is to form, as the determinable is to what determines,”³³ always bearing in mind, however, that “morality is a kind of accident of the human

²⁷ C.-R. BILLUART, *Summa Sancti Thomae hodiernis academiarum moribus accommodata*, cit., t. 2, p. 284: “actus in esse physico est fundamentum actus ut moralis: atqui actus in esse naturae constituitur formaliter per ordinem et tendentiam realem transcendentalem ad obiectum in esse naturae seu physico consideratum, comparatur enim ad obiectum ut motus et via ad terminum: ergo actus moralis constituitur formaliter per ordinem et tendentiam realem transcendentalem ad obiectum in esse moris consideratum, id est, ut subditum et regulabile per regulas morum.”

²⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 286: “Bonitas moralis nihil aliud est quam ordo realis transcendentalis actus ad obiectum consonum regulis morum” (The moral goodness isn’t other thing that the transcendental real relation of the act with the object according to the moral rules).

²⁹ T.G. BELMANS, *Le sens objectif de l’agir humain*, cit., p. 84: “les valeurs morales et les valeurs ontiques constituent des catégories proprement irréductibles.”

³⁰ S. RAMÍREZ, *De actibus humanis*, cit., p. 578: “ordo physicus vel psychologicus et ordo moralis pertinent ad diversa genera, quia ordo physicus pertinet ad ordinem entitatis et maxime concernit causam vel principium efficiens; dum ordo moralis pertinet ad ordinem bonitatis et malitiae et maxime concernit causam finalem totius vitae. Quia ergo sunt ordines diversi in essendo, nihil mirum quod sint etiam diversi quantum ad identitatem vel distinctionem seu multiplicationem.”

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 503: “Genus naturae vel psychologicum et genus moris non sunt realiter idem. Atqui libertas per se primo pertinet ad genus naturae seu psychologicum, dum moralitas per se primo spectat ad genus moris.”

³² *Ibidem*, p. 504: “Libertas enim semper *specificatur* ex obiecto; bonitas autem et malitia non semper ex obiecto sumitur, ut patet in actibus indifferentibus, qui sunt indifferentes moraliter, sed determinati physice.”

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 496: “Si autem *comparentur inter se* istae bonitates et malitiae, apparet quod bonitas et malitia *psychologica* prior est naturaliter, et determinabilis a bonitate et malitia *moralis*, et ideo se habet ad moralem ut *materia* ad formam, ut determinabile ad determinans.”

act considered psychologically.”³⁴ Therefore in strict continuity with the Angelic Doctor the Spanish Dominican asserts that “a single exterior act with respect to psychological unity can be one or multiple morally, and in consequence can be good or evil according to the different aspects.”³⁵ As an example, he says “a single ‘continuous walk’ is an exterior act according to the *genere naturae*, but can be multiple in the *genere moris* as the will or intention of the walker is directed to different ends.”³⁶

McInerny substantially agrees with this interpretation when he says “[f]rom the moral point of view, the same natural process can fall under two different moral types.”³⁷

Martin Rhonheimer, reacting against a discussion centered excessively on goodness and evil considered in their *genus naturae*, says that “‘good’ and ‘evil’ in the moral sense present themselves exclusively before the will of an acting subject. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ in the moral sense are correlates of intentions and choices, and the correlates of intentions and choices are, for their part, actions: it is not the ‘death of X’ that is a moral evil, but to choose or intend the ‘death of X’; thus not the ‘death of X,’ but ‘the killing of X.’ This in fact means: ‘to will the death of X.’”³⁸ Good and evil according to the *genus moris* are not good or bad facts, but good or bad *actions* that are voluntarily desired, and therefore “if someone kills an innocent person, the moral evil is not in the death of the innocent, but in the injustice of the will of the murderer, in the deformation of his will.”³⁹ But to adequately discern the movement of the will in relation to its object, one must put oneself in the first person perspective. The Swiss philosopher notes that “from the perspective of the observer there is no relevant difference between the action of a bird building its nest and an intentional human action. From this perspective one would have to describe the action simply as a causal chain of observable movements of bodies (and other ‘events’), and the actions provoked by them. Intentionality is not ‘observable,’ as is the simple end (teleology) of a ‘doing.’ ‘Intentionality’ is so to speak the internal perspective of the teleology. Not only to do something with an end in mind, but also in a particular way, because the end is the reason for which one acts. Precisely this is an intention.”⁴⁰ For Rhonheimer, the *genus moris* by its very nature requires the perspective of the first person, given that it investigates the intentional voluntariness of human action.

Another important idea that the Swiss thinker draws from a certain Thomistic tradition is that acts of the will are per se in the *genus moris*, given that the will’s object, which is conceived, measured and presented by the practical reason, is necessarily in the moral order. Consequently, there is no purely physical object of the will. Rhonheimer says: “Acts of the will also possess their *genus naturae*, their natural identity, but this is in fact identical to their *genus moris*. Given that the will is an aspiring based on reason, and its object is an objective good of reason – the *bonum rationis* –, in the will there is consequently no difference between the natural and moral identity of an act. That to which the will aspires is always already the good in its moral dimension. The difference between

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 481: “moralitas est accidens quoddam actus humani psychologicè considerati.”

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 583: “Unus idemque actus exterior unitate psychologica potest esse unus vel multiplex unitate morali et consequenter potest esse bonus vel malus secundum diversa.”

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 584: “eadem ambulatio continua est unus actus exterior in genere naturae, at potest esse multiplex in genere moris, prout voluntas seu intentio ambulantis mutatur secundum diversos fines.”

³⁷ R.M. MCINERNY, *Thomistic Ethics*, cit., p. 80.

³⁸ M. RHONHEIMER, *La prospettiva della morale*, cit., p. 107: “‘Bene’ e ‘male’ in senso morale appaiono esclusivamente davanti alla volontà di un soggetto agente. ‘Bene’ e ‘male’ in senso morale sono correlati di intenzioni e di atti di scelta; e i correlati di intenzioni e di atti di scelta sono da parte loro *azioni*: non la ‘morte di X’ è un male morale, *scegliere* o *mirare* alla ‘morte di X’; dunque non la ‘morte di X’, ma ‘uccidere X.’ Infatti, questo significa: ‘*volere* la morte di X’.”

³⁹ IDEM, *Legge naturale e ragione pratica*, cit., p. 321: “se qualcuno assassina un innocente, allora il male morale non sta nella morte dell’innocente, bensì nell’ingiustizia della volontà dell’assassino, nella deformazione della sua volontà.”

⁴⁰ IDEM, *La prospettiva della morale*, cit., p. 39: “Dalla prospettiva dell’*osservatore* non c’è nessuna differenza rilevabile tra il fare di un uccello che costruisce il nido e un’azione umana intenzionale. Qui si dovrebbe descrivere l’agire semplicemente come una connessione causale tra movimenti osservabili di corpi (ed altri “eventi”), e le azioni che ne sono provocate. L’intenzionalità non è “osservabile”, a differenza della semplice finalizzazione (teleologia) di un fare. L’“intenzionalità” è per così dire la prospettiva interna della teleologia: non solo fare qualcosa in modo finalistico, ma farlo in questa maniera, perché il fine è il *motivo* per cui lo si fa. Proprio questo è un’intenzione.”

the natural and moral identity results precisely from the fact of ‘objectifying’ an act so that it is not an object of a will (that chooses or tends intentionally),”⁴¹ as for example when we speak of the “sexual act” abstracting from its intentional dimension (i.e. the conjugal act, adultery or fornication).

Pinckaers, comparing Aquinas’s perspective with that of the Angelic Doctor’s predecessors and contemporaries, emphasizes that “St. Thomas introduces a new perspective on the moral act. He no longer looks at it with the eyes of a metaphysician or a theologian preoccupied with the problem of the origin of evil, but with the eyes of a moralist who sees in the human act the work of the will. This is, for him, the essential point of view. The order of the will to the end is in his eyes fundamental in the moral constitution of the human act. Consideration of the natural goodness of the action passes to the second level.”⁴² According to the Belgian Dominican, therefore, this new perspective initiated by St. Thomas is the consideration of human action according to its intentional order, i.e. according to the *genus moris*.

3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

One can say that there is a basic overall consensus concerning the interpretation of the binomial *genus naturae/genus moris*. All of Aquinas’s interpreters recognize the usefulness of this distinction, which does not seem to present great interpretive difficulties. Some differences between authors can be identified, however.

First, the way of conceiving the articulation of the *genus naturae* with respect to the *genus moris* varies significantly among the interpreters. It seems to us that the various authors can be divided into two main groups. On the one hand, those who conceive the human act according to the *genus naturae* as a “complete” human act, that is, as a movement not only of the various non-spiritual faculties of man, but also of freedom itself (reason and will) as it tends to the object considered physically, i.e. prescindendo from its relation with moral rules. For these authors the human act then enters into the *genus moris* when the physical object is considered in relation to the moral rules.

The other group of interpreters considers that the *genus naturae* refers to that dimension of human action that results from an abstraction, not from moral rules as with the first group, but from the intelligibility and voluntariness of concrete action, which is to say an abstraction from the operations of reason and will – what might be called the “humanity” of a concrete action. For this group of authors the *genus moris* is characterized, not by the simple consideration of the moral rules applied to a given object considered in the non-moral order, but precisely by the consideration of the act departing from the principles proper to human action as human, that is, from the reason that proposes the moral object (a practical good) and from the will that tends to it. For this group, therefore, it doesn’t make sense to speak of an object of reason and will that would only be in the *genus naturae*. The object of the will is per se a moral object, a practical good, and thus necessarily in the *genus moris*, even though it could have an indifferent moral species. The fact that a given moral object is morally indifferent does not diminish in anything its proceeding from a deliberate will. To be morally indifferent neither implies nor signifies being demoted to the *genus naturae*, but only that a given object of the will, considered in itself, presents no particular character of agreement or dis-

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 131-132: “Anche gli atti della volontà posseggono il loro *genus naturae*, la loro identità naturale. Questa è però appunto identica al *genus moris*. Siccome la volontà è un aspirare sulla base della ragione e il suo oggetto è il bene oggettivo alla ragione, il *bonum rationis*, allora non esiste in esso nessuna differenza tra l’identità naturale e morale di un atto. Ciò a cui la volontà aspira per natura è sempre già il bene nella dimensione morale. La differenza tra identità naturale e morale risulta proprio dal fatto di oggettivare un atto *non* come oggetto di una volontà (che sceglie o che tende intenzionalmente).”

⁴² S.-Th. PINCKAERS, *Le renouveau de la morale*, cit., p. 123: “Saint Thomas inaugure une nouvelle perspective sur l’acte moral; il ne le regarde plus avec les yeux du métaphysicien ou du théologien préoccupé du problème de l’origine du mal, mais avec ceux du moraliste qui voit dans l’acte humain l’œuvre de la volonté. C’est là pour lui le point de vue essentiel; l’ordre de cette volonté à la fin est à ses yeux primordial dans la constitution morale de l’acte humain. La considération de la bonté naturelle de l’action passe au second plan.”

agreement with the order of reason.

Bearing in mind these last considerations, it seems clear to us that it is the second group of authors which does justice to the richness of Aquinas's thought. The *genus naturae* for St. Thomas is an abstraction from the deliberate voluntariness of a given act. It is that voluntariness of the act that introduces it into its *genus moris*, as is clear from Thomas's statements, and not merely the consideration of the object in relation with moral rules.

A final consideration, on the contemporary context of discussions on the morality of human acts. Given that utilitarian, consequentialist, proportionalist ethics has reached a wide audience in many different spheres, and given that according to its method it concentrates on considerations made primarily according to the *genus naturae* of acts,⁴³ it is at times difficult to establish a dialogue between these new proposals and St. Thomas's perspective on the *genus moris*.⁴⁴

⁴³ As is well known, these moral proposals are concerned above all with the maximization of a good "state of affairs," and not with the order of the will in relation to the ends suitable to human nature.

⁴⁴ Two excellent studies on the perspective proper to morality are: M. RHONHEIMER, *La prospettiva della morale*, cit., and G. ABBA, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale?*, cit..