

Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act: A Reading in Light of the Texts and Commentators

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Abstract: *This essay offers a reading of St. Thomas Aquinas's account of the object of the human act by drawing upon primary texts, the classical commentators, and some leading contemporary interpreters. Given the various ways in which Thomas employs the expression obiectum, the central task is to determine precisely how he understands the object that specifies – i.e., gives species to or determines the kind of – the human act. This clarity is needed as commentators disagree as to whether this object is a res physica (or physical thing), a physically caused effect, the object of a virtue, or a human act. The resulting interpretation will most importantly exclude the proportionalist or revisionist reading of Aquinas. It will further conclude that the latter understanding of the object, as itself a human act, is best supported by Thomas's texts.*

In this essay, I offer a contribution to the contemporary efforts to recover the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on what is typically called “the specification of human acts,” that is, the determination of their moral species or “kind.” In my view, although works on this topic have led to considerable progress in recent years, such efforts will not reach fruition until we have been able to combine a careful study of the primary texts with a consideration of how they have been understood by both classical and contemporary interpreters; I try to draw upon all of these in my efforts toward the articulation of a fully coherent account of Thomistic action theory. Whereas my broader work in this area seeks to offer a general contribution along these lines,¹ the present essay addresses one of the central topics requiring clarification: Aquinas's understanding of the object of the human act.

1. This essay was originally the fourth chapter of my doctoral dissertation, *A especificação moral dos actos humanos segundo são Tomás de Aquino*, Edizioni Università Santa Croce, Rome 2008. 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.

St. Thomas frequently uses the expression “*obiectum*,” applying it to various realities in the way that his predecessors did.² For example, each of the human faculties has its object, as do the virtues and the vices; each scientific discipline has its object, every type of art, every human act has an object, every action and every passion, etc. The term “object,” then, can be used with a wide variety of meanings.

The noun *obiectus* seems to derive literally from the contraction of the preposition *ob* (in front of) with *iacum*, the past participle of the verb *iacere*, meaning to throw. A more literal translation of *obiectum* might thus be “thrown (or placed) in front of.”³

In this essay we propose to investigate what exactly St. Thomas understands by the object of the human act, given that this expression is susceptible to a certain ambiguity, thus allowing a variety of interpretations. We will begin by examining the principal texts in which Aquinas addresses the question, so as to then consider the various possible interpretations. Where possible, we will try to avoid repeating texts I have discussed elsewhere.⁴

Given that St. Thomas says repeatedly that the human act receives its species from its object,⁵ it is of maximum importance to determine with exactness what in fact Thomas understands by the object of the human act.

1. The Important Texts

For St. Thomas, the human will is a rational appetite, which has as its proper object the intelligible good in all its breadth and universality. This ordination of the will as a human faculty to its proper object is not subject to the choice

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2. Cf. L. DEWAN, “*Obiectum*”: *Notes on the Invention of a Word*, in “Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge” 48 (1981), p. 64: “In the *De anima* of Grosseteste, the texts show us the application [of *obiectum*] to types of appetitive power, appetitive operation, natural inclination, and the Christian theological virtues.”
 3. Cf. M.-J. NICOLAS, *Vocabolário da Suma Teológica*, in “São Tomás de Aquino, Suma teológica”, vol. 1, Edições Loyola, São Paulo 2003², p. 90: “Etimologicamente o objecto, *ob-jectum*, é aquilo que está posto diante. [...] O objecto especifica e define a faculdade, o movimento ou o acto que a ele visam” (etymologically the object, *ob-jectum*, is that which is placed in front of [something]. [...] The object specifies and defines the faculty, the movement or the act that is in view of it); B. MONDIN, *Oggetto*, in “Dizionario enciclopedico del pensiero di san Tommaso d’Aquino,” Edizioni Studio Domenicano, Bologna 2000, p. 466.
 4. I refer primarily to chapter III of my dissertation, *A especificação moral dos actos humanos segundo são Tomás de Aquino* (Edizioni Università Santa Croce: Rome, 2008). There I analyze *ST*, I-II, q. 8 where Thomas considers the object of will. In a.1, ad 2, Thomas affirms that “the object of the will is the good” ([o]biectum autem voluntatis est bonum). In the body of a.2 he writes that “the aspect (*ratio*) of the good, which is the object of the power of the will, may be found not only in the end, but also in the means” ([r]atio autem boni, quod est obiectum potentiae voluntatis, invenitur non solum in fine, sed etiam in his quae sunt ad finem). In the body of a.1, he writes that “the will is the rational appetite” ([V]oluntas est appetitus quidam rationalis). It is necessary, therefore, that we recognize the good presented by the practical intellect as one understood under the aspect of the good (*apprehendatur in ratione boni*). *ibidem*.
 5. This point is uncontested among interpreters.

of the human person; that is, it is not we who determine the will's object in a global sense, but it is as it were inscribed in our *modus essendi*. For this reason St. Thomas uses the expression *voluntas ut natura* (literally "the will as nature" in the sense of its natural ordination to rational good) to emphasize the will's *determinatio ad unum* (determination to a specific object) with respect to its proper object, and the expression *voluntas ut ratio* (literally, the will as reason in the sense of the will under an aspect of reason)⁶ to refer to the multiplicity of choices in which this structural orientation can be realized. Along these lines Aquinas says that "the will can tend to nothing except under the aspect of good. But because good is of many kinds, for this reason the will is not of necessity determined *ad unum*" (to a single thing).⁷ That is, that *ratio* or rationale of universal good to which the will is determined *ad unum* is not found in a complete way in the actions that immediately present themselves as realizable.⁸

Here, what we want to determine is what St. Thomas understands by object of the human act. We will therefore begin by recalling what is the object of the will as a faculty, since a human act is an act that proceeds from the deliberate will, as recognized by all interpreters.

According to St. Thomas,

The species of any voluntary act derives from the object, which is the form of the will which produces the act. Two things contribute to the object of an act: one which is almost (*quasi*) material, and the other which is like the formal, and which completes the rationale or aspect (*ratio*) of the object, just as light and color contribute to the visible. That which has the aspect (*ratio*) of material in relation to

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6. Thomas's use of the Latin word *ratio*, which is important to the present essay, has numerous different senses related to the core notion of pertaining to reason. In the present context, the term can be variously translated as aspect, rationale, reason, and perhaps nature. In this essay, we try as appropriate to both give the most precise English translation and maintain reference to the Latin original. Thus, *ratio* is sometimes left untranslated to connote the broader sense of the term, sometimes translated, when a particular English word captures the exact sense, and sometimes translated with the original in parentheses, where this seems helpful.
7. 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, I, q. 82, a. 2, ad 1: "voluntas in nihil potest tendere nisi sub ratione boni. Sed quia bonum est multiplex, propter hoc non ex necessitate determinatur ad unum." English passages from the *Summa Theologiae* will generally (but not exclusively) follow the English Dominican translation (Christian Classics, Westminster 1981).
8. Cf. R.M. MCINERNEY, *Ethica Thomistica: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1997, second edition, p. 77: "The will just is the faculty of the good; goodness is its formal object as color is the object of sight. But just as we do not see color in general but some particular color, so too we only will goodness as embodied in a particular end."

the object of the will is some thing that is wanted: but the rationale (*ratio*) of the object is completed with the aspect (*ratio*) of a good.⁹

As we said above “the wanted thing is not the perfection of the will, or of the object, except under the aspect of the good (*sub ratione boni*), just as color is not the object and perfection of sight except under the action of light.”¹⁰ This indicates that, for Thomas, the object of the human act necessarily possesses an intrinsic intelligibility, a *ratio* of the good, without which the will would not tend toward it. It is also interesting to note that he begins by defining the object as a *forma voluntatis producentis actum* (a form of the will producing the act). The object is a *forma* to the extent that “just as the natural form is in the matter of the agent, likewise the form of goodness is in the object wanted in view of the end.”¹¹ It is therefore not surprising that Thomas states simply that “the object has the nature (*ratio*) of an end,”¹² specifically a proximate end.¹³

He also says that the object is a *forma voluntatis* (a form of the will), which implies that it derives necessarily from the practical reason, given that the will, as a rational appetite, cannot tend to anything which is not presented to it by the reason;¹⁴ or, considering things from the point of view of the intellect, “the intellect

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9. 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. 1, d. 48, q. 1, a. 2, c.: “species autem cujuslibet actus voluntarii trahitur ex objecto, quod est forma voluntatis producentis actum. Ad objectum autem alicujus actus duo concurrunt: unum quod se habet quasi materialiter, et alterum quod est sicut formale, complens rationem objecti; sicut ad visibile concurrunt lux et color. Illud autem quod se habet materialiter ad objectum voluntatis, est quaecumque res volita: sed ratio objecti completur ex ratione boni.”
 10. *Ibidem*, ad 1: “quod volitum non est perfectio voluntatis, vel objectum, nisi in quantum stat sub ratione boni, sicut nec color objectum visus et perfectio, nisi secundum quod stat sub actu lucis.”
 11. *Ibidem*, ad 5: “sicut forma naturalis est in materia ab agente, ita forma bonitatis est in volito a fine.”
 12. *Ibidem*, lib. 2, d. 36, q. 1, a. 5, arg. 5: “materia actus est objectum ejus. Objectum autem habet rationem finis.”
 13. Cf. *ibidem*, ad 5: “actus aliquis habet duplicem finem: scilicet proximum finem, qui est objectum ejus, et remotum, quem agens intendit” (certain acts have two ends: the proximate end, which is its object, and the remote [end], which the agent desires); IDEM, *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, in “Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita,” t. 23, Commissio Leonina - J. Vrin, Rome - Paris 1982, q. 2, a. 4, ad 9: “duplex est finis: proximus et remotus. Finis proximus actus idem est quod obiectum, et ab hoc recipit speciem. Ex fine autem remoto non habet speciem” (there are two kinds of ends, the proximate and the remote. The proximate end of acts is the same as the object of the acts, and acts take their species from the object. And acts do not take their species from the remote end). 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.
 14. Cf. *ibidem*, lib. 3, d. 26, q. 1, a. 2, c.: “appetitus rationis, qui est de bono apprehenso secundum rationem” (the rational appetite, that concerns the rational good apprehended).

does not act except through the will, because the movement of the will is an inclination which follows a particular form that is possessed intellectually.”¹⁵ Finally, it is important to emphasize that Aquinas says that the *forma voluntatis* which is the object, produces the act. This statement becomes more comprehensible if we bear in mind the *ordo intentionis* (the order of intention) that we spoke of above.¹⁶ This form that is presented to the will by the reason as under a particular aspect of an appropriate good, is precisely that which one wants to realize with the exterior act, and it is in this sense that St. Thomas says that it produces the act.

After stating that the object of the human act is a form of the will which produces the act, St. Thomas makes an important distinction between two dimensions of the object of the act. The first is almost (*quasi*) material, which Thomas defines as any *res volita* (thing willed) and the other is formal, which he identifies as the *ratio boni* (aspect of the good). Thus, according to our stated purpose of examining the object of the human act, for St. Thomas it can be defined as a form of the will from which the exterior act proceeds, and that is composed simultaneously of a particular *res volita* under a particular *ratio boni*.

This aspect of the good is thus like the soul of the object of the act. For this reason Aquinas says that “In moral matters, the object constitutes the species by reason of the formal aspect of the object, not by its material element.”¹⁷ A single *res volita* under a different *ratio boni* results in a specifically distinct object. St. Thomas claims that “the form of the will is the end and the good, which is the will’s object and that which is wanted; and thus it is necessary that in acts of the will there be a specific difference according to the aspect or *ratio* of end. And because acts are in the *genus moris* (the moral genus or kind) by the fact that they are voluntary, likewise there is a diversity of species in the *genus moris*, according to the diversity of ends. And because good or evil are deduced according to the order to the end, it is likewise necessary that there be essential differences in the *genus moris*.”¹⁸ The *ratio of end* of every moral object must necessarily have

15. IDEM, *Quaestiones de quodlibet*, in «Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita», t. 25, Commissio Leonina - Éditions du Cerf, Rome - Paris 1996, VI, q. 2, a. 1, c.: “Intellectus autem non agit nisi mediante voluntate: quia motus voluntatis est inclinatio sequens formam intellectam.”

16. I refer mainly to chapter III of my dissertation. The central point is that the order of intention proceeds from the most remote ends to the most proximate ends, whereas the order of execution proceeds from the most proximate ends to achieve the most remote ends. It is also important to underline that when talking about human acts, the order of execution always and necessarily presupposes a determined order of intention.

17. *De malo*, q. 9, a. 2, ad 10: “in moralibus obiectum constituit speciem, non secundum id quod est materiale in ipso, sed secundum formalem rationem obiecti.”

18. *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 1, c.: “Forma autem voluntatis est finis et bonum, quod est ejus obiectum et volitum; et ideo oportet quod in actibus voluntatis inveniatur differentia specifica secundum rationem finis. Et quia actus sunt in genere moris ex hoc quod sunt voluntarii; ideo in genere moris est diversitas speciei, secundum diversitatem finis. Et quia malum et bonum sumuntur secundum ordinem ad finem, ideo oportet quod sint essentialia differentiae in genere moris.”

a relationship of agreement, indifference or disagreement with the order of those ends which practical reason itself recognizes as appropriate and due (*debitum*). St. Thomas emphasizes the specificity of the object of the human act as compared with natural action when he states that “every action takes its species from its object; while human action, which is called moral, takes its species from the object in relation to the principle of human actions, which is the reason.”¹⁹ According to St. Thomas, one cannot prescind from the decisive role that human reason plays in the constitution of the object of the human act *as human*: the object of the human act is a form presented to the will by the reason, as we have seen, and as such already includes a constitutive relation with the order of reason (*ordo rationis*). Along these lines Thomas asserts that “the species of moral actions are constituted by forms as conceived by the reason.”²⁰

How does St. Thomas conceive of the relation between the object and the exterior act? Here it must be said that “the will tends to the exterior act as to its object,”²¹ since the will tends to both as to its end,²² but a further distinction must be made. “In fact, an action may sometimes terminate in something which is made, as building does in a house, and as healing does in health. Sometimes, however, it does not, as in the cases of understanding and sensing. Now, if an action does in fact terminate in something that is made, the intention of the agent tends through the action toward the thing that is produced. But, if it does not terminate in a product, then the inclination of the agent tends toward the action itself. So, it must be that every agent in acting intends an end, sometimes the action itself, sometimes a particular thing produced by the action.”²³ At times the transitive dimension of human

19. *Summa theologiae*, II, q. 18, a. 8, c.: “actus omnis habet speciem ad obiecto; et actus humanus, qui dicitur moralis, habet speciem ab obiecto relato ad principium actuum humanorum, quod est ratio.”

20. *Ibidem*, a. 10, c.: “species moralium actuum constituuntur ex formis, prout sunt a ratione conceptae.”

21. *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 3, ad 6: “voluntas tendit in actum exteriorem sicut in obiectum.”

22. Cf. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1: “actus habet speciem ab obiecto; et propter hoc peccatum denominatur ab actu exteriori secundum quod comparatur ad ipsum ut obiectum” (acts take their species from their object, and so we name sins by exterior acts as the sins are related to them as the sins’ objects); L. DEWAN, *Objectum*, cit., note 50, p. 59: “for St. Thomas, in the case of an active power, the *obiectum* is the *terminus* of the movement”; *De malo*, q. 6, arg. 16: “voluntas est potentia activa.”

23. IDEM, *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. 2, n. 2: “Actio vero quandoque quidem terminatur ad aliquod factum, sicut aedificatio ad domum, sanatio ad sanitatem: quandoque autem non, sicut intelligere et sentire. Et si quidem actio terminatur ad aliquod factum, impetus agentis tendit per actionem in illud factum: si autem non terminatur ad aliquod factum, impetus agentis tendit in ipsam actionem. Oportet igitur quod omne agens in agendo intendat finem: quandoque quidem actionem ipsam; quandoque aliquid per actionem factum.” Translation from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three*

action (that resulting outside the agent) is sought as the end of the act itself, because the *ratio boni* that moves to the action is found in it. At other times it is precisely the immanent dimension of the human act that constitutes the end to which the will deliberately tends. In the first case, obviously, the “house” to which I intentionally tend through the action of construction does not derive its *ratio boni* from its ontological (or “transcendental”) goodness, but from its apprehension on the part of reason as a particular practical good, i.e., something that presents itself to the moral subject as suitable. Thomas underscores the peculiarity of human action when he says that “the intellectual agent acts in view of an end that he determines for himself; conversely, the natural agent acts in view of an end [...] without, however, determining the end for itself, given that it does not know the *ratio* of an end, but is moved to an end determined for it by another. The intellectual agent does not determine the end except under the aspect of a good; in fact the intelligible does not move except under the aspect of the good, which is the object of the will.”²⁴ When St. Thomas says that a person voluntarily tends to a “house,” he implicitly understands here the *ratio* under which the house is perceived as a particular suitable good, because only this is a *forma voluntatis* capable of causing the movement of the will, given that “the object moving the will is a good apprehended as suitable. And so a good, if it is presented to us as good but not as suitable, will not move the will.”²⁵ Thus, it is not the goodness of the house as such that constitutes the form of the object of the act of the will, but its suitability for the rational agent.

It is also important to not confuse the sense in which St. Thomas understands the proximate object of a concrete human act as the object of a virtue or of a vice. When, for example, Thomas says that “the property of another is the particular object of theft, the object that specifies theft,”²⁶ this should not lead us to think that the “property of another” *tout court* is the object of the human act from which the moral species of theft derives. In another passage, Thomas says that “an action is said to be evil in its species, not because it has no object at all; but because it has an object in disaccord with reason, for instance, *to appropriate another’s property*.”²⁷ Therefore, the object of the theft and the object of the evil act are not

Providence, Part I, Translated with an introduction and notes by Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956, 1975): 34-35.

24. *Ibidem*, cap. 3, n. 7: “Agens per intellectum agit propter finem sicut determinans sibi finem: agens autem per naturam, licet agat propter finem, ut probatum est, non tamen determinat sibi finem, cum non cognoscat rationem finis, sed movetur in finem determinatum sibi ab alio. Agens autem per intellectum non determinat sibi finem nisi sub ratione boni: intelligibile enim non movet nisi sub ratione boni, quod est obiectum voluntatis.”
25. *De malo*, q. 6, c.: “obiectum movens voluntatem est bonum conveniens apprehensum; unde si aliquid bonum proponatur quod apprehendatur in ratione boni, non autem in ratione convenientis, non movebit voluntatem.”
26. *Ibidem*, q. 2, a. 7, ad 8: “res aliena est proprium obiectum furti dans sibi speciem.”
27. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 18, a. 5, ad 2: “Dicitur enim malus actus secundum suam speciem, non ex eo quod nullum habeat obiectum; sed quia habet obiectum non conveniens rationi, sicut tollere aliena.”

simply synonymous, given that there is both a difference and a similarity between “another’s property” and “to take another’s property.” The difference is that, when we speak of the object of human habits, we abstract from an essential element of the object of the act, which is precisely that *ratio boni* according to which the will tends toward it. Returning to our example, we would say that it is insufficient to simply say that objects are *res alienae* (a thing belonging to another) to determine what is the object of a particular act; we must also consider what is the *tollere* (to take) which expresses the manner in which the will places itself in relation to these *res alienae*, and from which the act derives its moral species.²⁸ When we say “theft” we *assume* the manner in which the will places itself in relation to a particular *res aliena*; it is then legitimate to speak of the different objects of the theft (i.e., things one might steal). When we consider the object of the act, however, and try to determine its moral species, it is necessary to recognize that its object is *tollere alienum*,²⁹ because that is the form of the will that produces action (*forma voluntatis producentis actum*).

2. Interpretation

The interpretation of the concept of *obiectum* of the human act in St. Thomas has been, and still is today, varied.³⁰ Undoubtedly, many times Thomas uses the concept of object with a certain freedom to refer to different, though frequently related, realities; his use of the term could generate confusion, if not genuine perplexities.³¹ This fact often leads to differing conceptions of how the human act is specified, given that, for Aquinas, acts are specified by their objects.³² A different conception of what Thomas means by object leads, almost necessarily, to a different conception about the way the moral species of a given human act is determined.

28. Cf. *Ibidem*, a. 10, c.: “tollere alienum habet speciem ex ratione alieni, ex hoc enim constituitur in specie furti” (thus to appropriate another’s property is specified by reason of the property being “another’s,” and in this respect it is placed in the species of theft).

29. Cf. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 5, c.: “aliquod autem obiectum quod importat aliquid discordans a ratione, sicut *tollere alienum*, et hoc facit malum in genere” (and there is another kind of object that introduces something in discord with reason and makes an act generically evil (e.g., *taking what belongs to another*)). Emphasis added.

30. Cf. R.M. McINERNEY, *Ethica Thomistica*, cit., p. 81: “St. Thomas’s use of the phrase ‘object of the action’ is an ambiguous one, and it is not always easy to see what distinction he wishes to draw between the object of the will and the object of the action.”

31. Cf. S.-Th. PINCKAERS, *Le renouveau de la morale: études pour une morale fidèle à ses sources et à sa mission présente*, Casterman, Tournai 1964, p. 131: “Quand on lit le texte de saint Thomas, on est étonné de la plasticité qu’il accorde aux termes ‘fin’ et ‘objet’, de l’emploi apparemment libre qu’il en fait” (When one reads the text of St. Thomas, one is amazed at the plasticity which he accords to the terms “end” and “object,” of the apparently free use that he makes of them).

32. Cf. J. PILSNER, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford University Press, New York 2006, p. 82: “The evidence taken together suggests that *obiectum* in Aquinas can refer to many different kinds of realities related to human actions and habits. This explains why commentators have disagreed about this topic.”

a) *The classical commentators*

Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534) uses the concept of object in substantially the same way as Aquinas does. For the Dominican cardinal “the end is not only the end [sought for itself], but it is also the object of the will, and this has the place of the form that is the principle of the action.”³³ The object, then, formally speaking, is a proximate end of an *electio* (choice), which confers on the human act its primary moral goodness.³⁴ As an example, Cajetan says that “to love God and to hate God, the marital act and adultery, and the like, receive their specific goodness and evil from the object.”³⁵ It is important to note that in this example Cardinal Cajetan conceives of the object of the act as an action, even choosing two examples in which the “material” element of the object is the same. For him, “to love God” and “to hate God” are two specifically distinct objects from the moral perspective, as are “the marital act” and “adultery.”

For Francisco Suárez (1548-1617) the object of the human act can be spoken of in two principle ways. According to the famous Jesuit, “we can [...] speak either of the formal object, which is the reason in view of which the will acts, or of the material object, upon which the will acts.”³⁶ Suárez therefore distinguishes the formal object of the human act and the material object of the human act, though he emphasizes that “the object is not called moral, except to the degree in which it can be the cause of the moral act.”³⁷ In the moral object, therefore, one cannot prescind from the formal object, because only the latter can originate a movement of the will. As an example, Suárez says that “hatred for God does not have for a proximate object God, according to the essence of the divine being, but some evil done to God.”³⁸ For the Jesuit theologian, the moral object that specifies the human act cannot be defined prescinding from what he calls the formal object. In this same line of reasoning, when speaking of the moral object as the specifying principle, he says that “the object of which we are speaking coincides with the intrinsic end, and in this sense there is no difference between saying that the act receives its specific

33. 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. 1, a. 3, cit., t. 6, p. 11: “finis non est solum finis, sed obiectum voluntatis; ac per hoc, loco formae, quae est principium agendi.”

34. Cf. *ibidem*, I-II, q. 18, a. 3, cit., t. 6, p. 129: “prima bonitas moralis in actu sit ex obiecto” (the first moral goodness in the act is the one proceeding from the object)

35. *Ibidem*: “amare Deum, et odium Dei, actus matrimonialis, adulterium, et similia, bonitatem et malitiam habent specificam ex obiectis.”

36. F. SUÁREZ, *De ultimo fine hominis*, in “Opera omnia”, t. 4, Vivès, Paris 1856, p. 11: “Possumus enim loqui aut de obiecto formali, quod est voluntati ratio operandi: aut de materiali obiecto, circa quod voluntas operatur.”

37. IDEM, *De bonitate et malitia humanorum actuum*, in “Opera omnia”, t. 4, Vivès, Paris 1856, p. 291: “objectum non denominatur morale, nisi quatenus esse potest causa actus moralis.”

38. *Ibidem*, p. 292: “odium Dei non habet pro obiecto proximo Deum, sed non esse Dei, vel aliquod malum inferendum Deo.”

goodness from the object and from the end, as Thomas also [...] teaches. It was also said that one did not speak of the material object, but of the formal; therefore nothing prevents that in the same material there can be many formal aspects of goodness, from which the acts of the will can receive their specific goodness.”³⁹

A first comment that we believe opportune at this point is that the distinction between material and formal object used by Suárez seems to us a problematic innovation. As we saw above, St. Thomas prefers to speak of a formal *element* and a material element of a single object of the will. The material element, which Suárez calls the material object, is not an object of the will in the proper sense, a fact which Suárez implicitly acknowledges when he says, as we have just seen, that the moral object cannot prescind from the intrinsic end that he calls the formal object. The use of the concept of “material object” in the context of the treatment of the morality of human acts seems to us to lead the discussion into potential ambiguities, besides involving a departure from Aquinas’s terminology.

John of St. Thomas (1589-1644), when he addresses the object of the exterior act in his *Cursus theologicus*, speaks explicitly of the two great alternatives that divide Aquinas’s interpreters: “Some consider the object of the act to be properly the exterior thing, concerning which the action is done [...], with these exterior things being considered the material of the actions, measured and regulated according to the rule of reason, or not according to it. Others say that this exterior material is not properly the object which the reason orders, because the object of the exterior and the interior act is the same, but this exterior material is the circumstance *quid* (what). They thus consider the object of the exterior act to be precisely the act as done, realized with respect to this material.”⁴⁰ Essentially, we have on the one hand those who claim that the object of the exterior act is a *res externa* (an external thing) as measured and regulated by reason, and on the other hand those who think that the object of the exterior act is the same as the elicited act of the will, and must be identified with precisely the realized act. After distinguishing these two positions, John of St. Thomas opts for the first, saying that “the object of the exterior action is not properly an operation as realized, but the thing itself which is

39. *Ibidem*, p. 322: “objectum, de quo agimus, coincidit cum fine intrinseco, et hoc sensu non est diversum quid dicere, actum sumere bonitatem specificam ex objecto et ex fine, ut etiam D. Thomas supra citatus docuit: dictum etiam est non esse sermonem de objecto materiali, sed de formali, ideo nihil obstat quod in eodem materiali conjungantur multae rationes formales bonitatis, quominus ab eis possint voluntatis actus specificas bonitates sumere.”

40. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Cursus theologicus*, t. 5, Desclée & C., Paris 1964, p. 497: “Aliqui existimant objectum talis actus [externus] esse rem ipsam externam, circa quam versatur actio [...] prout talis res externa consideratur ut materia illius actionis mensuranda et attingenda secundum regulas rationis, vel praeter illas. – Alii dicunt hanc materiam externam proprie non esse objectum de quo ratio disponit: quia objectum actus externi et interni idem est; sed hanc materiam externam esse circumstantia *quid*. Et ita assignant pro objecto actus externi ipsummet actum prout in facto esse, consummatum circa talem materiam.”

considered by that realized act; just as the end of a miser is money, that of a lustful person a woman, that of the gluttonous food, and that of the blessed God, these are in fact the objects, that is, they are the objective ends.”⁴¹ After so many examples, there can be no doubt that for John of St. Thomas the object is a *res* (money, food, etc.) which is only in the moral order as measured and regulated by reason. “In fact, the principles which give the species in acts are the objects, and therefore it is from the object, properly speaking, that morality is derived,”⁴² “because the *ratio* of the morality in acts derives from the comparison with the object, considered not in its natural dimension, but in its comparison with moral rules.”⁴³ It is obvious, then, that “the act cannot concern this object as in accord with or contrary to reason, except in that it tends to the object, not only according to its natural goodness and attractiveness, but also as it is regulated and ordered by reason.”⁴⁴

It is clear that John of St. Thomas conceives the object of the human act as a *res in esse naturae* (a thing in its natural being), even if he simultaneously only considers it in its moral dimension to the extent that it is under the regulation and ordination of reason.⁴⁵ It is from this regulation of reason that the moral species of the act is derived, and therefore it is possible that different objects *in esse naturae* would constitute a single moral object.⁴⁶

What to say of John of St. Thomas’s interpretation? It seems to us that the judgment made above concerning the interpretation of Suárez continues to apply here, but is made worse by the fact that John of St. Thomas himself acknowledges other interpretations of St. Thomas concerning the object of the exterior act – which in our view are more in keeping with Aquinas’s texts. St. Thomas, as far as

41. *Ibidem*: “objectum actionis externae non est ipsamet operatio in facto esse: sed res illa, quae a tali actu, etiam in facto esse considerato, apprehenditur: sicut finis avari est pecunia, luxuriosi femina, gulosi cibus, beati Deus; ista enim sunt objecta, seu finis objectivi.”

42. *Ibidem*, t. 1, Typis societatis S. Joannis Evangeliste – Desclée et sociorum, Parisi – Tormaci - Romae 1931, p. 167: “Principia autem speciei in actibus sunt objecta, et ideo ab objecto per se loquendo sumitur moralitas.”

43. *Ibidem*, t. 5, cit., p. 481: “quia ratio moralis in actibus sumitur per comparisonem ad objectum, consideratum non in esse naturae, sed in comparatione ad regulas moris.”

44. *Ibidem*, p. 482: “actus non potest tangere in objecto hoc quod est conveniens vel disconveniens rationi, nisi quia respicit tale objectum non solum secundum bonitatem seu appetibilitatem in esse naturae, sed etiam in ratione regulabilis et ordinabilis per rationem.”

45. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 561: “in moralibus supponitur entitas actus physica, et superadduntur respectus ad objecta, ut regulata regulis rationis, pene quos moralis species constituitur”; *ibidem*, p. 493: “Ceterum objectum in praesenti bifariam sumi potest. – Uno modo communiter, et ita tota sua latitudine, pro omni quod attingitur a voluntate, et ex parte rei attacktae se tendet. Et sic comprehendit etiam circumstantias et fine [...]. – Alio modo sumitur objectum stricte, prout distinguitur a fine movente, et circumstantiis adjacentibus.”

46. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 523: “Cum vero objectum sit multiplex entitative, dicimus reddi unum moraliter, non ex unitate actus, sed ex unitate regulationis, et modi regulandi sub quo illa omnia coordinantur.”

we can tell, never explicitly says that the object of the human act is a material *res*; rather, he always emphasizes, explicitly or implicitly, that in the same object of the human act two elements can be distinguished, one material and the other formal. It is the conceptual passage from “material element of the human act” to “material object of the human act” that seems to us to be open to criticism. The “material object” as such is still outside of the universe of possible objects of the will, because it is still not a practical good. It lacks a formal element, without which it can never be constituted as an end for the will. When St. Thomas speaks of an *ipsa res* (a thing itself) being the end of the will, this is only possible, as we have seen, because an abstraction is made from the formal element which includes the way in which the will sets itself regarding that “thing”.⁴⁷ To say that “money is the end of the greedy person” must not be understood as synonymous with “the object of the act of the will is money *tout court*.” It is true that the virtue of generosity and the vice of greed have temporal goods as their specific object. It is not true, however, that a particular temporal good can simply be an object of a human act. It is always necessary to consider the formal element, for example “to buy,” “to sell,” “to steal,” “to rent,” “to loan” this concrete temporal good. These, in fact, are potential objects of acts of the will.

In the same cultural context, the Carmelite friars of Salamanca (the *Salmanticenses*) wrote a famous and extensive commentary on the *Summa theologiae* entitled *Cursus theologicus* (1631-1712), in which they claim that “moral acts are specified by their objects, not in an absolute way, but as is said, according to the order of reason, in which objective morality consists.”⁴⁸ For them, the object of the human act considered absolutely is an *objectum physicum* (a physical object), which enters the moral order through its subjection to the determination

47. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 3, a. 1, c.: “finis dicitur dupliciter. Uno modo, ipsa res quam cupimus adipisci, sicut avaro est finis pecunia. Alio modo, ipsa adeptio vel possessio, seu usus aut fruitio eius rei quae desideratur, sicut si dicatur quod possessio pecuniae est finis avari, et frui re voluptuosa est finis intemperati” (our end is twofold. First, there is the thing itself which we desire to attain: thus for the miser, the end is money. Secondly there is the attainment or possession, the use or enjoyment of the thing desired; thus we may say that the end of the miser is the possession of money; and the end of the intemperate man is to enjoy something pleasurable); *ibidem*, q. 11, a. 3, ad 3: “finis dicitur dupliciter, uno modo, ipsa res; alio modo, adeptio rei. Quae quidem non sunt duo fines, sed unus finis, in se consideratus, et alteri applicatus. Deus igitur est ultimus finis sicut res quae ultimo quaeritur, fruitio autem sicut adeptio huius ultimi finis. Sicut igitur non est alius finis Deus, et fruitio Dei” (we speak of an end in a twofold sense: first, as being the thing itself; secondly, as the attainment thereof. These are not, of course, two ends, but one end, considered in itself, and in its relation to something else. Accordingly God is the last end, as that which is ultimately sought for: while the enjoyment is as the attainment of this last end. And so, just as God is not one end, and the enjoyment of God, another...).

48. SALMANTICENSES, *Cursus theologicus*, V. Palmé - J. Albanel, Paris - Brussels 1878, t. 6, p. 29: “actus morales specificari ab objectis, non absolute, sed ut dicunt ordinem ad rationem, in quo moralitas objectiva consistit.”

of the law.⁴⁹ For them, therefore, the “object in its ontological dimension is not moral; rather, it is so only as an end, not in the sense that the law talks about it neither that it must or must not be, but should this or that act terminate in it or not.”⁵⁰ The object is thus conceived of as that reality which, possessing its own ontological density (*objectum physicum*), is the end of a *specific* act of the will, i.e., of an act of the will of a specific type. And it is in this line of thought that the expression *finis operis* (typically translated as “the end of the act”)⁵¹ is understood. It follows, then, that when considering the object as giving the moral species to the act, the Salamancans hold that “the object specifies morality; it does not, however, specify according to physical goodness, but as it is subject to moral rules.”⁵² It is from this subjection of the physical object to moral rules that the moral species of the act is determined; conversely, if we only consider the voluntary act in relation to the physical object but prescinding from moral rules, it would be outside of the moral order.⁵³ As an example, the Salamancans say that “theft and restitution have formally distinct objects,”⁵⁴ though they might have the same physical object, because they are related in an essentially different way to moral rules. The opposite case is also possible, i.e., that of two formally identical acts with respect to moral rules, but oriented to different physical objects.⁵⁵

Of the Salamancans we can state that they maintain the same tendency to “materialization” of Thomas’s concept of the object of the human act that is found in previous commentators. They speak of the *objectum physicum* as the end of

49. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 49: “proportione serbata, dum consideramus objectum secundum se, erit tantum objectum physicum; antecedente autem lege sine aliquo realiter superadditio constituetur intrinsece objectum morale, eiusque intrinseca vis extendet se ad terminandum actum sub determinatio legis, ac proinde in quantum moralem. Et sicut vim illam moraliter productivam in voluntate non dicimus esse extrinsecam, neque aliud secundum rem ab eius entitatem, ita non est dicendum huiusmodi vim moraliter terminativam in objecto esse extrinsecam, vel distinctam realiter ab entitate.”

50. *Ibidem*: “objectum prout sic non est morale in essendo, sed dumtaxat in terminando, nec de eo dicat lex an debeat esse, vel non esse, sed an debeat talis vel talis actus ad ipsum terminari, aut non terminari.”

51. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 65: “si loquamur de fine intrinseco qui dicitur *finis operis*, coincidit cum objecto” (if we speak of the intrinsic end that is called *finis operis*, it coincides with the object).

52. *Ibidem*, p. 12: “esto specificativum moralitatis sit objectum; non tamen specificat secundum bonitatem physicam, sed secundum quod subjicitur regulis morum.”

53. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 26: “subjectionem objecti ad regulas morum tunc solum sumi formaliter in ratione moralitatis objectivae, terminique et specificavit moralitatis actus, quando praecise consideratur ut determinatio et mensuratio bonitatis et appetibilitatis ipsius objecti, nec curatur an alias etiam sit ut *quod* appetibilis; sed hoc se habet de materiali. E contra vero cum sumitur ut aliquid in recto et ut *quod* appetibile, et ut capax recipiendi denominationem *volitti*, non consideratur ut ad genus moris pertinens adhuc objective, ac proinde neque ut specificans moralitatem actus, sed ut objectum physicum specificans entitatem volitionis.”

54. *Ibidem*, p. 32: “furtum et restitutionem habere objecta formaliter distincta.”

55. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 32: “ludus et venatio quamvis in esse physico habeant objecta distincta, et ipsi actus distincti; in esse moris habent objectum formaliter ejusdem speciei.”

the movement of the will, and its morality is seen as a submission to moral rules, always tendentially conceived of as norms.

Charles René Billuart (1685-1755) shares substantially the same interpretation of the concept of the object of the human act as that of his predecessors whom we have examined. The Belgian Dominican claims that “there are two aspects to consider in the object of the will, one which is like the material, which is obviously the wanted thing itself, and the other is like the formal, which is the reason for the wanting and which is the end; just as in the object of sight, color is like the material and light like the formal, because through color, light becomes visible in act.”⁵⁶ Here “end” is used to refer, not to the *finis operantis* (i.e., the remote end of the agent) but to the *finis proximus* (the proximate end of the agent) that constitutes the intrinsic intentionality of the object.

A doubt could arise as to whether this *res volita* (thing willed) is called a “material object” of the will, since this is not clear from the previous citation. “For object here we do not understand something that is set before the will, as if the circumstances themselves were also the object, but that which is primarily and directly sought by the will (therefore the circumstances are not the object, because clearly the will is directed to them in a secondary manner), just as God is the object of charity, another’s possessions are the object of theft, etc. The object can be considered in two ways: first, physically, as an ontological reality which is some existing thing; second, as a moral reality, as it is under the reason which directs, prohibits or prescribes.”⁵⁷ The object of the human act is thus a physical object as under the direction of reason; this is also called the *finis operis*.⁵⁸ The moral object

56. C.-R. BILLUART, *Summa Sancti Thomae hodiernis academiarum moribus accommodata*, Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1880, t. 2, p. 316: “in objecto voluntatis duo esse considerata: unum quod est quasi materiale, scilicet ipsa res volita: aliud quod est quasi formale, scilicet ratio volendi, quae est finis: sicut in objecto visus, color est quasi materiale, lux vero quasi formale, quia per eam efficitur color visibilis actu.”

57. *Ibidem*, p. 289: “Per objectum hic non intelligimus quidquid objicitur voluntati, sic enim ipsae circumstantiae forent etiam eius objectum; sed id quod primo et per se attingitur a voluntate, quo modo circumstantiae non sunt objectum, quippe quae ut tales attinguntur tantum secundario; sic Deus est objectum charitatis, res aliena objectum furti, etc. Objectum vero potest considerari dupliciter: 1° physice et in esse entis, prout est aliquid extra nihil; 2° in esse moris et prout subest rationi dirigenti, prohibenti, vel praecipienti”; cf. S.-Th. PINCKAERS, *Le rôle de la fin dans l’action morale selon saint Thomas*, in “Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques” 45 (1961), pp. 407-408: “L’objet de l’acte moral, pour Billuart, c’est l’objet physique, simplement revêtu d’une relation à la règle des moeurs, transporté dans l’ordre moral par son rapport à la loi, à ses préceptes” (The object of the moral act, for Billuart, is the physical object, simply covered with a relation to the moral rule, transported into the moral order by its relation with the law and its precepts).

58. Cf. C.-R. BILLUART, *Summa Sancti Thomae hodiernis academiarum moribus accommodata*, cit., t. 2, p. 290: “Finis operis, qui et dicitur intrinsecus, coincidit cum objecto; finis operantis illi advenit ab extrinseco et accidentaliter, ita ut sine illo staret idem actus.”

conceived in this way gives the moral species to the human act,⁵⁹ though it must be recognized that “regarding a single object considered physically, there can be acts of different species, good and evil,”⁶⁰ and this because “the act of the will is not specified by the material object but by the formal object, that is, by the motive and the formal reason for the wanting.”⁶¹ The same material object can be wanted for different reasons, reasons which specifically distinguish the act.⁶²

This operation carried out by Billuart, in line with the previous authors we have examined, of distinguishing between the material and the formal object of the act, opens the door to potential confusion, especially regarding the distinction between the *finis proximus* and the *finis remotus* or, if one prefers, between the *finis operis* and the *finis operantis*. At a certain point St. Thomas, so as to distinguish in the act the *obiectum* and the *finis*, considered, on the side of the object, the *finis proximus*, and on the part of the *finis* considered the *finis operantis*.⁶³ With this operation, however, Billuart ends by not making this distinction so clearly, given that for him the material object already does not include the *finis proximus*, which is now in the formal object. But if the formal object is the formal reason for the wanting, it would also seem that this is where the concept of the *finis operantis* belongs. This new conceptual distinction would thus result in it being more difficult to distinguish adequately between these two levels of intentionality. This was in fact fundamentally the error into which the proportionalist interpretation of St. Thomas fell, as we will see below.

St. Thomas, when referring to the object of the *electio*, does not distinguish as Billuart does between a material object and a formal object; rather, he distinguishes between the two elements which form a single object of the *electio* or choice. As we have already seen, he says that “in the object two concur, one as quasi material and the other as formal” (*ad obiectum duo concurrunt unum quasi materialiter et alterum sicut formale*).⁶⁴ That is, Aquinas distinguishes two

59. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 265: “non ipse intellectus formaliter specificet actum voluntatis, sed ipsum obiectum propositum, seu si vis, intellectus quatenus proponit voluntati obiectum quo determinatur ad certae speciei actum”; *ibidem*, p. 289: “in moralibus prima et essentialis bonitas attenditur ex forma quae dat speciem actui humano; et prima malitia ex huius formae defectu: atqui forma dans speciem actui humano est obiectum.”

60. *Ibidem*, p. 289: “circa idem obiectum physice consideratum, possunt versari actus speciei diversi, bonus et malus.”

61. *Ibidem*, p. 296: “Actus voluntatis non specificatur ab obiecto materiali sed formali, id est a motivo et ratione formali volendi.”

62. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 317: “Eadem res volita, quae est obiectum materiale voluntatis, potest sub diversa consideratione esse bona et mala, v. g. mors latronis considerata a iudice ut necessaria bono communi, est bona; considerata ab uxore ut noxia familiae, est mala.”

63. Even though Thomas makes little reference to the concept of *finis operantis* – mainly in his earlier writings – I prefer to use *finis operantis* instead of *finis remotus* because I find this terminology less ambiguous when referring to the object of *intentio*. In fact, the *finis remotus* can assume several senses, can be used to refer to the object of *intentio*, to a virtuous end, or even to the last end.

64. Cf. *Super Sent.*, lib. 1, d. 48, q. 1, a. 2, c.

dimensions, material and formal, within a single object of the human act, rather than speaking of two objects. Essentially, Billuart constructed the notion of the moral object based on the ontological consideration of a material object.⁶⁵

Though largely unknown among contemporary English-language moralists, Santiago Ramírez (1891-1967) was undoubtedly one of the great specialists in the moral thought of Aquinas.⁶⁶ According to the Spanish Dominican the distinction between goodness and malice in the human act “is primary or specific, because it derives precisely from the object of the human act, which specifies the act in its morality, just as it specifies it in its ontological dimension.”⁶⁷ He seems therefore to have a place for speaking of an object which specifies the human act *in esse naturae* (in its natural being). This ontological specification (Ramírez prefers to call it psychological) of the human act is like the basis onto which the moral order is grafted,⁶⁸ and thus Ramírez says that “morality is a kind of accident when the human act is considered psychologically.”⁶⁹ Nothing, therefore, prevents that “there could exist a complete, perfect and good psychological act that is simultaneously morally evil, and vice-versa.”⁷⁰ The will is specified by its object, which is necessarily an intelligible good.⁷¹ This intelligible good, however, is not wanted simply as a “being,” but as it is proposed by the intellect as a suitable good.⁷² The object in the human act, therefore, is not simply a “thing” in its ontological dimension, but presents itself as a particular reality realizable from the operative

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65. Cf. S.-Th. PINCKAERS, *Le rôle de la fin dans l'action morale selon saint Thomas*, cit., p. 407: “Billuart lui aussi part de la considération de l'acte physique, en sa bonté naturelle, pour passer ensuite à la bonté morale. C'est à partir de l'objet en son entité physique qu'il définit la nature de la moralité” (Billuart also departs from the consideration of the physical act, in its natural goodness, then passing to moral goodness. It is from the object in its physical entity that he defines the nature of morality).
66. Cf. J.-P. TORRELL, *Initiation à Saint Thomas d'Aquin. Sa personne e son oeuvre*, Cerf - Editions Universitaires de Fribourg, Paris - Fribourg 2002², p. 358.
67. 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 1972, p. 542: “[Distinctio bonitatis et malitiae moralis] est *per se primo seu specifica*, quia sumitur *ex proprio obiecto* actus humani, quod ipsum *specificat* in esse moris, sicut specificabat in esse naturae.”
68. Cf. *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.”
69. *Ibidem*, p. 481: “moralitas est accidens quoddam actus humani psychologice considerati.”
70. *Ibidem*, p. 493: “sic potest esse actus psychologice completus et perfectus et bonus simulque moraliter malus et vicissim.”
71. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 72: “bonum intellectum est obiectum voluntatis”; *ibidem*, pp. 235-236: “voluntas, quae non movetur quoad specificationem nisi a bono intellectu.”
72. *Ibidem*, p. 74: “voluntatis, quae fertur in obiectum suum quod est bonum et ens non absolute, sed prout est intellectum et proponitur ei ab intellectu”; *ibidem*, p. 224: “voluntas fertur naturaliter ad appetendum omne bonum conveniens homini secundum naturam suam.”

point of view.⁷³ Along these lines, the Spanish Dominican says that “it is necessary that the eligible object be executable, or operable, or doable by us,”⁷⁴ thus seeming to suppose that the object in question is not a simple *res*, but a particular action which focuses on a particular *res*.

b) The contemporary debate

Still today, agreement does not exist concerning how the object of the human act should be interpreted in St. Thomas. A problem that has been at least partially overcome is that of the proportionalist interpretation of Aquinas on this theme, a good representative of which is Louis Janssens.

According to Janssens “The *intentio* (intention) is directly aimed at the absolute element of the structure of the action, that is, the end itself which is the reason that the means are willed and consequently is the principle of the act (*finis* as *principiorum actionis humanae*), the formal element which specifies the act.”⁷⁵ The relation of the chosen means to the order of reason, and therefore its intrinsic morality, is considered a pre-moral fact, since morality depends only on the *intentio*. Janssens claims that “For the proper understanding of this view it must be remembered that the end of the subject *determines* the means. Or, in other words, the sense of the means can be attributed *only* to something from the point of view of the end.”⁷⁶ This vision is the basis of Richard McCormick’s famous *expanded notion of object*, which is one of the fundamental pillars of proportionalism, and which makes the moral species of the human act derive only from the *intentio*, understood always as the *finis operantis* or remote end of the agent. Janssens knows St. Thomas’s texts well, and believes to have found in them the basis for his interpretation. Commenting on *Quodlibet III*, q. 12, a. 2, Janssens implicitly identifies the *materiam obiecti* (the matter of the object) with the chosen means, and the *ratio obiecti* (the rationale or aspect of the object) with the *intentio* of the agent,⁷⁷ because only with this reading can the words of Aquinas provide a

73. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 147: “proprium et formale obiectum voluntatis non est bonum sensibile et corporale et singulare, quod est proprium obiectum passionis seu appetitus sensitivi, sed solum bonum intelligibile et spirituale et universale.”

74. *Ibidem*, p. 335: “necesse est quod obiectum eligibile sit exequibile vel operabile vel agibile vel utilizabile a nobis.”

75. L. JANSSENS, *Ontic Evil and Moral Evil*, in “Louvain Studies” 4 (1972), p. 119.

76. *Ibidem*.

77. Cf. L. JANSSENS, *Ontic Good and Evil. Premoral Values and Disvalues*, in “Louvain Studies” 12 (1987), p. 77: “In *Quodlibetum III*, art. 27 [= *Quodlibet III*, q. 12, a. 2, c.], St. Thomas develops a fundamental argumentation which confirms the view of Lottin. He suggests first and foremost that an act receives its specification (*species*) not from its object (*non secundum materiam obiecti*), but from the manner in which it is the object of the act itself (*secundum rationem obiecti*): the seeing of a stone receives its specification not from the stone, but from its coloration, which as such (*per se*) is the proper object of our visual power. Thomas applies this distinction between material and formal object to the issue of the morality of our human acts: ‘Every human act has the property of sin or merit inasmuch as it is voluntary. According to its own nature,

confirmation for his interpretation.⁷⁸ Janssens always interprets the expression *finis*, which Aquinas uses continually (but without specification), as referring exclusively to the interior act of the will understood as the *finis operantis*. At the same time the expression *materia* is almost always equated with the exterior act seen as a simple *materia ex qua*, i.e., including only the material dimension of the act, deprived of any underlying intention.⁷⁹ The object of the act thus seems to result from a strange combination: an exterior act (understood in the sense of a simple *materia ex qua*) informed by an interior act (understood as a *finis operantis* or remote end), which latter would be the only source from which the moral species of the human act derives.⁸⁰

the will has as its proper object the good as it is apprehended. Therefore, a human act is to be judged virtuous or vicious according to the apprehended good (*secundum bonum apprehensum*) which as such (*per se*) is the proper object of the will, and not according to the material object of the act (*non secundum materiale obiectum actus*).’ [*Quodlibet III*, q. 12, a. 2, c.].”

78. With the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, this interpretive possibility met with serious reservations on the part of the Magisterium. Cf. *Catechism*, n. 1755: “Obiectum electionis potest per se solum totum agendi modum vitare. Sunt concreti agendi modi – sicut fornicatio – quos eligere semper erroneum est, quia eorum electio deordinationem implicat voluntatis, id est, malum morale” (The object of choice can by itself vitiate an act in its entirety. There are some concrete acts – such as fornication – that it is always wrong to choose, because choosing them entails a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil); *ibidem*, n. 1756: “Erroneum ergo est de actuum humanorum moralitate iudicare, solummodo intentionem quae illos inspirat, vel circumstantias considerando (rerum ambitum, socialem pressionem, coactionem vel necessitatem agendi) quae quasi eorum sunt scaena. Actus sunt qui per se ipsos et in se ipsi, independenter a circumstantiis et ab intentionibus, ratione sui obiecti semper sunt graviter illiciti; sic blasphemia et periurium, homicidium et adulterium. Non licet malum facere ut exinde bonum proveniat” (It is therefore an error to judge the morality of human acts by considering only the intention that inspires them or the circumstances (environment, social pressure, duress or emergency, etc.) which supply their context. There are acts which, in and of themselves, independently of circumstances and intentions, are always gravely illicit by reason of their object; such as blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery. One may not do evil so that good may result from it); *Veritatis splendor*, nn. 74-83.
79. Cf. W. E. MAY, *Aquinas and Janssens on the Moral Meaning of Human Acts*, in “The Thomist” 48 (1984), p. 575: “Janssens acknowledges that according to St. Thomas the external act is specified by its object [L. JANSSENS, *Ontic Evil and Moral Evil*, cit., p. 124, referring to *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 18, aa. 2.4-8; q. 20, aa. 1-3]. But he denies that this means that the exterior act can be judged morally good or bad without reference to the end of the inner act of the will, precisely because the end of the inner act of the will is always the formal element while the exterior act with its object is the material element of human action [L. JANSSENS, *Ontic Evil and Moral Evil*, cit., p. 124, referring to *Summa theologiae*, II, q. 18, a. 6, c. and ad 2].” Pinckaers also, commenting on Janssens’ earliest articles, states that this author, basing himself on St. Thomas, “traite l’acte extérieur à la manière d’un moyen en vue de la fin du sujet et en vient à lui refuser une qualité morale propre” (treats the exterior act as a means in view of the subject’s end, and ends up denying that it has a proper moral quality) (S.-Th. PINCKAERS, *La question des actes intrinsèquement mauvais et le “proportionnalisme”*, in “Reveu thomiste” 82 (1982), p. 205).
80. An excellent synthesis of the interpretation of St. Thomas offered by Janssens in his earliest works can be found in W. E. MAY, *Aquinas and Janssens on the Moral Meaning*

It must also be said, however, that “in his 1982 essay Janssens offered significant correctives to his earlier analyses of Aquinas, without however, abandoning his own position and, indeed, once more insisting that Aquinas accepted proportionalism.”⁸¹ Among these changes are his recognition that “external acts as specified by their objects have *moral* significance,”⁸² and that “sin, in the moral sense, always consists in the deviation from the order of reason to the final end.”⁸³ Nevertheless, he still seems to defend the idea that one can intentionally will to cause a physical evil for proportional reasons, when he says that “The ontic evil caused by killing an evildoer for the sake of justice or the beating of a delinquent for punishment, says Thomas, is morally good, and the sake of justice and the reasonableness of the punishment of the delinquent can be proportionate reasons to justify the causation of ontic evil.”⁸⁴ Janssens seems to miss the perspective of the intentionality of the agent, which is that adopted by St. Thomas, focusing too much on the effects caused by the agent through his action. “To cause” something and “to intend” something must be adequately distinguished to be able to proceed to a correct moral evaluation of an act.

The proportionalist reading of the moral object was the target of many relevant criticisms, frequently based on Aquinas’s doctrine.⁸⁵ Even though the proportionalist proposal has been set aside, however, a consensus on the interpretation of St. Thomas on this point has not yet been reached by other scholars. We will now consider some of the most relevant contemporary proposals.

Servais Pinckaers, leaving no room for ambiguity, claims that “the object of moral choice is properly an action, and not an exterior instrument.”⁸⁶ He is thus opposed to the conception of the moral object as a *res physica*, instead seeing in it an *actio*. Criticizing Billuart’s interpretation, which is clearly opposed to his, he recognizes that “the object of the moral act, for Billuart, is the physical object,

of Human Acts, in “The Thomist” 48 (1984), pp. 566-577. After a detailed analysis of the relevant texts, May states that “one of Janssens’s principal claims about Thomas’s thought on the structure and moral meaning of human acts is false, namely, Janssens’s contention that for Aquinas one cannot give a moral judgment of the exterior act unless this act is related to the end the agent has in view in choosing it as a means” (p. 591).

81. *Ibidem*, p. 567.

82. *Ibidem*, p. 599; cf. L. JANSSENS, *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Question of Proportionality*, in “Louvain Studies” 9 (1982), p. 37: “the order of reason becomes evident when the object of the external action is qualified as appropriating, borrowing, using, fencing, or restituting other people’s goods”; “It is evident that from a moral viewpoint the importance of the object of the exterior action is not diminished in Thomas’s view” (p. 44).

83. L. JANSSENS, *St. Thomas Aquinas and the Question of Proportionality*, cit., pp. 37-38.

84. *Ibidem*, p. 40.

85. Cf. M. RHONHEIMER, *Intentional Actions and the Meaning of Object: A Reply to Richard McCormick*, in “The Thomist” 59 (1995), pp. 279-311.

86. S.-Th. PINCKAERS, *Notas ao tratado sobre os actos humanos* [in *Suma teológica*, vol. III, Edições Loyola, São Paulo 2001, portuguese translation of S.-Th. Pinckaers *Notes explicatives*, in «Saint Thomas d’Aquin, Somme théologique, Les actes humains, 1a-2ae, qq. 18-21», t. 2, Cerf, Paris 1997, pp. 155-214], cit., note f, p. 191.

simply invested with a relation to the moral code, introduced into the moral order by its relation with the law with its precepts and prohibitions.”⁸⁷

For Théo Belmans “the object represents the formal element, thanks to which the act of will is specified in goodness or evil”;⁸⁸ this element, as such, coincides with the proximate end of the action.⁸⁹ For Belmans, similarly to what we find in Pinckaers, “it would be a serious error to impute the moral value of an action to a material factor constituted by a simple *res volita* in the order of things.”⁹⁰ Commenting on the ambiguity of the term object, Belmans laments “the misfortune that the term object led even the best interpreters of St. Thomas to absolutize the importance of the *finis operantis* at the expense of the *finis operis*, likening the latter to a pre-moral fact.”⁹¹ Belmans also considers that the moral object is defined in function of the concrete context of our action,⁹² in this way emphasizing the importance of knowing the ethical context for being able to determine the object of a given action.

Elisabeth Anscombe on the one hand affirms the existence of an intrinsic morality of specific acts,⁹³ and at the same time the possibility of erroneously describing a given human act. In fact, “the description ‘killing someone’ may be the description of an *act of a human being (actus hominis)* without describing a *human act (actus humanus)*.”⁹⁴ That is, it is possible to describe an action from the point of view of an external observer without identifying the object of the human act.

87. IDEM, *Le renouveau de la morale*, cit., p. 129: “L’objet de l’acte moral, pour Billuart, c’est l’objet physique, simplement revêtu d’une relation à la règle des mœurs, transporté dans l’ordre moral par son rapport à la loi, à ses préceptes, à ses interdits.”

88. T.G. BELMANS, *Le sens objectif de l’agir humain. Pour relire la morale coniugale de Saint Thomas* (Studi Tomistici 8), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 1980, p. 10: “l’objet représente l’élément formel grâce auquel le vouloir se spécifie en bien ou en mal.”

89. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 41: “le terme *finis* peut signifier deux choses: ou bien la fin prochaine qui n’est autre chose que l’objet de l’agir, ou bien la fin éloignée poursuivie à travers ce dernier” (the term *finis* can signify two things: either the good of the proximate end which is nothing other than the object of the action, or the remote end pursued by means of the latter).

90. *Ibidem*, p. 116: “ce serait un grave erreur d’imputer la valeur morale d’un agir à un facteur matériel constituant une simple *res volita* de l’ordre de la chose.”

91. *Ibidem*, p. 215: “la mauvaise fortune du terme *objet* a induit jusqu’aux meilleurs interprètes de S. Thomas à absolutiser l’importance du *finis operantis* aux dépens du *finis operis* assimilé à un facteur pré-moral.” Here *finis operantis* is the remote end and *finis operis* is the proximate end.

92. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 180: “l’objet direct du dictamen de notre conscience se définit en fonction du contexte concret de nos agirs et non pas des abstractions qui en dérivent” (the direct object of the dictate of our conscience is defined in function of the concrete context of our actions, and not from abstractions deriving from it).

93. Cf. G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, *Action, Intention and ‘Double Effect’*, in M. Geach - L. Gormally (eds.), “Human Life, Action and Ethics,” Academic Imprint, Charlottesville 2005, p. 218: “there are several kinds of action which, if they are done intentionally, are evidently evil action, no matter what they are done for.”

94. *Ibidem*, p. 215.

Stephen Brock offers a distinctive reading. The American philosopher considers that the object of the human act is the patient considered in its totality, i.e., that *res* upon which the agent acts.⁹⁵ “The patient itself is in a way an object of the agent’s intention. ‘The object, even though it be the matter around which an act is formed (*terminatur*), nevertheless has the nature of an end, insofar as the intention of the agent bears upon it’; [I-II, q. 73, a. 3, ad 1] and, again, it is insofar as something is an end that it specifies action. [See also I-II, q. 1, a. 3].”⁹⁶ Brock seems to understand here the *materia circa quam* as a *res physica*, a thing, the patient upon which the agent acts. In this sense only transitive actions have an object in the sense described here.⁹⁷ When the patient upon which one acts changes, then the object changes, and consequently also the name and the species of the agent’s action.⁹⁸ According to Brock, “For Aquinas, what makes an action to be an action of a certain kind is its object. He also calls the object the ‘matter’ of the action, that ‘around which’ (*circa quam*) the action is formed. This is the patient. The patient however, can be considered in various ways – as something having precisely the capacity for what the agent intends, or as something having some other characteristic – and, under each of these considerations, as not yet acted upon or as acted upon. Properly speaking, it is as acted upon that the patient makes the action be of a certain kind. This means, among other things, as subject to an effect derived from the agent. But not every effect introduced into the patient by the agent is something intended by the agent.”⁹⁹ Brock’s tends to focus more on some metaphysical aspects of moral action as he himself acknowledges.¹⁰⁰

Another important interpreter of Aquinas is Giuseppe Abbà. For the Italian philosopher, “the term *object* is reserved to the designation of the specific forms that are at the origin of the specification of the act of willing.”¹⁰¹ The object is thus a form that morally specifies the act of the will. According to Abbà, “for St. Thomas

95. S.L. BROCK, *Action and Conduct. Thomas Aquinas and the Theory of Action*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1998, p. 86: “The whole patient is the object of the agent.”

96. *Ibidem*, p. 90.

97. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 15: “Transitive verbs can signify immanent actions, because even immanent actions can have ‘objects’; not objects upon which they are performed, but objects about which they are concerned. Hitting Socrates’ nose is doing something to his nose, whereas seeing Socrates’ nose is merely an operation concerned with Socrates’ nose.”

98. *Ibidem*, p. 85: “Actions get their names from their objects, and insofar as their objects are distinct entities, so are they. Carr helps himself by the example he chooses: replenishing a water supply by operating a pump. I would agree that these are distinct actions, because their objects are distinct entities. The object of an agent’s action is nothing other than the patient, and the pump is not the same thing as the water supply.”

99. *Ibidem*, pp. 88-89.

100. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 3: “The present work stays more on the ‘surface’ of human action, to mark off its shape, seen both in distinction from and in connection with physical action.”

101. G. ABBÀ, *Lex et virtus. Studi sull’evoluzione della dottrina morale di san Tommaso d’Aquino*, LAS, Rome 1983, p. 166: “il termine *oggetto* è riservato per designare le forme determinate che stanno all’origine della specificazione dell’atto di volere.”

[...] the object that specifies the action is defined in function of the ends of the virtues and the circumstances are evaluated in function of the ends of the virtues.”¹⁰² The object is thus a form that is in relation with the ends of the virtues, and from that relation derives the moral species of the object itself.¹⁰³ “Certainly, the object contains a good to be pursued or an evil to be avoided; but the action does not receive its moral specification from the goods it pursues or the evils it avoids, but from the object *secundo esse moris*, that is, as it constitutes a special articulation of some virtuous end. Thus, for example, the moral object of the act of theft is not the material good stolen or the material damage caused, but the *debitum* or the *indebitum*.”¹⁰⁴ For Abbà the object of the human act is not a *res physica* which is then introduced into the moral order, but a form that is “born” from the outset in the *genus moris* (the moral genus or kind), even if the proposed action includes a material dimension inherent in its transitive realization.¹⁰⁵ Abbà illustrates this by saying that “a single physical behavior could constitute different actions: to pass money to someone could be an act of generous fraternal help, an act of paying a debt, an act of remuneration, an act of corruption, etc. What makes actions to be true and proper actions – human, moral and responsible – is the fact that they are realized by the subject as the *object of his own choices*. He constructs them as behavior by means of which he realizes his own *purpose*. Therefore the action is only the *exterior* component of a complex actualization, of which the *interior* component is constituted by the act of choice.”¹⁰⁶ The object conceived in this way presents itself as an intentional proposal to realize a concrete action, the

102. IDEM, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale? Ricerche di filosofia morale*, LAS, Rome 1996, p. 201: “per Tommaso [...] l’oggetto che specifica l’azione viene definito in funzione dei fini virtuosi e le circostanze vengono valutate in funzione dei fini virtuosi.”

103. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 200: “la definizione dell’oggetto che specifica l’*actus imperatus* e delle circostanze rilevanti è costruita in funzione dei fini virtuosi” (the definition of the object that specifies the *actus imperatus* and of the relevant circumstances is constructed in function of the ends of the virtues).

104. IDEM, *L’originalità dell’etica delle virtù*, in “Salesianum” 59 (1997), p. 516: “L’oggetto contiene certamente un bene da perseguire o un male da evitare; ma l’azione non riceve la sua specificazione morale dai beni che persegue o dai mali che evita, bensì dall’oggetto *secundum esse moris*, cioè in quanto costituisce una speciale articolazione di qualche fine virtuoso. Così ad esempio, l’oggetto morale dell’atto di furto non è il bene materiale rubato né il danno materiale arrecato, bensì il *debitum* e l’*indebitum*.”

105. Cf. IDEM, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù. Saggio di filosofia morale*, LAS, Rome 1995², p. 260: “l’atto interiore riceve la sua specificazione non dall’azione esteriore considerata nella sua realtà comportamentale (*esse naturae*), ma dalla concezione che il soggetto, con la sua ragion pratica e la sua ‘visione,’ si fa di tale azione (*esse moris*)” (the interior act receives its specification, not from the exterior action considered in its reality as a behavior (*esse naturae*), but from the conception that the subject, with his practical reason and his “vision,” makes of the action (*esse moris*)).

106. *Ibidem*, p. 167-168: “uno stesso comportamento fisico può costituire azioni diverse: passar denaro ad una persona può essere un’azione di soccorso fraterno generoso, un’azione d’assolvimento d’un debito, un’azione di retribuzione, un’azione di corruzione, ecc. Ciò che fa sì che le azioni siano azioni vere e proprie, umane, morali, responsabili è il fatto che ad esse perviene il soggetto agente dandosele come *oggetto delle proprie*

end of a choice, which has the nature of a form capable of “animating” a concrete exterior behavior and of conferring on it its moral species. “What St. Thomas understands by the object of the *actus imperatus* is not a physical good suitable to human nature, as it was for Suárez, following John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham; it is, rather, the *actus imperatus* itself considered not as a physical behavior (*secundum esse naturae*), but as represented and conceived by the practical reason in function of the *ordo rationis* and of the ends of the virtues (*secundum esse moris*). Conceived in this way, the object can be intrinsically compatible – or not – with the *ratio virtutis*, independently of the circumstances.”¹⁰⁷

Ralph McInerny addresses a problem relevant to this context when he says: “If the object of the act is what I am doing, it may seem difficult to appreciate Thomas’s distinction between the kind of act an act is and the purpose for which it is done. The difficulty increases when he tells us that the specification of an act is taken from the end for the sake of which it is done.”¹⁰⁸ McInerny recognizes that if we identify the object of the act with what one is doing, which he, like Thomas, also identifies with the proximate end of the will,¹⁰⁹ then it becomes difficult to distinguish between this proximate end which constitutes the object, and the ulterior end in view of which this object is willed.

For the American philosopher “[t]he object of the action is that which the agent sets out to do, to effect.”¹¹⁰ The object seems then to be conceived of as an action. Regarding the structure of such an object, McInerny says that “[a]ny object of deliberate choice is a kind of sandwich of another sort. There is the particular kind of thing chosen – a hamburger – and its immediate aspect of desirability, say, tastiness. These are the under side of the sandwich, the matter of the object of deliberate will. The top half, the form, is the *ratio boni*, the formality of goodness – not partial goodness, but goodness as fulfilling and perfecting of the agent.”¹¹¹ Here he distinguishes between a material element of the object and a formal element. The formal element appears then as a proximate end, in fact “Anything that counts as a human act is undertaken with a view to some end. The end is what is given as

scelte: egli se le costruisce come comportamento per via del quale egli realizza un proprio *intento*. Pertanto l’azione è solo la componente *esteriore* di un’attuazione complessa, la cui componente *interiore* è costituita dall’atto della scelta.”

107. IDEM, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale?*, cit., p. 201: “Ciò che Tommaso intende per oggetto dell’*actus imperatus* non è un bene fisico conveniente alla natura umana, come invece è per Suárez, al seguito di Giovanni Duns Scoto e di Guglielmo di Ockham; è invece l’*actus imperatus* stesso considerato non come comportamento fisico (*secundum esse naturae*), ma in quanto rappresentato e concepito dalla ragione pratica in funzione dell’*ordo rationis* e dei fini virtuosi (*secundum esse moris*). Concepito così, l’oggetto può essere intrinsecamente compatibile o non con la *ratio virtutis*, indipendentemente dalle circostanze.”

108. R.M. McINERNY, *Ethica Thomistica*, cit., pp. 81-82.

109. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 83: “The proximate end is synonymous with the object of the action.”

110. IDEM, *Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1992, p. 81.

111. *Ibidem*, p. 30.

answer to the question: What are you doing? Since we intend to do what we do and what we intend is a good, the good for the sake of which the act is performed is an end."¹¹² As can be understood from the question he poses, here McNerny is not referring to the *finis operantis*, but to the intrinsic finality of the object of the act.¹¹³ The object is not then a mere physical reality apprehended by reason, but something that is in some way constituted in its moral being precisely by reason, inasmuch as only the reason is capable of "measuring" the suitability of a particular *res* to the global good of the acting subject.¹¹⁴ It thus seems more than justified to say that the reason has an active role in the constitution of the object of choice.

For Martin Rhonheimer "it is not possible to describe the object of a moral act without considering it as the object and the content, full of moral significance, of an act of choice of the will, or rather, as a good to which the elective act of the will tends,"¹¹⁵ and consequently "the object indicates *what one does* when someone does something."¹¹⁶ The Swiss philosopher asserts that "'human actions' are always actions that are *chosen and wanted*. For an action to become wanted and chosen, it has need of a prior structuring that is both fundamental and intentional.

112. *Ibidem*, p. 48.

113. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 29: "We listed above a number of possible objects of choice – a hamburger, a nap, listening to music, a walk – and we can add that we choose and eat this quite singular hamburger, take a nap here and now, listen to this piece of music recorded by this orchestra on CD and so on. Needless to say, the walks we take are singular events, not general occasions. But if actions are thus singular, the singular things we choose are chosen under formalities. X is chosen as such-and-such – as tasty, relaxing, elevating or diverting, say, thinking of our examples. Since these are the reasons they are chosen, we can say that things chosen as tasty or relaxing or elevating or diverting can be said to be chosen as good. The good is that which is sought."

114. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 30: "Let us say that [a person] can either pursue or not pursue the attractive object. Let us say it is a chocolate sundae. No human being can be expected not to want a chocolate sundae when it is set before him. That it would taste good, etc., goes without saying. But the human choice is whether or not to choose that tasty good here and now. The thing is that good in the sense of tasty has to meet a further requirement. It has to be good in the sense of an appropriate object of deliberate will. Deliberate will involves an apprehension that goes beyond mere perception. Reason, as it guides our choices, is at least implicitly aware of our overall good and when something is deliberately chosen, the implication is that it serves our overall good.

That seems to be what St. Thomas means when he says things are objects of human choice *sub ratione boni*. A hamburger is chosen by the human agent, not simply because it is tasty, but because eating it here and now is thought to serve the overall good of the agent."

115. M. RHONHEIMER, *La prospettiva della persona agente e la natura della ragione pratica*, 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. 170: "non è possibile descrivere l'oggetto di un atto morale senza considerarlo come oggetto e contenuto, carico di significato morale, di un atto di scelta della volontà, ossia come bene al quale tende l'atto elettivo della volontà." This text was later published in the English language edition of *Nova et Vetera 2.2* (Fall 2004): 461-516 as "The Perspective of the Acting Person and the Nature of Practical Reason: The 'Object of the Human Act' in Thomistic Anthropology of Action," trans. Joseph T. Papa. The text is found on 462.

116. *Ibidem*: "l'oggetto indica *che cosa* si fa quando si fa qualcosa."

‘To be in bed’ cannot in fact be ‘wanted’ and realized in this rudimentary (non-intentional) form. If someone *chooses* to get into bed, he chooses it ‘under a description,’ which is then the description of a basic intention – for example, ‘to rest.’ We are dealing here, therefore, with ‘basic intentional actions,’ the intentional content of which is that which is called the ‘object’ of an action.¹¹⁷ The object is thus a form capable of being chosen by the will as the proximate end of the acting subject; “this proximate end is the intelligible content of a concrete mode of acting, a ‘form conceived by reason,’”¹¹⁸ and “this *forma a ratione concepta* is nothing other than the object of an action in its *genus moris*.”¹¹⁹ “The reasons for the action in a properly practical sense are thus the objects of the action. An object of an action is a good that is the object of the wanting that chooses and tends to it, and therefore it is always also of the practical reason. It is something that is recognized as a ‘good,’ case by case, in a particular context, and that as such is wanted and realized in the action. Thus, the object of an action is precisely its *content*, an aspect of the action itself, just as the object of the act of seeing is the seeing in itself, even if this is always a ‘seeing of a particular thing.’”¹²⁰ Rhonheimer illustrates his interpretation with the example of the “Moonlight Serenade”: “If the Moonlight Serenade were itself the content or the object, then the content or the object of ‘*playing* the Moonlight Serenade’ and ‘*composing* the Moonlight Serenade’ would be the same thing, and both things, to play music and to compose it, would be objectively identical, i.e., the same type of intentional action.”¹²¹

117. IDEM, *La prospettiva della morale. Fondamenti dell’etica filosofica*, Armando editore, Rome 1994, p. 39: “le ‘azioni umane’ sono sempre azioni *scelte e volute*. Affinché un’azione diventi voluta e scelta, essa ha bisogno di una strutturazione primaria o fondamentale e intenzionale. ‘Stare sul letto’ non può affatto essere ‘voluta’ e compiuto in questa forma rudimentare (non-intenzionale). Se qualcuno *sceglie* di mettersi sul letto, lo sceglie ‘sotto una descrizione’ che è appunto la descrizione di un’intenzione basilare; per es. ‘riposarsi.’ Si tratta qui dunque di ‘*azioni-base intenzionali*,’ il cui contenuto intenzionale è ciò che si chiama anche l’‘oggetto’ di un’azione.”

118. IDEM, *La prospettiva della persona agente e la natura della ragione pratica*, cit., p. 180: “questo fine prossimo è il contenuto intelligibile di un modo di agire concreto, una ‘forma concepita dalla ragione.’”

119. IDEM, *Legge naturale e ragione pratica. Una visione tomista dell’autonomia morale*, Armando Editore, Rome 2001 (orig. German: *Natur als Grundlage der Moral*, Tyrolia - Verlag, Innsbruck - Vienna 1987), p. 115: “Questa ‘forma a ratione concepta’ non è nient’altro che l’oggetto di un’azione nel suo ‘genus moris.’”

120. IDEM, *La prospettiva della morale*, cit., p. 82: “I motivi dell’azione in senso propriamente pratico sono dunque oggetti d’azione. Un oggetto dell’azione è il bene che è oggetto del volere che sceglie e intende, e perciò anche sempre della ragion pratica. È qualcosa che è riconosciuto come ‘buono’ di volta in volta in un certo contesto e che in quanto tale è voluto e realizzato nell’agire. In quanto tale, l’oggetto di un’azione è proprio il suo *contenuto*, un aspetto dell’azione stessa; così come l’oggetto dell’atto del vedere è il vedere stesso, anche se questo è sempre un ‘vedere qualcosa.’”

121. *Ibidem*, p. 123: “Se la sonata al chiaro di luna fosse essa stessa il contenuto o l’oggetto, allora il contenuto o l’oggetto di ‘*suonare* la sonata al chiaro di luna’ e ‘*comporre* la sonata al chiaro di luna’ sarebbero la stessa cosa, e ambedue le cose, eseguire musica e comporre, sarebbero oggettivamente identiche, cioè lo stesso tipo di un’azione intenzionale.”

One could object that this vision of the object proposed by Rhonheimer is too formalistic, neglecting the material dimension of the moral object. To respond to this possible objection the Swiss philosopher points out that “[t]he 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 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.”¹²²

Another important reading is that of Angel Rodríguez Luño.¹²³ For the Spanish theologian “the moral object is formally a purpose or an *operative proposal* conceived of and evaluated by the practical reason.”¹²⁴ The form of the object is thus an intentional proposal. Therefore “in a practical sense, the good is not a thing – for example, a watch – but a thing as the correlative end of the tendency or of the purpose that animates an action.”¹²⁵ In fact – notes Rodríguez Luño – “the person himself, on the other hand [as opposed to his sensitive faculties, which always relate in the same way to their proper object], can relate to the same reality in very different ways (approval or disapproval, love or hate, buy it or steal it) – which is the reason why that reality, as the object or good to which the will tends, cannot be defined independently of the way in which the person considers it, or rather, it cannot be defined independently of the voluntariness of the person who concerns himself with that reality.”¹²⁶ The *res physica* as such, then, is not the object of the human act, since it is not yet a practical good capable of moving the rational appetite.¹²⁷

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122. IDEM, *La prospettiva della persona agente e la natura della ragione pratica*, cit., p. 216: “l’oggetto di un atto non è dunque soltanto ‘ciò che io voglio’ o ‘ciò che mi propongo fare’; ma in esso è anche presente una materialità propria alla natura ‘fisica’ dell’atto che entra nella costituzione di ciò che è l’oggetto.”
123. To illustrate the thought of this author we will cite sometimes a work that he produced together with Enrique Colom (COLOM, E. – RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, A., *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi. Elementi di Teologia Morale Fondamentale*, Edizioni Università della Santa Croce, Roma 2003³). It would be more correct to attribute citations from this source to both authors, but for practical reasons we will name only Rodríguez Luño.
124. E. COLOM – A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi. Elementi di Teologia Morale Fondamentale*, Edizioni Università della Santa Croce, Rome 2003³, p. 194: “l’oggetto morale é formalmente un proposito o un *progetto operativo* concepito e valutato dalla ragione pratica.”
125. A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Ética General*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2004³, p. 176: “En sentido práctico, el bien no es una cosa – por ejemplo, un reloj – sino una cosa como término correlativo de la tendencia o del propósito que anima una acción.”
126. E. COLOM – A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi*, cit., p. 177: “la persona invece può porsi in maniere molto diverse di fronte ad una stessa realtà (approvarla o disapprovarla, amarla o odiarla, comprarla o rubarla), ragione per la quale tale realtà, in quanto oggetto o bene a cui mira la volontà, non può essere definita indipendentemente dal modo in cui la persona la prende di mira, vale a dire, non può essere definita indipendentemente dalla volontarietà della persona che a quella realtà si volge.”
127. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 178: “le azioni scelte sono volute sempre sotto una descrizione razionale” (chosen actions are always wanted under a rational description); A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Ética General*, cit., p. 178: “El objeto de la acción es concebido y constituido por la razón práctica” (the object of the action is conceived of and constituted by the practical reason).

“The moral object is formally a purpose or an operative proposal conceived of and evaluated by the practical reason, and as such chosen.”¹²⁸ “This deliberate interior purpose is like the ‘soul’ of the action, its living interiority, without which there is no human action,”¹²⁹ and consequently it is important to always bear in mind that “the object of the action is not a thing or an event, but the content of a decision of the subject which can have a relation to a thing or an event, or express an attitude toward a thing or a person, or toward a particular use of a thing.”¹³⁰

For these reasons, for Rodríguez Luño it is important to remember that “the human action cannot be described as an exterior ‘doing,’ separated from the interior purpose which precedes and inspires it.”¹³¹ “The description of the human action, to be adequate, must include the unity that exists between the exterior conduct and the interior proposal which that conduct realizes. If one considers only the execution, the human act would be seen as a physical event. [...] This implies, from the ethical point of view, that to evaluate an action is to evaluate the deliberate tendency or interior purpose that constitutes it as a human action endowed with significance.”¹³² At the same time, “it is necessary to bear in mind that the interior purpose represents the basic level of intentionality that constitutes the formal and decisive element of the moral object of the chosen exterior action.”¹³³ The intrinsic goodness or malice of that moral object will depend on its relation of accord or disaccord with the moral virtues.¹³⁴

Joseph Pilsner acknowledges the varied use that St. Thomas makes of “object” when he says that “at times it seems as if ‘object’ is used by Thomas to

128. E. COLOM – A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi*, cit., p. 194: “l’oggetto morale è formalmente un proposito o un progetto operativo concepito e valutato dalla ragione pratica, e in quanto tale scelto.”

129. A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Ética General*, cit., p. 177: “Este propósito interior deliberado es como el ‘alma’ de la acción, su interioridad viva, sin la cual no hay acción humana.”

130. *Ibidem*, p. 188: “El objeto de la acción no es una cosa o un evento, sino el contenido de una decisión del sujeto que puede hacer relación a una cosa o evento, o expresar la actitud ante algo o alguien o cierto uso de una cosa.”

131. *Ibidem*, p. 177: “la acción humana no puede ser descrita como un ‘hacer’ externo separado del propósito interior del que procede y que lo inspira.”

132. *Ibidem*, p. 177: “La descripción de la acción humana, para para ser adecuada, debe comprender la unidad que existe entre la conducta externa y el proyecto interior que aquella realiza. Si se atendiese sólo a la ejecución, el acto humano sería visto como un evento físico. [...] Esto implica, desde el punto de vista ético, que valorar una acción es valorar la tendencia o propósito interior deliberado que la constituye como acción humana dotada de significado.”

133. E. COLOM – A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi*, cit., p. 193: “occorre tener presente (invece) che il proposito interiore rappresenta il livello basico di intenzionalità che costituisce l’elemento formale e decisivo dell’oggetto morale dell’azione esterna scelta.”

134. Cf. A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Ética General*, cit., p. 189: “el principio general de la especificación moral de las acciones voluntarias es que éstas reciben su primera y fundamental especificación según la relación de su objeto con las virtudes (o vicios)” (the general principle of the moral specification of voluntary actions is that they receive their first and fundamental specification according to the relation of their object with the virtues (or vices)).

refer to any human end (or good); at other times it seems as if it refers only to proximate ends.”¹³⁵ Outside of these uses, however, Pilsner claims that for St. Thomas, “[o]bject, [...] is principally related, not to the four causes, but to Aristotle’s scheme for defining human powers (and their proper acts).”¹³⁶ And in this sense the moral object is an object of the will.

The American philosopher implicitly shows himself to be aware of the two great alternatives for interpreting the object of the human act in St. Thomas, and he explicitly asks the crucial question: “According to Aquinas, is it more correct to understand an end as the ‘thing alone’ or as the ‘thing together with its related action’? Thomas believes that both ways of considering an end are completely acceptable; how the end is presented just depends on one’s point of view.”¹³⁷ But then “[h]ow can there be two specifically diverse human actions, liberality and justice, which both deal with ‘money’ as their object? Doesn’t this violate Aquinas’s principle? Thomas answers this question by showing that a moral object involves more than just a physical description of that thing to which these two kinds of human actions are related.”¹³⁸ Therefore “something which is the same physically speaking can have two different formal aspects, each of which constitutes a different object, properly speaking. Money is the object of liberality qua donatable, and of justice qua tender for a debt.”¹³⁹ Pilsner thus admits that it is by the formal aspect of the action that the type or the species of the moral object is determined. Less fortunate, in our opinion, is the equation he makes in the course of his study of the object of the human act with the object of the virtues and the vices.¹⁴⁰

Another important interpreter of Aquinas’s thought is Carlo Caffarra. In considering *ST* I-II, q. 18, a. 2, in which St. Thomas places the question of whether the goodness or malice of human actions derives from the object, the Italian theologian comments opportunely:

“St. Thomas’s question is: from where derives the fullness of being proper to human action? What is it that produces in the human act that proper fullness – or its malice? On what basis is the measure established of the being proper to an action?

Aquinas’s response is that that which defines the *form*, that which decides the measure of the act, that which defines it in its being, is the object of the act.

It is first necessary, however, to explain what Thomas understands by “object” of the act. In the first place *it is not the reality* with which I enter into a relation by my action; for example, the object of the theft

135. J. PILSNER, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, cit., p. 4.

136. *Ibidem*, p. 239.

137. *Ibidem*, p. 88.

138. *Ibidem*, p. 106.

139. *Ibidem*, p. 107.

140. Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 77-90.

of a horse is not the horse. Precisely because things are not the object, good and bad actions can exist; in fact every reality is good, and if their morality were to depend on these realities, as objects of the acts, every action would be good. Evil is not found in created realities, but in the use the sinner makes of them.

Secondly, the object of the act *is not the physical action* carried out by the subject. Recall the example of being in bed: this could assume a variety of actions (recovering from illness, resting, being lazy).

Thirdly, the object of the act *is not the effect* or the consequences of the act itself. For example, I jump into the Tiber to save a drowning person, but I am unable to do so, and he drowns: the desired effect was not attained, but the object of the action was nonetheless to save a person. Another example: a person asks you for alms, lying to you about his miserable state; moved to compassion, you give him alms, only to learn later that he was more wealthy than you are. If the alms must be measured by the effect of relieving the misery of a poor person, then you did not give alms. The Curé of Ars, however, said that it was right to give alms to whomever asks...

The object of the act is *that which* the person wants or intends when he acts. That is, it is the response that one reasonably gives to the question 'what are you doing?'¹⁴¹

141. 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, pp. 19-20: "La domanda di S. Tommaso è: donde viene la pienezza dell'essere dovuta ad un'azione umana? Che cosa è che produce nell'atto umano quella pienezza dovuta, oppure la sua malizia? In base a cosa si stabilisce la misura dell'essere proprio di una azione?

La risposta dell'Aquinatè è che ciò che stabilisce la *forma*, che decide la misura dell'atto, che lo definisce nel suo essere è l'oggetto dell'atto.

Bisogna però prima spiegare cosa intende Tommaso per 'oggetto' dell'atto. In primo luogo *non è la realtà* con la quale entro in rapporto mediante la mia azione; per esempio, l'oggetto del furto di un cavallo non è il cavallo. Proprio perché l'oggetto non sono le cose possono esserci azioni buone e cattive; infatti tutte le realtà sono buone, e quindi se da esse dipendesse, come oggetti degli atti, la loro moralità, tutte le azioni sarebbero buone. Nelle realtà create non c'è il male, ma nell'uso che ne fa il peccatore. In secondo luogo, l'oggetto dell'atto *non è l'azione fisica* compiuta dal soggetto. Ricordiamo l'esempio di starsi a letto: può supporre azioni diverse (curarsi, riposarsi, fare il pigro).

In terzo luogo, l'oggetto dell'atto *non è l'effetto* o le conseguenze dall'atto stesso. Ad esempio, mi butto nel Tevere per salvare una che affoga, ma non ci riesco e questi annega: l'effetto desiderato non è stato raggiunto, ma l'oggetto dell'azione era comunque salvare una persona. Un altro esempio: uno ti chiede l'elemosina, raccontandoti le sue finte disgrazie; tu impietosito fai l'elemosina, e poi costui risulta essere più ricco di te. Se l'elemosina si deve misurare per l'effetto di sollevare la miseria di un povero, allora non hai fatto l'elemosina. Invece il curato d'Ars difendeva che era giusto fare l'elemosina a chiunque gli chiedesse...

L'oggetto dell'atto è *ciò che* la persona vuole o intende quando agisce. Ovvero, è la risposta che si dà sensatamente a chi ti chiede 'cosa stai facendo?'

It is also clear that for the Italian theologian, according to St. Thomas “the object of the act is necessarily related to reason,”¹⁴² since he considers that “the intelligibility of an act is not an accident, a quality of the act, but that which constitutes it in its essence as a human act.”¹⁴³ Therefore “the definition of a human act as depending on what the will intends does not coincide with the physical definition of what occurs, of the event; rather, the same fact as a physical occurrence can have different definitions as a human act,”¹⁴⁴ depending on the different proximate ends to which it can be ordered by the acting subject.¹⁴⁵ It would thus be a serious error to analyze the human act from the moral point of view while ignoring or putting between parentheses its intrinsic intelligibility. “The definition of the human act cannot prescind from its moral quality.”¹⁴⁶

3. Final considerations

A first observation, somewhat surprising, derives from the fact that some interpreters of St. Thomas do not clearly distinguish the object of the human act from the object of a virtue or a vice. As we tried to show at the end of our exposition of the relevant texts of Aquinas, these two senses in which St. Thomas uses “object” are not synonymous.¹⁴⁷ Pilsner and John of St. Thomas seem to incur this error most obviously, which compromises a significant portion of their argumentation.

But let us return to the global vision that we have just outlined in the previous pages. What can be said of such a great variety of interpretations? It seems to us that, even if there are many subtleties that distinguish one author from another, the various interpretations we have examined can be gathered into three major groups.

A first group sees the moral object as a physical object transposed to the moral order by a relation with reason. These authors tend to describe the object of the human act departing from metaphysical considerations; moral considerations are then developed on this basis.

142. *Ibidem*, p. 23: “l’oggetto dell’atto si trova necessariamente rapportato alla ragione.”

143. *Ibidem*, p. 24: “La ragionevolezza di un atto non è un accidente, una qualità dell’atto, ma quello che lo costituisce nella sua essenza di atto umano.”

144. *Ibidem*, p. 12: “La definizione di un atto umano in quanto dipende da ciò che intende la volontà non coincide con la definizione fisica dell’accadimento, dell’evento, ma lo stesso fatto in quanto accadimento fisico può avere diverse definizioni in quanto atto umano.”

145. Cf. *ibidem*: “Un movimento si distingue da un’altro per la sua direzione. Ciò che definisce l’agire umano è ciò che intende la volontà. È il fine che specifica l’atto umano” (One movement is distinguished from another by its direction. What defines human action is what the will intends. *It is the end that specifies the human act*).

146. *Ibidem*, p. 22: “La definizione dell’atto umano non può prescindere della sua qualità morale.”

147. When it is said that “material goods” are the *object* of avarice, the concept of object is not used in the same sense as when one says, for example, that the *object* of a particular human act is “to steal a car.” “Material goods” and “to steal a car” are *objects* in a slightly different sense, and therefore they cannot simply be equated. This does not mean that they do not each have their rightful place in moral discourse.

A second group is formed by the proportionalist interpretation of the moral object. Of this group we considered only Janssens, because it was he who attempted to found this vision more thoroughly and systematically on the texts of St. Thomas. For these authors, the object of the human act can only be considered in its totality, that is, also considering the further intentions of the acting subject, and the circumstances. It seems clear to us that this reading was also favored by some classical interpretations of Aquinas such as Billuart, who used the concept of material object. The problem is that the object of the act for St. Thomas does not correspond to Billuart's material object. The former (i.e., Thomas's moral object) already possesses an intrinsic intentionality, whereas the latter (material object) is in fact not in itself susceptible to a moral evaluation. We are convinced that the influence of these authors, like Billuart, can help explain the present-day arrival at a proportionalist interpretation of Aquinas's texts. This proposal, as we have already emphasized above, ends by neutralizing the morality of the *electio*, so as to make it depend exclusively on the *intentio* of the acting subject. The discernment of the object of the human act does not then depend on the sensible response to the question "what are you doing?" but on "what are you truly seeking by your action?" Abbà, criticizing this interpretation, rightly says that "it is precisely the Thomistic conception of the *obiectum* that disappears in teleological ethics."¹⁴⁸ Rodríguez Luño also points out that "proportionalism is not a conception concerning the relation between the means and the end, but a theory about the constitution of the object of the moral action."¹⁴⁹

Finally, a third group is comprised mostly of more recent authors, who in some way distinguish themselves from the "classical" interpretation more frequently held by the authors of the first group. These authors understand the object of the act as a proposal of action conceived by the practical reason, which as such has a constitutive relation of agreement or disagreement with the ends appropriate to the human person. The object conceived of in this way is in the moral order by its very nature, meaning that the object of the *human* act is, as such, necessarily a moral object.

The moment has now arrived for posing the crucial question: which of these three groups of interpreters is correct?

With respect to the second group, those who believe to have found in St. Thomas the basis to defend proportionalism, it seems to us sufficient to say that for Aquinas, it is enough that the object of the *electio* – or if we prefer, the *materia circa quam* – be contrary to the order of reason for the entire action to be corrupted.¹⁵⁰

148. G. ABBÀ, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale?*, cit., p. 202: "è proprio la concezione tomista dell'*obiectum* che scompare nell'etica teleologica."

149. A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Ética General*, cit., p. 192: "El proporcionalismo no es una concepción acerca de la relación entre los medios y el fin, sino una teoría sobre la constitución del objeto de la acción moral."

150. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 100, a. 1, c.: "actus aliquis est malus ex genere ex eo quod cadit super materiam indebitam" (an act is evil generically when it bears on undue matter); *ibidem*, q. 110, a. 3, c.: "Mendacium autem est malum ex genere. Est

If what one does is evil in itself, it is already unnecessary to consider the goodness or malice of the *finis operantis*.¹⁵¹ The proportionalist interpretation, therefore, does not truly reflect the thought of the Angelic Doctor. It is only fair to point out, however, that many of the texts of Aquinas that are relied on by proportionalist authors as a basis for their reading are not easily interpreted; specifically, it is often not clear whether, by the term *finis*, St. Thomas is referring to the *finis proximus* of the *electio* or the *finis operantis* of the *intentio*. It seems to us that the only way to resolve these ambiguities is to consider all of the other texts in which Aquinas treats of this question, which we have tried to do. Indeed, in some of the more difficult cases, only through a great familiarity with Aquinas's thought can certain interpretive difficulties be resolved.

This leaves us with the authors of the first and the third group. The former tend to identify the object of a human action with some physical object around which the action is built or performed, while the latter consider this object as a proposal of action conceived and measured by the practical reason. To compare these two positions I will begin with the observation that, throughout his writings, St. Thomas emphasizes with a certain insistence that the object of the will is a rational good.¹⁵² It could not be otherwise, given that the will is a rational

enim actus cadens super indebitam materiam, cum enim voces sint signa naturaliter intellectuum, innaturale est et indebitum quod aliquis voce significet id quod non habet in mente"; *De malo*, q. 7, a. 1, c.: "exteriores 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" (exterior acts differ generically by reason of their objects. Hence it is commonly said that an act bearing on due or proper matter is good generically and an act bearing on undue matter is evil generically).

151. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 110, a. 3, c.: "quod est secundum se malum ex genere, nullo modo potest esse bonum et licitum, quia ad hoc quod aliquid sit bonum, requiritur quod omnia recte concurrant; bonum enim est ex integra causa, malum autem est ex singularibus defectibus, ut Dionysius dicit, IV cap. de Div. Nom. Mendacium autem est malum ex genere" (An action that is naturally evil in respect of its genus can by no means be good and lawful, since in order for an action to be good it must be right in every respect: because good results from a complete cause, while evil results from any single defect, as Dionysius asserts (Div. Nom. iv). Now a lie is evil in respect of its genus).
152. Cf. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1, cap. 74, n. 2: "Bonum enim intellectum est obiectum voluntatis" (the intellectual good is the object of will); *ibidem*, cap. 81, n. 3: "bonum intellectum sit proprium obiectum voluntatis" (the intellectual good is the proper object of will); *ibidem*, lib. 3, cap. 107, n. 7: "proprium enim obiectum voluntatis est bonum intellectum. Bonum autem voluntatis est in eo quod sequitur intellectum: sicut in nobis bonum est quod est secundum rationem, quod autem est praeter hoc, malum est" (the proper object of the will is the intellectual good. The good of the will is in following the intellect: for us the good is that which is according to reason, and that which is besides it [reason] is evil); *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 21, a. 1, ad 2: "bonum intellectum sit obiectum voluntatis" (good as perceived by intellect is the object of the will); *ibidem*, q. 82, a. 4, c.: "bonum intellectum est obiectum voluntatis" (the good understood is the object of the will); *ibidem*, I-II, q. 56, a. 6, c.: "obiectum voluntati sit bonum rationis voluntati proportionatum" (the object of the will is the good of reason propor-

appetite.¹⁵³ Now, a rational good is not a simple *res physica*. A house, as a simple *res physica*, is not yet a rational good, and therefore cannot yet be considered a potential *obiectum voluntatis*. To buy a house, to sell a house, to rent a house, to inherit a house, to own a house and so on – *these* are rational goods, capable by their very nature of attracting the movement of the will, and as such they can be called *obiecta voluntatis*.

If natural agents act by determination of their proper form, intellectual agents propose to themselves, under the aspect of the good, the ends toward which they tend. Along these lines Aquinas states with great clarity that “the intellectual agent acts in view of the end as he proposes the end to himself, whereas the natural agent, though he has an end in view [...] does not determine the end for himself, because he does not know the *ratio* of the end, but is moved to a particular end by another. Conversely, the intellectual agent does not set an end for himself except under the aspect of the good. In fact, the intelligible does not move except under the aspect of the good, which is the *obiectum voluntatis*.”¹⁵⁴ It seems quite clear to us, then, bearing in mind all that has been said, that for St. Thomas the object of the human act is always a practical good, which is proposed in its formality (*ratio boni*) and measured in its morality (*commensuratio*) by the practical reason.¹⁵⁵ To recognize this fact does not imply the denial of the existence of a material dimension of the object. St. Thomas explicitly recognizes these two dimensions when he says that “in the object of the will two aspects must be considered, one like the material, which is properly the thing desired, and the

tionate to the will); *ibidem*, II-II, q. 82, a. 3, c.: “bonum intellectum est obiectum voluntatis” (the object of the will is a good understood); *De potentia*, q. 10, a. 2, c.: “bonum enim intellectum est obiectum voluntatis” (the intellectual good is the object of will); *De malo*, q. 3, a. 6, ad 2: “bonum intellectum est obiectum voluntatis” (the understood good is the object of the will); *ibidem*, a. 8, c.: “bonum intellectum est voluntatis obiectum” (the understood good is the object of the will); *De virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2: “bonum intellectum est obiectum voluntatis” (the object of the will is a good understood); *ibidem*, a. 8, ad 13: “bonum intellectum est obiectum voluntatis” (the object of the will is a good understood); *ibidem*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 12: “bonum intellectum est obiectum voluntatis” (the object of the will is a good understood); *Compendium theologiae*, lib. 1, cap. 33: “Bonum enim intellectum, cum sit obiectum voluntatis” (the intellectual good, that is the object of will).

153. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 1, a. 2, c.: “rationalem appetitum, qui dicitur voluntas” (the “rational appetite,” which is called the will).

154. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 3, n. 7: “Agens per intellectum agit propter finem sicut determinans sibi finem: agens autem per naturam, licet agat propter finem, ut probatum est, non tamen determinat sibi finem, cum non cognoscat rationem finis, sed movetur in finem determinatum sibi ab alio. Agens autem per intellectum non determinat sibi finem nisi sub ratione boni: intelligibile enim non movet nisi sub ratione boni, quod est obiectum voluntatis.”

155. Cf. *ibidem*, cap. 10, n. 12: “Voluntas vero movetur ex iudicio virtutis apprehensivae, quae iudicat hoc esse bonum vel malum, quae sunt voluntatis obiecta” (in fact, the will is moved by the judgment of the apprehensive power that judges this to be good or evil, that are the objects of will).

other like the formal, or the *ratio volendi*, which is the end.”¹⁵⁶ It is true that there is a material dimension or element in the human act. What seems to us to go beyond Aquinas’s thought is to assume, more or less explicitly, the existence of a material moral object. As we have just seen, the *res physica* cannot be the object of the will except under a specific *ratio boni*; it therefore makes no sense to speak of a material *moral* object. One can only apply the term moral object (*obiectum voluntatis*) to the *ipsa res volita* (the willed thing itself) when it is considered together with the *ratio volendi* (aspect under which it is willed). Without the *ratio volendi* it is not possible that a simple *res* be an object of the will, because it is not yet a rational good, susceptible of being desired rationally. The end of the movement of the will to a proximate end is an exterior *act*, and not an exterior thing, and this because the exterior thing, as such, cannot be the end of an act of the will; it is not yet, considered in itself, a practical good, and thus a potential object of the rational appetite that is the will. Along these lines, St. Thomas states with great clarity that “the exterior *action* is the object of the will, inasmuch as it is proposed to the will by the reason, as a good apprehended and ordained by the reason.”¹⁵⁷ The ontological goodness as such falls entirely outside of the object proper of the will.¹⁵⁸

Therefore, bearing in mind St. Thomas’s texts that we presented at the beginning of this essay, together with these final considerations, it seems to us that the interpretation of the third group is more in agreement with Aquinas’s thought, i.e., that the object of the human act must be understood precisely as a specific *actio*, and not as a *res physica* regulated by reason. ■

156. IDEM, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, in “Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita,” t. 22, Editori di San Tommaso, Rome 1970-1976, q. 23, a. 7, c.: “in obiecto voluntatis duo sunt consideranda: unum quod est quasi materiale, scilicet ipsa res volita; aliud quod est quasi formale, scilicet ratio volendi, quae est finis.”

157. *Summa theologiae*, II, q. 20, a. 1, ad 1: “actus exterior est obiectum voluntatis, in quantum proponitur voluntati a ratione ut quoddam bonum apprehensum et ordinatum per rationem.” Emphasis added.

158. Cf. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 85, n. 3: “Omnis electio et actualis voluntas in nobis immediate ex apprehensione intelligibili causatur: bonum enim intellectum est obiectum voluntatis” (every choice and act of will in us proceeds immediately from an intelligible apprehension, in fact the intellectual good is the object of will).