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SUBJECTIVE OBJECTIVITY IN AQUINAS: THE INTERDEPENDENCE AND REFLEXIVITY OF INTELLECT AND WILL

1. Objectivity and the human subject

Aquinas's thinking about the relationship of intellect and will is highly nuanced. He argues that the loving will and the knowing intellect always involve each other. The true is something good and must be desired if it is to be known. The good is something true and must be understood if it is to be desired. At every level, intellect and will influence each other. Nothing can be understood unless it is sought, and nothing can be sought unless it is understood.

The technical scholastic vocabulary can obscure the full significance of what Aquinas is doing here philosophically. He is exploring at different levels what we might today call the question of *objectivity*; or, to see it from the other side, the question of *the subject*. At the level of epistemology he wants to affirm that our understanding is inescapably human. The desire of the will influences everything. Our purposes and preferences determine when we understand, whether we understand, what we understand, and how we understand. Understanding is thoroughly subjective – this is what makes it personal. Yet at the same time we understand only what is there and nothing more. It is the intellect that understands, not the will, and it is the nature of the intellect to be formed by the being of whatever is understood. So understanding is thoroughly objective as well as subjective. The emergence of objectivity in fact depends on subjectivity. At the level of action theory and ethics Aquinas wants to affirm that the goods we seek, which determine our actions, are freely chosen by the human subject. No good (apart from the final end) is so good that it cannot be seen in a different perspective. What is crucial is that we can choose which perspective to take on each good, so that the subjective attractiveness of the good depends on our choice, and our actions follow from this choice. Yet at the same time we can only be attracted to what is actually a good, since it is the intellect alone that understands what is good in this personal perspective.

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acta philosophica · i, 16, 2007 · pp. 91-108

In both epistemology and action theory Aquinas thus proposes a kind of subjective objectivity. Objective truth is unveiled through its encounter with a purposeful subject, and the subject only grasps this truth in the terms of its own subjective preferences. It is still, nevertheless, completely objective. Truth is human.

At this stage the notion of subjective objectivity may seem unconvincing. In this article we will explore Aquinas's descriptions of human intellect and will. Each has its own clear function. The richness of his account comes from the fact that there is a reflexive aspect to every human act, so that human beings know their own knowing and their own willing, and they will each act of knowing and each act of willing. In this context, objectivity takes on a different meaning. The search for foundations is still possible, but much more nuanced. It will help to bear in mind that this rather technical-sounding discussion that follows about intellect and will concerns these broad questions of objectivity, subjectivity, and the nature of human experience.[1]

2. The interdependence of intellect and will

There are a number of places where Aquinas describes the intellect and the will and their complementary functions. In an article about angels Aquinas makes some distinctions which apply to human beings as well as to angels.[2] Human beings relate to the world in two distinctive and complementary ways. *Through the intellect* they take in what is outside them. This 'bringing inside' is actually a way of describing the intellect as it 'reaches out to what is outside it' – so there is no danger of forgetting that knowledge is a relationship we have with things and not just an internal possession of thoughts *about* things. *Through the will* human beings go out *in rem exteriorem*, 'towards the external thing'. Willing is a movement that brings about a change in our active relationship with the world and not just in our understanding. We involve

[1] I will not pay much attention in this article to the differences between Aquinas's earlier and later writings on intellect and will. There is an ongoing debate about the development of Aquinas's thinking, and I accept Daniel Westberg's conclusion that the differences are in emphasis rather than in matters of substance: Aquinas did not, as Odon Lottin proposed, move from a kind of intellectual determinism (in *De Veritate*) to a more voluntarist conception of human action (in *De Malo* 6). There is a consistent picture of the interdependence of intellect and will, a picture in which every action takes place for the sake of a good that is both understood and desired. D. Westberg, *Did Aquinas Change His Mind About the Will?*, «Thomist», 58 (1994), p. 56.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.59:2c; hereafter referred to without title. The Latin text is from the Leonine edition of Aquinas's complete works, that is, *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici Opera Omnia*, Rome 1882-, Volumes 4-11. I have based my English translation on that found in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Maryland Christian Classics, Westminster 1948, 5 volumes.

ourselves, as Aquinas writes in *De Veritate*, with «the being that the thing has in itself» and not just with its being as it is understood.[3]

Human beings thus take things in through the intellect and go out to them through the will; they think and they act; they understand the world and they try to achieve things in this world. There seems to be a natural progression from understanding to willing, and in a number of places Aquinas writes in a straightforward way about the dependence of the will on the intellect. The will depends on reason to supply its object.[4] Two passages illustrate this.

«The will does not do the ordering, but tends to something as it is ordered by reason. Consequently this word 'intention' indicates an act of the will, presupposing the ordering of the reason as it orders something to the end».[5]

«The goodness of the will depends properly on the object. Now the will's object is proposed to it by reason. Because the good as it is understood [*bonum intellectum*] is the object of the will proportioned to it».[6]

In this scheme it is the reason that first understands what is good and the will that consequently seeks it. There are so many fitting examples one could imagine: A woman sees that a job advertised in the newspaper has a high salary, so she puts in an application for the post. A man catches sight of a particularly striking painting in a gallery, so he sits down to contemplate it. There are objective goods here – money, beauty – and they have to be understood by the intellect before they can be sought by the will. In order for the will to be attracted to a good, the intellect must first take in the fact that something *is* good and desirable, it must comprehend its *ratio*, its meaning as good.[7]

The will, therefore, depends on the intellect. The intellect takes priority. In article I.82:4, however, Aquinas looks at the question in another way. In the first articles of question I.82 Aquinas accepts that the will moves human beings towards their *beatitudo* (happiness), towards their perfect good (art. 1), by seeking certain particular goods (art. 2), in response to the understanding which the intellect has of what is good (art. 3). *Bonum enim intellectum movet voluntatem*, «the good which is understood moves the will».[8] Then, in article 4, Aquinas shifts to another level and asks whether the will moves the intellect.

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, 22:11c; hereafter referred to as DV. The Latin text is from the Leonine edition of Aquinas's complete works, that is, *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia*, Rome 1882-, Volume 22, Parts 1-3. I have based my English translation on that found in Thomas Aquinas, *The Disputed Questions on Truth*, translated by R. W. Mulligan, J. V. McGlynn and R. W. Schmidt, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago 1952, 3 volumes.

[4] Reason (*ratio*) and intellect are the same power in human beings, though they work in different ways. Through intellect we apprehend intelligible truth; through reason we build on this truth and connect it with other truths and so arrive at a deeper intelligible truth. See I.79:8.

[5] I-II.12:1ad3.

[6] I-II.19:3c.

[7] See I.82:3c. The object of the intellect is *ipsa ratio boni appetibilis*.

[8] I.82:3ad2.

At first sight this is a surprising and perhaps unnecessary question. One might think that Aquinas has already resolved the question of the order of intellect and will. The will, he has already shown, is the movement of human beings towards the good as it is presented by the intellect. Now, strangely, Aquinas asks whether this process of understanding is itself something which we have to want. This is a reflexive question about whether the act of the intellect, which furnishes the will with its object, is itself something which we desire, something which we actively seek, something for which we are responsible. Reflexivity is a hugely significant issue. It is worth looking at article 1.82:4 in depth, together with the related articles DV22:12 («Does the will move the intellect and the other powers of the soul?») and 1-II.9:1 («Whether the will is moved by the intellect?»).

The objections Aquinas acknowledges to the reflexive thesis of 1.82:4 all revolve around the problem of priority. I will paraphrase the three short arguments. Objection 1: It has already been established (in art. 3) that the intellect precedes and moves the will by its understanding of the good. (In DV22:12obj1 Aquinas cites Augustine: «For nothing is loved or desired unless it is known».[9]) Objection 2: It is the nature of the will to move (the human being) after it has been moved (by the good which is understood), and it is the nature of the intellect to move the will (by understanding the good) *on the basis of something which does not move* (the apprehended good). In other words, there is a non-moving foundation to movement, a source of movement, which in this case is the goodness of the object understood. In other words, the reality of the world is what founds our understanding and therefore our desires. Objection 3: Aquinas will not allow any room for some kind of unmotivated, purposeless, irrational willing. The will is precisely the rational appetite, and «we can will nothing but what we understand».[10] So if the will does move us to understand, it must have a reason to do this, and so we must already think that it is *good to understand* at this moment. This willing (of the process of understanding) must be on the basis of some prior understanding, by the intellect, of the goodness of this act of understanding. This prior understanding would itself have needed willing, «and so on indefinitely, which is impossible».[11] In other words, if willing is to be rational, there must be at least some foundation in the intellect for the initial act of willing.

All three objections argue that the priority of the intellect is essential to the whole structure which Aquinas has been working to build. Without this priority: (obj1) our understanding has no objective foundation in the world, (obj2) our willing has no objective foundation in what is understood, and (obj3) a vicious circle of understanding and willing is created in which there is no beginning and no possibility of justifying any thought or action.

[9] DV22:12obj1. [10] 1.82:4obj3. [11] 1.82:4obj3.

3. The distinction between exercise and specification

In the body of I.82:4 Aquinas makes some distinctions and begins to explore the reflexive nature of the soul. We can relate his answers here to those he gives in the related articles DV22:12 and I-II.9:1. There are two ways in which one thing can move another thing.

«First, as an end; for instance, when we say that the end moves the agent. In this way the intellect moves the will, because the good understood is the object of the will, and moves it as an end».[12]

Aquinas never renounces this principle that the will can only ever seek what the intellect presents to it as good. The 'end which moves' gives shape and direction to the movement. In DV22:12 Aquinas characterises this end as the *ratio agendi*, the *ratio movendi*: it is the reason for acting, the pattern or meaning or sense of this particular movement. He clarifies this by saying that the *ratio agendi* is «the form of the agent by which it acts». This form «is in the agent by way of intention», through its reception by the intellect, and «not according to the existence it has of its nature [*non secundum esse naturae*]».[13] The intellect, therefore, grasps the goal to be achieved and presents it to the will, it *praeconcipit* ('conceives beforehand') the *ratio* of the end. The second way in which one thing is said to move another thing is this:

«A thing is said to move as an agent, in the way that what causes an alteration moves the thing it alters, and what pushes moves what is pushed [*sicut alterans movet alteratum, et impellens movet impulsum*]. In this way the will moves the intellect and all the powers of the soul».[14]

DV22:12 gives a simple explanation of this. Action and movement concern things as they are in themselves, in the world, and not as they are spiritually in the soul by way of intention. It is the will which relates to things in this way, which inclines human beings to real things in the world and not just to intentions in their minds. We could paraphrase this by saying that no amount of theorising will actually make anything happen. Aquinas offers a terse example: The idea of heat never kept anyone warm («it is not heat in the soul which heats, but that which is in fire»).[15]

In I-II.9:1 Aquinas identifies these two types of movement by distinguishing between the exercise or use (*exercitium vel usus*) of an act and its determination (*determinatio*) or specification (*specificatio*).[16] He uses the analogy of sight.

[12] I.82:4c. [13] DV22:12c. [14] I.82:4c. [15] DV22:12c.

[16] In this article (I-II.9:1) 'determination' and 'specification' are synonymous. In I-II.10:2 Aquinas writes only of 'specification'.

To see anything at all we have to exercise our sight, we actually have to be seeing. If we *are* then exercising our sight, *what* we actually see (the objects, the colours, the distances) is determined by the world we are looking at and not by ourselves. «The first of these is on the part of the subject, which is sometimes acting, sometimes not acting, while the other is on the part of the object, by reason of which the act is specified».[17]

So there are two types of movement: exercise, which gets the whole process going; and specification, which determines how the process will develop. The intellect, like other powers of the soul, has its own proper object, its own good, which is the truth of things. Once it is acting, the activity of the intellect is governed by its proper object, but this intellectual activity itself needs activating – it does not just happen. Intellectual activity, with its particular ends, needs activating by the will, which seeks the more universal human good (which is happiness).

> «Now the object of the will is good and the end in general, and each power is directed to some suitable good proper to it, as sight is directed to the perception of colour, and the intellect to the knowledge of truth. Therefore the will as agent moves all the powers of the soul to their respective acts, except the natural powers of the vegetative part, which are not subject to our decision».[18]

There are a number of points to note here. The will activates an act of understanding but does not specify the content of the understanding. This activation is for the sake of an end, which is the universal good which the human being seeks, and so the activation is itself based on a prior understanding of the universal good. Yet there is not a vicious circle, since the prior understanding of happiness which motivates the will is not the same as the particular understanding which the intellect achieves now in this particular act of understanding.

The implications of this are profound. All human understanding is for the sake of something larger, which is our ultimate goal in life – whatever that may be. We are not trapped in the immediacy of our present experience. We do not just automatically understand the world and automatically seek what we understand. We also decide whether we want to understand or not; we determine when we shall understand, on the basis of a larger understanding and an already established commitment to a larger goal. In other words, we have a reflective distance from those acts which seem to be a constitutive part of our experience. On the one hand, we understand and evaluate the world to which we are present; there is an immediacy and transparency which creates a kind of identification between self and world and values and actions. On the other hand, we are also understanding and evaluating *this very process of understand-*

[17] I-II.9:1c. [18] I.82:4c.

ing and evaluating the world, in the light of a deeper understanding of who we are and what we seek.

4. Reflexivity of intellect and will

The reply to the first objection of 1.82:4 is a substantial reflection on the interrelation of intellect and will and is like a continuation of the body of the article. Aquinas's key insight is that there are two ways of considering intellect and will. First, one can consider these powers in terms of their general object, «as apprehensive of universal being and truth», as «appetitive of universal good».[19] Second, one can consider the intellect or the will *secundum quod est quaedam res, et particularis potentia habens determinatum actum*, «as a thing of a certain sort and a particular power having a determinate act». We can, as it were, stand within the functioning of intellect or of will, looking out at their objects, or we can stand outside these processes and see them as objects of investigation or of desire in themselves, as observable *things*, *powers*, and *acts*. Human beings are not only *within* their experience of understanding and wanting, looking out to the world, transparently concerned with the true and the good. We are not just completely caught up in our own activity, unaware of ourselves. We are also aware of our own understanding and wanting, because these are acts which we can view taking place *within* our 'world' as well as vantage points on the world. We are conscious of the act of our own consciousness of the world, and thus we are implicitly conscious of and present to ourselves. The soul, of which intellect and will are powers, is not just formed by the world and attracted to what it finds, it is also formed by its own understanding of *itself-being-formed* and attracted by its understanding of *itself-being-attracted*. It may seem tendentious to draw so much meaning out of a straightforward distinction, but the reflexive nature of intellect and will is brought out with great clarity in the second half of this first reply:

«If, however, we take the intellect as regards the common nature of its object and the will as a determinate power, then again the intellect is higher than and prior to the will, because under the notion of being and truth [*sub ratione entis et veri*] (which the intellect apprehends) is contained both the will itself, and its act, and its object. Wherefore the intellect understands the will, and its act, and its object, just as it understands other species of things, as stone or wood, which are contained in the common notion of being and truth. But if we consider the will as regards the common nature of its object, which is good, and the intellect as a certain thing and a particular power, then the intellect itself, and its act of understanding, and its object, which is truth, each of which is some species of good, is contained under the common notion of good, as one particular instance of it [*sub communi ratione boni continetur, velut quoddam speciale*]. And in this way the will is higher than the intellect, and can move it».[20]

[19] 1.82:4ad1. [20] 1.82:4ad1.

So in some respects, the will is an object for the intellect, and in other respects, the intellect for the will. There is no suggestion, however, that one consideration excludes the other. The simultaneous reflexivity of intellect and will is a perpetual possibility, as Aquinas implies in the conclusion to this reply, which repeats a thought from I.16:4ad1.

«From this we can understand why these powers encompass each other in their acts [*hae potentiae suis actibus invicem se includunt*], because the intellect understands the will to will, and the will wills the intellect to understand [*quia intellectus intelligit voluntatem velle, et voluntas vult intellectum intellegere*]. In the same way good is contained under truth, inasmuch as it is an understood truth, and truth is contained under good, inasmuch as it is a desired good».[21]

When this same argument about the mutual influence of acts of intellect and will on each other is referred to in I-II.17:1 Aquinas adds the following seemingly paradoxical conclusion: «The result is that an act of reason precedes an act of will, and conversely [*actum voluntatis praeveniri ab actu rationis, et e converso*]».[22]

DV22:12 goes further and provides a much more explicit statement of the capacity *of each power* to reflect *on itself* as well as on the other powers. Aquinas cites the immateriality of the soul as a reason for this.

«The higher powers of the soul, because immaterial, are capable of reflecting upon themselves. Both the will and the intellect, therefore, reflect upon themselves, and upon each other, and upon the essence of the soul, and upon all its powers [*reflectuntur super se, et unum super alterum, et super essentiam animae, et super omnes eius vires*]. The intellect understands itself and the will and the essence of the soul and all the soul's powers. Similarly the will wills itself to will, and the intellect to understand, and wills the essence of the soul, and similarly the other powers [*Intellectus enim intelligit se, et voluntatem, et essentiam animae, et omnes animae vires; et similiter voluntas vult se velle, et intellectum intelligere, et vult essentiam animae, et sic de aliis*]».[23]

These statements about reflexivity could not be clearer, and we should not shy away from that element of circularity which haunts these discussions and which Aquinas readily acknowledged:

«Since there is in reflection a certain similarity to circular motion, in which what is last in the movement is what was originally the beginning [*Cum in reflexione sit quaedam similitudo motus circularis in quo est ultimum motus quod primo erat principium*], we must so express ourselves in regard to reflection that what was originally prior then becomes posterior».[24]

What is the point of introducing this reflexive, second-level to the functioning of the soul? Is it not enough for human beings to relate to the world without

[21] I.82:4ad1. [22] I-II.17:1c.
[23] DV22:12c. [24] DV22:12ad1.

relating to their own powers? What is the difference, for example, between *willing* and *willing to will*, between *knowing* and *knowing that one knows*? Why the duplication? The answer is that it will allow Aquinas to explain how human beings are free. If we apprehend our own involvement with the world we can assess what we are doing and why we are doing it, we can judge what we wish to understand and whether we want to act. Aquinas believes that we are present to our acts of intellect and will. Without this we cannot be free. His central contention, repeated time and again, is that human beings do not just take in the world through knowledge and reach out to it through desire, we also know our own knowing and desiring, and desire our own knowing and desiring.

Understanding, therefore, is an act of the intellect which only takes place when it is wanted by the will. There are different levels to this. (I) To understand *anything at all*, to understand *in general*, we have to want to understand in general, we have to want the intellect to function. (II) To understand *this object*, we have to want to understand this object. (III) To understand *this aspect of this object*, we have to want to understand this aspect of this object. This never means that the will is determining the nature of what is understood, since this formal determination is specified solely by the object and apprehended by the intellect. Yet it means that whenever we understand anything we have to think that it is good to understand, and good to understand this object, and good to understand this object in this way. Each level of understanding is an act that needs willing, although the different acts may be implicitly willed in a single act.

There are many unresolved issues here, and I will leave most of them hanging. The main concern in this article is to notice the implications for Aquinas's concept of objectivity. We have learnt that through the intellect human beings are open to the world. We are present to the objective reality of things and transformed by them. But now the functioning of this intellect seems to depend on the human will. Despite Aquinas's reassurances that the understanding of the intellect is formed solely by its object, we are left with the suspicion that our own desires *determine* our understanding. If this is true, it is a strange and very human notion of objectivity. I will sketch some ways in which Aquinas's idea of objectivity is indeed thoroughly *human*.

5. The role of the will in activating the intellect

Aquinas has likened understanding to sight.[25] We have to open our eyes 'before' we can see anything; we have to 'exercise' our sight, to get it working, 'before' this sight can be specified by the objects we see. This is true even

[25] See the comments on I-II.9:1 above.

though the exercise and specification are simultaneous – the opening of the eyes coincides with the beginning of seeing. So we can't begin to see in general without actually seeing anything in particular, but we must want to see in general in order to see anything in particular. In the same way the intellect, 'before' it can be specified by its objects, needs to be exercised. In terms of this exercising, «no object moves the will necessarily, for no matter what the object be, it is in our power not to think of it, and consequently not to will it actually».[26] If we stop thinking about something then we will stop desiring it, so if we want to desire anything in particular we have to have the more general desire *to think at all*. Human beings can't understand anything unless they have an interest in understanding.

The functioning of the intellect is an act that must be willed. This may seem a trivial point, but it is highly significant. We need to have a brief digression on the subject of *the human end* in order to appreciate its significance. In the first question of Part I-II of the *Summa* Aquinas discusses the nature of our final end. In I-II.1:6 Aquinas argues that whatever we desire, it must be desired for the sake of our last end, because we wish all goods to contribute somehow to our perfect good, and our will could not be attracted to a particular good unless we were seeking our greatest good through it.

So all human actions take place for the sake of the ultimate good of the one who acts. We can now combine this conclusion with the earlier conclusion that the functioning of the intellect is *an act that must be willed*. This means that *all* our understanding has to occur within the framework of our goals and desires. No understanding is neutral or passive, it never just comes to us, even though the content of understanding comes from the object. There is therefore always a personal stake in human understanding, it depends on a commitment to our final goal, and it only takes place if we judge that understanding is a good which helps us achieve our final goal. This has nothing to do with the distinction between the speculative and practical intellects.[27] *All* acts of the intellect, speculative as much as practical, are *acts* which have to be wanted and willed because they are good and because they help us to achieve our final goal. Acts both of the speculative and practical intellect have to be judged (by the practical intellect) to be worthwhile.

Objective knowledge therefore requires the personal commitment of the subject, and each single act of understanding has to be wanted as a means to our happiness. In this sense our objective understanding of the world reflects our subjective attitude to the world. Understanding is still not in any way *specified* by the desires of the subject, but the fact that there is any understand-

[26] I-II.10:2c.

[27] See 1.79:11, where Aquinas explains that they are the same power directed either to consideration of the truth or to operation.

ing at any moment is completely dependent on our deepest personal desire. Our desire to understand (or not) influences the way the world is revealed to us, and different human worlds emerge, depending on the interest of the subject. This is true even before we take into account *what our specific interests are*. The measure of our interest *as such* affects the world we allow ourselves to encounter. David Burrell writes of Aquinas's view:

«Knowledge or information can be assimilated only in the measure we have sought it. This is not to say, of course, that we find only what we're looking for! We may well be surprised. But at least we have to be probing in the area which yields the unexpected knowledge».[28]

If understanding *in general* needs exercising, it is also the case that *each particular act* of understanding needs exercising. We cannot see unless we are willing to open our eyes *and* to pay attention to the particular object within our sight. The willing of the general exercise is included in the particular exercise, but it is nevertheless distinct. This is apparent when we have a desire to see a particular object which is frustrated by an unwillingness to see in general (e.g., we want to watch the film but we are too tired to keep our eyes open), and when we have a desire to see in general which is frustrated by a failure to see anything in particular (e.g., we want to see but there is a power cut and it is pitch black). We can recall the following passage already cited:

«But if we consider the will as regards the common nature of its object, which is good, and the intellect as a certain thing and a particular power, then the intellect itself, and its act of understanding, and its object, which is truth, each of which is some species of good, are contained under the common notion of good, as particular things. And in this way the will is higher than the intellect».[29]

So the will has to want each particular act of understanding. Put another way, we can only understand something if we think it is good to understand. It is vital to remember that it is the goodness *of the act of understanding* that is in question at this reflexive level, and not *the goodness of the object* of understanding, which is determined by the being of the object itself. The intellect alone discerns the goodness of a thing.

6. The possibility of different points of view

If the exercise of the intellect by the will influences our understanding of the world, it is also true that *the manner in which the intellect is exercised* influences our understanding as well. The intellect approaches its object in different ways, from different perspectives. It does not just take a cold, neutral view of

[28] D. B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, in 1979, p. 121.

[29] 1.82:4ad1.

the world. The particular view it takes colours the nature of the good that it discovers, so that the personal approach adopted by the intellect, as much as the character of the object itself, determines which good the will is attracted to. This may seem to undermine Aquinas's contention that the good is specified solely by the object, and that the will is necessarily attracted to a good object. There are two articles in Part I-II that will help us clarify these questions.

In I-II.10:2 Aquinas asks whether the will is moved by its object *of necessity*. First, as we have already seen, Aquinas writes that no object moves the will to the exercise of its act necessarily, since it is in our power not to think of it and so not to be actually attracted to it. We would then expect Aquinas to say that at the level of specification, when the will is confronted with a particular object, the movement will be necessitated by the object. The will should either be attracted to the object or not, depending on the nature of the object. We have learnt that the goodness of a thing, its attractiveness, depends on its being, which is apprehended by the intellect. So there should be a necessity about the will's movement (or lack of movement) towards an object. Yet Aquinas doesn't quite say this. He does confirm our expectations by insisting that «if the will be offered an object which is good universally and from every point of view [*universaliter bonum et secundum omnem considerationem*], the will tends to it of necessity, if it wills anything at all; since it cannot will the opposite».[30] How could we not want the perfect good? But then he introduces a fascinating analogy with sight and says that we can decide *whether* we are moved by something by deciding *in what way we attend to it*.

Aquinas develops the analogy in this way: Sight is concerned with what is visible. It is 'illuminated colour' (*obiectum coloratum in actu*) that moves the sight.[31] If we are actually looking at something which is illuminated, if our sight is being exercised and we do not turn our eyes away, we cannot fail to see it.

> «But if sight were confronted with something only partially illuminated [*quod non omnibus modis esset color in actu*], and with one part lit up, one part in darkness [*sed secundum aliquid esset tale, secundum autem aliquid non tale*], then sight would not necessarily see such an object, for it might direct its attention to that part of the object in darkness [*qua non est coloratum in actu*], and thus it would not see it».[32]

Aquinas imagines that part of an object is hidden in shadow. Let's say that a bright scarf is carelessly placed in an open drawer, with one end dangling out over the front. When we look at the end hanging in the light of the room, we see it quite clearly. But if we peer into the back of the drawer we can hardly

[30] I-II.10:2c.

[31] The analogy is difficult to follow. Aquinas writes that the colour of an object can be in actu or not. The sense seems to be that the surface of an object can be illuminated and visible, or in darkness and therefore invisible. I have translated the texts quite freely with this meaning in mind.

[32] I-II.10:2c.

see the scarf – its colour and even its outline are indistinct in the darkness and we cannot distinguish it from the gloves and T-shirts. Aquinas wants to make a subtle distinction on which his whole philosophy of freedom depends. There is a difference, he believes, between (I) *not looking at something* and (II) *looking at something without seeing it* – even though in both cases we fail to see the thing. In the first case, we turn our gaze away from something. In the second case, we turn our gaze to a different part of the same thing, and this shift of attention means we are unable to see the object, because of the nature of the object or of the circumstances.

This slightly strained analogy allows Aquinas to say that it is possible for us to see an object in a different way, and even *to see 'something' different*, even though we are looking at the same thing. We have different apprehensions not because the formal specification given to sight by the colour *of the object* changes, but because the nature of the attention given by the subject changes. So there is a *real difference* in what is seen which *depends on the subject who sees* even though *what is seen is still specified solely by the object itself*. Aquinas is struggling to express how a change in the subject can bring about a change in what is perceived without undermining the objective nature of the perception. Having made these distinctions in this example from the world of sensation, Aquinas then applies them to the powers of the soul.

«Now just as illuminated colour is the object of sight, so is good the object of the will. Wherefore if the will be offered an object which is good universally and from every point of view, the will tends to it of necessity, if it wills anything at all; since it cannot will the opposite. If, on the other hand, the will is offered an object that is not good from every point of view [*quod non secundum quamlibet considerationem sit bonum*], it will not tend to it of necessity. And since lack of any good whatever brings an aspect of non-good [*quia defectus cuiuscumque boni habet rationem non boni*], consequently, that good alone which is perfect and lacking in nothing, is such a good that the will cannot not-will it, and this is Happiness. Whereas any other particular goods, in so far as they are lacking in some good, can be regarded as non-goods [*inquantum deficiunt ab aliquo bono, possunt accipi ut non bona*], and from this point of view, they can be set aside or approved by the will, which can tend to one and the same thing from various points of view [*secundum diversas considerationes*]».[33]

We have here one of the most striking conclusions from the discussion so far: *Any other particular goods, in so far as they are lacking in some good, can be regarded as non-goods*. It's easy to think of examples. We look at a cake and can consider either how tasty it is or how fattening it is; we investigate a new business venture and can consider either the benefits it could bring or the financial risks it presents; we bump into a friend and can call to mind either her past generosity or her past impatience. Our response in each situation will be determined

[33] I-II.10:2c.

by the specific consideration we make of this object, and not just by the global object in view. The important thing to realise is that in each example the intellect can see *both* points of view. Both are true. Both truths are specified by the object. It is as if there are two rival acts of the intellect, two potential thoughts. But in fact they are both held at the same time. Either truth can be set aside or approved by the will. When the will does approve one truth it is not determining what is true, it is determining that a particular aspect of the truth shall be noticed, by exercising a specific act of the intellect. The will is not determining *what* is good, it is determining which aspect of the good is understood. The reflexivity of the powers of the soul is essential here, since the will is exercising and so controlling *the act of the intellect* and not the specification of the good.

It is important to appreciate the significance of what Aquinas is doing here. He is trying to find a third way between intellectualism and voluntarism. Let us take each of these in turn. (I) *Intellectualism:* If the specification of the good depends solely on the object and our intellectual apprehension of that object, then the will must inevitably follow that good. It has no leeway, it cannot reinterpret the good, since the intellect is formed by the object alone. Intellectualism leads to determinism. (II) *Voluntarism:* If, alternatively, the will can specify what is good without being bound by our intellectual apprehension of the object, then we will certainly have more control over our goals and our actions, but our desires will not be rooted in the objectively apprehended reality of the world. Voluntarism leads to irrationalism. (III) *Aquinas's Third Way:* If, however, we can apprehend with our intellect a single object but view that object in different ways, the different views might attract or repel us in different ways. Intellectual determinism is avoided, because we are freely choosing to see this aspect of something rather than another aspect, and our actions will depend on our willingness to attend to the goodness of one aspect or the other. Equally, an irrational voluntarism is avoided, because the nature of the aspect of the good which *is* seen depends solely on the specification provided by the object as it forms the intellect. In other words, what we desire *is actually good*. The will does not specify the good, it simply determines *that* one aspect of the good can or cannot be specified. The will determines *the perspective* in which the objectively determined good is seen.

These themes are deepened in I-II.13:6. Aquinas is writing about the freedom to choose.

«[Reason], in all particular goods, can consider the aspect of some good [*potest considerare rationem boni alicuius*], and the lack of some good (which has the aspect of evil), and in this respect it can apprehend any single one of such goods as to be chosen or to be avoided [*potest unumquodque huiusmodi bonorum apprehendere ut eligibile, vel fugibile*]».[34]

[34] I-II.13:6.

So the reason changes its 'consideration' and in this way the will is brought to seek a certain good. It is usually a bad thing, for example, to be cut open with a knife, but the patient accepts this at the hands of the surgeon who is trying to remove a tumour. A child falls into a surging river and a stranger heroically jumps in to save the child, despite his desire to protect the good of his own life. This does not mean that human beings can change their *final* good, which is always the complete perfection of happiness. The particular goods which we are re-interpreting at any moment are always a means to our ultimate end. The necessity of our final end is one element of Aquinas's scheme which saves it from circularity and absurdity. Yet in each example the particular good under consideration will only be appreciated and sought if the will wants to consider it.

These two articles from Part I-II allow Aquinas to draw a startling conclusion. Every single particular good can be freely apprehended as not-good, without compromising in any way the objectivity of good and the openness of the intellect to truth. Every single particular good can thus be willed or not willed, depending on the point of view we take on it.

7. Subjective objectivity and human understanding

Aquinas has come to a number of conclusions: Understanding *in general* has to be willed; every *particular* act of understanding has to be willed; every object can be seen from different perspectives; every good object can be seen to be bad in certain respects; an object can only be willed if it is seen to be good; an object can only be seen to be good if the will approves and exercises this act of understanding it as good. This means that we cannot understand anything unless we think it is good to understand it, and that we will refuse to understand if we think that this understanding is bad for us. So our understanding of the world is entirely dependent on what we think is good for us, which is in turn dependent on the overall orientation of our lives to a final goal. We only see 'what we want to see'. Yet it bears repeating the proviso Aquinas has already made. It is the good *of the act of understanding this object* (an internal, reflexive good) that is at issue here, not the good *of the object which is understood* (which is determined entirely by the being of the object as apprehended by the intellect).

Human beings have to allow themselves to start thinking and to continue thinking along a certain line of thought, even though *the understanding itself* is specified by the object under consideration. This act of the will is the foundation of all reasoning, and it saves Aquinas from an intellectual determinism which would insist there is only one way in which a given object or circumstance can specify our good.

«The root of liberty is the will (which is where freedom lies [*sicut subiectum*]) but it is the reason that is its cause. For the will can tend freely towards a variety of things,

because the reason can have various conceptions of good [*voluntas libere potest ad diversa ferri, quia ratio potest habere diversas conceptiones boni*]».[35]

Aquinas is not a compatibilist, one who believes that accounts of voluntary action are compatible with deterministic explanations.[36] David Gallagher draws attention to the reflexive roots of Aquinas's thinking on this matter. It is not enough to assert that the will can be moved without necessity by a number of alternative particular goods presented to it by the intellect. The crucial question is «how the intellect comes to consider an object in one way and not in another such that the will's act with respect to the object is specified as it is».[37] How, in other words, do we choose to dwell on one good rather than another? We do this by willing *the consideration of this good* (a reflexive act), which has to take place 'before' we will *this good* (an act in the world). This two-stage explanation can seem to be a form of compatibilism, because our action in the world (the second stage) *is* determined solely by the good that is understood. The will *necessarily* moves towards the good that is understood in the world, which seems like a form of determinism. The decisive factor, however, is that *the consideration of this good* (the first stage) has to be willed. This willing is a reflexive movement which depends on the soul's ability to observe and judge its own acts. Our willingness *to consider this good* is not determined in any way by the objective nature of the good itself, which is why Aquinas's account is not compatible with determinism. Gallagher summarises this clearly:

«The *exercise* of the intellect's act is something voluntary. I may think of the utility of a murder and suppress the thought of its wickedness, or I may consider it in the opposite way. According as the intellect considers an action one way or another it will judge it to be either good or bad. But whether or not it considers one way or another is determined by the will. This is where the will's capacity either to command or to stop the exercise of reason is decisive. The judgment of an action's goodness or evil depends on how the agent considers it, and this consideration falls under the control of the will. [...] An act of choice is specified by the object which reason supplies. But which object reason supplies, or better, under which aspect a particular action is judged, depends upon how the will exercises the intellect's act in its regard».[38]

Aquinas's genius lies in the fact that he locates freedom in the reflexive procedures which establish *how* the world is understood. Once this world is established, with its presently understood goods, he never needs to argue that the will asserts its 'voluntariness' or 'freedom' by going against what it under-

[35] I-II.17:1ad2.

[36] See N. Kretzmann, *Philosophy of Mind*, in N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (editors), *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp. 147-48.

[37] D. M. Gallagher, *Free Choice and Free Judgment in Thomas Aquinas*, «Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie», 76 (1994), pp. 247-77, at p. 266.

[38] D. M. Gallagher, o.c., p. 267.

stands to be good. Aquinas preserves the twin foundations of a 'deterministic' intellectual specification of what is good and a 'voluntaristic' exercise of the particular consideration which allows this specification. He holds onto his cake and eats it.

There are therefore many ways in Aquinas's account in which the objective is thoroughly subjective. (A) There must be an initial willingness of the will to understand anything at all. Even before the world reveals its particularities this general willingness gives a certain shape and rhythm to the appearance of the world, which depends on one's desire for truth and understanding. At any moment the will can think or not think about anything at all, for many different reasons. The pattern of thinking and not thinking decides the pattern of the appearance of the world. (B) There has to be a willingness of the will to see some types of understanding as 'good' and worthy of interest and to ignore others. We cannot understand anything unless we value the activity of understanding in question. Any good can be seen as not-good from a certain perspective, and any act of understanding can be seen as not-good from a certain perspective. (C) Our understanding of any particular aspect of the thing at hand is a good which must be sought by the will. The multifarious properties and characteristics of any object reveal themselves only if someone is interested in them.

For Aquinas, every single thing understood is objective – whether we are considering the world as a whole, the objects within it, their orientation within its structure, or their characteristics. Our understanding is *specified* by the nature of what is understood. Yet this objectivity is only revealed through the interests of human beings, through the activation of the will as we seek specific, concrete goods (including the goods of understanding) in our quest for our ultimate good.

Objectivity, we could say, is subjective. We don't need to pretend that we stand in some neutral space outside our personal experience in order to begin the process of understanding the objective world. We act within a culture and a language, guided by a set of personal and communal goals, and as we act we come up against the objective. This is against the view that objective understanding is somehow adulterated by the presence of the subject, a view held with such force by, for example, Karl Popper. He went to great lengths to protect scientific knowledge from the errors of psychologism and could even assert that some forms of knowledge are totally independent of anyone's claim to know. «Knowledge in the objective sense is *knowledge without a knower*: it is *knowledge without a knowing subject*».[39]

[39] K. R. Popper, *Epistemology without a Knowing Subject*, in *Objective Knowledge, an Evolutionary Approach*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1979, p. 109.

Aquinas makes understanding radically personal, without losing the objectivity of truth. We have *to make things true*, in the sense that all understanding is something we have to do. Understanding is an act which has to be done for an end. What matters is how we *conceive the world to be*, where 'conception' can imply both 'thinking about what is' and 'creating something new' (as in the conception of a baby). *Invenire* is another word which provides a useful double meaning: in contemporary English 'to discover' and 'to invent' have opposing senses, but in Latin a single word stands for both.

Aquinas emphasises the constructive work that needs to be done by each individual intellect in order to place the truth of things in the perspective of human understanding. Truth is not just found, ready-made – it has to be personalised. To think that we have to become more detached in order to become more objective is an illusion, in any area of understanding. Yet this is in no way a denial of universality or objectivity, because the truth gained by each person *is* the truth of things. The subjective element does not blur but reveals the being of things. The ontological priority of things is what founds the universality of our particular modes of understanding.

This personal construction of truth is the foundation for human freedom and responsibility. We are free to act because we are free to understand the world in different ways. If one starts with the assumption that there is only a single (and therefore determined) way of understanding the world common to all human beings, one's view of freedom will inevitably become voluntaristic. This is because freely made personal preferences, if they are not linked to a personalised understanding of the world, must therefore be made by an irrational will that turns against the shared and determined understanding. But for Aquinas truth is not found by trying to escape from our personal interests. These interests give us a purchase on truth. Knowledge depends on desire, on love. If we come to share a larger truth it is because our interests and love have expanded and not because we have abandoned them for some impersonal neutrality.