

The *Ordo Rationis* and the Moral Species

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Abstract: *This essay considers St. Thomas Aquinas's understanding of the relation between the ordo rationis and the moral specification of human acts. In the first part it considers the most relevant texts where Thomas develops these topics, underlining his main ideas. The second part studies how some of Thomas' classical and contemporary interpreters have presented his thought on these matters, highlighting some of their differences. The final section draws conclusions regarding reason as the rule of morality, the concept of "human nature" used in moral discourse, and on the creative role of practical reason in the conception of the moral object; it also explores whether Thomas' approach is useful in determining the moral species of complex human actions involving multiple human goods and intended ends.*

In this essay, I offer to English language readers an additional component of my broader work toward the recovery of St. Thomas's teaching on "the specification of human acts."¹ In particular, this essay attempts to integrate some of the concepts studied in my broader work into an organically coherent synthesis. Such integration between the various aspects of St. Thomas's teaching is required in order to understand the relationship between the moral specification of human action and the *ordo rationis* by which it is measured. I hope to show that these concepts, when placed in relation to one another, almost naturally manifest the intelligibility of the other distinctions and notions used by St. Thomas.

1. This essay was developed from the eleventh chapter of my doctoral dissertation, *A especificação moral dos actos humanos segundo são Tomás de Aquino* (Rome: Edizioni Università Santa Croce, 2008). Two selections of this work have previously been made available to English language readers in the *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15:2 (August 2008). These include my "Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act: A Reading in Light of the Texts and Commentators," 243-76, and "Aquinas on Interior and Exterior Acts: Clarifying a Key Aspect of His Action Theory," 277-316. I offer special thanks to Dr. Joseph T. Papa for his excellent translation, and to Dr. William F. Murphy, Jr.

1. The Important Texts

a) *The Rule of Morality*

According to St. Thomas “man’s good must needs be appraised with respect to some rule. Now this rule is twofold, [...] viz. human reason and Divine Law,”² as we noted in chapter III. To act humanly, therefore, is to act according to right reason. Now, “the formal principle of the virtues is good as defined by reason,”³ given that “reason directs all things in view of the end.”⁴ In this line Thomas also says that “human virtue, which makes a man good, and his work good, is in accord with man’s nature, for as much as it accords with his reason: while vice is contrary to man’s nature, in so far as it is contrary to the order of reason,”⁵ that is, “acts of virtue are suitable to human nature, since they are according to reason, whereas acts of vice are discordant from human nature, since they are against reason.”⁶

“Since the rational soul is the proper form of man, there is in every man a natural inclination to act according to reason: and this is to act according to virtue. Consequently, considered thus, all acts of virtue are prescribed by the natural law,”⁷ given that, as we have seen “[t]he perfection of a virtue depends on the reason.”⁸ Therefore, “all virtuous acts belong to the natural law. For it has been stated that to the natural law belongs everything to which a man is inclined according to his nature,”⁹ and he can even go as far as to say that “[n]atural reason [...] appoints the end to moral virtues.”¹⁰ St. Thomas claims that “[t]he essence of human virtue consists in safeguarding the good of reason in human affairs, for this is man’s proper good,”¹¹ and thus he says, for example, that “the virtue which is in the irascible and concupiscible powers is nothing else but a certain habitual conformity of these powers to reason.”¹² It is clear that “a man learned in moral science might be able

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2. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 63, a. 2, c.: “oportet quod bonum hominis secundum aliquam regulam consideretur. Quae quidem est duplex, ut supra dictum est, scilicet ratio humana, et lex divina.”
 3. *Ibid.*, q. 61, a. 2, c.: “Principium enim formale virtutis de qua nunc loquimur [quatuor cardinales virtutes], est rationis bonum.”
 4. *Ibid.*, q. 73, a. 3, c.: “Ratio autem ordinat omnia in agibilibus ex fine.”
 5. *Ibid.*, q. 71, a. 2, c.: “virtus humana, quae hominem facit bonum, et opus ipsius bonum reddit, in quantum est secundum naturam hominis, in quantum convenit rationi, vitium autem in quantum est contra naturam hominis, in quantum est contra ordinem rationis.”
 6. *Ibid.*, q. 54, a. 3, c.: “actus virtutum naturae humanae conveniunt, eo quod sunt secundum rationem, actus vero vitiorum, cum sint contra rationem, a natura humana discordant.”
 7. *Ibid.*, q. 94, a. 3, c.: “cum anima rationalis sit propria forma hominis, naturalis inclinatio inest cuilibet homini ad hoc quod agat secundum rationem. Et hoc est agere secundum virtutem. Unde secundum hoc, omnes actus virtutum sunt de lege naturali.”
 8. *Ibid.*, q. 60, a. 5, c.: “perfectio virtutis ex ratione dependet.”
 9. *Ibid.*, q. 94, a. 3, c.: “omnes actus virtuosus pertinent ad legem naturae. Dictum est enim quod ad legem naturae pertinet omne illud ad quod homo inclinatur secundum suam naturam.”
 10. *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 47, a. 6, ad 1: “virtutibus moralibus praestituit finem ratio naturalis.”
 11. *Ibid.*, q. 129, a. 3, c.: “ad rationem virtutis humanae pertinet ut in rebus humanis bonum rationis servetur, quod est proprium hominis bonum.”
 12. *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 56, a. 4, c.: “virtus quae est in irascibili et concupiscibili, nihil aliud est quam quaedam habitualis conformitas istarum potentialium ad rationem.”

to judge rightly about virtuous acts, though he had not the virtue¹³ personally, but what such a person clearly cannot do is choose under the command of virtue. Aquinas here rightly observes that “someone who does not possess justice can do a particular just work. But if we consider the way in which [this work] is realized, one who does not possess the virtue cannot act in the same way as one who possesses it,”¹⁴ and this either because he does not tend intentionally toward justice, or because, at the least, the choice is not born of the *habitus* of justice.

b) The ratio obiecti and the Moral Species of the Act

When asked whether conscience binds the moral subject or not, Aquinas responds in the affirmative, and makes statements in his argumentation relevant to the moral specification of human acts. We will therefore include the body of his response here in its entirety, so as to then offer a brief commentary. It should be noted that this text is dated Easter of 1270,¹⁵ which puts the timing of its composition very near to the other texts that are most significant for the object of our study (i.e., the *Summa theologiae*, the *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, and the *Sententia libri Ethicorum*). Here is the text:

“I answer that, although the act receives its species from the object, it nevertheless does not receive the species according to the object’s matter, but according to the meaning of the object (*rationem obiecti*), just as the seeing of a rock does not receive the species from the rock, but from the color that is itself the object of vision. Now, every human act has the aspect of sin or of merit insofar as it is voluntary. On the other hand, the object of the will, according to its own nature, is the apprehended good, and therefore the human act is judged virtuous or vicious according to the apprehended good, upon which the will is of itself set, and not according to the material object of the act, as when someone [for example], intending to kill his father kills a deer instead, incurring the sin of patricide; conversely, if a hunter intends to kill a deer but, having taken due care, accidentally kills his father, he is immune from the crime of patricide. Consequently, if something that is of itself not contrary to the law of God, such as lifting a straw from the ground, or swearing, is understood with an erroneous conscience to be contrary to the law of God and the will is set on it as such, it is clear that the will will be set, speaking formally and *per se*, on what is contrary to the law of God, whereas materially on what is not contrary to the law of God, and even more to that which is according to the law of God. And therefore it is clear that in this case the law of God

13. *Ibid.*, I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3: “aliquis instructus in scientia morali, posset iudicare de actibus virtutis, etiam si virtutem non haberet.”

14. *Quodlibet IV*, q. 10, a. 1, c.: “aliquis non habens iustitiam potest facere aliquod opus iustum. Sed si attendamus ad modum faciendi, ille qui non habet virtutem, non potest operari sicut ille qui habet.”

15. R. Coggi, “Introduzione,” in Thomas Aquinas, *Le questioni disputate*, vol. 10, ESD, Bologna 2003, p. 9.

is despised, and there must be sin. It is necessary, therefore, that conscience always obligates, whether it is correct or erroneous, whether in things evil in themselves or in things indifferent, in such a way that one who acts against his conscience sins.”¹⁶

It should be noted that St. Thomas distinguishes between the matter of the object and the formal aspect or meaning of the object. In other passages, Aquinas calls the matter of the object the *materia ex qua*, which is like the “cadaver” of the action. Thomas’s example of vision and a rock, moreover, confirms and further illuminates his explication. The object of vision is not the rock as such, but the rock’s color, because the visual faculty is not susceptible of being specified by material beings, but by the colors of the various material beings. In an analogous way, the object of the will is not a being *tout court*, but an aspect of good of a particular action, as we have shown above. What we wish to emphasize here, however, is that according to Thomas’s response, the human act is considered vicious or virtuous insofar as the apprehended good to which the will tends as its object is contrary or not to the law of God. In other words, the rule of the morality of a human act is its agreement or not with the eternal law, that law which, as we have seen, is participated in by man through the light of natural reason. In fact, according to Aquinas “there are two rules of the human will: one is proximate and homogeneous, viz. the human reason; the other is the first rule, viz. the eternal law, which is God’s reason, so to speak,”¹⁷ and he can therefore say “[f]or whatever things are comprised under the order of reason, are comprised under the order of God Himself.”¹⁸

c) *Acting According to the ordo rationis*

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16. *Quodlibet III*, q. 12, a. 2, c.: “Respondeo. Dicendum, quod cum actus recipiat speciem ab objecto, non recipit speciem ab eo secundum materiam obiecti, sed secundum rationem obiecti: sicut visio lapidis non recipit speciem a lapide, sed a colorato, quod est per se obiectum visus. Omnis autem actus humanus habet rationem peccati vel meriti in quantum est voluntarius. Obiectum autem voluntatis secundum propriam rationem est bonum apprehensum. Et ideo actus humanus iudicatur virtuosus vel vitiosus secundum bonum apprehensum, in quod per se voluntas fertur, et non secundum materialem obiectum actus: sicut si aliquis credens occidere patrem, occidat cervum, incurrit parricidii peccatum; et e contrario si quis venator putans occidere cervum, debita diligentia adhibita, occidat casualiter patrem, immunis est parricidii crimine. Si ergo aliquid quod secundum se non est contra legem Dei, ut levare festucam de terra, vel iurare, apprehendatur, errante conscientia, ut contra legem Dei existens, et sic voluntas in ipsum feratur, manifestum est quod voluntas fertur, per se loquendo et formaliter, in id quod est contra legem Dei; materialiter autem in id quod non est contra legem Dei; immo forte in id quod est secundum legem Dei. Et ideo manifestum est quod est ibi contemptus legis Dei; et ideo necesse est quod sit ibi peccatum. Et ideo dicendum est quod omnis conscientia, sive recta, sive erronea, sive in per se malis, sive in indifferentibus, est obligatoria; ita quod qui contra conscientiam facit, peccat.”
17. *Summa theologiae*, II, q. 71, a. 6, c.: “Regula autem voluntatis humanae est duplex, una propinqua et homogena, scilicet ipsa humana ratio; alia vero est prima regula, scilicet lex aeterna, quae est quasi ratio Dei.”
18. *Ibid.*, q. 72, a. 4, c.: “Quaecumque enim continentur sub ordine rationis, continentur sub ordine ipsius Dei.”

Undoubtedly, “the act of concupiscence is so far natural to man, as it is in accord with the order of reason; while, in so far as it trespasses beyond the bounds of reason, it is, for a man, contrary to nature.”¹⁹ For man to act humanly, it is *necessary* that he act rationally, since “the proper form of man is that by which he is a rational animal, thus it is necessary that man’s works be good or evil by the fact that they are according to right reason. In fact the perversion of reason is repugnant to the nature of reason.”²⁰

“Man is what he is because of reason. In fact, the highest perfection of animals is the sensitive part, and thus when a man departs from what agrees with reason to pursue what is appropriate to the sensitive part, he exchanges his human condition for an animal one, and in this way the sin or fault in which the act consists corrupts the soul or [its] powers, according to its deviation from the order of reason, by which [latter] he was directed toward the due end.”²¹

Thus “[r]eason was given to man that he might ensue those things to which his nature inclines, not in all cases, but in accordance with the order of reason.”²²

If this is true, then it follows that “[r]eason should govern every act”²³ and that in essence “sin, in human acts, is that which is against the order of reason,”²⁴ given that “[r]eason has the direction of those things for which man has a natural appetite; so that if the appetite wander from the rule of reason, whether by excess or by default [i.e., defect], it will be sinful.”²⁵ In fact, for St. Thomas, “we consider the good and evil in human acts as they are in accord with reason informed by the divine law, whether by nature or by instruction or by infusion.”²⁶ He also says that “if being in accord with reason and being contrary to reason belong to the species

19. *Ibid.*, q. 82, a. 3, ad 1: “concupiscere est homini naturale, in quantum est secundum rationis ordinem, concupiscentia autem quae transcendit limites rationis, est homini contra naturam.”

20. *Sententia Ethic.*, lib. 2, lect. 2, n. 3: “Propria autem forma hominis est secundum quam est animal rationale. Unde oportet quod operatio hominis sit bona ex hoc, quod est secundum rationem rectam. Perversitas enim rationis repugnat naturae rationis.”

21. *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 35, q. 1, a. 5, c.: “Homo enim, est illud quod est, per rationem; ultima vero perfectio in brutis est secundum partem sensibilem; unde quando homo ab eo quod est conveniens secundum rationem, transit in id quod parti sensitivae convenit, mutatur a conditione humana in conditionem brutalem; et per hunc modum peccatum vel culpa, quod in actu consistit, dicitur corrumpere animam vel potentias, secundum scilicet quod pervertit eam ab ordine rationis per quem in debitum finem dirigebatur.”

22. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 69, a. 4, ad 1: “ideo homini data est ratio, ut ea ad quae natura inclinatur non passim, sed secundum rationis ordinem exequatur.”

23. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 1, ad s.c. 7: “omnis actus per rationem regulari debet.”

24. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 153, a. 2, c.: “peccatum in humanis actibus est quod est contra ordinem rationis.”

25. *Ibid.*, q. 162, a. 1, ad 2: “ratio est ordinatrix, et ita, si aliquis a regula rationis recedit, vel in plus vel in minus, erit talis appetitus vitiosus.”

26. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 4, c.: “bonum et malum in actibus humanis consideratur secundum quod actus concordat rationi informatae lege divina, vel naturaliter, vel per doctrinam, vel per infusionem.”

of human acts, we should say that some acts are intrinsically good, and some acts intrinsically evil";²⁷ the morality of human acts is thus an essential distinction between them, and not merely accidental. Therefore, "every voluntary action that turns aside from the order of reason and of the Eternal Law, is evil, and [...] every good action is in accord with reason and the Eternal Law."²⁸ Even more concretely, it can be said that "if the object of an action includes something in accord with the order of reason, it will be a good action according to its species; for instance, to give alms to a person in want. On the other hand, if it includes something repugnant to the order of reason, it will be an evil act according to its species; for instance, to steal."²⁹ Therefore, according to Aquinas, "moral acts take their species from their objects as the latter are related to reason."³⁰ This is a very important conclusion.

The species and morality of the act depend, therefore, on its object, as the latter is related to the order of reason. It is in this sense that St. Thomas says "the use of food and sexual capacities is not illicit in itself, but can only be illicit when it departs from the order of reason."³¹ It is fundamental to always remember that "[g]ood is presented to the will as its object by the reason: and in so far as it is in accord with reason, it enters the moral order, and causes moral goodness in the act of the will."³² To judge the morality of a particular object is therefore to evaluate its agreement or not with the order of reason. In this light one can correctly interpret Aquinas's statement that:

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27. Ibid.: "si esse secundum vel praeter rationem pertinet ad speciem actus humani, oportet dicere quod aliqui actus humani sint secundum se boni, et aliqui secundum se mali."
28. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 21, a. 1, c.: "omnis actus voluntarius est malus per hoc quod recedit ab ordine rationis et legis aeternae, et omnis actus bonus concordat rationi et legi aeternae."
29. Ibid., q. 18, a. 8, c.: "si obiectum actus includat aliquid quod conveniat ordini rationis, erit actus bonus secundum suam speciem, sicut dare eleemosynam indigenti. Si autem includat aliquid quod repugnet ordini rationis, erit malus actus secundum speciem, sicut furari"; cf. Ibid., II-II, q. 99, a. 2, c.: "ubicumque invenitur specialis ratio deformitatis, ibi necesse est quod sit speciale peccatum, quia species cuiuslibet rei praecipue attenditur secundum formalem rationem ipsius, non autem secundum materiam vel subiectum. In sacrilegio autem invenitur specialis ratio deformitatis, quia scilicet violatur res sacra per aliquam irreverentiam. Et ideo est speciale peccatum. Et opponitur religioni" ([w] herever we find a special aspect of deformity, there must needs be a special sin; because the species of a thing is derived chiefly from its formal aspect, and not from its matter or subject. Now in sacrilege we find a special aspect of deformity, namely, the violation of a sacred thing by treating it irreverently. Hence it is a special sin. Moreover, it is opposed to religion).
30. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 4, ad 5: "Actus autem moralis, sicut dictum est, recipit speciem ab obiecto secundum quod comparatur ad rationem."
31. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 127, n. 7: "usus ciborum et venereorum non est secundum se illicitus, sed solum secundum quod exit ab ordine rationis illicitus esse potest." English translation for the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is from Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles Book Three: Providence, Part I*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1975.
32. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 19, a. 1, ad 3: "bonum per rationem repraesentatur voluntati ut obiectum; et in quantum cadit sub ordine rationis, pertinet ad genus moris, et causat bonitatem moralem in actu voluntatis."

“There are in fact some actions that, considered absolutely, bear a certain deformity or disorder, but by adding some circumstances become good, just as killing or injuring a man involves in itself a certain deformity, but if one adds that by killing him a wrongdoer is brought to justice, or by injury a delinquent is disciplined, it would not be a sin but something virtuous.”³³

The change in the moral species of an act into another, similar according to its *genus naturae*, is possible due to the presence of a new condition that decisively alters the relation of the moral object with the order of reason, in this case causing the act to change from a vicious species to a virtuous one.

As we have already noted,

“[r]eason should direct the action not only as regards the object, but also as regards every circumstance. Therefore one may turn aside from the rule of reason through corruption of any single circumstance; for instance, by doing something when one ought not or where one ought not; and to depart thus from the rule of reason suffices to make the act evil.”³⁴

On the other hand “if a circumstance added to an act introduces no special repugnance to reason, it does not specify the act.”³⁵ Regarding the evil consequences of acts that are in themselves disordered,

“[i]f [...] the harm follow directly from the sinful act, although it be neither foreseen nor intended, it aggravates the sin directly, because whatever is directly consequent to a sin, belongs, in a manner, to the very species of that sin: for instance, if a man is a notorious fornicator, the result is that many are scandalized; and although such was not his intention, nor was it perhaps foreseen by him, yet it aggravates his sin directly.”³⁶

33. *Quodlibet IX*, q. 7, a. 2, c.: “Sunt vero quaedam actiones quae absolute consideratae, deformitatem vel inordinationem quamdam important, quae tamen aliquibus circumstantiis advenientibus bonae efficiuntur; sicut occidere hominem vel percutere, in se deformitatem quamdam importat, sed si addatur, occidere malefactorem propter iustitiam, vel percutere delinquentem causa disciplinae, non erit peccatum, sed virtuosum.”

34. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 73, a. 7, ad 3.: “ratio debet ordinare actum non solum quantum ad obiectum, sed etiam quantum ad omnes circumstantias. Et ideo aversio quaedam a regula rationis attenditur secundum corruptionem cuiuslibet circumstantiae, puta si aliquis operetur quando non debet, vel ubi non debet. Et huiusmodi aversio sufficit ad rationem mali.”

35. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 6, c.: “Si ergo circumstantia addita nullam specialem repugnantiam ad rationem importet, non dat speciem actui.”

36. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 73, a. 8, c.: “Si vero nocumentum per se sequatur ex actu peccati, licet non sit intentum nec praevium, directe peccatum aggravat, quia quaecumque per se consequuntur ad peccatum, pertinent quodammodo ad ipsam

For the Angelic Doctor “it is clear that man is directed by the divine law to observe the order of reason in regard to all things that can come to his use,”³⁷ and he can therefore say that “the good in human acts is dependent upon their being regulated by reason.”³⁸ Now,

“the acts get their species from their objects. So, the better the object is, the more virtuous the act will be in its species. Now, the end is better than the means to the end; and of the means, the closer one is to the end, the better it is. Hence, among human acts, that one is best which is directed immediately to the ultimate end, namely, God. After this, an act is better in its species the closer its object is to God.”³⁹

From this it derives that there are virtues that are more important than others, with the corresponding vices being more serious than others, according to the relation they have with the final end of human life.

As we have already seen, “sin and evil are always due to a departure from the order of reason to the general end of human life.”⁴⁰ A disordered act of the will in relation to that final end is sufficient to corrupt the person’s entire act. In fact, “the act is deformed because it is at variance with the requisite rule of reason or of God’s law. And there can be such deformity in both internal and external acts, although it is because of the will that we impute external deformed acts to human beings as moral wrongs.”⁴¹ We must always remember that “sin occurs in human acts solely because a person overlooks the rule of reason.”⁴²

d) The ordo rationis and the Moral Virtues

What is the relation of the order of reason to the moral virtues? According to Aquinas the *ordo virtutis* is the *ordo rationis*,⁴³ and thus “every act that tends to

peccati speciem. Puta si aliquis publice fornicetur, sequitur scandalum plurimorum, quod quamvis ipse non intendat, nec forte praevideat, directe per hoc aggravatur peccatum.”

37. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 128, n. 1: “manifestum est quod secundum legem divinam homo inducitur ut ordinem rationis servet in omnibus quae in eius usum venire possunt.”
38. *Ibid.*, cap. 139, n. 3: “Bonum in actibus humanis est secundum quod ratione regulantur.”
39. *Ibid.*, n. 2: “Actus speciem recipiunt ex obiectis. Quanto igitur obiectum est melius, tanto et actus erit virtuosior secundum speciem suam. Finis autem melior est his quae sunt ad finem: quorum tanto aliquid melius est, quanto est fini propinquius. Inter actus igitur humanos ille est optimus qui in ultimum finem, scilicet Deum, immediate fertur. Post quem, tanto actus melior est secundum suam speciem, quanto obiectum est Deo propinquius.”
40. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 21, a. 2, ad 2: “semper peccatum et malum attenditur per deviationem ab ordine rationis ad finem communem humanae vitae.”
41. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, c.: “Deformitas autem actus est per hoc quod discordat a debita regula rationis vel legis Dei. Quae quidem deformitas invenitur non solum in actu interiori, sed etiam exteriori. Sed tamen hoc ipsum quod actus exterior deformis imputatur homini ad culpam, est a voluntate.”
42. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 139, n. 13: “peccatum in actibus humanis accidit ex hoc solo quod aliquis praeterit regulam rationis.”
43. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 100, a. 2, c.: “ordo virtutis, qui est ordo rationis” (the order of virtue, which is the order of reason).

some good, if it does not tend toward it in a disordered way, has for its end the good of some virtue, given that the virtues perfect sufficiently all those things that can be goods of man.”⁴⁴ For him, “all the goodness of moral virtue depends on the rectitude of reason,”⁴⁵ since “the perfection of moral virtue [...] consists in that the appetite be regulated by reason. Now, the first principles of reason are naturally inscribed in our being, both the operative principles and the speculative principles.”⁴⁶ In this line he can say that “[t]he good of human virtue pertains to the order of reason,”⁴⁷ given that “the root of virtue consists in the rectitude itself of reason, according to which the actions and the passions must be directed,”⁴⁸ and that therefore “[v]irtue is constituted by the fact that the ordination of reason is imposed on an appetitive power, and vice derives from the fact that an appetitive movement withdraws from the ordination of reason.”⁴⁹ It is also true that “[t]he passions of the soul, in so far as they are contrary to the order of reason, incline us to sin: but in so far as they are controlled by reason, they pertain to virtue.”⁵⁰

For St. Thomas,

“the good of moral virtue consists chiefly in the order of reason: because ‘man’s good is to be in accord with reason’ [...]. Now the principal order of reason is that by which it directs certain things towards their end, and the good of reason consists chiefly in this order; since good has the aspect of end, and the end is the rule of whatever is directed to the end.”⁵¹

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44. *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 5, ad 3: “Omnis autem actus in aliquod bonum tendens, nisi inordinate in illud tendat, habet pro fine bonum alicujus virtutis, eo quod virtutes sufficienter perficiunt circa omnia quae possunt esse bona hominis.”
45. *Sententia Ethic.*, lib. 2, lect. 7, n. 8: “tota bonitas virtutis moralis dependet ex rectitudine rationis.”
46. *Ibid.*, lect. 4, n. 7: “perfectio virtutis moralis, de qua nunc loquimur, consistit in hoc, quod appetitus reguletur secundum rationem. Prima autem rationis principia sunt naturaliter nobis indita, ita in operativis sicut in speculativis.”
47. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 161, a. 5, c.: “bonum humanae virtutis in ordine rationis consistit.”
48. *Sententia Ethic.*, lib. 2, lect. 8, n. 3: “radix virtutis consistit in ipsa rectitudine rationis secundum quam oportet actiones et passiones dirigere.”
49. *De malo*, q. 8, a. 1, ad 3: “virtus constituitur ex hoc quod ordo rationis ponitur in vi appetitiva; vitium autem consurgit ex hoc quod motus appetitivus ab ordine rationis recedit.”
50. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 24, a. 2, ad 3: “passiones animae, in quantum sunt praeter ordinem rationis, inclinant ad peccatum, in quantum autem sunt ordinatae a ratione, pertinent ad virtutem.”
51. *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 141, a. 6, c.: “bonum virtutis moralis praecipue consistit in ordine rationis, nam bonum hominis est secundum rationem esse, ut Dionysius dicit, IV cap. de Div. Nom. Praecipuus autem ordo rationis consistit ex hoc quod aliqua in finem ordinat, et in hoc ordine maxime consistit bonum rationis nam bonum habet rationem finis, et ipse finis est regula eorum quae sunt ad finem.”

It can therefore be said that “the formal element [in all of the virtues] is precisely this order of reason,”⁵² which means that “all virtuous acts belong to the natural law,”⁵³ given that “[a]lthough the virtues are not caused by nature as regards their perfection of being, yet they incline us to that which is according to nature, i.e. with the order of reason.”⁵⁴ Therefore, “every act is virtuous as a result of the goodness of its end.”⁵⁵ It must also be admitted, however, that “if human acts are made good by the virtues, then that act must be better which belongs to the better virtue.”⁵⁶

e) Moral Evil Involves Opposition to the ordo rationis

On the question of the cause of moral evil, according to St. Thomas, “evil has no efficient, but only a deficient cause, for evil does not result from an agent cause, unless because it is deficient in power.”⁵⁷ “So, evil, as a specific difference in the genus of moral matters, does not simply imply something that is evil in its own essence, but something that is good in itself, though evil for man, inasmuch as it takes away the good of reason which is the good for man.”⁵⁸

“A question worthy of consideration arises at this point. As the term good signifies ‘perfect being,’ so the term evil signifies nothing else than ‘privation of perfect being.’ In its proper acceptance, privation is predicated of that which is fitted by its nature to be possessed, and to be possessed at a certain time and in a certain manner. Evidently, therefore, a thing is called evil if it lacks a perfection it ought to have. Thus if a man lacks the sense of sight, this is an evil for him. But the same lack is not an evil for a stone, for the stone is not equipped by nature to have the faculty of sight.”⁵⁹

52. *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 67, a. 1, c.: “formale in omnibus virtutibus est ipse ordo rationis.”

53. *Ibid.*, q. 94, a. 3, c.: “omnes actus virtuosi pertinent ad legem naturae.”

54. *Ibid.*, q. 71, a. 2, ad 1: “virtutes, etsi non causentur a natura secundum suum esse perfectum, tamen inclinant ad id quod est secundum naturam, idest secundum ordinem rationis.”

55. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 139, n. 11: “omnis actus virtuosus est ex fine boni.”

56. *Ibid.*, n. 6: “Si ex virtutibus actus humani boni redduntur, oportet meliorem esse actum qui est melioris virtutis.”

57. *Ibid.*, cap. 10, n. 7: “malum non habet causam efficientem, sed deficientem: quia malum non sequitur ex causa agente nisi in quantum est deficientis virtutis.”

58. *Ibid.*, cap. 8, n. 8: “nec malum, secundum quod est differentia specifica in genere moralium, importat aliquid quod sit secundum essentiam suam malum: sed aliquid quod secundum se est bonum, malum autem homini, in quantum privat ordinem rationis, quod est hominis bonum.”

59. *Compendium theologiae*, lib. 1, cap. 114: “Est igitur considerandum, quod sicut nomine boni intelligitur esse perfectum, ita nomine mali nihil aliud intelligitur quam privatio esse perfecti. Quia vero privatio proprie accepta, est eius quod natum est, et quando natum est, et quomodo natum est haberi, manifestum est quod ex hoc aliquid dicitur malum quod caret perfectione quam debet habere. Unde homo si visu careat, malum est ei, non autem malum est lapidi, quia non est natus visum habere.”

Put simply, therefore, “evil is the privation of a due perfection.”⁶⁰ In this sense, Aquinas says that

“as physical entities receive their species from their form, so moral entities receive their species from the end which is the object of the will and on which all morality depends. In physical entities, moreover, the presence of one form entails the privation of another, as, for instance, the form of fire entails the privation of the form of air. In moral entities, similarly, one end involves the privation of another end. Since the the privation of a due perfection is an evil in physical entities, the reception of a form which implies the privation of the form that ought to be possessed, is an evil – not, indeed, because of the form itself – but because of the privation its presence involves. In this sense, to be on fire is an evil for a log of wood. In the field of morality, likewise, the pursuit of an end that entails the privation of the right end is an evil, not on account of the end itself but because of the privation necessarily implied. In this way two moral actions directed to contrary ends differ as good and evil. Thus the corresponding contrary habits differ in good and evil as by specific differences and as being contrary to each other. This is so not because of the privation from which evil receives its designation, but because of the end which involves the privation.”⁶¹

60. Ibid., cap. 117: “malum est privatio perfectionis debitae”; cf. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 14, n. 5: “Secundum omnes species causarum discurrendo, invenitur malum esse per accidens causa. In specie quidem causae efficientis quia propter causae agentis deficientem virtutem sequitur defectus in effectu et actione. In specie vero causae materialis, quia ex materiae indispositione causatur in effectu defectus. In specie vero causae formalis, quia uni formae semper adiungitur alterius formae privatio. In specie vero causae finalis, quia indebito fini adiungitur malum, in quantum per ipsum finis debitus impeditur” (Moreover, evil is found to be an accidental cause in a discursive examination of all types of cause. This is so, in the kind of cause which is efficient, since a defect in the effect and in the action results from a deficiency of power in the acting cause. Then, in the type of cause that is material, a defect in the effect is caused by the unsuitable character of the matter. Again, in the kind of cause which is formal there is the fact that a privation of another form is always the adjunct of the presence of a given form. And, in the type of cause that is final, evil is connected with an improper end, inasmuch as the proper end is hindered by it).

61. *Compendium theologiae*, lib. 1, cap. 116: “sicut naturalia consequuntur speciem a forma, ita moralia a fine, qui est voluntatis obiectum, a quo omnia moralia dependent. Sicut autem in naturalibus uni formae adiungitur privatio alterius, puta formae ignis privatio formae aeris, ita in moralibus uni fini adiungitur privatio finis alterius. Cum igitur privatio perfectionis debitae sit malum in naturalibus, formam accipere cui adiungitur privatio formae debitae, malum est, non propter formam, sed propter privationem ei adiunctam: sicut igniri malum est ligno. Et in moralibus etiam inhaerere fini cui adiungitur privatio finis debiti, malum est, non propter finem, sed propter privationem adiunctam; et sic duae actiones morales, quae ad contrarios fines ordinantur, secundum bonum et malum differunt, et per consequens contrarii habitus differunt bono et malo quasi differentiis existentibus, et contrarietatem ad invicem habentibus, non propter privationem ex qua dicitur malum, sed propter finem cui privatio adiungitur”; cf. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 4, ad

“Whenever an act has some disorder inseparably joined to it, it can never be done in a good way, because its disorder is something excessive or deficient and, consequently, the just mean in which virtue consists can never be attained in that act.”⁶² “Now desire is said to be inordinate through leaving the order of reason, wherein the good of moral virtue consists: and a thing is said to be a sin through being contrary to virtue.”⁶³ Indeed,

“whatever is contrary to the order of reason is, properly speaking, contrary to the nature of man, as man; while whatever is in accord with reason, is in accord with the nature of man, as man. Now ‘man’s good is to be in accord with reason, and his evil is to be against reason,’ as Dionysius states [...]. Therefore human virtue, which makes a man good, and his work good, is in accord with man’s nature, for as much as it accords with his reason: while vice is contrary to man’s nature, in so far as it is contrary to the order of reason.”⁶⁴

It is more clear, therefore, that “vice and sin are against the order of human reason, and [...] they are contrary to the eternal law,”⁶⁵ and that “the more the will tends toward unworthy ends, the greater is the difficulty in returning to a proper and worthy end. This is evident in the case of people in whom vicious habits have developed already, as a result of their growing accustomed to sinning.”⁶⁶ “Now, the good pertaining to virtue consists in a certain commensuration, for there is a

8: “sicut in naturalibus privatio consequitur aliquam formam, sicut ad formam aquae consequitur privatio formae ignis; ita in moralibus ad positionem alicuius modi vel speciei vel ordinis sequitur privatio debiti modi aut speciei vel ordinis. Et ita ex eo quod positive in actu invenitur, recipit actus speciem; sed ex privatione consequente dicitur malus” (As in things of nature, privation results from the presence of a form [e.g., privation of fire’s form results from the presence of water’s form], so in moral acts, privation of due measure or form or order results from what is in the acts positively, and we call them evil from the resulting privation).

62. *Quodlibet VIII*, q. 6, a. 4, c.: “quandocumque aliquis actus habet aliquam inordinationem inseparabiliter annexam, nunquam potest bene fieri; quia ipsa inordinatio est aliquid superfluum, vel diminutum, et ita non potest in tali actu medium accipi, in quo virtus consistit.”
63. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 148, a. 1, c.: “Dicitur autem appetitus inordinatus ex eo quod recedit ab ordine rationis, in quo bonum virtutis moralis consistit. Ex hoc autem dicitur aliquid esse peccatum quod virtuti contrariatur.”
64. *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 71, a. 2, c.: “id quod est contra ordinem rationis, proprie est contra naturam hominis inquantum est homo; quod autem est secundum rationem, est secundum naturam hominis inquantum est homo. *Bonum autem hominis est secundum rationem esse, et malum hominis est praeter rationem esse*, ut Dionysius dicit, IV cap. de Div. Nom. Unde virtus humana, quae hominem facit bonum, et opus ipsius bonum reddit, intantum est secundum naturam hominis, inquantum convenit rationi, vitium autem intantum est contra naturam hominis, inquantum est contra ordinem rationis.”
65. *Ibid.*, ad 4: “vitium et peccatum sit contra ordinem rationis humanae, et quod sit contra legem aeternam.”
66. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 12, n. 7: “Quanto autem voluntas magis in fines indebitos tendit, tanto difficilior reddit ad proprium et debitum finem: quod patet in his in quibus per peccandi consuetudinem iam est habitus vitiorum inductus.”

mean that is set up between opposed vices according to a proper judgment of the limiting circumstances. Therefore, the more it departs from this harmonious balance, the greater the evil is,⁶⁷ but it must always be remembered that “[i]n virtues the extreme consists in exceeding right reason,”⁶⁸ and not, for example, in diverging from the opinion of the majority. Indeed it often happens that the virtuous mean as determined by the truly prudent person is different than what seems “balanced” for most people. The mean wherein moral virtue is found is not determined sociologically, but is located between two vices which, one by excess and the other by defect, depart from the *ordo rationis*.

f) Requirements for Virtuous Action

Aquinas also emphasizes with some insistence that

“in order that an *electio* be good, two things are required. First, that the intention be directed to a due end; and this is done by moral virtue, which inclines the appetitive faculty to the good that is in accord with reason, which is a due end. Secondly, that man take rightly those things which have reference to the end [*ea quae sunt ad finem*]: and this he cannot do unless his reason counsel, judge and command aright, which is the function of prudence and the virtues annexed to it.”⁶⁹

In the *Commentary on the Sentences* Aquinas expounds upon the requirements of the moral virtues. After citing this substantial block of text, we will highlight several key elements of its teaching including the determination of the virtuous end, the inclination toward it, and the choice of the means to realize the end.

“Three things are necessary for the perfection of moral virtue. The first is the prior determination of the end, the second the inclination to the previously-determined end, and the third the choice of those things that are for the end. The proximate end of human life is the common good of reason, which is why Dionysius says that for man, evil is to act against reason, and he must therefore intentionally desire all of the moral virtues, since they lead the passions and the actions back to right reason. Right reason is natural, and thus the determination of the end pertains to natural reason and precedes prudence,

67. *Ibid.*, cap. 139, n. 15: “Bonum autem virtutis in quadam commensuratione consistit: est enim medium, secundum debitam limitationem circumstantiarum, inter contraria vitia constitutum. Quanto igitur magis ab hac harmonia receditur, tanto est maior malitia.”

68. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 123, a. 4, ad 3: “extremum in virtutibus attenditur secundum excessum rationis rectae.”

69. *Ibid.*, II, q. 58, a. 4, c.: “Ad hoc autem quod electio sit bona, duo requiruntur. Primo, ut sit debita intentio finis, et hoc fit per virtutem moralem, quae vim appetitivam inclinat ad bonum conveniens rationi, quod est finis debitus. Secundo, ut homo recte accipiat ea quae sunt ad finem, et hoc non potest esse nisi per rationem recte consiliantem, iudicantem et praecipientem; quod pertinet ad prudentiam et ad virtutes sibi annexas.”

just as the intellect precedes the principles of knowledge; thus the philosopher says [...] that prudence has for its principles the ends of the virtues. But this good of reason is determined insofar as it is constituted by a medium term in the actions and in the passions, through a due measure of the circumstances – something which prudence does. Therefore the mean of moral virtue [...] is to be according to right reason, which is prudence, and thus in a certain way prudence determines the end of the moral virtues, and its act mixes with that of the others; but the inclination to that end is attributed to moral virtue, which consents naturally to the good of reason. This inclination to the end is called *electio*, since the proximate end is ordered to the final end, and thus the philosopher says [...] that virtue makes choice upright. But the discernment concerning those things through which we attain this good of reason in the actions and in the passions is the act of prudence. Therefore the determination of the end precedes the act of prudence and of moral virtue, but the inclination toward the end, or the upright choice of the proximate end, is principally the act of moral virtue, but originally of prudence. Thus the philosopher says that rectitude of choice pertains to a virtue other than prudence, just as rectitude in the natural tendencies derives from divine wisdom as the orderer of nature, and in this way also the act of prudence is mixed with the acts of the other virtues. Just as the natural inclination derives from natural reason, so also the inclination of moral virtue derives from prudence, the choice of those things that are for the end, and thus the choice concerns the precept of reason to tend to these things. But the act of prudence is proper to itself, and distinct from the acts of the other virtues.”⁷⁰

70. *Super Sent.*, lib. 3, d. 33, q. 2, a. 3, c.: “ad perfectionem virtutis moralis tria sunt necessaria. Primum est praestitutio finis; secundum autem est inclinatio ad finem praestitutum; tertium est electio eorum quae sunt ad finem. Finis autem proximus humanae vitae est bonum rationis in communi; unde dicit Dionysius, quod malum hominis est contra rationem esse: et ideo est intentum in omnibus virtutibus moralibus, ut passiones et operationes ad rectitudinem rationis reducantur. Rectitudo autem rationis naturalis est; unde hoc modo praestitutio finis ad naturalem rationem pertinet, et praecedit prudentiam, sicut intellectus principiorum scientiam; et ideo dicit philosophus, 6 *Ethic.*, quod prudentia habet principia fines virtutum. Sed hoc bonum rationis determinatur secundum quod constituitur medium in actionibus et passionibus per debitam commensurationem circumstantiarum, quod facit prudentia. Unde medium virtutis moralis, ut in 2 *Ethic.* dicitur, est secundum rationem rectam, quae est prudentia; et sic quodammodo prudentia praestituit finem virtutibus moralibus, et ejus actus in earum actibus immiscetur; sed inclinatio in finem illum pertinet ad virtutem moralem quae consentit in bonum rationis per modum naturae: et haec inclinatio in finem dicitur electio, in quantum finis proximus ad finem ultimum ordinatur. Et ideo dicit philosophus, 2 *Ethic.*, quod virtus moralis facit electionem rectam. Sed discretio eorum quibus hoc bonum rationis consequi possumus et in operationibus et in passionibus, est actus prudentiae: unde praestitutio finis praecedit actum prudentiae et virtutis moralis; sed inclinatio in finem, sive recta electio finis proximi, est actus moralis virtutis principaliter, sed prudentiae originaliter. Unde philosophus dicit, quod rectitudo electionis est in aliis virtutibus a prudentia, sicut

Aquinas begins, therefore, by speaking of the three elements that constitute the perfection of moral virtue. The first is the determination of the virtuous end, which is a work of the practical reason that must discern what goods/ends are suitable to man as such, and to what degree. But to be virtuous, it is not enough to know what the moral virtues are – one’s human desire must also be ordered toward these. It is in this sense that Aquinas says that the second element necessary for the perfection of virtue is the voluntary inclination to the virtuous end. It is not enough, for example, to know in what justice consists – one must also want to be just. Finally, the third necessary element is the appropriate choice of the actions that *hic et nunc* realize the virtuous ends known and desired. This discernment of the concrete behavior that will realize virtuous *praxis* is the work of prudence, the virtue that perfects practical reason and is responsible for the right ordering of the *electio* with respect to the virtuous ends intentionally known and desired.

Thomas also emphasizes that rectitude of practical reason is natural in man, and it is this natural rectitude of reason that gives origin to the habit of the first practical principles,⁷¹ founded on the rectitude of the natural inclinations which – Thomas explicitly states – derive from the ordination of nature established by the divine Wisdom. Practical reason, therefore, naturally grasps the rational good in all its breadth – which in this passage Aquinas calls the common good of reason as the natural end of man – as well as the various other goods toward which the human person as such is inclined. These human goods are like the material basis of the ends of the moral virtues, given that the latter result from the rational regulation of each of these goods in view of happiness, that is, in view of the global and integral good of the human person as such.⁷² A particular light, then, is shed on Thomas’s assertion that we must intentionally desire all the moral virtues, because only in this

rectitudo in intentione naturae est ex sapientia divina ordinante naturam: et secundum hoc actus etiam prudentiae immixtus est actibus aliarum virtutum. Sicut enim inclinatio naturalis est a ratione naturali, ita inclinatio virtutis moralis a prudentia; electio autem eorum quae sunt ad finem, secundum quod electio importat praeceptum rationis de his prosequendis. Sed actus prudentiae sibi proprius est, et distinctus ab actibus aliarum virtutum.”

71. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2, c.: “primum principium in ratione practica est quod fundatur supra rationem boni, quae est, bonum est quod omnia appetunt. Hoc est ergo primum praeceptum legis, quod bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum. Et super hoc fundantur omnia alia praecepta legis naturae, ut scilicet omnia illa facienda vel vitanda pertineant ad praecepta legis naturae, quae ratio practica naturaliter apprehendit esse bona humana” (the first principle of practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that “good is that which all things seek after.” Hence this is the first precept of law, that “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.” All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this: so that whatever the practical reason naturally apprehends as man’s good [or evil] belongs to the precepts of the natural law as something to be done or avoided).

72. This does not mean that there cannot be people who experience disordered inclinations, i.e., inclinations contrary to the order of reason. This can very well happen, but in such cases it is due to a perversion of nature. Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 78, a. 3, c.: “aliquis habens quasdam naturales inclinationes ad aliqua peccata, propter corruptionem naturae” (as in the case of a man who is naturally inclined to certain sins, by reason of some natural corruption in himself).

way does man tend in a human way, i.e. freely and consciously, to his full realization through action.

Another idea that Aquinas stresses here is that these virtuous ends are, on the one hand, the principles of prudence, without which what Aristotle calls *eupraxis*, excellence in human action, is not possible; but on the other hand prudence also participates in a certain way in the determination of the virtuous ends themselves. This means that the virtues are necessary for prudence to be able to determine what is the virtuous choice, but at the same time one cannot acquire the virtues without prudence! This is why the external helps of education, laws, and above all, grace, are important and necessary in the formation of the character of the human person. During the process of education (the formation of the virtues), one must learn to trust the practical judgment of those who have already reached a certain maturity in virtue and can thus “see” the ends appropriate to human nature with greater clarity.

g) Multiple Specification of a Single Act

Can a single action be specified by more than one virtue? According to St. Thomas “nothing hinders one act from being quickened by different habits, so as to be reduced to various species in a certain order.”⁷³ For example, “where an act of one virtue is directed to the end of another virtue it partakes somewhat of its species; thus when a man thieves in order to commit fornication, his theft assumes, in a sense, the deformity of fornication.”⁷⁴ This happens because “the virtue that is directed to the end of another virtue passes, as it were, into the species of the latter virtue.”⁷⁵ In fact, “if one thing be directed to another as its end, it is drawn, especially in moral matters, to the species of the thing to which it is directed: for instance ‘he who commits adultery that he may steal, is a thief rather than an adulterer.’”⁷⁶ It can therefore be said that

“the act of some habit, insofar as it is commanded by that habit, certainly receives a moral species, formally speaking, from the act itself; such that when someone fornicates so as to steal, even though the act is materially one of intemperance, nevertheless considered formally it is one of avarice. But even though the act of intemperance receives in some way the species from the fact that it is commanded by

73. Ibid., II-II, q. 4, a. 3, ad 1: “Nihil autem prohibet unum actum a diversis habitibus informari, et secundum hoc ad diversas species reduci ordine quodam.”

74. Ibid., q. 85, a. 3, c.: “quando actus unius virtutis ordinatur ad finem alterius virtutis, participat quodammodo speciem eius, sicut cum quis furatur ut fornicetur, ipsum furtum accipit quodammodo fornicationis deformitatem.”

75. Ibid., q. 181, a. 1, ad 3: “virtus quae ordinatur in finem alterius virtutis, transit quodammodo in speciem eius”.

76. Ibid., a. 2, c.: “id quod ordinatur ad aliud sicut ad finem, praecipue in moralibus, trahitur in speciem eius ad quod ordinatur, sicut *ille qui moechatur ut furetur, magis dicitur fur quam moechus*.”

avarice, nevertheless the intemperance [considered in itself] does not receive the species by the fact that its act is commanded by avarice.”⁷⁷

that is, the fornication does not cease to be fornication, even when it is carried out in view of theft. It is thus clear that

“[i]t is possible, of course, for one act pertain to two vices, provided the act of one vice be directed to the end of another vice. For instance when a man steals so he may fornicate, the act is specifically one of avarice, but by its intention it belongs to lust. In the same way, it also happens in the case of virtues that the act of one virtue is ordered to another virtue. Thus, when one gives away his possessions so that he may enjoy the friendship of charity with another man, this act specifically belongs to liberality, but from its end it pertains to charity. Now, acts of this kind acquire greater value [merit] from the greater virtue, that is, from charity rather than liberality. Hence, though it loses its character as an exclusive act of charity, it will be more praiseworthy and worthy of greater reward than if it were done liberally, with no relation to charity.”⁷⁸

The following words on this question, from St. Thomas’s commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, merit careful attention. After citing this lengthy text in full, we will reflect upon its key aspects.

“A given action is specifically determined, morally, in two ways. One way is on the part of the object, such that fornication is said to regard those things that are pleasing to the touch; this determination is material and is said of the habit that produces the act. The other way is on the part of the end [*finis operantis*]; this is the formal specification, which is said of the habit that commands. It happens at times that the act is determined by the same species in both parts, as when a given act is commanded and produced by the same habit, as for example

77. *De virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 10: “actus alicuius habitus, prout imperatur ab illo habitu, accipit quidem speciem moralem, formaliter loquendo, de ipso actu; unde cum quis fornicatur ut furetur, actus iste licet materialiter sit intemperantiae, tamen formaliter est avaritiae. Sed licet actus intemperantiae accipiat aliquantulum speciem, prout imperatur ab avaritia; non tamen ex hoc intemperantia speciem accipit secundum quod actus est ab avaritia imperatus.”

78. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 138, n. 5: “Contingit enim unum actum duorum vitiorum esse, dum actus unius vitii ad finem alterius vitii ordinatur: ut, cum quis furatur ut fornicetur, actus quidem secundum speciem suam est avaritiae, secundum intentionem vero luxuriae. Eodem autem modo et in virtutibus contingit quod actus unius virtutis ad aliam virtutem ordinatur: sicut, cum quis sua dat ut cum altero amicitiam habeat caritatis, actus quidem ex sua specie est liberalitatis, ex fine autem caritatis. Huiusmodi autem actus maiorem laudem habet ex maiore virtute, scilicet ex caritate, quam ex liberalitate. Unde, etsi remittatur in eo quod liberalitatis est ex eo quod ad caritatem ordinatur, laudabilior, et maiori mercede dignus erit quam si liberalius ageretur non in ordine ad caritatem.”

when one fornicates for pleasure. At other times it is determined in both parts, but with different species, as when an act is realized by one habit and commanded by another, as when one fornicates for money, which is in fact determined by the species of lust with respect to the object, but by the species of avarice because of the end [*finis operantis*]; nevertheless, in this case there are not two sins, but a double sin, because it is a single act. It also happens at times that a given act is not determined to a concrete [moral] species on the part of the object, but [only] on the part of the end. This act is commanded by a concrete habit, but is not realized by any concrete habit, as in the case of edifying one's neighbor, an act that is not realized by charity, because this latter is only realized by interior acts, which do not accomplish the edification, but only the commanding of it. It is realized materially through other virtues, and not determined by one, but by all, because charity can command them all. And because active scandal is a sin opposed to the edification of one's neighbor, therefore, materially speaking, on the part of the matter and of the habit that carries out the act it is not a special sin, but speaking only formally, on the part of the end and of the habit that commands it, it is opposed to the habit of charity, i.e., it corresponds to the vice of hatred; thus, when someone says or does something wrong with the intention of causing his neighbour's ruin, he commits a special sin of scandal. If, however, this happens outside of his intention (*praeter intentionem*), then it is not a special sin of active scandal, but a particular circumstance of the sin, to which, just as with an act of virtue that is ordered to its end by charity, so any sin, when considered by itself, is ordered to an end opposed [to charity], even if that end is not willed intentionally by the agent."⁷⁹

79. *Super Sent.*, lib. 4, d. 38, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 2, c.: "actus aliquis determinatur ad speciem moris dupliciter. Uno modo ex parte objecti, sicut fornicatio ex hoc quod est circa delectabilia tactus; et haec determinatio est materialis, et respicit habitum elicentem actum. Alio modo ex parte finis; et haec est formalis specificatio, et respicit habitum imperantem. Contingit autem quandoque quod ad eandem speciem determinatur actus ex utraque parte, sicut quando aliquis actus ab eodem habitu elicitur et imperatur, ut cum quis fornicatur propter delectationem. Quandoque autem ex utraque parte determinatur, sed ad diversas species, ut quando actus ab uno habitu elicitur, et ab alio imperatur, sicut cum quis fornicatur propter lucrum; determinatur enim ad speciem luxuriae ex objecto, sed ad speciem avaritiae ex fine; non tamen sunt ibi duo peccata, sed unum peccatum duplex, cum sit unus actus. Quandoque etiam evenit quod aliquis actus non determinatur ad aliquam certam speciem ex parte objecti, sed ex parte finis, eo quod habet determinatum habitum a quo imperatur, sed non a quo elicitur, sicut aedificare proximum, quem actum caritas non elicit, quia ejus non est elicere nisi interiores actus, per quos non fit aedificatio, sed imperat eum, et ab aliis virtutibus elicitur materialiter, non determinate ab aliqua, sed ab omnibus, quia caritas omnibus imperare potest. Et quia scandalum activum est peccatum oppositum aedificationi proximorum; ideo, materialiter loquendo, ex parte materiae et habituum elicentium non est speciale peccatum, sed solum loquendo formaliter, ex parte finis et habitus imperantis qui est habitus caritati oppositus, scilicet vitium odii; et ideo quando aliquis dictum vel factum minus rectum facit intendens

Thomas starts by explaining that a given human action can get its moral species not only from its object (*finis proximus*) but also from its *finis (operantis or remotus)*.⁸⁰ This happens, for example, when “one fornicates for money.” He goes on by saying that the moral species that proceeds from the object gives the “material” specification to the act (in this case lust) and the one that proceeds from the end is the formal specification of the act (in this case avarice); Thomas underlines that these do not form two sins, but one sin, because it is one act, with a double sinfulness. On other occasions, when the object (specified by the *finis proximus*) of the act does not pertain to any special virtue or vice, then the moral species would be conferred to the act only that from the end (*finis operantis or remotus*). Considering the case of scandal, Thomas defends that, when someone commits a sin without any intention of causing his neighbor’s ruin then this happens *praeter intentionem* of the agent and it is not a sin of scandal but an aggravating circumstance to his sinful action.

In the above passage from his Commentary on the Sentences, Aquinas presupposes principles articulated clearly in his *Summa theologiae*:

“habits are not differentiated except their acts be of different species. For every act of the one species belongs to the same habit. Now since the species of an act is derived from its object, considered under its formal aspect, it follows of necessity that it is specifically the same act that tends to an aspect of the object, and that tends to the object under that aspect: thus it is specifically the same visual act whereby we see the light, and whereby we see the color under the aspect of light.”⁸¹

occasionem ruinae proximo praestare, speciale peccatum scandalizando committit. Si autem praeter intentionem suam accidat, non erit scandalum activum speciale peccatum; tamen erit circumstantia quaedam peccati, eo quod sicut quilibet actus virtutis habet ordinem ad finem caritatis, etiamsi actus non ordinetur in finem illum, et sicut habet aptitudinem ut imperetur a caritate; ita quodlibet peccatum, quantum est de se, habet ordinem ad contrarium finem, etiamsi ille finis non intendatur ab agente.”

80. In my reading of Aquinas, the *finis remotus* (which I treat as equivalent to the *finis operantis* because I find it less ambiguous) is understood as the end of the *intentio/intention*, while the *finis proximus* is the end of the *electio/choice*. Without denying the differences in their readings of Aquinas’s action theory, recent interpreters, consistent with no. 78 of *Veritatis splendor*, reflect the retrieval of Thomas’s teaching on the centrality of the proximate end in determining the object and species of the human act. It may be helpful to note that the terminology of *finis operis/finis operantis*, which becomes popular in the later tradition, can be understood consistently with, and corresponding to, Aquinas’s binomial *finis proximus/finis remotus* (or *operantis*). If, on the other hand, the *finis operis* were understood differently, i.e., as the natural end (*finis naturalis*), the resulting theory would not be that of Aquinas.

81. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 25, a. 1, c.: “habitus non diversificantur nisi ex hoc quod variat speciem actus, omnes enim actus unius speciei ad eundem habitum pertinent. Cum autem species actus ex obiecto sumatur secundum formalem rationem ipsius, necesse est quod idem specie sit actus qui fertur in rationem obiecti, et qui fertur in obiectum sub tali ratione, sicut est eadem specie visio qua videtur lumen, et qua videtur color secundum luminis rationem”; cf. *Ibid.*, III, q. 85, a. 2, c.: “species habituum distinguuntur secundum species actuum, et ideo ubi occurrit specialis actus laudabilis, ibi necesse est

Now, given that “moral acts are not specified by the final end but by their proximate ends,”⁸² it can therefore also be said that

“[v]ices take their species from their proximate end, while, from their remote end, they take their genus and cause. Thus in the case of adultery committed for the sake of theft, there is the species of adultery taken from its proper end and object; but the ultimate end shows that the act of adultery is both the result of the theft, and is included under it, as an effect under its cause, or a species under its genus, as appears from what we have said about acts in general [...]. Wherefore, as to the case in point also, the proximate end of heresy is adherence to one’s own false opinion, and from this it derives its species, while its remote end reveals its cause, viz. that it arises from pride or covetousness.”⁸³

If “moral matters do not receive their species from the last end, but from their proximate ends: and these, although they be infinite in number, are not infinite in species,”⁸⁴ it necessarily follows that the act of fornication carried out by a person who desires to fornicate so as to steal, is unquestionably something commanded by an avaricious will, but as an act it remains an act with the moral species of fornication.

b) The Crucial Role of Reason

In summary, not only does human action concern those acts ordered by reason to the end, but these acts receive their species (or kind) from their end in relation to reason, and are specified by reason as good or evil, which concerns their correspondence to the rational structure of the virtues (or vices). In Thomas’s words, “our acts are called moral according as they are ordered by reason to the end of the will, and in fact from this they have the character of good or evil”,⁸⁵ similarly, “the order of reason is like the ordering principle, whereas the will is like that which is ordered.”⁸⁶ Now,

ponere specialem habitum virtutis” (habits are specifically distinguished according to the species of their acts, so that whenever an act has a special reason for being praiseworthy, there must needs be a special habit).

82. *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 38, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3: “actus morales non specificantur a fine ultimo, sed a finibus proximis.”

83. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 11, a. 1, ad 2: “vicia habent speciem ex fine proximo, sed ex fine remoto habent genus et causam. Sicut cum aliquis moechatur ut furetur, est ibi quidem species moechiae ex proprio fine et obiecto, sed ex fine ultimo ostenditur quod moechia ex furto oritur, et sub eo continetur sicut effectus sub causa vel sicut species sub genere, ut patet ex his quae supra de actibus dicta sunt in communi. Unde et similiter in proposito finis proximus haerens est adhaerere falsae sententiae propriae, et ex hoc speciem habet. Sed ex fine remoto ostenditur causa eius, scilicet quod oritur ex superbia vel cupiditate.”

84. *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 60, a. 1, ad 3: “moralia non habent speciem a fine ultimo sed a finibus proximis, qui quidem, etsi infiniti sint numero, non tamen infiniti sunt specie.”

85. *Super Sent.*, lib. 6, d. 16, q. 3, a. 1, ql. 1, c.: “actus nostri dicuntur morales secundum quod a ratione ordinantur in finem voluntatis; ex hoc enim habent rationem boni vel mali.”

86. *De virtutibus*, q. 2, a. 9, ad 2: “ordo rationis est ut ordinantis; sed voluntatis ut ordinatae.”

“moral acts, since they are voluntary acts that proceed from reason, necessarily take their species from some aspect of an act’s object considered in relation to reason. And so [...] moral acts will be specifically good acts if they are in accord with reason, and moral acts will be specifically bad acts if they are in discord with reason.”⁸⁷

Moreover,

“even if good and evil are not differences in an action as an action, they are still differences in the action as voluntary: just as the rational or the irrational are not differences of a substance as a substance, but as it is considered as ensouled; therefore nothing prevents that, in a particular genus of actions, the actions be distinguished according to good and evil.”⁸⁸

as occurs in human acts which, as proceeding from reason and will, are specifically distinguished as virtuous or vicious acts.⁸⁹

87. *De malo*, q. 2, a. 6, c.: “actus moralis sit actus qui est a ratione procedens voluntarius, oportet quod actus moralis speciem habeat secundum aliquid in obiecto consideratum quod ordinem habeat ad rationem. Et sic praec. quaest. dictum est, quod si sit conveniens rationi, erit actus bonus secundum speciem, si autem sit discordans a ratione, secundum speciem malus erit.”

88. *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1: “quamvis bonum et malum non sint differentiae actionis inquantum est actio, sunt tamen differentiae ejus secundum quod est voluntaria: sicut etiam rationale et irrationale non sunt differentiae substantiae ut substantia est, sed secundum quod consideratur ut animata; et ideo nihil prohibet in aliquo genere actionum easdem actiones specie per bonum et malum differre.”

89. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 48, a. 1, ad 2: “bonum et malum non sunt differentiae constitutivae nisi in moralibus, quae recipiunt speciem ex fine, qui est obiectum voluntatis, a qua moralia dependent. Et quia bonum habet rationem finis, ideo bonum et malum sunt differentiae specificae in moralibus; bonum per se, sed malum inquantum est remotio debiti finis. Nec tamen remotio debiti finis constituit speciem in moralibus, nisi secundum quod adiungitur fini indebito, sicut neque in naturalibus invenitur privatio formae substantialis, nisi adiuncta alteri formae. Sic igitur malum quod est differentia constitutiva in moralibus, est quoddam bonum adiunctum privationi alterius boni, sicut finis intemperati est, non quidem carere bono rationis, sed delectabile sensus absque ordine rationis. Unde malum, inquantum malum, non est differentia constitutiva; sed ratione boni adiuncti” ([g]ood and evil are not constitutive differences except in morals, which receive their species from the end, which is the object of the will, the source of all morality. And because good has the nature of an end, therefore good and evil are specific differences in moral things; good in itself, but evil as the absence of the due end. Yet neither does the absence of the due end by itself constitute a moral species, except as it is joined to the undue end; just as we do not find the privation of the substantial form in natural things, unless it is joined to another form. Thus, therefore, the evil which is a constitutive difference in morals is a certain good joined to the privation of another good; as the end proposed by the intemperate man is not the privation of the good of reason, but the delight of sense without the order of reason. Hence evil is not a constitutive difference as such, but by reason of the good that is annexed).

2. Interpretation

a) *The Classical Commentators*

Cardinal Cajetan, in his *Commentary on the Summa theologiae*, asserts that “the good, as being suitable according to the order of reason, is the objective moral good, and as such gives moral goodness to the act.”⁹⁰ This objectivity of right reason seems to coincide with the moral virtues,⁹¹ given that

“the moral goodness of right reason derives from the end itself of the virtues, that is, it derives from the same reality from which moral virtue derives, thus the moral goodness [of the act] is not distinct from the good proper to moral virtue; for this reason the act that depends on right reason and right appetite does not possess two moral goodnesses,”⁹²

but one. Consequently, to act according to reason is equivalent to acting according to the moral virtues. In fact, “the ends of the moral virtues are the good of reason ordered to God, the natural end [of man], as the necessary means for reaching him.”⁹³ He can then say that “for any act of virtue, right reason and right appetite are necessary.”⁹⁴

According to the Dominican philosopher, Aquinas’s expression,

“‘the goodness of reason is participated’ can be understood in two ways. First, in the sense of reason itself, in that it is something whose parts are apprehended, and in this way it does not mean moral goodness formally, but intellectual goodness formally, that is, the rectitude of reason, as possessing goodness, is the formal good not morally but intellectually. But principally, and as the cause of goodness, it is moral. The second way, is in the participants themselves, as the apprehended part, and in this way it indicates moral goodness, and is the cause of all the moral virtues. Which way this expression is understood doesn’t matter. In fact it is always true that we are not dealing with a different

90. Cajetan (cardinal), *Comment on the “Summa theologiae,”* I-II, q. 19, a. 1, in “Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita”, Typograpia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide, Romae 1888-1907, t. 6, p. 142: “bonum, ut conveniens secundum rationis ordinem, est bonum moris obiective. Et sic dat bonitatem moralem actui.”

91. Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 18, a. 8, cit., t. 6, p. 136: “forma virtutum, idest recta ratione” (the form of the virtues, i.e. the right reason).

92. *Ibid.*, q. 20, a. 5, cit., t. 6, p. 159: “bonitas moralis rectae rationis *de ipso fine virtutum*, idest de eodem de quo est virtus moralis, non est alia a bonitate morali ipsius virtutis moralis; ac per hoc, actus pendens ex recta ratione et recto appetitu, non propterea habet duas bonitates morales.”

93. *Ibid.*, q. 71, a. 6, cit., t. 7, p. 11: “finis moralium virtutum sit bonum rationis ordinatum ad Deum finem naturalem, ut medium necessarium ad consequendum illum.”

94. *Ibid.*, q. 20, a. 3, cit., t. 6, p. 159: “ad quemlibet actum virtutis concurrunt bona ratio e bonus appetitus.”

moral goodness, and that the participation of reason in it coincides in any case with moral virtue.”⁹⁵

The opposition or not to the order of reason causes a given human act to be essentially an act ordered according to that order, and therefore good – or disordered. According to Cajetan, “only in moral things are good and evil of themselves constitutive differences.”⁹⁶ “Moral evil is the privation of the due goodness according to reason,”⁹⁷ and therefore “sin is of itself one, and is a reality contrary to virtue,”⁹⁸ not because it tends to that privation directly, but because it tends to something that necessarily involves this lack of rectitude. Thus “in moral things the privation of the substantial goodness never occurs without an added opposition to the good,”⁹⁹ and in fact “every sin is an act contrary to some virtue, and from this very contrariness follows the privation of the due rectitude”¹⁰⁰ of the act in relation to the final end of man. “An evil act of intemperance, for example, completely cancels the good of temperance from that act,”¹⁰¹ and is therefore called contrary to reason, “because the sinner, thinking in this case of the intemperate person, considers the sensible good, the pleasure opposed to reason, to be his final end.”¹⁰²

However, “it is necessary in the evil act of the will that a particular good, true or apparent, be realized, along with the privation of a particular good that is due according to right reason. And as the act is directed to a good, it receives a positive species, but on the other hand it is called evil in that in fact, the privation of the due good has an evil attached to it.”¹⁰³ “Thus in moral realities the evil is twofold: namely, privative, and this is absolutely and formally the evil, which is nothing at all, and of

95. Ibid.: “*bonitas rationis participatur*, dupliciter intelligi potest. Primo, in se ipsa ratione, ut est res cuius pars capitur. Et sic non significat bonitatem moralem formaliter, sed bonitatem intellectualem formaliter: rectitudo enim rationis, quae eius est bonitas, non morale, sed intellectuale bonum est formaliter; primordialiter autem et causaliter bonitas est moralis. – Secundo, in ipsis participantibus, ut est pars capta. Et sic est bonitas moralis, et causa in omnibus virtutibus moralibus. – Quocumque modo intelligatur haec littera, non refert. Semper enim verum est quod non est alia bonitas moralis; et quod ratione participationis ipsius, in quamlibet coincidit virtutem moralem.”

96. Ibid., q. 19, a. 2, cit., t. 6, p. 142: “in solis moralibus bonum et malum sunt per se differentiae constitutive.”

97. Ibid., q. 18, a. 8, cit., t. 6, p. 136: “malum moraliter est privatio bonitatis debita secundum rationem.”

98. Ibid., q. 72, a. 1, cit., t. 7, p. 13: “peccatum est unum per se, et est ens contrarium virtuti.”

99. Ibid., q. 18, a. 8, cit., t. 6, p. 135: “in moralibus privatio substantialis bonitatis moralis nunquam invenitur, nisi adiuncta oppositae bonitati.”

100. Ibid., q. 71, a. 6, cit., t. 7, p. 10: “omne peccatum est actus contrarius alicui virtuti, et ad huiusmodi contrarietatem sequitur privatio debita rectitudinis.”

101. Ibid., q. 18, a. 8, cit., t. 6, p. 136: “Actus namque intemperantiae undique malus tollit totum bonum temperantiae ab illo actu.”

102. Ibid., q. 71, a. 6, cit., t. 7, p. 11: “Quia peccans, puta intemperatus, constituit sibi ultimum finem in bono sensibili, puta delectatione contraria rationi.”

103. Ibid., q. 18, a. 5, cit., t. 6, p. 132: “oportet in malo actu voluntatis inveniri bonum aliquod verum vel apparens, cum privatione bonitatis alicuius spectantis ad rectam rationem. Et pro quanto actus ille ad bonum fertur, speciem sortitur positivam, ex qua dicitur malus contrarie: pro quando vero privationem bonitatis debitaе habet annexam malus privative.”

which God is not the author; and the converse, and this is good in itself and comes from God, even if a negative privation is strongly attached to it.”¹⁰⁴ Summing up for the Dominican Cardinal, “sin consists in that which someone does in opposition to right reason,”¹⁰⁵ which is by definition in opposition to virtue.

For Francisco Suárez also, “sin is an act deprived of due order.”¹⁰⁶ Regarding the relationship between virtue and right reason, he says “when a man acts well, that is, when he acts primarily because of virtue, this behavior is maximally within his intention.”¹⁰⁷ “To say [...] that the act of the will is good and perfect is nothing other than to say that it is correct and excellent, but this kind of goodness is nothing other than the virtue itself that is in the act.”¹⁰⁸ As for Aquinas and Cajetan, moral rectitude and virtue thus seem to be identified. The Jesuit theologian asserts that “the act of the will has goodness and perfection in it in the same degree that it is an act of virtue,”¹⁰⁹ and “this mode of being of virtue, which is present in the act of the will, is called moral good or moral goodness.”¹¹⁰

For John of St. Thomas “the act of the will enters the *genus moris*, not due to the object that is freely willed, but insofar as it falls within the order of reason.”¹¹¹ It is therefore the order of reason that constitutes the act as moral. For the Dominican “moral goodness considered formally, as it proceeds from elicited acts, is the condition or the intrinsic order toward the object, as it is in conformity with and measured by the rule of reason.”¹¹² Therefore, “that goodness of the will, on which depends all the goodness [of the human act, morally], which is according to the order to the end, depends on reason.”¹¹³

In what exactly does reason as the rule of morality consist? If, on the one hand, John of St. Thomas says that “the *debitum* is the free action that is realized in

104. Ibid.: “Est igitur in moralibus malum dupliciter: scilicet privative, et hoc est simpliciter et formaliter malum, quod est nihil, cuius Deus non est auctor; et contrarie, et hoc est in se bonum, et est a Deo, quamvis privatio sibi anexa a nullo forte sit.”

105. Ibid., q. 71, a. 6, cit., t. 7, p. 9: “peccatum consistit in hoc quod aliquis agit contra rectam rationem.”

106. F. Suárez, “De bonitate et malitia humanorum actuum,” in *Opera omnia*, t. 4, Vivès, Paris 1856, p. 377: “peccatum esse actum debito ordine privatum.”

107. Ibid., p. 314: “quando homo operatur bene, hoc esse virtutis per se primo operatur, et hoc maxime cadit sub intentione ejus.”

108. Ibid., p. 313: “Dicendum primo actum voluntatis esse bonum et perfectum, nihil aliud esse quam esse rectum et studiosum: atque hoc modo bonitatem ejus non esse aliud quam ipsum esse virtutis quod in ipso est.”

109. Ibid.: “actus voluntatis in tantum est in se bonus et perfectus, in quantum est actus virtutis.”

110. Ibid., p. 315: “hoc esse virtutis, quod est in acti voluntatis, denominetur bonum morale, seu bonitas moralis.”

111. John of St. Thomas, *Cursus theologicus*, t. 5, Desclée & C., Paris 1964, p. 479: “actus voluntatis non ex objecto ut volito et libero, sed prout cadit sub ordine rationis, sumit genus moris.”

112. Ibid., p. 520: “Bonitas moralis formaliter, ut tenet se ex parte actus eliciti, est habitudo seu ordo intrinsecus ad objectum, ut conforme et mensuratum regulis rationis.”

113. Ibid., p. 479: “bonitas illa voluntatis ex qua dependet tota bonitas, quae est secundum ordinem ad finem, dependet ex ratione.”

view of the just and virtuous end,¹¹⁴ thus seeming to want to associate duty with virtue. On the other hand, he says that

“the law touches in the first place the matter itself [of the act], or object, as something contrary to or in conformity with the agent; and as such it proposes the act so that it might be willed or not. Therefore, for the act to be good it must derive its morality from the object, and this regulation and ordination of the reason concerning the object are implicit, and from these it receives its conformity to the law, which influences and configures the object. The law is the rule and measure of reason in the *genus moris*, but the act does not derive, but receives, something specific from the object, unless by the tendency and order to it, because only through this is it compared and united to the object. Therefore moral goodness, if it is received from the object of one’s own act, must consist in the order and tendency toward the object.”¹¹⁵

In this passage he seems to give primacy to the concept of law over reason in determining the moral species of human acts. If this is true, it would be a departure from Thomas’s approach.

In another passage he says “we draw near to God through the virtues, or distance ourselves from him through vices and sins,”¹¹⁶ appearing to assume a relation between the virtues and the order of reason. In fact, “what is said regarding the essence of sin, whether it be an act or a habit, is that it is in some way opposed to virtue and opposed to the root of virtue which is the rational nature.”¹¹⁷ Reason, then, is the root of virtue. “In the moral order, there is a true, proper and strict opposition between virtue and vice, the good act and the evil act,”¹¹⁸ given that “what is constitutive in the evil moral species is the positive ordination toward an undue end,”¹¹⁹ and, therefore, “before the privation present in sin committed by actions, there is a specific opposition, also in the *genus moris*, to virtue, and this opposition

114. *Ibid.*, p. 623: “debitum est actioni liberae ut fiat ex fine honesto et virtuoso.”

115. *Ibid.*, p. 521: “lex tangit prius ipsam materiam, seu objectum, tamquam quid difforme vel conforme sibi; et sic proponit illud, ut eliciatur vel non eliciatur actus. Ergo, ut actus sit bonus, debet haurire hanc moralitatem ex objecto: et, supposita regulatione et ordinatione rationis circa objectum, ex illo desumere conformitatem ad legem, quae circa tale objectum versatur et de objecto disponit; lex autem est regula et mensura rationis in genere morali. Sed actus non haurit sed sumit aliquid ab objecto, nisi per tendentiam et ordinem ad illud: quia solum, mediante hac, comparatur et copulatur objecto. Ergo bonitas moralis, si est desumpta ab objecto in ipso actu, consistere debet in ordine et tendentia ad ipsum.”

116. *Ibid.*, p. 163: “ad Deum accedimus per virtutes, vel ab eo recedimus per vitia et peccata.”

117. *Ibid.*, p. 174: “Quae pertinent ad essentiam peccati, et an sit actus vel habitus; et quomodo sit contra virtutem et contra radicem virtutis, quae est natura rationalis.”

118. *Ibid.*, p. 534: “in linea et ordine morali, invenitur vera, propria, et rigorosa contrarietas inter virtutem et vitium, actum bonum et malum.”

119. *Ibid.*, p. 543: “quod hoc constitutum speciei malae moralis est positivus ordo ad finem indebitum.”

can be nothing other than opposed,¹²⁰ whereas “the sin of omission consists in the privation of a due act.”¹²¹ If this is so, then “moral evil and good, or vice and virtue, are immediately opposed, and the one immediately deprives the other. In the *genus moris*, therefore, there are no intermediate species between these.”¹²² It must also be recalled that “the genuineness of a virtue is not realized only in the end that is the cause, but also in those things that are ordered to the end.”¹²³

For the Carmelites of Salamanca

“the objective goodness can be considered in two ways, either materially and in the being of things, or formally in the nature of the object. In the first way, one considers only the being of the external act and the physical tendency to the object or end as good in itself, which is matter suitable to be regulated and approved by reason.”¹²⁴

With this statement, they seem to suppose that the natural ends in the order of being are like the necessary foundation for the subsequent consideration of moral ends. We might note that this is a significant point in subsequent debates and interpretation: it seems to suggest that natural ends may never be frustrated, an approach that thinkers will reject as physicalism or biologism. Still, such statements must be understood in light of the Salamancan teaching that “all human acts that are good according to the *genus moris* are specified by a particular end.”¹²⁵ In another passage the moral rule that determines the morality of the human act is made more explicit. The Carmelites assert that “the object is the specifier of morality; however it does not specify according to physical goodness, but as [the object] is subject to moral rules.”¹²⁶ It is thus by its relation with the “moral rules” that the objective morality of the human act is specifically determined for the Salamancans.

Billuart recalls that “where the relationship of voluntary and formal agreement or disagreement with right reason differs, there is also a different good-

120. Ibid., p. 537: “ante privationem datur in actu commissionis [peccati] aliqua oppositio, etiam in genere morali, contra virtutem; et haec oppositio non potest esse nisi contraria.”

121. Ibid., p. 549: “peccatum omissionis consistit in privationi actus debiti.”

122. Ibid., p. 602: “malum et bonum morale, seu vitium et virtus, sunt opposita immediata; et unum privat altero immediate. Ergo non datur species media inter illas in genere morali.”

123. Ibid., p. 582: “honestas virtutis non solum invenitur in fine qui est causa, et gratia sui, sed etiam in his quae ordinatur ad finem.”

124. Salmanticenses, *Cursus theologicus*, V. Palmé - J. Albanel, Paris - Brussels 1878, t. 6, p. 131: “bonitatem objectivam posse considerari dupliciter: vel materialiter, et in esse rei, vel formaliter in ratione objecti: primo modo solum dicit entitatem actus externi, et tendentiam eius physicam ad objectum, vel finem secundum se bonum, quae est materia apta per rationem regulari et approbari.”

125. Ibid., p. 149: “omnes actus humanos bonos in genere moris specificari ab aliquo fine.”

126. Ibid., p. 12: “esto specificativum moralitatis sit objectum; non tamen specificat secundum bonitatem physicam, sed secundum quod subjicitur regulis morum”; cf. Ibid., p. 26: “subjectionem objecti ad regulas morum tunc solum sumi formaliter in ratione moralitatis objectivae, terminique et specificavit moralitatis actus” (the subjection of the object to the moral rules is then only taken formally in reason of the objective morality, it terminates and specifies the morality of the act).

ness or malice.”¹²⁷ That is, the morality of an action depends on the agreement or not of a given voluntary act with right reason. He also says, however, that “morality derives from the order of reason, i.e. from the moral rules.”¹²⁸ It is important to take note of this identification of the concept of *ordo rationis*, not with the concept of the virtuous ends, but with that of the “moral rules,” which is clearly an innovation from at least the language of Aquinas. In another place he also says, quite explicitly, that “moral goodness is nothing other than the real transcendental relation of the act with an object that accords with moral rules.”¹²⁹ For Billuart, therefore, an act is morally good to the degree that its object is in accordance with moral rules. He seems to set aside, therefore, the consideration of the relationship of agreement between a specific choice (*finis proximus*) and the virtuous ends. For him, what matters is the real transcendental relation of the object, not with the virtuous ends, but with the “moral rules.”¹³⁰

b) Contemporary Interpretations

In this subsection we will consider the approaches of several more recent authors ranging from the mid-twentieth century to contemporary writers. These scholars include the following: Santiago Ramírez, Leonard Lehu, Servais Pinckaers, Giuseppe Abbà, Martin Rhonheimer, Joseph Pilsner, Angel Rodríguez Luño, and Carlo Caffarra.

Santiago Ramírez asserts that “the act is morally good, when both on the part of the object and on the part of what remains there is no opposition, but rather agreement, with the final end of man or with the moral rule, which is the eternal law manifest through the natural law, by the positive divine law, or by ecclesiastical or civil law.”¹³¹ With this he seems to attribute a primary role to the concept of law in the specification of human action.

127. C.-R. Billuart, *Summa Sancti Thomae bodiernis academiæ moribus accommodata*, Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1880, t. 2, p. 324: “ubi est diversa convenientia aut inconvenientia voluntaria et formalis cum recta ratione, ibi est diversa bonitas vel malitia.”

128. *Ibid.*, p. 293: “Moralitas desumitur ex ordine ad rationem seu regulas morum.”

129. *Ibid.*, p. 286: “Bonitas moralis nihil aliud est quam ordo realis transcendentalis actus ad obiectum consonum regulis morum.”

130. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 284: “actus in esse physico est fundamentum actus ut moralis: atqui actus in esse naturæ constituitur formaliter per ordinem et tendentiam realem transcendentalem ad obiectum in esse naturæ seu physico consideratum, comparatur enim ad obiectum ut motus et via ad terminum: ergo actus moralis constituitur formaliter per ordinem et tendentiam realem transcendentalem ad obiectum in esse moris consideratum, id est, ut subditum et regulabile per regulas morum” (the action in its physical being is the fundament of the action in its moral being. The action in its natural being is formally constituted by the real transcendental tendency to the object considered in its natural or physical being; it compares to the object like the motion to the term. Therefore, the moral action is formally constituted by the order and real transcendental tendency to the object considered in its moral being, i.e., to the object while submitted and ruled by the moral rules); *Ibid.*, p. 288: “obiectum actus indifferentis non pertinere ad ordinem legis prohibentis aut præcipientis, bene tamen ad ordinem legis permittentis” (the object of the indifferent act doesn’t pertain to the order of the forbidding or commanding law, but to the order of the permitting law).

131. S. Ramírez, “De actibus humanis,” in *Edición de las Obras Completas di Santiago Ramírez*, O.P., t. 4, V. Rodríguez (ed.), Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas,

Leonard Lehu claims that “for St. Thomas, the moral good has essentially to do with reason, as its proper rule.”¹³² In fact “reason presents to the will not only the physical object, but necessarily presents the object considered morally, and from this perspective it is said that reason is the rule of morality”,¹³³ “the act of the will is good to the degree that it conforms to the dictates of right reason. In the contrary case it would be evil and sin.”¹³⁴

“Every time an act is the product of two principles, two powers or two virtues, one principle being immediate and the other mediate, in this act, which can be considered as composed of matter and form, the immediate principle provides the material element and the other principle provides the formal element. The human act is an act which proceeds from the will, the immediate principle, and from reason, the mediate principle. This is why, in the human act, the matter is provided by the will and the form by reason.”¹³⁵

He can thus claim that “reason is the formal principle of the human act.”¹³⁶ In Lehu’s reading of Aquinas, “reason presents not only the object to the will, but the regulated object, that is, the moral object.”¹³⁷

“In acts, what causes the species to vary is the essential difference in the objects considered in relation with the principle of the act,”¹³⁸ which is reason:

Madrid 1972, p. 494: “*Moraliter* vero est bonus, quando tam ex parte obiecti quam ex parte ceterorum non habetur oppositio, sed potius convenientia cum fine hominis ultimo vel cum regula morum, quae est lex aeterna manifestata per legem naturales vel per legem positivam divinam, ecclesiasticam vel civilem.”

132. L. Lehu, *Philosophia moralis et socialis praelectiones habitae in Pontificio Internationali Collegio Angelico de Urbe*, Lecoffre, Paris 1914, p. 110: “Apud S. Thomam, bonum morale essentialiter importat respectum ad rationem, tanquam ad suam propriam regulam.”
133. *Ibid.*, p. 103: “ratio voluntati praesentat non solum obiectum physicum, sed necessario praesentat obiectum moraliter sumptum, et sub hoc respectu ratio dicitur regula moralitatis.”
134. *Idem*, *La raison règle de la moralité d’après Saint Thomas*, Gabalda, Paris 1930, p. 217: “L’acte de la volonté est bon lorsqu’il se conforme au “dictamen” de la raison droite. Dans le cas contraire, il sera mauvais et péché.”
135. *Idem*, “A propos de la règle de la moralité. Commentaire de S. Thomas I^a II^{ae},” *Q. 18, A. 5*, in *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 18 (1929), p. 458: “Toutes les fois qu’un acte est le produit de deux principes, de deux puissances ou de deux vertus, l’un principe immédiat, l’autre principe médiat, dans cet acte que l’on peut considérer comme composé de matière et de forme, le principe immédiat fournit l’élément matériel, et l’autre principe, l’élément formel. L’acte humain est un acte qui procède de la volonté, principe immédiat, et de la raison principe médiat. C’est pourquoi dans l’acte humain, la matière est fournie par la volonté, la forme par la raison.”
136. *Ibid.*, p. 465: “la raison est le principe formel de l’acte humain.”
137. *Idem*, *Philosophia moralis et socialis*, cit., p. 103: “Ratio non solum praesentat obiectum voluntati, sed praesentat obiectum regulatum, seu obiectum morale.”
138. *Idem*, *A propos de la règle de la moralité*, cit., p. 453: “Dans les actes, ce qui diversifie l’espèce, c’est la différence essentielle dans les objets considérés par rapport avec le principe de l’acte.”

“what is contrary to reason is, properly speaking, contrary to the nature of man as man.”¹³⁹ It is clear then that “in human acts, moral good and moral evil constitute an essential difference in the object as considered in relation to the principle of the human act,”¹⁴⁰ which is reason.

“Considered in themselves, the natural ends are [...] the ends of the moral virtues, which are tied up with the natural inclinations. Considered as they are expressed, they are the first, indemonstrable principles of practical reason or, put otherwise, they are the precepts of the natural law. All of these formulations, whatever their particular nuance may be, are used indistinctly by St. Thomas.”¹⁴¹

Reason, then, is the measure or rule of the human act, insofar as it naturally apprehends these indemonstrable natural ends to which man is naturally inclined. It is in this sense that the expression *ordo rationis* is used. “The *ordo rationis* is simply the order of reason, i.e. the order established by reason,”¹⁴² beginning from the natural inclinations. In this direction Lehu says that “natural reason is the rule of morality and [...] the natural inclinations are the basis of this rule.”¹⁴³

At the same time it must be said that “the rule of morality is twofold, one immanent to man himself, and the other transcendent, from God,”¹⁴⁴ “but with subordination: reason is certainly the rule, but a regulated rule, and the eternal law is always the regulating rule.”¹⁴⁵ The eternal law is the basis and cause of reason as the measure of the morality of human acts, “and it is this participation in the eternal law on the part of the rational creature that is called the natural law.”¹⁴⁶ “St. Thomas attributes, therefore, the first direction of our acts, not to human nature, but to

139. Idem, *La raison règle de la moralité*, cit., p. 223: “ce qui est contraire à la raison est à proprement parler contraire à la nature de l’homme en tant qu’homme, et ce qui est conforme à la raison est conforme à la nature de l’homme en tant qu’homme” (that which is contrary to reason is, properly speaking, contrary to the nature of man as man, and that which conforms with reason conforms with the nature of man as man).

140. Idem, *A propos de la règle de la moralité*, cit., p. 454: “dans les actes humains, le bien et le mal moral constituent une différence essentielle dans l’objet considéré par rapport avec le principe de l’acte humain.”

141. Idem, *La raison règle de la moralité*, cit., p. 147: “Considérées en elles-mêmes, les fins naturelles sont, avons-nous dit, les fins des vertus morales qui se confondent avec les inclinations naturelles. Considérées dans leur expression, ce sont les principes premiers indémontrables de la raison pratique, autrement dit les préceptes de la loi naturelle. Toutes ces formules, quelle que soit leur nuance sont employées indifféremment par S. Thomas.”

142. Ibid., p. 120: “l’*ordo rationis* est simplement l’ordre de la raison, c’est-à-dire l’ordre établi par la raison.”

143. Ibid., p. 229: “la raison naturelle est règle de la moralité et que les inclinations naturelles sont le fondement de cette règle.”

144. Idem, *Philosophia moralis et socialis*, cit., p. 101: “duplicem esse regulam moralitatis: unam immanentem, in ipso homine; alteram transcendente, ex parte Dei.”

145. Ibid., p. 105: “[Duplex igitur est regula moralitatis,] sed cum subordinatione: ratio humana est regula quidem, sed regula regulata, lex aeterna est regula semper regulans.”

146. Idem, *La raison règle de la moralité*, cit., p. 152: “Et c’est cette participation de la loi éternelle dans la créature raisonnable qui s’appelle la loi naturelle.”

natural reason (synderesis or natural law),¹⁴⁷ and it thus follows that “agreement with reason is known prior to agreement with [human] nature”¹⁴⁸ as an ontological reality. To speak of the agreement of a particular act with the order of reason is thus the same as to measure the agreement of a particular act with those ends toward which man is naturally inclined. In fact, reason recognizes that “[t]he final end and the ends of the virtues are determined by nature. All of the other particular ends are determined by the free will of the person.”¹⁴⁹ Lehu can thus say that “in the practical order, right reason creates syllogisms beginning from the right end, and necessarily and infallibly reaches objective and universal moral truth, as for example that theft is wrong.”¹⁵⁰ In the same line of thought, Kluxen stresses that “‘objective’ morality, therefore, does not emerge from the realization of the ‘ontological’ good of the being.”¹⁵¹

Pinckaers criticizes a certain mode of expression that traditionally considers the *finis operantis* as the subjective element of the morality of the act. He claims “the *finis operis* and the *finis operantis* do not constitute, from the moral point of view, two kinds of ends of a different nature”¹⁵² (the *finis operis* – in Thomas’s sense, as distinguished from some later manuals – is also ordered to an end by the agent’s reason), and “therefore the end does not introduce a subjective element in the moral act that is opposed to the objectivity given by the object of the exterior act.”¹⁵³ This means, among other things, that the rule of morality for both the object of the act and the *finis operantis* is the same, and is equally objective in both cases. What is this rule? Pinckaers says that according to St. Thomas the proximate rule of morality is reason, as it participates in the remote and transcendent rule, which is the eternal law.¹⁵⁴ But is this rule of morality to be understood primarily as a collection of due ends, or as a collection of norms to be observed? Pinckaers claims that Aquinas proposes the first, i.e. that the morality of a human act depends on its

147. Ibid., p. 158: “S. Thomas attribue donc la première direction de nos actes, non à la nature humaine, mais à la raison naturelle (syndérèse ou loi naturelle).”

148. Ibid., p. 222: “la convenance à la raison est connue avant la convenance à la nature.”

149. Ibid., p. 143: “La fin dernière et les fins des vertus sont déterminées par la nature; toutes les autres fins particulières sont déterminées par la libre volonté de l’homme.”

150. Idem, *Philosophia moralis et socialis*, cit., p. 108: “in ordine practico ratio recte syllogizans ex fine recto, infallibiliter et necessario devenit ad veritatem moralem objectivam et universalem, v. g. furtum est malum.”

151. W. Kluxen, *L’etica filosofica di Tommaso d’Aquino*, V&P, Milan 2005, p. 264: “la moralità ‘oggettiva’ non emerge dunque dalla realizzazione alla bontà ‘ontica’ dell’ente.”

152. S.-Th. Pinckaers, *Le renouveau de la morale: études pour une morale fidèle à ses sources et à sa mission présente*, Casterman, Tournai 1964, p. 139: “*Finis operis* et *finis operantis* ne constituent pas, du point de vue moral, deux sortes de finalités de nature différente.”

153. Ibid., p. 138: “La finalité n’introduit donc pas un élément subjectif dans l’acte moral opposé à l’objectivité fournie par l’objet de l’acte extérieur.”

154. Cf. Idem, “Notas ao tratado sobre os actos humanos” [in *Suma teológica*, vol. III, Edições Loyola, São Paulo 2001, portuguese translation of S.-Th. Pinckaers “Notes explicatives,” in *Saint Thomas d’Aquin, Somme théologique, Les actes humains, 1^a-2^{ae}, qq. 18-21, t. 2*, Cerf, Paris 1997, pp. 155-214], cit., note d, p. 263.

ordination (or not) to the final end of man and to the virtuous ends, which dispose the human person to happiness.¹⁵⁵

Giuseppe Abbà offers strong criticisms of Suárez's position on the moral object and the specification of the human act. According to the Italian philosopher,

“[w]hat Thomas means by the object of the *actus imperatus* is not a physical good suitable to human nature, as it is for Suárez, following Duns Scotus and Ockham; rather, it is the *actus imperatus* itself, considered not as a physical behavior (*secundo esse naturae*), but as represented and conceived by the practical reason in function of the *ordo rationis* and of the virtuous ends (*secundum esse moris*). Conceived in this way, the object can be intrinsically compatible or not with the *ratio virtutis*, independently of the circumstances.”¹⁵⁶

“The persistence of the conception of Duns Scotus and Ockham concerning moral knowledge in Suárez's reading of the Thomistic texts appears in his treatise *De bonitate et malitia humanorum actuum*, published posthumously in 1628, but composed during the years 1592-1593. In it, Suárez defends a conception of moral knowledge that is at the basis of his conception of the moral law, natural and divine, which he later expounded in his more famous treatise *De legibus* (Coimbra 1612), which had a vast diffusion and an enormous influence throughout Europe.”¹⁵⁷

155. Cf. Idem, *Le renouveau de la morale*, cit., p. 142: “nous avons dégagé la perspective nouvelle sur l'acte moral qu'inaugure saint Thomas; il le regarde du point de vue de l'intention de la volonté agissante ordonnée à la fin comme à son principe spécificateur. La distinction en bien et en mal, qui se prend par rapport à la fin, constitue une différence essentielle de l'action morale. Aussi la finalité tient-elle à l'essence de la moralité” (we have highlighted the new perspective on the moral act inaugurated by St. Thomas; he considers it from the point of view of the intention of the acting will, ordered to the end as to its specifying principle. The distinction between good and evil, which is taken from its relation to the end, constitutes an essential difference in moral action. Thus the finality pertains to the essence of morality).

156. G. Abbà, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale?*, *Ricerche di filosofia morale*, LAS, Rome 1996, p. 201: “Ciò che Tommaso intende per oggetto dell'*actus imperatus* non è un bene fisico conveniente alla natura umana, come invece è per Suárez, al seguito di Giovanni Duns Scoto e di Guglielmo di Ockham; è invece l'*actus imperatus* stesso considerato non come comportamento fisico (*secundum esse naturae*), ma in quanto rappresentato e concepito dalla ragione pratica in funzione dell'*ordo rationis* e dei fini virtuosi (*secundum esse moris*). Concepito così, l'oggetto può essere intrinsecamente compatibile o non con la *ratio virtutis*, indipendentemente dalle circostanze.”

157. Ibid., p. 83: “La persistenza della concezione scotista e ockhamista della conoscenza morale nella lettura suareziana dei testi tomisti appare nel suo trattato *De bonitate et malitia humanorum actuum*, pubblicato postumo nel 1628, ma composto tra gli anni 1592-93. In esso Suárez sostiene una concezione della conoscenza morale che sta alla base della sua concezione della legge morale, naturale e divina, quale egli espone successivamente nel più famoso trattato *De legibus* (Coimbra 1612), che ebbe vasta diffusione ed enorme influsso in tutta Europa.”

“Even though Suárez based himself on the texts of St. Thomas, his conception of reason as regulator of acts of the will entirely lost the Thomistic conception of practical reason; rather, it is clearly in line with the way opened by Duns Scotus and Ockham. It is a reason that grasps a natural order prior to itself and proposes it to the will; it proceeds with natural logic to apply universal prescriptions to particular cases, and in this function Suárez studies it under the name of conscience which, as the proximate rule of human acts, is distinguished from the primary or remote rule, which is the eternal law or the will of God.”¹⁵⁸

For Abbà, Aquinas’s texts must be read differently. He says that “the definition of the object that specifies the *actus imperatus* and the relevant circumstances is constructed in function of the virtuous ends,”¹⁵⁹ and that “the [moral] subject will not reach a morally correct final practical judgment if he is not disposed to virtue in both the practical reason and in the appetites.”¹⁶⁰ The virtue of practical reason which perfects deliberation about means is prudence, which consequently acquires a role of primary importance. “Prudence, however, cannot be constituted except in formal dependence, not only on a natural knowledge of the virtuous ends, but also and even more so on a good disposition of the appetitive faculties with respect to the virtuous ends.”¹⁶¹ “It is also necessary that the individual himself be inclined to the virtuous end, that his appetite be well-disposed with respect to human ends, in such a way that the individual acknowledges the judgment of reason as entirely his, as a specific mediation of ends which he has at heart.”¹⁶² “The virtuous ends function as the subject’s own rule with respect to action. Practical wisdom works to apply the general rule to the particular case, to give concrete form to the virtuous end in

158. *Ibid.*, p. 84: “Benché Suárez, si appoggi ai testi tomisti, questa sua concezione della ragione come regolatrice degli atti di volontà ha smarrito completamente la concezione tomista della ragion pratica; essa sta invece nella scia aperta da Giovanni Duns Scoto e da Guglielmo di Ockham. Essa è una ragione che apprende un ordine di nature ad esse previo e lo propone alla volontà; procede per logica naturale ad applicare prescrizioni universali a casi particolari e in questa funzione Suárez la studia sotto il nome di coscienza che, come regola prossima degli atti umani, si distingue dalla regola prima o remota, che è la legge eterna o volontà di Dio.”

159. *Ibid.*, p. 200: “la definizione dell’oggetto che specifica l’*actus imperatus* e delle circostanze rilevanti è costruita in funzione dei fini virtuosi.”

160. *Idem*, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù. Saggio di filosofia morale*, LAS, Rome 1995², p. 159: “il soggetto [morale] non perverrà a un giudizio pratico ultimo moralmente corretto se non dispone di virtù sia nella ragion pratica, sia negli appetiti.”

161. *Idem*, *Lex et virtus. Studi sull’evoluzione della dottrina morale di san Tommaso d’Aquino*, LAS, Rome 1983, p. 206: “La prudenza però non può costituirsi se non in formale dipendenza non solo da una conoscenza naturale dei fini virtuosi, ma anche e ancor più da una buona disposizione delle facoltà appetitive nei riguardi dei fini virtuosi.”

162. *Ibid.*, p. 214: “È necessario anche che l’individuo stesso sia inclinato al fine virtuoso, che il suo appetito sia ben disposto nei riguardi dei fini umani, affinché l’individuo riconosca il giudizio della ragione come interamente suo, come mediazione particolare dei fini che gli stanno a cuore.”

an action appropriate to the particulars of the situation.”¹⁶³ Abbà then claims that to act against reason is nothing other than to act against virtue, and conversely, “if we are virtuous, we are also perfectly rational.”¹⁶⁴

“When therefore ethical theory applies itself to the study of the direct exercise of practical reason *in particulari*, it must study practical reason as connected with the other operative principles of voluntary conduct, and specifically with virtuous and vicious dispositions.”¹⁶⁵ In fact “the judgment of choice cannot be upright if it is not commanded by an appetite that is well-disposed with respect to human ends.”¹⁶⁶ “It is not practical reason that invents goods for human beings, especially basic goods. The human subject finds himself oriented toward these by natural inclinations”¹⁶⁷ that reason grasps naturally and subsequently regulates in view of the final end. Here we have the foundations of the objectivity of human action. For Abbà “the way of conceiving the order among human goods in view of the good life constitutes the regulating principle of all voluntary acts”;¹⁶⁸ this order among human goods in view of the good life, moreover, corresponds in Aquinas’s terminology to the *ordo virtutis* in view of *beatitudo*.

Rhonheimer seems to defend a reading similar to that of Abbà. According to the Swiss philosopher “there are natural finalities that form a necessary presupposition for the reasonableness of any intentionality.”¹⁶⁹ Now, “this order created by practical reason in the natural inclinations is the order of virtue.”¹⁷⁰ Here “created” is not used in an absolute sense, given that “the ‘ordinatio rationis’ of the natural law is not an ‘ordinatio’ that provides these natural inclinations, rather it is an ‘ordinatio’ *in* the natural inclinations, given that the latter are in effect, at the level of the structure

163. Idem, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale?*, cit., p. 45: “I fini virtuosi funzionano come la regola propria del soggetto in vista dell’azione. La saggezza pratica opera per applicare la regola generale al caso particolare, per dar forma concreta al fine virtuoso in un’azione appropriata ai particolari della situazione.”

164. Ibid., p. 248: “se siamo virtuosi, siamo anche perfettamente razionali.”

165. Idem, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù*, cit., p. 159: “Quando dunque la teoria etica si spinge a studiare l’esercizio diretto della ragion pratica *in particulari*, essa deve studiare la ragion pratica in quanto connessa con gli altri principi operativi della condotta volontaria, e precisamente con le disposizioni virtuose o viziose.”

166. Idem, *Lex et virtus*, cit., p. 212: “il giudizio di scelta non può essere retto se non è comandato da un appetito ben disposto in ordine ai fini umani.”

167. Idem, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù*, cit., p. 202: “Non è la ragione pratica che inventa quali sono i beni per l’uomo, specialmente i beni basilari. A essi il soggetto umano si ritrova orientato per inclinazioni naturali.”

168. Ibid., p. 151: “Il modo di concepire l’ordine tra i beni umani in vista della vita buona costituisce il principio regolatore di tutti gli atti volontari.”

169. M. Rhonheimer, “La prospettiva della persona agente e la natura della ragion pratica. L’oggetto dell’atto humano’ nell’antropologia tomistica dell’azione,” in L. Melina, J. Noriega (eds.), *Camminare nella Luce. Prospettive della Teologia morale a 10 anni da Veritatis splendor*, Lateran University Press, Rome 2005, pp. 212-213: “esistono delle finalizzazioni naturali che formano un presupposto necessario per la ragionevolezza di qualsiasi intenzionalità.”

170. Idem, *Legge naturale e ragion pratica. Una visione tomista dell’autonomia morale*, Armando Editore, Rome 2001, p. 499: “questo ordine creato dalla ragion pratica nelle inclinazioni naturali è l’ordine della virtù.”

of being, the expression of the plan of divine Providence, and thus participate in the directive power of the eternal law.”¹⁷¹

An important distinction must be made, however.

“While the first principles of practical reason or of the natural law (for example, one must do good, wrong no one, aspire to truth, venerate God, etc.) do not yet stipulate any kind of specific action (*species*), in the so-called secondary principles there is already that nearness to concrete action that is made possible by the identification of such *species*. These deduced, ‘discovered’ principles are identified in content, as Thomas explains, with the Decalogue, with the ends of the moral virtues or with the order of justice.”¹⁷²

Therefore, “the practical reason that ‘forms’ the object of an act is not a reason without its own principles. These principles are precisely the precepts of the natural law.”¹⁷³ In this sense,

“a *res aliena* is neither ‘due’ nor ‘undue’ matter, neither ‘appropriate’ nor ‘inappropriate.’ To establish such a relation and to know it is solely the work of reason, which in this way informs the will, conferring the moral species on the latter’s act. For this reason an object is ‘evil’ that is unsuitable *to reason*, and thus ‘to take someone else’s property’ is an ‘object unsuitable to reason.’”¹⁷⁴

Rhonheimer also says that “in no operation is ‘nature’ the rule of good and evil. The nature of a being is rather what determines what that rule is in each case.

171. Ibid., p. 248: “la ‘ordinatio rationis’ della legge naturale è una ‘ordinatio’ che non dispone di queste inclinazioni naturali, bensì è una ‘ordinatio’ nelle inclinazioni naturali, giacché queste sono in effetti, sul piano della struttura dell’essere, espressione del piano della divina provvidenza, partecipano dunque alla vis direttiva della legge eterna.”

172. Ibid., p. 283: “mentre i principi primi della ragion pratica o della legge naturale (ad esempio: si deve fare il bene; non si deve fare torto a nessuno; si deve anelare alla verità; si deve venerare Dio, ecc.) non fissano ancora alcuna specie di azione specifica (“species”), nei cosiddetti principi secondari si trova invece già quella prossimità all’agire concreto che è resa possibile dall’identificazione di tale “species.” Questi principi dedotti, “trovati,” si identificano contenutisticamente, come spiega Tommaso, con il Decalogo, con i fini delle virtù morali o con l’ordine della giustizia”

173. Idem, *La prospettiva della persona agente*, cit., p. 217: “la ragion pratica che “forma” l’oggetto di un atto non è una ragione senza i suoi principi propri. Questi principi sono precisamente i precetti della legge naturale.”

174. Ibid., p. 179: “una *res aliena* non è né materia “dovuta” né “non dovuta,” “appropriata,” né “non appropriata.” Stabilire un tale rapporto e conoscerlo è opera soltanto della ragione, che in questo modo informa la volontà, conferendo al suo atto la specie morale. Per questo è “cattivo” un oggetto che non conviene *alla ragione*, e perciò “sottrarre la proprietà altrui” è un “oggetto non conveniente alla ragione” [*Summa theologiae*, q. 18, a. 5, ad 2].”

In the case of human nature and human acts, that rule is reason.¹⁷⁵ “Moral reason – practical reason – is itself a rule: it is the ‘measure’ of the morality of human acts, a natural rule, which is inherent in human nature and a participation in divine reason,¹⁷⁶ and “itself regulates and guides natural human tendencies and inclinations to their *due* end, which end is part of an order that is not natural, but of reason. This is precisely the order of *reason*, which is the adequate expression of what is natural for man in a properly *moral* sense.”¹⁷⁷ This “*ordo rationis*, which is the order of the moral virtues, and finds its fulfillment in the *ordo amoris*,”¹⁷⁸ is decisive in the moral specification of the human act, since “the practical reason that ‘forms’ the object of an act is not a reason without its own principles. These principles are precisely the precepts of the natural law.”¹⁷⁹ Therefore, “these goods, grasped naturally by practical reason as human goods, are the ends of the various natural inclinations, not however [...] as such, but precisely ‘regulated’ by reason.”¹⁸⁰ In this view, the object of the human act is already configured morally as conceived and regulated by practical reason, and it thus follows that in the case of intrinsically evil acts, “any act is *intrinsically* evil not in that it is evil because it is prohibited, but prohibited because it is evil, that is, precisely on the basis of its intrinsic and specific ‘moral nature’”¹⁸¹ – that is, on the basis of its constitutive contrariness to the order of reason.

As an example, Rhonheimer asserts that “a lie is evil, not as contrary to the nature of language, but because it is opposed to the virtue of truthfulness, to communicative justice.”¹⁸² “The finality of the virtue of truthfulness therefore constitutes the ‘ethical context,’ in relation to which lying acquires its objective identity.”¹⁸³ Now, whether in the case of lying or in that of other human acts,

175. *Ibid.*, p. 183: “in nessuna operazione la “natura” è *regola* del bene e del male; la natura di un essere è invece quello che determina che cosa è questa regola in ogni caso. Nel caso della natura umana e degli atti umani, questa regola è la ragione.”

176. *Ibid.*, p. 182: “La ragione morale – la ragione pratica – è, essa stessa, regola: è “misura” della moralità degli atti umani, una regola naturale, che è inerente alla natura umana e una partecipazione della ragione divina.”

177. *Ibid.*: “è essa [la ragione pratica] stessa che regola e indirizza la naturalità delle tendenze ed inclinazioni umane al loro fine *dovuto*, il quale fa parte di un ordine, non naturale, ma della ragione. Si tratta esattamente dell’ordine *della ragione*, che è l’espressione adeguata di ciò che per l’uomo è naturale in un senso propriamente *morale*.”

178. *Ibid.*, p. 216: “*ordo rationis*, che è l’ordine delle virtù morali, il quale trova il suo compimento nell’*ordo amoris*.”

179. *Ibid.*, p. 217: “la ragion pratica che “forma” l’oggetto di un atto non è una ragione senza i suoi principi propri. Questi principi sono precisamente i precetti della legge naturale.”

180. *Ibid.*: “Questi beni, naturalmente afferrati dalla ragion pratica come beni umani, sono i fini delle diverse inclinazioni naturali, non però, e questo è importante, in quanto tali, ma proprio “regolati” dalla ragione.”

181. *Ibid.*, p. 208: “ogni atto è cattivo *intrinsecamente* in quanto non è cattivo perché è proibito, ma proibito perché è cattivo, cioè proprio in base alla sua intrinseca e specifica “natura morale.”

182. *Ibid.*, p. 205: “la menzogna è cattiva, non in quanto contraria alla natura del linguaggio, ma perché si oppone alla virtù della veracità, alla giustizia comunicativa.”

183. *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206: “La finalità della virtù della veracità costituisce, dunque, il “contesto etico,” in rapporto a cui la menzogna acquista la sua identità oggettiva.”

“this ‘ethical context’ is always that of a particular virtue. In the case of lying, it is justice; in that of contraception and of masturbation, chastity. Nevertheless, the moral virtues are not defined without a relation to anthropological truth, i.e. to human nature, which is revealed and imposes itself as a moral rule by means of *reason*, beginning with the natural law, which is the *ordinatio rationis* at the universal level and at the level of principles.”¹⁸⁴

The moral virtues possess, therefore, an anthropological basis that guarantees their objective and universal dimension, and therefore “that which we can *reasonably* will as the end of a concrete choice, doing specific things, depends, therefore, not simply on our subjective opinion or on our freedom, but in some cases also on natural presuppositions that are grasped by reason and understood as human goods.”¹⁸⁵ Which is to say, there are cases in which the moral virtues enter in a direct relation with the moral object, independently of the *finis operantis*.

Joseph Pilsner, for his part, begins by observing that “Thomas uses five different terms to designate what specifies human actions: end, object, matter, circumstance, and motive. It is not immediately clear what some of these terms mean in this context, or how they are related to specification.”¹⁸⁶ “Aquinas believes that human beings have a God-given natural inclination to intelligible good(s) which forms the basis for their practical reasoning. The intelligible character or *ratio* of these goods (and what opposes them) can be understood and expressed in the form of precepts.”¹⁸⁷ But in what do these intelligible goods consist? “Human agents are attracted to rational goods and can discern which characteristics formally constitute these goods. One such good is temperance [...]. One knows whether this human action [of sexual intercourse] is morally good or morally bad (here temperate or intemperate) when one knows whether the woman is ‘one’s own’ or ‘not one’s own.’”¹⁸⁸ Thus, although – in his way of speaking of intelligible goods – he seems to be influenced by the basic human goods theory of Germain Grisez and John Finnis, Pilsner also seems to identify the rational goods to which man tends naturally with the moral virtues. He later says, “a human action is specified according to its object’s relation (*ordo*) to reason. Reason (as understood in this context) measures human actions against conceptions of rational goods. For instance, the good of charity is

184. Ibid., p. 208: “Questo “contesto etico” è sempre quello di una determinata virtù. Nel caso della menzogna, è la giustizia; in quello della contraccezione e della masturbazione, la castità. Le virtù morali, tuttavia, non si definiscono senza rapporto alla verità antropologica, cioè alla natura umana, che si rivela e si impone come regola morale attraverso la *ragione*, iniziando con la legge naturale, che è la *ordinatio rationis* a livello universale e dei principi.”

185. Ibid., pp. 215-216: “Ciò che possiamo *ragionevolmente* volere come fine di una scelta concreta, facendo determinate cose, dipende dunque non semplicemente dal nostro parere soggettivo, o dalla nostra libertà, ma in alcuni casi anche da presupposti naturali, colti dalla ragione e intesi come bene umani.”

186. J. Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, p. 2.

187. Ibid., p. 133.

188. Ibid., p. 105.

realized when alms are given, while the good of justice is opposed in the taking of another's thing."¹⁸⁹ Although he generally speaks in terms of rational goods, in these examples, Pilsner asserts that to be opposed to reason means to go against the rational goods, which he explains as going against the virtues of charity and justice.

"Human actions [...], are primarily related to the human power of will, and will has an object - intelligible good(s) - which defines this power and its related actions. In addition to this most basic level of the will's specification, Thomas sees differences in the objects of will which allow one to discriminate further among will acts; for instance, relevant differences in the object can determine whether actions are morally good or evil, and whether they belong to more particular moral species, such as fraternal correction or murder."¹⁹⁰

"Good and evil as species of human actions, then, do not contrast perfection and privation in themselves, but human actions with a due order to an end and human actions (positively described) which lack such a due order."¹⁹¹ Therefore, "when a human action has an end which is in accordance with reason, it is called good in its species, and when it has an end which is contrary to reason, it is called evil in its species."¹⁹² It follows, moreover, that "an action with two or more ends can assume two or more moral species."¹⁹³

"So how is human action related to the rule of reason? Aquinas holds that a human action possesses a natural determinateness of sorts even apart from any comparison to right reason. For instance, an action can be described as 'taking something', or 'killing', and so forth; such species do not imply moral goodness or evil. When an action is considered in relation to right reason, however, the action is placed in a very different light: this standard of reason helps to define the action in a new way, identifying certain features of it as significant from a moral perspective, and defining the human action in a moral species, such as 'theft' or 'murder.'¹⁹⁴

Pilsner thus admits a double specification of human action in St. Thomas. One that is "natural," in that it is not related to the order of reason, and to which a non-moral description of the action is associated, and another that is moral, that relates the act with the order of reason and produces the moral specification of the act.

189. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

190. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

191. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

192. *Ibid.*.

193. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

194. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

Rodríguez Luño holds that “each of the [moral] virtues inclines the person to a particular type of human good.”¹⁹⁵ In practice “the concrete modality that the tendency of the will assumes in each individual action constitutes that action as a particular type of action,”¹⁹⁶ that is, different kinds of actions correspond to different kinds of “wanting,” and therefore “in function of its voluntariness, one type of action is distinguished from another, which at times could be practically identical to the external observer.”¹⁹⁷ “Actions that essentially harm a virtue are incompatible with and destructive of the good of the person,”¹⁹⁸ and are thus necessarily evil. In fact “when the constitutive or first-level tendency is in contradiction with a moral virtue (with justice, temperance, etc.), the action possesses a moral negativity that no further or second-level intention (*finis operantis*) can heal,”¹⁹⁹ because this situation involves a disorder of the will in relation to the good of the human person. In this sense he also says that “between a will ordered to the final end and a deliberate action that under some aspect absolutizes a finite good, there is an insuperable objective contradiction.”²⁰⁰

Rodríguez Luño notes that “through his intentions, the person creates a relation between various purposeful actions and different ends and motives. From this, however, it does not follow that the moral significance of the purposeful actions can always be reduced to that significance which the person wants to give them in ordering them to an end.”²⁰¹ As we have seen, the objective moral significance of a concrete choice is based on its relation of agreement or not with moral virtue. “Vice, for example, does not lead merely to judgments concerning this or that act, but also concerning a general formal rationale of moral action, providing life maxims such as ‘everything pleasurable must be enjoyed,’ ‘all effort must be avoided,’ ‘one must flee danger at any cost.’”²⁰² Since human acts are those which proceed from reason

195. A. Rodríguez Luño, *La scelta etica. Il rapporto fra libertà e virtù*, Ares, Milan, 1988, p. 49: “ciascuna delle virtù [moral] inclina l'uomo verso un genere del bene umano.”

196. E. Colom - A. Rodríguez Luño, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi. Elementi di Teologia Morale Fondamentale*, Edizioni Università della Santa Croce, Rome 2003³, p. 176: “la modalità concreta che la tendenza del volere assume in ogni singola azione costituisce tale azione in un tipo determinato di azione.”

197. *Ibid.*, p. 181: “in ragione della volontarietà un tipo di azione si distingue da un altro, che talvolta potrebbe essere quasi identico per l'osservatore esterno.”

198. A. Rodríguez Luño, *Ética General*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2004⁵, p. 191: “Las acciones que lesionan esencialmente una virtud son incompatibles y destructivas del bien della persona.”

199. E. Colom - A. Rodríguez Luño, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi*, cit., p. 195: “quando l'intenzionalità costitutiva o di primo livello entra in contraddizione con una virtù morale (con la giustizia, la temperanza, ecc.), l'azione possiede una negatività morale che nessuna intenzione ulteriore o di secondo livello (*finis operantis*) può sanare.”

200. A. Rodríguez Luño, *Ética General*, cit., p. 186: “Entre una voluntad ordenada al fin último y una acción deliberada que bajo algún aspecto absolutiza un bien finito, existe una contradicción objetiva insuperable.”

201. *Ibid.*, p. 191: “A través de sus intenciones, la persona pone en relación diversas acciones finalizadas con diversos fines y motivos, pero de ello no se sigue que el significado moral de las acciones finalizadas pueda siempre reducirse al que la persona les quiere dar al ordenarlas a un fin.”

202. *Idem*, *La scelta etica*, cit., p. 76: “Il vizio, per esempio, porta a giudicare non solo di questo o di quell'atto, ma anche delle ragioni formali generali dell'operare morale, fornendo

and will, it follows that “the species of voluntary acts is a moral species,”²⁰³ given that they are necessarily in relation with the order of reason.

Carlo Caffarra thinks that

“the goodness or evil of the human act is determined based on the relationship that the object of the act has with reason. If this relation is positive, i.e., the object is reasonable, then the act is good. If, on the other hand, the relationship is negative, i.e., the object of the act is not reasonable, then the act is not good. But this relationship, positive and negative, is not limited to deciding the goodness or malice of the act, but makes it that a good act is specifically different than an evil act.”²⁰⁴

Therefore, “reason, through its exercise, constitutes the object of the act in its morality,”²⁰⁵ and distinguishes it essentially from other types of human acts. This reason, however, as determining the morality of the object of the act, is not an autonomous reason, since “the goodness of the will depends on reason, while the latter is a participation in the eternal law of God.”²⁰⁶

3. Final Considerations

With respect to the rule of morality, it seems that the commentators we have studied can be grouped basically into two groups, notwithstanding the differences that exist from author to author. The first group is comprised of those who identify the rule of morality with *ratio*, understood as *ordo rationis* and *ordo virtutis*. In this group are Cajetan, Suárez (though, clearly, not in Abbà’s opinion), John of St. Thomas, Lehu, Pinckaers, Abbà, Rhonheimer, Pilsner, Rodríguez Luño and Caffarra. For these authors the morality of the human act derives from its agreement or disagreement with the ends of the moral virtues.

A second group of authors seems to identify the *ratio*, to which Aquinas refers as the proximate rule of morality, with “moral norms”; among these authors are the Salamancans, Billuart and Ramírez. For them, a human act is morally good or evil

massime di vita come “tutto il dilettevole deve essere goduto,” “si deve evitare qualsiasi sforzo,” “si deve rifuggire dal pericolo a qualsiasi costo.””

203. E. Colom - A. Rodríguez Luño, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi*, cit., p. 192: “la specie degli atti volontari è una specie morale.”

204. C. Caffarra, *Concetti fondamentali dell’etica di S. Tommaso D’Aquino*, Dispensa ad uso degli studenti del Pontificio Istituto Giovanni Paolo II per gli studi su Matrimonio e Famiglia, Rome 1996, p. 22: “La bontà o malizia dell’atto umano viene determinata sulla base del rapporto che l’oggetto dell’atto ha con la ragione. Se questo rapporto è positivo, cioè l’oggetto è *ragionevole*, allora l’atto è buono; se il rapporto invece è negativo, cioè l’oggetto dell’atto è *irragionevole*, allora l’atto non è buono. Ma tale rapporto, positivo o negativo, non si limita a decidere della bontà o malizia dell’atto, ma esso fa sì che un atto buono sia *specificamente diverso* da un atto cattivo.”

205. Ibid., p. 24: “la ragione, mediante il suo esercizio, costituisce l’oggetto dell’atto nella sua moralità.”

206. Ibid.: “la bontà della volontà dipende dalla ragione in quanto essa è partecipazione della legge eterna di Dio.”

if it observes or violates the moral norms. The natural law is therefore conceived not as an *ordo virtutis* but as a collection of norms.

Which of these interpretations is correct? It seems quite clear to us that the explicit identification of the *ordo rationis* with the *ordo virtutis* and with the *lex naturalis* is a legitimate reading of the doctrine of Aquinas, one that has the advantage of making the evaluation of the morality of human acts significantly less ambiguous. To act against the order of reason is to act against the principles of practical reason, which are the precepts of the natural law, which are ultimately identified with the moral virtues.²⁰⁷

Man is naturally inclined to various goods, and these inclinations, once they have been grasped, require regulation by practical reason in view of the integral good of the person. This *ordo rationis* based in the natural inclinations consists in the ends of the moral virtues, which will in turn form the practical principles of the agent. The objectivity of human action is based on these natural ends, an objectivity that is present intrinsically in the moral subject, and thus it is precisely through practical reason that the subject possesses in himself these moral ends which are the rule and objective measure of concrete human acts. Which is to say: an objective rule that is present in the subjectivity of the moral subject and which has as its primary basis the eternal law as the determining cause of the due ends of man as man. It is God, therefore, who determines the moral ends according to which the human person realizes himself in his appetitive dynamism, giving to man through the light of natural reason the possibility of participating in the divine *ordo rationis* through the progressive cognitive apprehension of these due ends, which are the ends of the moral virtues. It is God, for example, who naturally inclines man to justice, although that objective inclination is subjectively grasped through reason.

Aquinas calls this rational participation in the *lex eterna* the *lex naturalis*, at other times the *ordo rationis* or simply *ratio*. Agreement or not with reason means the agreement or not of a particular proximate end of the deliberate will with the final end and with the ends of the moral virtues. It is this *commensuratio* of the proximate ends (*electio* and *intentio*) with the ends suitable to human nature as such – which only human reason is capable of realizing – from which derive (or don't) the order, rectitude and goodness of a particular freely chosen behavior. Only virtuous intentions and choices are fully rational. For example, the choice to use spectacles to see well is a virtuous choice, it is *secundum rationem* and, therefore, morally good. It can thus be said that to use spectacles to see well, from the moral perspective, is a choice *secundum natura*, even though from a purely biological point of view “to wear glasses” would in fact be artificial and in this sense not natural. Moral goodness depends on the agreement of the choice with the principles of practical reason, i.e. with the virtuous ends, and not simply on agreement with “nature” taken in the sense of merely biological ends.

207. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 47, a. 6, c.: “in ratione practica praexistunt quaedam ut principia naturaliter nota, et huiusmodi sunt fines virtutum moralium, quia finis se habet in operabilibus sicut principium in speculativis” (in the practical reason, certain things pre-exist, as naturally known principles, and such are the ends of the moral virtues, since the end is in practical matters what principles are in speculative matters).

Consequently, when in moral discourse one attempts to demonstrate the rationality/ convenience or the irrationality/inconvenience of a given human behavior, it is important to explain why the behavior realizes, or opposes, a particular moral virtue. This is the logic that underlies the entire II-II of the *Summa theologiae*. St. Thomas, at the point when he evaluates the morality of actions, does not primarily make use of the *regula rationis* understood as moral norms or commandments, but as virtuous ends to which the action must tend (*debitum*), freely and consciously.²⁰⁸

Also, the concept of “human nature” as used in moral discourse must refer primarily to those ends that realize the human person, disposing him to full communion with God. Human nature understood in this way refers not to biological ends or to the various human faculties, but precisely to moral ends, that is, to the virtues that make human desire upright. In this sense, a human action should not be considered good or evil because it realizes or frustrates a given biological end, but because it realizes or goes against a particular moral virtue. This is not to say that the moral virtues are not related to biological ends, but only to emphasize that to oppose nature, morally speaking, is the same as to oppose virtue, or to oppose reason.

Perhaps it would be better to illustrate this idea with another example. The human ear is *naturally* oriented to “hearing” sounds, and thus to voluntarily prevent the ear from “hearing” is, in this sense, contra-nature, since it is contrary to its natural finality. But is it always immoral to “close one’s ears”? Common sense says no. The *moral* species of “to close one’s ears” does not derive from the natural *ordo* of the ear in relation to its natural (biological) end, but, as we have abundantly shown, from the *ordo rationis*, or better, from the *ordo virtutis*. This means that even if “to close one’s ears” is unnatural from the purely biological perspective, given that the ear was made for hearing, this action will be good or evil from the *moral point of view* depending on its *commensuratio* with the moral ends suitable to the human person as such, that is, depending on its *commensuratio* with the *ordo virtutis*. If, in particular circumstances, “to close one’s ears” means “to fail to respect one’s parents,” then in this case “to close one’s ears” is opposed to the virtue of filial piety and morally a bad action. If, in other circumstances, “to close one’s ears” means “to avoid hearing an excessively loud noise,” then it would be a good action because it would be an action ordered to the preservation of one’s health.

It has become quite clear in the course of the path we have pursued in this study that for Aquinas human acts are natural, morally speaking, if they are according to the *ordo virtutis*, which is to say that virtuous acts are natural, whereas vicious acts are contra-nature.²⁰⁹ From this perspective, sin is always an act against nature, insofar as it is a disordered wanting of the ends toward which nature naturally inclines us, and which are at the basis of the *ordo virtutis*. To act against virtue

208. Cf. *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 6, ad 12: “Bonum vero et malum dicuntur per comparisonem ad finem” (The good and evil, are said so by comparison to the end).

209. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 54, a. 3, c.: “actus virtutum naturae humanae conveniunt, eo quod sunt secundum rationem, actus vero vitiorum, cum sint contra rationem, a natura humana discordant” (acts of virtue are suitable to human nature, since they are according to reason, whereas acts of vice are discordant from human nature, since they are against reason); *Ibid.*, q. 19, a. 1, s.c.: “bona voluntas est quae est secundum virtutem” (a good will is one which is in accordance with virtue).

is therefore to act against nature. It must also be recognized, however, that in some instances Aquinas speaks of “sins against nature,” something which at first glance could seem to be a redundancy, given that sin is sin precisely because it opposes nature (the *ordo virtutis*). When Aquinas speaks of “sins against nature,” he uses “nature” in a second sense, that is, he is not only pointing out the opposition to the *ordo virtutis*, but he wants to highlight that in these vicious acts one goes against his own natural inclinations. These acts oppose not only right reason, but also the natural inclinations themselves. It is in this sense, for example, that homosexual acts are called sins against nature. They are sins by the fact that they are opposed to the virtue of chastity (*ordo virtutis*), and as such they can be said “against nature,” but they are also called “against nature” in a second sense, that is, not only because they are contrary to the *ordo virtutis*, but because they are contrary to the sexual inclination itself that *naturally* exists between man and woman.²¹⁰

Another important idea is that a reading that would grant to reason an overly “creative” power in the conception of the object of the human act does not seem to be founded on Aquinas’s texts. There are in fact “material” limits that condition the possible universe of intentional proposals with which the agent can claim to inform a given *actus imperatus*. These limits must be sought in the *debita proportio* of the *materia ex qua* with the *materia circa quam*, as I have argued elsewhere.²¹¹ Two extremes must be avoided here: on the one hand the “moralization” of the *materia ex qua*, which would be a kind of “materialism” (or “physicalism”) of the morality

210. Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 94, a. 3, ad 2: “natura hominis potest dici vel illa quae est propria homini, et secundum hoc, omnia peccata, in quantum sunt contra rationem, sunt etiam contra naturam, ut patet per Damascenum, in II libro. Vel illa quae est communis homini et aliis animalibus, et secundum hoc, quaedam specialia peccata dicuntur esse contra naturam; sicut contra commixtionem maris et feminae, quae est naturalis omnibus animalibus, est concubitus masculorum, quod specialiter dicitur vitium contra naturam” ([b]y human nature we may mean either that which is proper to man—and in this sense all sins, as being against reason, are also against nature, as Damascene states (De Fide Orth. ii, 30): or we may mean that nature which is common to man and other animals; and in this sense, certain special sins are said to be against nature; thus contrary to sexual intercourse, which is natural to all animals, is unisexual lust, which has received the special name of the unnatural crime); *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 154, a. 11, c.: “sicut supra dictum est, ibi est determinata luxuriae species ubi specialis ratio deformitatis occurrit quae facit indecentem actum venereum. Quod quidem potest esse dupliciter. Uno quidem modo, quia repugnat rationi rectae, quod est commune in omni vitio luxuriae. Alio modo, quia etiam, super hoc, repugnat ipsi ordini naturali venerei actus qui convenit humanae speciei, quod dicitur vitium contra naturam” ([a]s stated above, wherever there occurs a special kind of deformity whereby the venereal act is rendered unbecoming, there is a determinate species of lust. This may occur in two ways: First, through being contrary to right reason, and this is common to all lustful vices; secondly, because, in addition, it is contrary to the natural order of the venereal act as becoming to the human race: and this is called “the unnatural vice”); *Ibid.*, a. 12, c.: “in vitis quae sunt contra naturam transgreditur homo id quod est secundum naturam determinatum circa usum venereum [...] alias autem luxuriae species praeteritur solum id quod est secundum rationem rectam determinatum” (by the unnatural vices man transgresses that which has been determined by nature with regard to the use of venereal actions [...] With regard to the other species of lust they imply a transgression merely of that which is determined by right reason).

211. In chapters VI and X of my dissertation.

of the act, and on the other the “separation” of the *materia circa quam* from the *materia ex qua*, which would end by introducing an unacceptable dualism into human action.

From whence, then, does this form that is the *finis proximus* of the action derive? This form, as we have seen, is conceived by the practical reason, which is the only human faculty capable of apprehending and ordering all human action in view of the *finis ultimus*. Practical reason grasps the character of good (*ratio boni*) in the various alternatives of action, alternatives to which practical reason itself has given origin, departing from a wide range of stimuli, while simultaneously measuring their agreement or not with the good of the human person as such. This *commensuratio* of a given proposal of action with the *ordo rationis* leads practical reason to consider to what degree the given action realizes the attainment of the final end of man, bearing in mind his natural inclinations that, regulated by the same right reason, are nothing other than the ends of the moral virtues. The moral species of a human act, then, depends on this form that is conceived, ordered and measured by practical reason. Only practical reason can conceive, for example, the proposal of action of “spending a week on vacation with my grandparents,” integrating and ordering it into a coherent plan of life.

This form neither exists nor subsists outside of practical reason, since it is an intentional proposal. This proposal of action will have the character of a good to the extent that it realizes one’s humanity, that is, to the extent that it allows one to grow in virtue and thus realize a happy life. When, for whatever reason, practical reason detects in a particular proposal of action some aspect that is opposed to virtue, then this proposal acquires a negative moral specification, since it does not realize the vocation of the human person as such. It is only at the later moment of the *electio* that this form existing in reason (as a proposal of possible action) is communicated to the will as a *finis proximus* which gives the moral species. The moral species of an act will depend, therefore, on its particular relation of agreement with or opposition to the ends of the moral virtues, a *commensuratio* that is the work of practical reason, aided (or not) by common sense and especially by Revelation.²¹²

To emphasize that the act is morally specified departing from the *commensuratio* that the *finis proximus* has with the *ordo virtutis* does not mean that the act is *only* specified by its *finis proximus*. Aquinas frequently emphasizes that, according to the *genus moris*, the object of the *electio* and the object of the *intentio* form a single act.²¹³ As we have seen, *finis operantis* (or end of the *intentio*) *necessarily* have a *moral* species, since as the term of the movement of the will

212. God through revelation illuminates practical reason either on the content of the *finis ultimus* either on the content of the moral virtues. This revealed wisdom enhances powerfully the moral sensibility of the agent to the human goods. Cf. A. Rodríguez Luño, “La novedad de la fe como criterio de interpretación y actuación para la existencia moral,” in C.A. Scarponi (ed.), *La verdad os hará libres. Congreso Internacional sobre la Encíclica Veritatis splendor*, Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina - Ed. Paulinas, Buenos Aires, 2005, pp. 235-254.

213. Cf. *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 20, a. 3, ad 1: “actus interior et exterior sunt diversi secundum genus naturae. Sed tamen ex eis sic diversis constituitur unum in genere moris” (the internal and external actions are different in the physical order: yet distinct as they are in that respect, they combine to form one thing in the moral order).

they necessarily have a character of good, and consequently a positive or negative relation with the *ordo virtutis*. The *finis proximus* (or object of the *electio*), on the other hand, can be purely instrumental, without any relation of agreement/opposition with the order of reason, and thus of an indifferent moral species (although a particular *electio* is always morally specified). When this occurs, the *actus externus* receives its moral species solely from the *commensuratio* of the *finis operantis* with the *ordo virtutis*.

In fact, when we consider particular cases we note that, whereas the morality of the interior act, i.e. of the *intentio*, depends *only* on its object, the morality of the external act depends both on the object of the *electio* and on the morality of the will that commands that *electio*, i.e. on the object of the *intentio*. It is possible, however, to consider the morality of the external act abstractly, prescindendo from the further end to which this is ordered (something that scholars frequently do to study the morality of an act according to its species), and even to classify it according to its moral species, but it should be noted that such an operation, except in cases where the object of the *intentio* is immediately realizable, is an abstraction. In fact, *every actus externus* is also *necessarily* morally specified by the *commensuratio* that the *finis operantis* has with the *ordo virtutis*. This is why, even if the *actus externus* has a virtuous *finis proximus*, if the *finis operantis* is opposed to the *ordo virtutis* then the *actus externus* is also evil from the moral perspective, as in the external act of one who gives alms out of vainglory. This external act of “giving alms” is *also* the realization of an act of pride, and not only an act of generosity.

When the object of the *electio* has no particular relation with the *ordo virtutis*, i.e. it is an indifferent moral object, it has only the moral species of the object of the *intentio*, through the command of the will. For example, the external act “to turn on a light” would be an act of the species of the virtue of justice if it is ordered to “returning a sweater to its owner,” and this is true even if “turning on a light” is not *per se* an act that pertains to the virtue of justice. It is the *intentio* in the act toward a just object that gives origin to (it is the efficient cause of) the *electio* of “turning on a light.” In this case if we were asked what is the object of the external act, we would say that it is “to turn on the light”; if we were asked what is the moral species of that act, we would have to say that *per se* it is not an act of any virtue or vice, but since in this case it is caused by a will tending to justice, it also receives that moral specification. In this case, then, “to turn on a light” is an act of justice. In summary, it is one thing to consider the moral species of acts considering *only* the *finis intentus* taken in isolation, and another to consider the moral species of a concrete *actus externus* in which there is a combining of the morality of its intrinsic *finis proximus* with the morality of the *finis operantis* to which it is ordered.²¹⁴

214. Cf. *De virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 10: “actus alicuius habitus, prout imperatur ab illo habitu, accipit quidem speciem moralem, formaliter loquendo, de ipso actu; unde cum quis fornicatur ut furetur, actus iste licet materialiter sit intemperantiae, tamen formaliter est avaritiae. Sed licet actus intemperantiae accipiat aliquantulum speciem, prout imperatur ab avaritia; non tamen ex hoc intemperantia speciem accipit secundum quod actus est ab avaritia imperatus” (the act of a certain habit, while is commanded by that other habit, receives a certain moral species, formally speaking, of that same [commanding] act. Therefore the act of one who wants to fornicate in order to steal, is materially an

It is also important to point out that the moral species of an act may well derive from an omission, insofar as the latter is contrary to the *ordo virtutis*. When someone deliberately does not do what is appropriate for him according to the *ordo virtutis*, then his action is specified morally by the virtue against which he acts. For example, when someone deliberately omits due acts of reverence to God when in His Presence, then that omission is objectively an irreverent omission, contrary to the virtue of religion.

Do the concepts and doctrine of St. Thomas allow us to discern the moral species of an act in cases where discerning the moral object is more difficult? As we have pointed out several times, there are cases in which a variety of goods of the human person enter into play in the same action, and in which it can be difficult to ascertain what is the proximate end to which the will directly tends. We are convinced that these more complicated cases can be resolved by: a) determining if a *debita proportio* exists between the *materia ex qua* and the *finis intentus*, a point just referred to above, and b) applying the concepts of *per se intentum* and *praeter intentionem* to the act in question. If a *finis intentus* has a *debita proportio* to a given *materia ex qua*, this means that we are dealing with a *finis proximus*. Then the act will receive its moral specification from the *commensuratio* of this *finis proximus* with the *ordo virtutis*. All the other effects *praeter intentionem* – foreseen or not – are not *finis* to which the will deliberately directs itself, and hence normally do not morally specify the act in question.²¹⁵

Does what is *praeter intentionem*, then, ever specify the act? In some cases, yes, i.e. if what is *praeter intentionem* is a greater *debitum* according to the *ordo virtutis* than the *debitum* of that which is *per se intentus*. In this case what is *praeter intentionem* specifies the act as a deliberate omission does, because the contrariness to the *ordo virtutis* caused by the omission is clearly more vicious than what the *electio* seeks to realize through the virtuous *finis proximus* to which it tends. In these cases it would be vicious and imprudent, in the sense of opposed to the *ordo virtutis*, to not forego the act in question.

To sum up, it can be said that when given virtuous ends are mutually excluded from the same choice – when, for example, it becomes impossible through a single choice to “do good” and “avoid evil” – then practical reason must discern which of the two *finis proximus* is more virtuous, in light of the *ordo virtutis*, so as to determine which of the two should have practical prevalence and thus be desired *per se*. The evil tolerated *praeter intentionem* would only specify the act in the

act of intemperance and formally an act of greed. But although the act of intemperance receives other species while it is commanded by greed, yet from that intemperance the act receives the species insofar as it is commanded by greed).

215. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 18, a. 5, c.: “nihil quod est per accidens, constituit speciem, sed solum quod est per se” (nothing accidental constitutes a species, but only that which is essential); *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 64, a. 7, c.: “Moralia autem actus recipiunt speciem secundum id quod intenditur, non autem ab eo quod est praeter intentionem” ([M]oral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is beside the intention); *Ibid.*, q. 150, a. 2, c.: “moralia recipiunt speciem non ab his quae per accidens eveniunt praeter intentionem, sed ab eo quod est per se intentum” (morals take their species not from things that occur accidentally and beside the intention, but from that which is directly intended).

case of an imprudent omission, i.e., when it is not *secundum virtutem* to tolerate that evil. For example, a Catholic who misses Sunday Mass to go to a football game with his friends, *per se* desires a virtuous *finis proximus*, specified by the virtues of friendship and *eutrapelia*; however, to this *electio* is *coniunctus* a gravely vicious omission against the virtue of religion and of charity, and that deliberate omission makes this *electio* an act contrary to the *ordo virtutis*, morally specified by the act of omission committed. This, however, is not to say that all vicious omissions morally specify the *electio* – rather, this happens only in particular cases. In other cases, as for example in legitimate defense, Aquinas emphasizes how *defendere seipsum* is the more virtuous *electio* “since – he says – one is bound to take more care of one’s own life than of another’s”;²¹⁶ that is, legitimate defense is more in accord with the *ordo virtutis* than it would be to omit defending oneself so as to not cause harm – and even death, if necessary – to the unjust aggressor. In this case, as we have seen, the *electio* is *only* morally specified by the *finis proximus* that is *per se intentus*, assuming of course that the defense is in fact *legitimate*. ■

216. *Ibid.*, q. 64, a. 7, c.: “quia plus tenetur homo vitae suae providere quam vitae alienae.”