Right Reason and the Moral Order

The activity of any being is right and good when such activity is in agreement with the formal nature and end of that being. Bad action is a sort of dynamic “de-formity”; it lacks conformity with the existing nature of the agent. Things in this universe, below the level of man, lack freedom. Their actions tend automatically towards their ends. In plants and brutes, for instance, “bad” action can only mean failure to achieve their specific ends, due to the intervention of external impediments. There is no moral good or evil in infra-human agents.

Man must use his capacity for free action, in order to work toward his ultimate end. He must know what he should do; choose the appropriate means to do it; and then use these means. It is the function of reason to order free actions toward an end. Reason is the specific difference of man. His substantial form is rational. When man acts reasonably, he acts in accord with his own formal nature. When he acts unreasonably, consciously doing what he sincerely thinks wrong, he abuses the very power with which his free acts are produced. Just as it is bad and abusive for a wood saw to be used to cut steel, because such use destroys the capacity of the saw to do its proper work, so is it abusive and bad for a man to use his faculty of reason in thinking out and ordering actions which are contrary to human reason. There is something warped and twisted in all immoral action.

By the use of speculative reason, man can know something of the formal natures of all other existing things. He can understand the objective relations of his own nature to other real things in the universe. He knows that there are many kinds of less perfect beings than man. He can be shown, by metaphysical reasoning, that this finite universe could not have come into being, and could not continue to work according to very precise scientific formulae, unless there be an existing God, Who causes all things to exist and operate in accord with an intelligent plan. Even men who have had no training in the logical processes of reflecting on the necessary Source of all things have a primitive and natural conviction that there is a Supreme Being Who regulates the universe. There is a real order of beings, in which man occupies a very definite place. It is right for man to know his place and function among other beings. It is right for him to act in conformity with this right knowledge.

One of the things which made the ancient Greeks a great people was their general respect for life in accord with reason. While they did not always succeed in living up to their ideals, the literature, art and philosophy of the Greeks are representative of this high regard for reason. Their moral teachers, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, taught that the good man is the reasonable man. Stoicism, beginning three centuries before Christ and lasting for about five centuries into the Christian era, was one of the greatest and most influential systems of natural ethics. The Stoics taught that man should live, “in conformity with nature.” They considered nature to be permeated by a universal law of Reason, giving order to all things. This concept was taken over into Roman law and has exerted a great influence on later political and social institutions.

In the Christian Church, great teachers of the early centuries saw that reason is the mark of man’s dignity and the stamp of God’s Law on the human soul. St. Ambrose adapted Stoic rationalism to the practical use of the Church. St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and St. John Damascene applied it to the life of the individual Christian. A Greek Christian writer, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, continued this classic tradition, impressing on the mind of nearly every Christian spiritual writer, from the sixth to the fifteenth century, the view that a human act is good when all the pertinent causes or reasons for it are present, and bad when any necessary reason is lacking. Dionysius is the source of the axiom continually cited by St. Thomas: “bonum
causatur ex integra causa, malum autem ex singularibus defectibus."  

Commenting on a passage in Aristotle, St. Thomas gives a terse but very accurate summary of the relation between good action and right reason:

The good for any thing whatever consists in the fact that its action is in agreement with its form. Now, the form proper to man is that which makes him a rational animal. Consequently, it must be that a man's action is good from the fact that it is in accord with right reason. For the perversion of reason is repugnant to the nature of reason.  

The accompanying diagram of The Rational Order will help to explain the nature of right reason. At the top of the diagram is the Reason of God. That God is the First Cause of all existing and possible beings, is a conclusion of thomistic metaphysics. Hence, all finite beings, including man, are produced and maintained in being by God. All beings operate in accordance with the Divine Plan or Reason. If we could know directly the Eternal Reasons for all things, we might have a perfect understanding of what is right about every proposed finite action; we would then be masters of all practical knowledge. But man on this earth does not know directly what is in the Mind of God. Nor has God made known the Eternal Reasons for all things and events, even through supernatural revelation.

However, the moral agent may come to understand enough about the reasons, i.e., the specific natures and objective relations, of things in this world of nature to comprehend the part which man should play in life. The long arrow running vertically, at the left of the diagram, suggests that the Eternal Reason is the Source of all the finite reasons in the world of nature. All natural beings, except man, work automatically in accord with the Divine Reason.

Thus, while earthly man does not enjoy a direct vision of the Divine Reasons (the exemplary causes) in the Mind of God, he does know a universe which is rationally contrived, and which works in conformity with the Divine Plan. This means that the reasoning intellect of each man has some indirect knowledge of God's Reason.

\[\text{ETERNAL REASON} \rightarrow \text{HUMAN REASON} \rightarrow \text{MORAL SCIENCE} \rightarrow \text{AREA OF PRUDENCE}\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{SUPERIOR:} & \quad \text{Judgment of Synderesis:} \\
& \quad \text{("The good is to be done.")} \\
\text{II:} & \quad \text{Judgment of Moral Science:} \\
& \quad \text{("It is good to help others in distress.")} \\
\text{III:} & \quad \text{Impersonal Particular Judgment:} \\
& \quad \text{("This drowning man should be helped.")} \\
\text{IV:} & \quad \text{Personal Particular Judgment:} \\
& \quad \text{("I should save this drowning man.")} \\
\text{V:} & \quad \text{Judgment of Choice:} \\
& \quad \text{("I will save this man now.")} \\
\text{INFERIOR:} & \quad \text{First Principle} \\
\end{align*}\]

\[\text{FINITE REASONS OF NATURAL BEINGS}\]

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7 S.T., I-II, 19, 6, ad primum; quoting Dionysius, De Divinis Nominibus, c. 4, PG 31, 729.
8 In II Ethic., lect. 2; ed. Pirotta, p. 89, n. 257.
through the direct knowledge which every man has of the way that things exist and act in this world. Such common human knowledge of objective reality is called speculative knowledge. It need not be technical, or "scientific," in order to be right. In speculative reasoning, man thinks out some of the implications of his intellectual experience of the world about him. The conclusions of speculative reasoning may be newly discovered judgments about existing things; or these conclusions may be verifications of judgments, previously held in some tentative manner. Speculative reasoning is not always right but it may be rectified by reference to the world of existing realities which are its objects. Thus, the speculative conclusion that the earth is flat may be tested and proved wrong by reference to more accurate and more extensive sense knowledge of the shape of this earth. That some human beings may continue to reason incorrectly about such a matter, does not mean that the majority of men lack objective certainty on this point. The measure, or standard (regula), of rightness in speculative reasoning is the existing and objective nature of real things.

The triangular figure in the middle of the diagram is representative of human reason, in this objective order of reason. Man is a real being, existing as part of a rational universe. Human reason is the specific difference of mankind. All finite beings have "reasons," in the sense of formally distinct principles of existence and activity. Men have a "reason," which is the formal principle of human existence; this is the substantial form, the soul, of man. Now, it happens that the nature of man is marked off by its capacity to reason discursively, according to the rules which have been studied in logic. Man is fulfilling his formal role in the universe, when he acts in accord with his reason.

As soon as we begin to think about how to act, we are using practical reasoning. It is the same power of intellect that we use in reasoning speculatively or practically. In fact, we must know what things are (i.e., use speculative reason) before we can reasonably decide what to do about these things (i.e., use practical reason). The process of practical reasoning (more fully to be examined in Chapter VII) is represented by the narrowing down of the triangle in mid-diagram. Practical reasoning may start with general or particular knowledge of things, but it must terminate in a most particular judgment to the effect that the moral agent will (or will not) do a singular action under concrete circumstances.

The ultimate beginning of practical reasoning is found in the first principle of thinking about what should be done. Stated in its most universal form, this practical principle is simply: "The good should be done; evil should be avoided." Every man recognizes the rightness of this rule; though not every man may be able to formulate it. We shall see in the next chapter that it is known through the intellectual habit called syndenesis. In the same way, every man is guided in his thinking by the first principle of speculative reasoning, which is the principle of noncontradiction. It is not immediately practical to know that the good should be done. What is practical, is to know what things are good and then to do them.

Our initial moral reasonings terminate in universal judgments about actions which are generically good, and so to be done, and actions which are generically evil, and to be avoided. Thus, we may reason to the conclusion: "It is generally good to help others in distress." This kind of practical reasoning is used technically to establish the conclusions of moral science (ethics and moral theology), to formulate positive laws of a society, and also in our nontechnical, but personal, reflections on what is right and wrong in human action. Now, the important point is that general moral conclusions about morality are nearly always rightly made. If we get back to sufficiently universal rules and eliminate misunderstandings due to variations in terminology, we find that human beings agree to a remarkable extent about the general rules of conduct. Most of the rules of the Decalogue are accepted by all peoples, civilized and primitive. Even a thief becomes morally indignant when his own property is stolen.

These general conclusions about what is right and wrong are not made at the whim of the thinker. They depend on our true knowledge (through the speculative intellect) of the natures and relations of objectively existing realities. Nor are these moral rules deduced from a mere analysis of first practical principles. They are formed
by the process of practical reasoning about the ever increasing content of actual human experience. The principles are a guide for such reasoning but the content of the conclusions is derived from empirical knowledge. The moral agent must observe the world about him, his own nature and capacities, his place in the whole of things. Such intelligent observation is the basis for the conclusions of right speculative thinking. Right speculative knowledge is the source, in its turn, of right practical knowledge; for practical knowledge is simply the application of speculative knowledge to action. To know whether the act of killing a dog is of the same moral value as the act of killing a man, under identical circumstances, one must first understand what a dog is and what a man is.

The rightness of practical reasoning, then, depends on the rightness of speculative reasoning. But right action cannot be determined by universal rules alone. The moral agent, in the process of practical reasoning, must move forward beyond the realm of general rules through a series of more and more particular judgments. These judgments are indicated in the triangle of the diagram by the vertical lines, numbered III and IV, and the point which is numbered V. The narrowing down of the triangle to its point, at the right, suggests the decreasing universality of the practical judgments, eventually reaching the singular decision to act or not to act. Each practical judgment is the term of a deliberative process of practical reasoning. We shall see later that each process of reasoning to a practical conclusion may be expressed in syllogistic terms.

Judgment III is the first kind of particular operative judgment. At this point we find impersonal judgments about actual moral problems. That is to say, we are now in the area of prudence, of right reasoning about concretely proposed moral actions. The conclusion reached in judgment III is governed by the universal rule in judgment II, but results also from an added definite knowledge of the circumstances of the present moral problem. Such knowledge is acquired through sensation and intelligent interpretation of the sensed situation. In judgment III, one may conclude for instance: "This drowning person should be helped." This judgment is particular, in the sense that it applies to this one moral case; it is still somewhat universal, in the sense that it does not determine the one moral agent who should save him. Such a practical but impersonal moral judgment is usually right, because the thinker is not yet personally involved and his judgment is not likely to be swayed by personal feelings or passions. We may place the end of objective right reason at point III.

Judgment IV is personal and particular: "I should save this drowning man." This is the dictate of moral conscience. If made in accord with the rightness of the preceding judgment, this dictate retains the rightness of judgment III. But judgment IV is preceded by a further rational deliberation, including the addition of additional factual information about the circumstances of the agent. Thus, if one decides that a drowning man should be saved, and then observes that there is a good reason why one cannot do this act, the dictate of conscience may quite rightly be: "I should not save this man."

Moreover the judgment of conscience may run counter to the objective rightness of the whole situation. Such a conscience is called erroneous. This just means that the personal judgment of the agent is contrary to what a perfect knower would judge to be right in this situation. Now, erroneous conscience may be of two general types; the error in judgment IV may be either voluntary or involuntary. If it is voluntary, then the judgment of conscience is not right, either objectively or subjectively, for the agent is responsible for the mistake which he is making. But if the error is involuntary, then an objectively erroneous conscience is said to be subjectively right. Suppose our potential life-saver has been trained from earliest youth to regard swimming on Sunday as intrinsically immoral, an offense against the law of God. Suppose he has had no opportunity to rectify this mistaken belief. Under these circumstances, his judgment (that he should not save this drowning person) is objectively wrong but subjectively right. We shall discuss in Chapter VI the extent to which an erroneous conscience is obligatory. All that we need note here, is that objective right reason is not possible for all men to attain at all times. Right reason is the proximate standard of rightness in moral action, but this should not be taken to mean that it is always easy to judge what should be done. To the extent that he is able,
man should govern his moral actions by reference to right reason. No type of ethics tries to require the agent to do anything more than is possible, in order to be good.

We should also notice that moral conscience, represented as judgment IV, is the last purely cognitive act in the process of practical reasoning. The process of practical reasoning is performed at the volitional initiative of the will of the agent, of course, and it may be stopped, when the agent so wills; but it is essentially a series of intellectual acts. The last of these nonaffective acts of practical judgment is moral conscience. After the judgment of conscience, the decisive act is the act of election which goes on in the will, as directed by the practical intellect. Election is rational choice, so there must be a reason, embodied in a last practical judgment, for every choice. It is obvious that choice may be in opposition to the judgment of conscience; otherwise choice would not be free and man would not be able to make a bad choice. Hence, there must be a final practical judgment (no. V) in which the agent ultimately commits himself to an object of choice. This last practical judgment presents the proposed object of choice as a real, or apparent, good. Because it is the last practical judgment, the power of free choice (essentially, the will) must be governed by this judgment. This means that the last practical judgment is last, because the will of the agent so determines. If conscience is right, then its rightness may continue into the last practical judgment which is made in accord with conscience. If conscience is right, and the last practical judgment is opposed to it, then the choice must be bad. If conscience is wrong subjectively, the agent must have some suspicion of this error, and so he must reconsider his reasoning and make a new and right judgment of conscience.

After the choice has been made, there is still another act of the practical intellect (not shown in the diagram which deals only with

9 *De Verit.,* q. 17, 1, ad 4m: "judicium conscientiae consistit in pura cognitione; judicium autem liberi arbitrii in applicazione cognitionis ad affectionem, quod quidem judicium est judicium electionis." Cf. *In II Sent.,* d. 14, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3m.

10 *De Verit.,* q. 24, 2.c: "judicium de hoc particullari operabili ut nunc numquam potest esse contrarium appetitu."
God so understands and wills them. But it must also be remembered that man does not possess a natural knowledge of what is in God’s Mind. Hence, a modern theistic idealist (such as Immanuel Kant) may retain some conviction that there is a real difference between moral good and moral evil. But a modern non-theistic idealist (such as are many of Kant’s followers) is left without any standard of moral judgment, because he no longer believes in a God Who requires man to do his moral duty. In much modern ethics, no real standard of morality can be found, precisely because most modern philosophers think that man cannot know the real truth about things. That is why there are few references to modern books on ethics, in this course. Modern ethicicians frequently teach the history of ethical systems, without much attempt to suggest which they think right; or they teach descriptive courses based on surveys of the moral opinions of various classes of people. 11

The student will find brief explanations of St. Thomas’ understanding of the proximate and ultimate rules of morality, in: Appendix to Chap. IV, Text One: Standards of Morality: Human Reason, Eternal Law; and Text Two: The Voluntary Act and the Reason of the Object. For the best English exposition of the teaching, read: E. Gilson, Moral Values and the Moral Life, pp. 79–90. For other references see the end of this chapter.

The Moral Determinants: Object, Circumstances, End

There are three factors, or moral determinants, which must be considered in judging whether a concrete human act is morally good or bad, as a whole. These determinants are: the formal object of the action (ratio objecti), the circumstances, and the end.

We have seen that moral goodness always implies conformity with reason. Now, when an agent performs any moral act he thinks of the kind of act which he may do, and his practical intellect pre-

11 A recent and quite representative text is: R. A. Tsanoff, Ethics (New York and London, 1947). It is a sincere and well-written book. It will show the student the need for personal reflection on moral problems. It offers little help in the solution of these problems.

reason the standard of morality

sents a judgment which formally determines the act of choice which he elicits through his will. This act of choice cannot be made unless the general inclination of the will toward goodness is specified by the intellectual knowledge of the agent. This means that one must have some sort of intellectual motive, a reason, for every moral action.

Let us say that the agent considers the performance of a certain external action: burning another man’s finger. We shall see in a moment that this external action is the material object of the whole moral action. However, many reasons could be found for burning a man’s finger. Some such reasons could make the whole action morally approvable (as in the case of cauterizing a wound) and others could make the action morally bad (as in the case of burning a man’s finger with a lighted cigarette for a practical joke). It will be observed that the formal object includes what the agent intends to do, as is clear in the above cases, but it goes beyond the intention. We intend ends or purposes, whether they be ultimate or proximate. What makes the cauterization of a wound a good moral action, in some cases, is not merely the intending of a good end (to help the wounded person) but also the rational choice of as good a means as is possible under the concrete circumstances. In contemplating such an action, the agent, already intending a good end, thinks of the kind of action which he may do to achieve this intended end. Then he chooses to do this species of action, rather than any other kind, because he judges that it is the best means at his disposal for the attainment of this purpose. If he makes a bad choice, formally, there is some failure on his part to deliberate and judge properly. Granted the goodness of his intention, the agent may clearly be held responsible for the deliberation and choice of the right means to his intended end.

But what is to determine the rightness of the means? Obviously not merely the right intention or purpose of the agent; this is important and will be considered next, under the determinant which is the end. Besides intending the right end, the agent must think of a certain species of external action which, in his best judgment, will reasonably attain this end. Such a rationally considered species or
kind of action, as understood and chosen by the agent, is his formal motive for performing the external action. This formal motive, or objective reason for the action, is what St. Thomas calls the *ratio objecti.*

Thus, in the example of cautering a wound, the agent who intends to help a wounded friend may consider the whole situation and decide that he should burn this man's wound. Let us say that he goes ahead and burns it. If later, a medical doctor tells him that the cautering harmed rather than helped the wounded person, this does not necessarily mean that the action of cautering was morally bad. The doctor's criticism has to do with the success of the external action. The moral problem centers chiefly in the way that the agent deliberated, judged, and chose this species of action. Hence, it is quite possible for an agent to perform an action which is *formally* good (i.e., as he sincerely understands the action it is the best thing for him to do) and which is *materially* bad (i.e., the external action produces harmful results). What determines the moral character of the whole action is the fitness of this kind or species of action to the reasoning agent, having a certain intention under these concrete circumstances. The interior act of will is formally determined, then, by its relation to the reason of the agent. We may say that the rational motive (*ratio objecti*) is simply the way in which a certain species of action is rationally grasped by the agent. So, the moral character of the act of cautering would become evil if the agent did it, in order to enjoy the suffering of the wounded person. Not only the intention of the agent is changed here; the formal species of his action is changed. He is now performing an act of torture. Hence, his way of rationally grasping the proposed external act (i.e., his *ratio objecti*) is different from that of the agent who wishes to be helpful.

While the foregoing means that the moral agent must know what he is doing, it does not demand of such an agent a technical knowledge of the "species" of human actions, similar to that technical knowledge which a zoologist should have of the species of animals. As we have noted, the two great moral species are *good* and *evil.*

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12 S.T., I-II, 18, 2c and ad 1m. Read also: Appendix to Chap. IV, Text Three: *Formal Object, End, and Circumstances.*

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These we have restated respectively as, conformity to reason, and dissimilarity to reason. So, our present problem is to indicate how acts of certain types are known to be in accord with reason, and how acts of other kinds are known to be in discord with reason.

St. Thomas' suggestion, in regard to the solution of this problem, is that the agent should consider, first of all, the principal virtue to which the matter of the proposed act is related. The general theory of the four cardinal virtues is a necessary part of general ethics for this reason, and it will be studied in Chapter VIII. But, it is justifiable and necessary to anticipate now what is a matter of common knowledge, viz., that there are four basic moral virtues: prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. Most human actions will fall under the species of the last three, because prudence is concerned with right reasoning about any and every moral problem. Now, temperance includes the subject matter of any problem involving the rational regulation of concupiscence. Fortitude covers all the problems presented to reason by the irascible appetite, all cases where there is a question of the reasonable mean in fearing and daring. Justice deals with the exchange and distribution of external goods, in relation to some other person. Similarly, each theological virtue, faith, hope and charity, deals with a distinct subject matter. All that is necessary, then, in determining whether a moral action is good or bad, from the point of view of its subject matter (*materialiter*), is to place it under its proper virtue and then determine whether it is opposed to this virtue, or not. Thus, neglecting circumstances and the end (which are to be considered next), an act of risking one's life may be distinguished from an act of adultery, or of stealing, because risking one's life is related to fortitude. Adultery belongs under temperance (when viewed as an act of concupiscence), under justice (when viewed as the appropriation of another's property). Stealing is an act that is simply related to justice. Of course, various circumstances and ends may place the same act under more than one virtue. Thus a man may steal in order to satisfy intemperate desires, but the original character of stealing remains an act in opposition to justice. So, to judge whether an act is good or bad, in its formal object, one has

13 De Malo, q. 2, a. 6c.
sacred objects, another specific object is reached, by comparing the whole act with reason; it is a sacrilege.¹⁴

Continuing the same reasoning, we can see that the third moral determinant, the end, is a sort of circumstance. Let us say that the agent considered above, takes away another person’s goods so that the agent may keep his own family from dying. The fact that the agent’s family is in dire need is an important circumstance; it is also the basis for the good intention of the agent. In this case, he has a good end (to satisfy the extreme needs of his family, which he cannot do otherwise), and his act now has a new formal object. At this point of our consideration, the formal object is the relationship of the act, as now known, to reason. St. Thomas says: “though the end is an extrinsic cause, nevertheless the proper proportion to the end, and the relation to it, is something present within the action.”¹⁵

The three moral determinants are not mutually exclusive. When the individual act is to be judged, it must be viewed as one act, to be done or not to be done. Thus, in practice, there is no point to the making of an abstract judgment that the act is good from the point of view of its end (and so, to be done), but bad from another point of view, say of a certain circumstance (and so, not to be done). No action could rationally result from such a pluralization of the morality of the act. What is necessary is that the whole act be considered as an integral unit. This will involve the original formal object, the various pertinent circumstances, and the end for which it is to be done. All taken together and related to reason, in one formal unity, constitute the absolute character of the action. The agent must decide not to do it, if any significant determinant is lacking in reasonable goodness. He may decide to do it, if all are in keeping with reason, and it is a morally optional act. He must decide to do it, if all are good and if the situation is such that he is morally expected to act. If he fails in any of these situations, then he is guilty of an immoral act. Thus, no concrete, individual, moral act is morally neu-

¹⁴ *S.T.*, I-II, 18, arts. 10 and 11c.
¹⁵ *S.T.*, I-II, 18, 4, ad 1m; see the whole *corpus* of art. 4.
It might be thought much more simple to say that there is a set of moral rules, or laws, and that the agent, knowing these precepts, may judge his individual action in reference to them. This is partly true. It is a help to have acquired some knowledge of practical maxims of good behavior. However, from the philosophical point of view, as opposed to the legal approach, the question of metaphysical priority must be considered. Is it wrong to murder because there is a law against it, or because murder is an action which is in disformity with rational, human nature? The law is simply a universal formulation of the real relation of the proposed action to the reason of the agent. Beings are metaphysically prior to precepts. Hence, the ethical basis for the distinction of good and evil is not the natural moral law (which will be discussed in the next chapter), but the real nature of the human agent, on which natural moral law is proximately founded. If it be argued that the Law of God is the ultimate foundation for such distinctions, that may immediately be granted. But the point is, that the Law of God is really identical with the Reason and Nature of God. So, even from the ultimate point of view, law is not prior to being. St. Thomas is very clear on this matter, which is not so well understood by a later generation of legalistic moralists:

Nor should it be said, that they [human acts, or more specifically, sins] differ specifically according to the difference of precepts; rather on the contrary, the precepts are distinguished according to the difference of the virtues and vices, for precepts are for the sake of operating in accord with virtue and of avoiding sins. If indeed, some acts were sins solely because they were prohibited, then it would be reasonable for these sins to be specifically differentiated by the differences of the precepts.16

The Morality of the Interior and of the Exterior Act

Within the human agent, the potency which proximately gives rise to the moral act is the will. Without will, man would be morally paralyzed. The acts completed within the will we have called elicited acts, and they are also called interior acts. These may be distinguished from the acts of other potencies, and in particular from bodily acts, which are called exterior acts. It is necessary, now, to think of the moral specification, into good and evil, of both interior and exterior acts.

The goodness or evil of the interior act of will depends solely on the formal object. Circumstances which are merely accidental to the external performance of the act have no bearing, then, on the moral value of the will-act, as such. Of course, the end is the object of the will, in the order of intention. Hence, as far as the interior act is concerned, there is no real difference between the goodness or evil which derives from the end and the goodness or evil which depends on the formal object.18

Since the formal object of the interior act of will is what is proposed to the will by reason, the foregoing means that the will-act, considered apart from the exterior act, is good, if in accord with right reason (the problems associated with erroneous practical reaoning require detailed consideration and will be treated in Chapter VI) and bad, if in discord with the rational judgment of the agent.19

The question of the effect of good or bad intention, on the morality of the interior act, may be subdivided. If the intention precedes the will-act which is being considered, and is the cause of this act of will, then the goodness or badness of the will-act depends on the nature of the intention. For example, if the agent first intends to honor God, and as a result wills to fast because of this intention, the good of the intention carries over into the following will-act. On the same basis, the desire to fast, for the sake of a good intention, would be vitiated by the evil intention. However, if the act of intending follows the completed will-act, for instance, one wishes to do something and, as an afterthought, relates this to a good intention, the goodness of the intention does not retroact upon the preceding will-act. But such a good intention may make another consequent will-act good.20 Similarly, a consequent bad intention does not make

16 S.T., I-II, 19, 2c. and ad primum. 18 S.T., loc. cit., a. 5 and 6c. 19 Loc. cit., a. 7c.
the prior will-act evil, but it does vitiate the will-act which follows.  

It is quite possible for two people to will contrary things, and yet both perform morally good interior acts. This point is illustrated by an interesting example, given by St. Thomas. Suppose a just judge decides that a thief must be punished. Next, suppose that the thief's wife wishes that her husband will not be punished. The judge's will-act is good from the point of view of what is reasonable in view of the common good. The wife's will-act is morally good in relation to what is reasonable from the point of view of the good of her family. Since the Will of God is always directed to the common good, the judge's will may be objectively in accord with the Will of God, and the wife's may not be. So, there are cases (as in the wife's instance) where the moral agent may perform a morally good interior act which is not in keeping with the Divine Will. This must be carefully understood. To will something for a private good is not justifiable, unless it also be referred to the common good. Let us say, in the preceding example, that both the judge and the wife formally recognize the need of promoting the common good. They differ materially, however, in their willing of the means to this end. The wife may think that the loss of her husband's support will impair the welfare of her family and thus his imprisonment would not be for the common good. Hence, formally, both judge and wife would be in accord with the Will of God (in promoting the common good); but materially, only one of them would agree with God as to the proper means in this case. Man does not know, by his natural reason, what God would actually will in such a contingent case. Hence, in ethics, we cannot use the Will of God as a standard of the material goodness of an interior will-act.  

It should be clearly understood that the interior act is the root and source of the moral quality of the whole moral act. That is to say, "if the act of the will be good, the external act will also be good; but the latter will be bad, if the will-act is bad." Goodness or evil in the exterior act, which are neither directly nor indirectly willed by the agent, are not voluntary and do not alter the moral character of the act, as a whole. That is why the interior act is of primary importance in ethics.  

Turning now to the exterior, commanded act, we should notice first that it may be morally good in two ways. Certain of these acts are specifically good, because they are of such a nature that they agree, objectively, with reason. For example, to feed the poor and clothe the naked are good kinds of actions. They may be done for a bad intention, and this will make the whole act bad, for the agent with the bad intention. Even in such a case, there remains an objective goodness in these exterior acts (which does not redound to the agent's moral credit, because his act is not willed for the sake of a moral good). Where the interior act is good, and it is completed by an exterior act which has such a goodness of its own, there is obviously a kind of double goodness in the whole moral act. Hence, good deeds are of positive moral value. It is better to do what is good, having willed the good, than just to will to do what is good.  

Secondly, there are some exterior acts which are in themselves, morally neutral. When commanded by reason and will, these may become either good or bad. Where such an exterior act is morally good, it obtains its goodness from the interior act. There is, in such cases, but one goodness in the whole moral act, interior and exterior. Hence, if some unwilled cause prevents the performance of an objectively indifferent exterior act, the whole moral act is just as good as if it had been carried out externally. Similarly, where the exterior act is morally indifferent, an act which becomes morally bad because of the character of the interior act is just as bad, when the exterior act is prevented by some involuntary cause, as it is when it is externally completed. Of course, in the case of the bad act culminating in an accomplished exterior act, there is a possibility of additional will-acts, say of fruition, which may add to the total evil of the whole action. St. Thomas deals with the complications of such cases with precision:  

If we speak of the goodness of the exterior act, which is derived from the goodness of the end, then the external act adds nothing to this goodness:  

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21 Loc. cit., ad 3m.  
22 S.T., I-II, 19, 10, 3.  
23 Ibid., ad primum.  
24 C.G., III, c. 10.  
25 Read: Summa contra Gentiles, III, 10; in Pegis, Basic Writings, II, 17-21.  
26 S.T., I-II, 19, 10, 3. De Malo, q. 2, a. 2, ad 8m.
except in the case where the will, in itself, becomes better in good instances, or worse in evil instances. This would seem to be possible in three ways. First, *numerically*. If, for example, a man wishes to do something, with either a good or a bad end, and then does not do it, and if later he wishes it and does it: the act of will is doubled and so a double good, or a double evil, is done. Secondly, *extensively*. For instance, one man wishes to do something with a good or bad end, and stops because of some impediment, but another man continues the movement of his will until he completes the work: it is evident that [the latter's] will-act lasts longer in regard to the good or evil, and is, because of this, worse or better. Thirdly, *intensively*. There are some exterior acts which, because of their pleasurable or painful nature, are naturally capable of increasing or decreasing the intensity of the will-act. It follows that the more intensely the will inclines to good or evil, the better or worse it is.

Suppose there is some good or evil consequence accompanying the performance of the exterior act: does such a consequence modify the moral value of the human act as a whole? The first point to note in answering this is that certain people are expected to know the regular consequences of certain kinds of actions, because they are experts in such matters. Surgeons should know the ordinary effects of certain surgical operations, for instance, but nonsurgeons are not expected to have such technical knowledge. We distinguish, then, between the man who can reasonably be expected to know the probable consequences of a given action and the man who cannot. The moral responsibility of the expert is greater than that of the nonexpert. This reduces to the question of whether ignorance of such consequences is culpable or not. But where there is no question of culpable ignorance we must make still another distinction in regard to the probability of the consequences. Some results of an action are such that they rarely follow; for instance, few men, in proportion to the total number of participants in hunting deer, are shot by mistake. The agent who performs actions with rare bad consequences is not responsible morally for the occurrence of a materially bad result, if he could not reasonably be expected to foresee that it would happen in his particular case. This merely means that it is not evil to hunt deer, even though one knows that there is always some remote possibility of killing someone by such an action. On the other hand, if

*ST*, I-II, 20, 4.c.

one knows that a given exterior act is followed by certain consequences, *in most cases*, then even though one is not certain that these consequences will result in *this* case, one is morally responsible for the consequences when they do occur.\(^2\) It is to be noted that, unlike some later types of Scholastic ethics, the Thomistic theory places no emphasis on whether these consequences are directly or indirectly intended by the agent. If he knows that the consequences frequently occur, and does the act, he intends them. If he is not sure of the consequences in this particular case but knows that they usually occur, he also intends them. In both cases he is morally responsible for their goodness or evil. If he is not sure that they will follow, and knows that they do not usually follow, he is not morally responsible for them.\(^3\) The moral act must be viewed as a whole, and consequences which are known or should be known ahead, pertain to the original intention of the agent. Any morally bad consequences, then, except those which are purely involuntary, will make an otherwise good act, bad. But good consequences will not make an otherwise bad act, good. The principle always applies: a good act must be good in all its voluntary causes: a bad act is bad because of any single bad feature, provided this defect is voluntary.

We may notice, finally, that three types of moral relations characterize the human act, as a result of its goodness or evil in the order of reason. First, the human act in the relation of rational conformity or diffirrinity with the ultimate end is said to be *right* or *wrong*.\(^4\) It is in this sense that the human act is said to possess the formal character *(rationem)* of rightness or sinfulness. Second, considering right or wrong acts in relation to the responsibility of the agent for his own voluntary acts, we can say that the acts are *praiseworthy* or *culpable*. This second relation deals with what is called the imputability of the moral act.

An act is called culpable or praiseworthy, from the fact that it is imputable to the agent, for, to be praised or blamed is simply that the evil or goodness of his own act is imputed to someone. An act is imputed to an agent, when it is within his power, so that he has dominion over his

\(^2\) *ST*, I-II, 20, 5.c.
\(^3\) *De Malo*, q. 1, a. 4, ad 15m.
\(^4\) *ST*, I-II, 21, 1.c, and ad 2m.
good human act), then, even if this other person is not a fellow citizen in a political society, A acquires merit before God, because all men have at least one end in common, the Ultimate End, God. In this latter sense, all human acts have social merit or demerit before God. This is the field of distributive justice, that is to say, of what is owed to the individual agent, in the way of reward or punishment to be meted out by the society to which he belongs as a member. The two ways in which merit or demerit pertain to the human act are precisely described by St. Thomas:

Merit and demerit are spoken of in relation to the retribution which depends on justice. Now, retribution according to justice is accorded to a man because he acts for the benefit or harm of another person. It should be considered that each man living in some society is in some way a part and member of the whole society. Therefore, whoever does something for the good or evil of anyone existing in the society, does something which affects the whole society; just as he who injures someone's hand, injures the whole man, as a consequence. And so, when a man does something good or evil to another individual person, the formal nature of merit or demerit applies to this act, in two ways. First, because retribution is due him from the whole group. Of course, when a man directly relates his act to the good or evil of the whole group, retribution is due him primarily and principally from the whole group, but secondarily, from all parts of the group. And, when a man does something which bears on his own good or evil, retribution is also due him, inasmuch as this has a general bearing, because he himself is a part of the group. Of course, no retribution is due him from the point of view of it being good or evil to the individual person, for he is the same as the agent, unless perhaps we consider him in relation to himself, analogically, insofar as there is a sort of justice of man to himself.²³

It is apparent, then, that every moral act will have merit or demerit, in the sight of God, in two ways. Since God is the objective ultimate end of human acts, all human acts must be either for or against God, considered as an individual Terminus of voluntary action. Again, since God has care of the whole universe, every human act possesses merit or demerit before God, Who is the Ruler of the general society made up of all men.²⁴

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²¹ S.T., I-II, 21, 3a.
²² S.T., I-II, 21, 3a.
²³ S.T., I-II, 21, 4a.
²⁴ S.T., I-II, 21, 4a.
This is the point at which we might briefly consider the moral force of sanctions. This is the term used by post-Thomistic Scholastics to name those rewards and punishments, which make it advisable to obey the moral law. The position of some writers seems to be that the real reason for a man’s doing what is right is so that he may attain a positive reward and avoid punishment. It was to this superficial legalism that Immanuel Kant objected, throughout his *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant’s feeling was that an agent who did what was morally good, because he was going to be paid for it, was not really a good man. He was convinced that one should do what is right, simply because it is right. Now, setting aside all technical differences between the moral system of Kant and the ethics of Thomism, we may say bluntly that, on this particular point, Kant was right.

It would be a curious distortion of ethics, to say that man should be good because of the sanctions attaching to the natural moral law. The meriting of a reward and the setting up of a moral exigency for punishment (i.e., the acquisition of demerit) are moral consequences which follow upon the moral goodness or evil of the human act. The norm or standard, upon which such goodness or evil is to be determined, is not the success of the act in relation to certain sanctions, but rather the relation of the individual act to the order of reason. If we also know that there is a sort of secondary motive for being morally good, namely, that it pays in terms of reward and punishment in a future life, if not always in the present life, this is but a secondary reason for good action. St. Thomas recognized, as Kant did not, that it is reasonable and morally justifiable to work for an ultimate reward; this is another way of saying that every man should do his best to attain final happiness. But, to exalt moral sanctions into primary motives for moral goodness is neither good Kantianism, nor good Thomism. This is the conclusion of a very good interpreter of the moral position of St. Thomas:

It is not in order to receive a reward or avoid a punishment that one should act in such and such a way, but because his reason demands that he so act and subordinate all his acts to his final end, that is, to God.

Whether he does this or not, his act will be followed by a reward or a punishment; sanctions will be a normal consequence of his activity; they will not be its goal. 83

Summary of Chapter IV

In this chapter, we have faced the problem of the determination of the moral goodness or evil of the individual human act. After looking at various theories of moral standards, we concluded that a valid ethics must have an ultimate, unchangeable criterion of moral value, but that in practice the individual agent must use a proximate and practical standard of morality. The ultimate norm in Thomist ethics is the Reason of God. The proximate norm is human reason, speculatively regulated by the Reason of God, either directly by the immediate influence of God, or indirectly and naturally by man’s ordinary intellectual knowledge of the reasons of finite beings. The rational order includes this speculative area of reasoning and also the practical application of the reasons of things to the control of the voluntary acts of man. The diagram of the *Rational Order* summarizes this situation, whereby man is enabled to translate right knowledge into right action. The reason of the object, or formal object, of the human act is the principle, in accord with which the act is judged to be morally good or bad. As man’s problems are viewed more and more practically and concretely, it is necessary to make this formal object narrower and more concrete, i.e., by including the morally significant circumstances and the end intended by the agent. Thus, abstractly, human acts may be: good, bad, or indifferent. Concretely, the voluntary act must be either for or against man’s attainment of his ultimate end, or to put it another way, it must be either reasonable or unreasonable. It is the addition of the definite circumstances of the act which makes it impossible for the act to be morally neutral. The kind of act which a man performs may be determined in relation to the subject matter of the different virtues. The moral law is not the source of this distinction of virtuous acts, but its consequence.

Distinguishing the interior will-act from the exterior commanded act, we find that each may have a goodness or evil of its own, and that, in cases where the exterior act is morally neutral, it may acquire moral value from the preceding will-act. The interior act is the more important morally, but we cannot neglect the moral quality of the exterior act. As a consequence of its goodness, the moral act is termed: right, praiseworthy, and meritorious—depending on its relation to reason, to the responsibility of the agent, and to a reward. The bad act is similarly called: wrong, culpable, and demeritorious, on the basis of the same relations. Merit in relation to another private individual, and social merit in relation to some society, political or that of all men, are differentiated. Sanctions (rewards and punishments) are not primary motives for good or bad actions.

Appendix to Chapter IV

TEXT ONE: Standards of Morality: Human Reason, Eternal Law. Evil is of wider extension than sin, just as good is of wider extension than the righteous. For any privation of good in anything constitutes the essential nature of evil (rationem mali), but sin consists properly in an act which is done for some end, when it has not a due ordination to that end. Now, a due ordination to an end is measured according to some standard (regulum). And this standard, among things which act according to nature, is the very force (virtus) of nature, which inclines to such an end. Therefore, when an act proceeds from a natural force according to a natural inclination to the end, then rectitude is preserved in the act, because the mean of the act stems from the orderly relation of the active principle to the end, and not from the extremes. When, however, any act draws away from such rectitude, then the essential nature (ratio) of a sin is present.

And, in those things which are done voluntarily, the proximate standard (regula) is human reason, but the supreme standard is the eternal law. Therefore, whenever man's act proceeds to the end, in accordance with the order of reason and of the eternal law, then the act is right; but when it is twisted away from this rightness, it is then called a sin. Now, it is apparent from what has gone before, that every voluntary act that recedes from the order of reason and of the eternal law is thereby bad, and every good act is in agreement with reason and eternal law. (S.T., I-II, 21, 1.c.)

TEXT TWO: The Voluntary Act and the Reason of the Object. Though the act receives its species from the object, it does not receive the species from it considered as a material object, but according to the reason of the object (secundum rationem objecti): just as the act of seeing a stone is not specified by the stone, but by the colored thing which is the essential (per se) object of vision. Now, every human act has the reason [i.e., the formal nature] of a sin, or of a meritorious act, inasmuch as it is voluntary. But the object of the will, according to its proper reason, is the apprehended good; and so, the human act is judged virtuous or vicious, according to the apprehended good toward which the will is essentially attracted, and not according to the material object of the act.

For instance, if, believing that he is killing his father, a man kills a stag, he incurs the sin of patricide. And, on the other hand, if some hunter, thinking to kill a stag, and having taken due care, kills his father by chance, he is quite free from the crime of patricide. Therefore, if something which in itself is not against the Law of God, such as lifting a straw from the ground, or oath-taking, is apprehended by an erring conscience as contrary to the Law of God, and if the will is thus attracted to it, it is plain that the will is attracted to something which, essentially and formally speaking, is against the Law of God, even though, by chance, the act is [objectively] in accord with the Law of God. So, it is evident that there is, in this case, contempt for the Law of God. Therefore, in such an instance, there must be a sin. (Quaest. Quodl., III, q. 12.a. 27.c.)

TEXT THREE: Formal Object, End, and Circumstances. We are speaking now of the acts of man; hence good and evil in acts, according to our present way of speaking, are to be taken according
to what is proper to man as man. Now, this is reason, and so good and evil in human acts are to be considered according as the act is in accord with reason informed by the Divine Law, either naturally, or through teaching, or through infusion. So, Dionysius says (De Divin. Nomin., c. 4) that the evil of the soul is contrary to reason, and that of the body is contrary to nature.

And so, if to be in accord with, or contrary to, reason pertains to the species of the human act, one must say that, some human acts are good in themselves, and some are evil in themselves. For, we say that something is essentially (per se) in agreement with another thing, not only when it agrees with it by reason of its genus, but also when it agrees by reason of its species. For instance, rational and irrational are present essentially (per se) in animals by reason of their species, but not by reason of their genus, animal: for an animal is not, insofar as it is animal, rational or irrational.

Now, if to be contrary to reason, or in accord with reason, does not pertain to the species of a human act, it follows that human acts are essentially (per se) neither good nor bad, but indifferent, just as men are essentially neither white nor black. This then, is the point on which the truth of this question hangs.

To clear this up, we should consider that, since the act receives its species from the object, it is according to some reason of the object (rationem objecti) that the act will be specified in reference to one active principle; and it will not be specified by the same reason, in reference to another [active principle]. For, to know color and to know sound are different acts, according to species, if they be referred to the senses (for these are proper sensibles); but they are not specifically different, if they be referred to the intellect, for they are grasped intellectually under one common reason of the object, namely, that of being or truth. Likewise, to sense a white thing and a black thing are specifically different acts, if they be referred to the object of vision, but not, if they be referred to taste. It may be gathered, from this, that the act of any potency is specified according to that which essentially (per se) pertains to that potency, and not simply according to that which pertains to it accidentally (per accidentem).

If, then, the objects of human acts be considered, which have essential differences from the point of view of reason, the acts will be specifically different, according as they are acts of reason, though they may not be specifically different, when considered as acts of some other potencies. For example, to beget children with one's own wife, or to do so with a woman who is not one's wife, are acts having different objects from the point of view of reason, for one's own and what is not one's own are determined according to a rule of reason. However, these differences are accidental, if considered in relation to the generative potency, or even to the concupiscible power. So, the act of procreation, with one's own wife, or with another woman, are specifically different as acts of reason, but not as acts of the generative or concupiscible powers.

But acts are human to the extent that they are acts of reason. And so, it is clear that they do differ specifically, when considered as human acts. Thus, it is clear that it pertains to the very species of human acts, that some are good and some evil. Therefore, we should say, without qualification, that some human acts are in themselves good, or bad, and not that all are morally indifferent (except, perhaps, when they are considered solely in their genus). For, just as one may say that an animal, simply considered as an animal, is neither rational nor irrational, so also may it be said that the human act, simply considered as an act, never possesses the formal nature (rationem) of moral good or evil, unless something be added to narrow it down to a species. Nevertheless, even from the fact that it is a human act, and furthermore from the fact that it is a being, it may possess some formal character (rationem) of goodness, but not of this moral goodness, which consists in being in accord with reason; and that is what we are concerned with, now.

In reply to the second objection, we should say that whatever goes along with the species of a thing is always present in it. Therefore, since an act of man takes its species from the reason of its object, and is, according to it, good or evil, an act thus specified as good, never can be evil; nor can one specified as evil ever be good. Nevertheless, it can happen that, to an act which is good in itself, there may be added some other act which is evil according to some
relationship; and because of this sort of evil act, the good is said to produce evil at times, but it is not that it is in itself evil. For example, to give alms to the poor, or to love God, is an act good in itself; but to refer an act of this kind to some inordinate end, namely, to cupidity or vain-glory, is another act and evil. But these two acts are reduced, under some orderly relationship, into one. Now, the good, as Dionysius says (De Div. Nom., c. 4, p. 4) arises from a whole and integral cause, but evil from singular defects. Therefore, whatever of these be evil, either the act or the inordinacy of the act to the end, the whole is judged evil. Moreover, the whole thing is not judged good unless both are good; just as a man is not judged handsome, unless all his members are decorous, nor is judged to be ugly, even if one of his members is deformed. So it is that a bad act cannot be done rightly (bene), for, from the fact that it is bad, it cannot be good as a whole; but a good act can be done wrongly (male), because it is not necessary that it be evil as a whole, but it is enough that it be evil in some particular way.

In reply to the fifth objection, we should say that circumstances are related to moral acts, just as accidents outside the reason of the species are to natural things. Now, the moral act, as has been said, receives its species from the object according to the way that it is related to reason. So, it is said in a general way, that some acts are good or bad generically, and that the act which is good generically is an act dealing with some proper matter, such as feeding the hungry. But an act which is generically evil deals with improper matter, such as taking the goods of another; for, the matter of the act is called its object. But, over and above this goodness or evil, there may be added another goodness or evil from something extrinsic, which is called a circumstance, of place or time, or a condition of the agent, or the like. For example, one may take what is not his own, from a sacred place, or because of need, or something like that. And, though this kind of goodness or evil does not essentially (per se) pertain to the moral act, as something to be considered within its species, nevertheless another goodness or evil does belong to it according to its species, since (as has been said above in the body of the article) there are different formal principles (ratio) of goodness, according to various perfections. (De Malo, q. II, a. 4.c, and ad 2m, and ad 5m.)

TEXT FOUR: No Individual Human Acts Are Morally Indifferent. If we speak of the moral act according to its species, then not every moral act is good or evil, but some are morally indifferent, because the moral act gets its species from the object according to its relation to reason, as was said in the preceding article. Now, there is one sort of object which implies something in agreement with reason, and it makes [the moral act] good, in a general way (ex genere), for example: clothing the naked. There is another sort of object which implies something in discord with reason (such as, taking what belongs to another), and this makes it bad, in a general way. And, there is a third kind of object which neither implies something in agreement with reason, nor in discord with reason (for instance, lifting a straw from the ground, or some act like that), and this kind of act is said to be indifferent. On this point, those people are right, who divide acts into three classes: good, evil, and indifferent.

But, if we speak of the moral act, as individual, then every particular moral act must be good or evil because of some circumstance. For, it cannot happen that the singular act go on without circumstances which make it right or wrong. If anything whatever be done, when it should, where it should, as it should, and so on, then this kind of act is well ordered and good; but, if any of these be defective, the act is badly ordered and evil. This may chiefly be considered in the circumstance which is the end. For, what is done because of a just need, or pious utility, is done in a praise-worthy way, and is a good act; but that which does not have a just need and pious utility is regarded as idle. (De Malo, q. 2, a. 5.c.)

TEXT FIVE: The Specific Differentiation of Immoral Acts. Since the moral act is the voluntary act proceeding from reason, it is necessary for the moral act to get its species from something in the object, considered in an orderly relation to reason. Thus, it was said in the preceding article, that, if it be in agreement with reason, it
will be a specifically good act, but if it be in discord with reason, it will be a specifically bad act. Now, this business of the object being in discord with reason, and the consequent specific differentiation of immoral acts (peccati), can be taken in two ways: materially and formally.

Materially, [they may be considered] in opposition to virtue. The virtues differ specifically, according as reason finds the mean in diverse subject matters: thus, justice applies to the cases in which reason establishes a mean in commutations and distributions, and actions of that kind; temperance, however, applies to matters of concupiscence; fortitude, to questions of fear and daring; and so on for the others. . . . And so, immoral acts (peccata) differ specifically because of their opposition to the virtues, thus: homicide, adultery, and theft.

But, since there may be specifically different sins, in relation to one kind of subject matter, to which but one virtue applies, it is necessary, secondly, to consider formally the specific diversity of sins. That is, one may sin by way of excess or defect; thus does timidity differ from presumption, and illiberality from prodigality; or, according to various circumstances, as the species of gluttony are distinguished according to the items in this verse: "Too quickly, too magnificently, too much, too passionately, too eagerly." (De Maiô, q. 2,a. 6,c.)

Text six: The Goodness of the Interior and Exterior Act. The exterior act and the interior act of the will are mutually related in this way: each is at times the cause of goodness in the other; and each, considered in itself, has some goodness which it gives to the other. For, the exterior act has a goodness arising from the commensuration of circumstances, according as it is proportionate to the end to be sought by man. And since the exterior act is related to the will as an object, the interior will-act gets this goodness from the exterior act; not indeed from it considered as exercised but as intended and wished; for, insofar as it is exercised, it follows the will-act.

But some formal goodness is present in the interior will-act, in itself, insomuch as the will is the master of its own acts, and, on this basis, the act has the formal nature (rationem) of merit or is praiseworthy; and this goodness proceeds from the interior act to the exterior one. Therefore, speaking of that goodness which the will furnishes to the exterior act, the exterior act adds no goodness, provided the will remains equal from the point of view of the intensity of its act. I say this, because some acts are so capable of arousing pleasure that the will cannot be as intense before the act, as it is while the act is going on. . . . But some acts are difficult, and in these cases, the will becomes less intense while the act is going on; in such instances, the will-act can be more perfect before the act than during the act. But, if we speak of the goodness which the exterior act has of itself, then the exterior act completes the interior in goodness or evil, just as the terminus of a motion completes the motion; for it is related, as has been said, to the will as its object. (In II Sent., d. 40, q. unica, a. 3,c.)

Text seven: The Evil of the Interior and Exterior Act. If it be asked, whether one who only sins in his will-act, sins as much as he who sins both in will and in the [exterior] act, it must be answered that this can occur in two ways. In the first way, there is equality on the part of the will; in the second way, the will does not remain equal.

Inequality of will may occur in three ways. First of all, numerically: thus, if a man desires to sin by one movement of his will, and finds no opportunity to do so, his will-act passes away; but, in another agent, who first has the movement of his will, and then has an opportunity [to sin], the act of will is repeated. Thus, there is a double evil of will, one without the act, another with the act. Secondly, inequality may be observed in the manner (modum): for instance, one person may have the will to sin but, knowing that he has no opportunity, he desists from such a movement of the will; but another person, knowing that he has the ability to sin, continues the will-act until he reaches the [exterior] act. Thirdly, there may be inequality of will in regard to intensity: for, there are some sinful acts which are pleasurable, and in these the will increases by a sort
of removal of the control of reason, which was to some extent a restraint, before the performance of the act. Now, in whatever way there may be inequality in the will-act, there will be inequality in the sin.

But, if there be complete equality on the part of the will, then it seems that we should make the same distinctions in regard to sins that we do in regard to merit. He who has the will to give alms, and does not give because he has not the ability, merits just as much as if he had given, from the point of view of the essential reward, that is, of joy concerning God, for this reward corresponds to charity, which pertains to the will. But, in relation to an accidental reward, which is joy concerning any sort of created good, he merits more who not only wishes to give, but gives. For, he will rejoice not only because he has wished to give, but because he has given, by reason of all the good things which came from this giving.

Likewise, if the amount of demerit be considered in relation to the essential punishment, which consists in the separation from God and the sorrow arising from this, then he has not less demerit who sins only with his will, than he who sins in the [exterior] act; for this punishment is the contempt for God, which pertains to the will. But, in regard to the secondary punishment, which is the sorrow connected with any other kind of evil, he who sins both in the act and in his will has more demerit. For, he will have sorrow not only from the fact that he has willed evil, but also from the fact that he has done an evil thing, and from all the evils which result from his evil-doing.

In answer to the twelfth objection, we should say that in both acts, interior and exterior, there is the deformity of a sin; nevertheless, there is but one deformity for the two taken together (utriusque). This is so, because the deformity in one of them is caused by the other. (De Malo, q. 2, a. 2, ad 8m and ad 12m.)

Recommended Readings

Thomas Aquinas, St., Summa Theologiae, I-II, q. 18-21 (in Basic Writings, ed. Pegis, II, 317-365).

REASON THE STANDARD OF MORALITY

Bourke, St. Thomas and the Greek Moralists, pp. 21-29.
Brosnan, Prolegomena to Ethics, pp. 12-13, 167-173 (a brief critique of other types of moral theory).
Cronin, Science of Ethics, I, 318-366 (a criticism of utilitarianism).
Gilson, Moral Values and the Moral Life, pp. 79-90.
Murray, "Reason and Morality according to St. Thomas," Month, CLI (1928) 417-423.

ADVANCED READINGS

Lehu, La raison règle de la moralité d’après s. Thomas, 264 pp.
Lottin, Principes de Morale, I, 114-132.

Topics for Assignment

1. A Critical Appraisal of Utilitarianism
2. Right Reason Compared with Right Intention
3. Why Circumstances Modify the Morality of an Action
4. The Importance of the Interior Moral Act
5. The Nature of Merit and Demerit in Ethics