

How Intellect and Will Interplay in Human Action for Aquinas

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the interrelationship between will and intellect in human action for Aquinas. Will as the faculty of soul initiates human action when intellect presents a situation as the condition the action is required. The power of will and intellect both constitute the elements of rational action which characterizes human action as well as mode of existence which exhibit the essence of human soul. According to Aquinas, the incorporeality of the soul contributes to the substantial status of human soul and allows the soul to play the first principle of human life. The Intellect as an apprehensive power and the will as an appetitive power of the rational soul constitute human action which aims at a certain good and is not determined by natural instinct only. If the will is necessitated by the ultimate end, i.e., happiness, how can we explain the voluntariness of the will in human action when it is in the necessary relation to the ultimate end? In other words, how can we explain that the natural necessitation of the will is not incompatible with the voluntariness of the will as an agent of the action? Even though each and every human being as a rational being moves

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toward the same ultimate end, each one of us can have the different particular ends which are chosen as the means to the ultimate end. Therefore, this paper claims that the mutual interplay of the will and the intellect of human action explicates both rational characteristic of human action and diversity of individual choice given by each particular person.

Keywords

Will, Intellect, Aquinas, Human Action, Ethics

Introduction

Aquinas, in ST, I, 82, 4¹ inquires into the human action with the mutual interplay of intellect and will,² which Aquinas characterizes as two main powers or faculties of the human soul. But he does not think that will and intellect are independent of each other since they always work together in a human action; the intellect as a power of knowing understands that will wills, and the will as a power of appetite wills the intellect to understand.³

The human action is determined by the human soul, for the soul is the first principle of life in living things.⁴ Aquinas explains that the will and the intellect are the powers of the soul, which is the subject of the other powers of the soul, which characterizes the human soul as rational soul.⁵ Therefore, we have to understand the two faculties of the soul, i.e., the intellect and the will, to explain the human action. In this paper, I would like to investigate how Aquinas understands the basic structure of the human action, and how he finds the ground of the human action in the mutual interplays of the will and the intellect

I. The Soul as the First Principle of Human action.

1. The Soul as the First Principle

Aquinas starts to explain the nature of human being from a definition of the soul as the first principle of the life in living beings.⁶ The soul is whatever makes the difference between things animate and things inanimate that, for Aquinas, are a corporeal thing. Then, why cannot this principle of life be a material object?⁷

According to Aquinas, eye can be a principle of visual activities, but it cannot be a principle of digesting activities or a principle of hearing activities.⁸ These principles of individual activities cannot explain the living of the owner of each individual activity. The eye as the principle of visual activities cannot explain the fact that the owner of the eye is living, which is independent of the principle of visual activities. The principle of life is the principle which makes something alive and which all other principles of activities can be attributed to. This principle must be the primary principle by which all other activities of a living being can be explained. Therefore, the principle of life, soul is the first principle of all living beings.⁹

The soul as the first principle of life is not a body, but the actuality of a body.¹⁰ If the soul were a body, the soul would be explained on the basis of the something intrinsic to the living body; therefore it would not be the first principle of life. In other words, if the soul is a corporeal thing, then the soul is dependent on its corporeality and should have animated the thing whose soul exists by virtue of its corporeality. The soul as the first principle of life is not a part of the body but its form or actuality and cannot be identified with anything corporeal.¹¹

If the soul is the first principle of life, do all the living — plants,

animals, and human beings — have and share the same as their first principle? According to Aquinas, all the living things have soul as far as they are living things, but the soul of plants, animals and human beings are different from each other, by which they have different operations and powers.¹² The soul of a plant, for example, is the first principle of the nutritive life of plants; the soul of animals is the first of sensitive life; therefore, the animal act, which is operated by the sensitive soul, is directed to fulfilling their sensitive desires. However, human beings, who are rational, are fundamentally different from nonhuman beings since the human soul has intellect and will which is lacking in the souls of nonhuman beings.

2. *The human soul as a subsistent existence*

The human soul, for Aquinas, as “the principle of intellectual operation,” is *both incorporeal and subsistent*.¹³ In other words, the human soul is peculiar, for the status of the human soul is subsistent, which is “a necessary condition for its existing apart from the body whose form it is.”¹⁴ The subsistent soul, as Aquinas points out, can be explained by its own self operation; the operation of the human soul is *per se* and does not depend on the operations of a body which are accidental to the body.¹⁵ Hence from the incorporeality of the soul, Aquinas finds the subsistence of the human soul. In other words subsistence and incorporeality of the soul go hand in hand.

To make clear the subsistent nature of the human soul, in ST, I, 75, 2, Aquinas introduced three plausible objections against the subsistent nature of the human soul and present the replies to them. The first objection is that if the soul is subsistent then it can be referred to as this particular thing; but *this particular thing* refers to the whole human being

who is composed of soul and body, and it does not refer to soul alone. Against this object, Aquinas argues that the subsistence of the soul can be explained not by the whole which completes the specific nature of human being, but by the actuality which excludes the inherence of an accident.¹⁶

The second objection points out the intimate connection between the mode of existence and the mode of operation; everything subsistent can be described in terms of its own operation, but the operation of the human soul cannot be described as its own, and an operation of soul, as feeling or understanding, is not enough to act of itself and needs other existence to act. Aquinas replies to this objection by employing two different modes of the notion of *per se* existence. In the first mode, a thing that *per se* exists does not include accidental or material forms, as shown in the reply to the first objection. In the second mode, a thing that *per se* exists does not exist as part of anything else. In the latter sense, for Thomas, the operation of the soul can exist subsistent. For example, *I*, as a whole human being, operate and act according to *my* thinking. That is to say, *my* mode of existence depends on the matter of *my* thinking. *My* thinking here is contrasted with an operation of hand or eye, which are mere parts of the whole human being. Hence touching or seeing necessarily depends on sense organs and is attributed to the whole human being through sense organs. In this sense, sense organs are used as mere instruments, but that is not the case for the soul. The soul is the first principle by which human beings understand and on which all human activities are dependent.¹⁷

The third objection is that, since understanding as an operation of the soul requires phantasms which depend on bodily organs, the soul is not subsistent. Aquinas points out that even though the body is required for the act of understanding, the body is not the origin of understanding. This independence of understanding is made apparent with the dependence of sense perceptions; for a sense perception depends on a sense organ which

is part of the body as well as the sense perception requires the object of the senses. Thus the dependence of sense perceptions shows that sense organs are not subsistent. This is the reason why the animal soul, whose apprehensive powers depend merely on sense organs, is not subsistent. From these arguments, Aquinas concludes that the human soul is subsistent, for understanding is the *per se* operation of the human soul. Since understanding (intellect) is not a corporeal organ and does not directly use a corporeal organ, the intellect is not corporeal but spiritual. Therefore, the human action is fundamentally intellectual.

II. The Role of the Will and the Intellect

Aquinas illustrates that there are five powers in the soul; i.e., vegetative, sensitive, intellectual, appetitive, and locomotive powers, which are generically distinguished according to their objects.¹⁸ But Aquinas spells out that the intellect as a apprehensive power and the will as a appetitive power are distinct from the other powers as follows;

All the powers of the soul belong to the soul alone as their principle. But some powers belong to the soul alone as their subject; as the intelligence and the will. These powers must remain in the soul, after the destruction of the body. But other powers are subjected in the composite; as all the powers of the sensitive and nutritive parts.¹⁹

Hence the intellect and the will are independent of the body and are the subjects of the other powers; therefore, the intellect and the will determine the peculiar nature of the human soul. In other words, the intellect and the will are that which make human beings distinctive among

all the creatures.

1. *The Intellect as an Apprehensive Power of the Rational Soul*

The intellect as a power of the soul is an ability to apprehend something intrinsic. Even though the sense perception is also an ability to apprehend, the intellect is the only apprehensive power which constitutes the specific character of human action; for, “the sense perception is not the total and complete cause of intellectual knowledge.”²⁰ Animals have the sense perception as a cognitive power and act in accordance with it. The sense perception is directed to particular objects and is determined by the nature of a sense organ. Thus insofar as animals act according to their sense perceptions, they are determined to act in the same way by their natural species. Since animals do not have a higher standard by which their acts are compared and evaluated, they act according to their natural instincts and do not have control over their action. For example, when the sheep sees the wolf, it always flees; and when the cat sees the mouse, it always chases the mouse. Therefore, insofar as animals have the sense perception as their cognitive ability, the modes of their behaviors depend on the nature of their sense organs and of external objects.²¹

Aquinas considers the intellect as a cognitive power of human being that has the ability to abstract the form or the nature from material things.²² Material things are not in themselves fit as objects of thought. If that were the case, we would have to suppose the Platonic Forms which are necessarily separated from material things. Thus, Aquinas postulates the power belonging to the intellect, i.e., *agent intellect*, to create actually thinkable objects by abstraction from material things.²³

2. *The Will as Appetitive Power of the Rational Soul*

Aquinas claims that everything that has a soul, which is the form of life, has an inclination or tendency. In other words, every form of life is accompanied by some tendency. Aquinas says that this tendency varies according to a degree of knowledge that a kind of the soul possesses. For example, a stone is inclined to fall down to the earth; but this inclination of the stone which has no knowledge is merely determined by its natural quality. On the other hand, in those things that have knowledge, an inclination exists in a higher manner; for example, animals have an inclination according to their sense perceptions. In this case, this inclination follows the sensitive cognition and is determined by the nature of their sense organs; therefore, it is called the sensitive appetite. Human beings, however, have an inclination too, but this inclination is different from that of animals.²⁴ For the inclination of human beings follows the rational apprehension; therefore, the inclination is called the rational appetite or the will. Thus, the will of human beings is the power to incline to something external to fulfill their desire according to their intellect.²⁵

As stated above, the sense appetite follows the sense apprehension; and the rational appetite follows the rational apprehension. Thus insofar as animals have only the sensitive apprehension, their appetite depend on the nature of their sense organs which belong to their body; therefore, their action is directed toward fulfilling their sense desires. Hence animals do not act apart from their body, and their actions are determined by natural instinct proper to their natural species. On the other hand, human beings act according to the rational appetite which is accompanied by the rational apprehension.²⁶

When we consider the will as a kind of appetite, we are confronted with the problem that both the will and the sensitive appetite are

necessarily related to particular things. With regard to this problem, Aquinas replies that, “for the appetitive power is a passive power, which is naturally moved by the things apprehended: wherefore the apprehended appetite is a mover which is not moved, while the appetite is a mover moved...” For this reason, he claims that, “since what is apprehended by the intellect and what is apprehended by sense are generically different; consequently, the intellectual appetite is distinct from the sensitive.”²⁷ The peculiar nature of the intellectual appetite is made apparent as Thomas characterizes the objects of the intellectual appetite:

The intellectual appetite, though it tends to individual things which exist outside the soul, yet tends to them as standing under the universal; as when it desires something because it is good. Wherefore the Philosopher says (*Rhetoric*. Ii. 4) that hatred can regard a universal, as when *we hate every kind of thief*. In the same way by the intellectual appetite we may desire the immaterial good, which is not apprehended by sense, such as knowledge, virtue, and such like.²⁸

Insofar as the will as a *mover* tends toward particular things, the will as the intellectual appetite is hardly differentiated from the sense appetite; but insofar as is a mover *moved* by the intellectual objects which are grasped by the intellect it is necessarily differentiated from the sense appetite which is moved by the sensible objects which are grasped by sense.²⁹

The will as a mover can will a particular object over the other. In other words, the will may choose this or that. Hence the will has the control over its choice. Now, the will as an agent of the human action, according to Thomas, may choose one action over the other.³⁰ Thus the will seems to be free from any necessity; therefore, that which is wanted

cannot necessarily be related to the will. But Thomas says that the will is of necessity directed to the ultimate end, i.e., happiness. This natural necessitation of the will to the ultimate end is shown by the fact that every human being wills to be happy.³¹

If the will is necessitated by the ultimate end, i.e., happiness, how can we explain the voluntariness of the will in human action when it is in the necessary relation to the ultimate end? In other words, how can we explain that the natural necessitation of the will is not incompatible with the voluntariness of the will as an agent of the action? Thomas' answer is this: even though each and every human being as a rational being moves toward the same ultimate end, each one of us can have the different particular ends which are chosen as the means to the ultimate end.³²

Thomas continues to explain the voluntary nature of the will in terms of the object to which it moves. This voluntary nature of the will is not necessitated by the thing to which the will moves as the sensitive appetite is; but the will is moved by that rational capacity of the intellect which can compare several things together as the same time. In other words, the will is not moved by a mere particular good, but rather the will is moved by the particular good, which is chosen by the rational capacity of the intellect, among several kinds of good in the light of the ultimate good.³³ In a human action, therefore, the rational character of the will must be apparent since the will is always moved by the thing that is rationally chosen by the intellect. The intellect can choose a particular good among many, for the intellect moves itself toward its object under the guidance of the universal goodness which, in the case of the human action, is happiness.

3. *The Mutual Interplay of the Intellect and the Will*

In a human action, the intellect and the will as faculties of the soul mutually interact with each other; for while the will as a faculty of wanting wills what the intellect knows, the intellect as a faculty of knowing understands what the will wants. With respect to this mutual interplay of the will and intellect, Thomas raises the question whether the will is a higher power than the intellect or vice versa. Thomas, according to Kenny, answers in two ways: the first way is;

If we consider intellect and will simply as faculties, the intellect is superior. Both of them are concerned with goodness; but while the will can want various concrete goods, the intellect can achieve a general theory of goodness. The intellect does not just identify and pursue goods, but can explain in what their goodness consists and why they should be pursued.³⁴

If both will and intellect as faculties of the soul are taken in absolute fashion, the intellect is superior to the will. In the second way, Aquinas explains that the will may be superior in its particular activities than any acts of the intellect.³⁵ In other words, if the will and intellect are relatively considered, the will is superior to the intellect: in this case the will and the intellect are accounted not in themselves but in relation to their respective objects to which the activities of both will and intellect move accordingly. Since the object of the will, i.e., good or evil which resides in the thing while the object of the intellect, i.e., truth or falsehood is located in the mind, the former is more immediate to the agent than the latter; therefore, the will is superior to the intellect, for the more immediate, according to Thomas, is the nobler and higher.³⁶ Kenny summarizes these mutual

interplay or inclusions of will and intellect in a brief fashion as follows;

Each of two faculties has the other within its ambit. The intellect can think about the will, and the will's activities and objects, no less than about material objects like stocks and stones. On the other hand, the operation of the intellect is one among the many possible goods which may be objects of volition: we can want to understand, and we can want to attain to truth. So the activities and the objects of intellect and will mutually include each other: the intellect understands the will's willing, and the will wills the intellect's understanding

IV. Conclusion

Aquinas starts from the fact that human beings have the rational soul and characterizes the rational soul as incorporeal and subsistent. Then he defines intellect and will as the distinctive powers of the human soul which differentiate the human soul from the other souls, for intellect and will do not depend on the body for their operations and have *per se* operations. Finally, Aquinas concludes that the necessitated end the voluntariness of the human action are not contradict each other, but rather they are mutually include each other according to the ways in which the superiority of intellect or of will is taken with respect to themselves and to their relations to the objects. Hence, in a human action, intellect and will mutually interact at the same time, but yet they remain as two distinctive powers of the human soul. Consequently, the human soul as the first principle of human beings can determine the human action in the light of the mutual interplay of intellect and will.

NOTES

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 5 vols. Tr. Fathers of English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1948; repr., Westminster, MD.: Christian Classics, 1981). Hereafter cited as ST, and the numbers followed by ST mean the part, question, article, and if applicable objection or reply; for example, “I, 78, 1” means first part, question 78, first article.
2. Anthony Kenny, in his *Aquinas on Mind* (London: Routledge, 1993), 72, expresses the relationships between the will and the intellect in human action, as the “interlocking relationships” between the two. But I take the expression, “the mutual interplay” of the two, since these relationships involve an active mode of the soul.
3. ST, I, 82, 4.
4. ST, I, 75, 1.
5. ST, I, 77, 8.
6. ST, I, 75, 1.
7. *Ibid.*, According to Aquinas, life is manifested by motion and by understanding.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. ST, I, 76, 1.
12. ST, I, 78, 1.
13. ST, I, 75, 2.
14. Norman Kretzmann, “Philosophy of Mind,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, eds. N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 131.
15. ST, I, 75, 2.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. ST, I, 78, 1.
19. ST, I, 77, 8.
20. Kenny, *op. cit.*, 93. Cf. ST, I, 79, 1.
21. ST, I, 78, 4.
22. ST, I, 79, 3.
23. ST, I, 79, 3. Cf., Kenny, *op. cit.*, 43.

24. Kenny points out that it is problematic to see the inclination of all three kinds in the same fashion, i.e., in the teleological view point, as follows; “Where Aquinas goes wrong is in thinking that all natural agency is teleological: that is to say, that every natural action is the exercise of a tendency to produce some good (whether it be a good of the agent itself, or a contribution to some overall cosmic beauty)... But the operation of the laws of inertia and gravity and the natural activities of sulphur or uranium are teleological activities at all.” For this reason, Kenny argues that Aquinas would be wrong to attribute ends or aims to inanimate objects. (op. cit., 61-2) However, it is still valid to maintain the view that the inclination of human beings follows the rational apprehension which characterizes the peculiarity of the human action.

25. St, I, 80, 1.

26. Ibid.

27. ST, I, 80, 2.

28. ST, I, 80, 2, ad. 2.

29. ST, I, 80, 2.

30. ST. I, 82, 1, ad. 3.

31. ST, I, 82, 1.

32. Ibid., ad. 1.

33. ST, I, 82, 2.

34. Kenny, op. cit., 71. Cf., ST, I, 82, 3.

35. Ibid.

36. ST, I, 82, 3.