Lecture #6: St. Thomas Aquinas on Goodness & Badness in Human Actions

St. Thomas’ Moral Principles: Summary
1. The Dionysian Principle
   - An act (or thing) is good only if it is good in all respects;
     • it is bad if it is bad in any respect.
2. The Three Determinants of Morality
   - The goodness or badness of a human action is determined by three things:
     • the object
     • the end, &
     • the circumstances.
3. The Reason Principle
   - Good human actions are those which are in accordance with reason.

The Dionysian Principle
• “We must speak of goodness and badness in actions as of goodness and badness in things”—IaIIæ, 18.1
  - On “badness,” see translation note (next slide)
• What makes things good or bad?
  - The Dionysian Principle:
    • Bonum ex integra causa; malum ex quocumque defectu
    Badness results from any single defect, but goodness from the complete cause
    - Equivalently, goodness is fulness of being
      • “if a thing be lacking in its due fulness of being, it is not said to be good simply”
      • = having all the features appropriate to a thing of that kind

A Translation Note
• Considerandum est de bonitate et malitia humanorum actuum
  - Our translation: “We must think about the goodness and badness of human actions”
• Question: malum & malitia—bad & badness or evil & malice?
  - The distinction
    - can something be bad, but not evil?
      • the tires on one’s car can be bad; they can’t be evil
        - “evil” seems to be limited to moral badness
      • telling a white lie may be bad, but would we describe it as “evil”?
        - “evil” suggests that something is not only bad, but profoundly so
      • and what can be malum?
        • the weather: tempestas mala
      • malum = bad, not necessarily evil
        - So, not “a blind man is possessed of evil, inasmuch as he lacks sight”
        - but “of something bad”

Goodness in Aristotelian Philosophy
• All things are things of a certain kind
  - Goodness is judged by reference to features characteristic of things of one’s kind
    • Consider the criteria by which we would judge something we make
      - to be a good watch, the watch would have to keep time well
      - to be a good dog, the dog would have to be able to see, &c.
    - Full goodness requires all those features (goodness as “fulness in being”)
      • “Every action has goodness, in so far as it has being:
        - whereas it is lacking in goodness, in so far as it is lacking in something that is due to its fulness of being;
        - and thus it is said to be bad”
      • A good bloodhound must be good in all respects
        - not just capable of smelling
        - but of staying on task
      • A good farmer must be good in all respects
        - not only a good steward of his land
        - but capable of reliably producing a crop

The Three Determinants of Morality: Two Key Passages
• “Accordingly a fourfold goodness may be considered in a human action.
  - First, that which, as an action, it derives from its genus;
    • because as much as it has of action and being so much has it of goodness,
      as stated above (a. 1).
  - Secondly, it has goodness according to its species;
    • which is derived from its suitable object.
  - Thirdly, it has goodness from its circumstances,
    • in respect, as it were, of its accidents.
  - Fourthly, it has goodness from its end,
    • to which it is compared as to the cause of its goodness.”
    —Ia2æ, 18.4 c
• “Nothing hinders an action that is good in one of the way mentioned above, from lacking goodness in another way. And thus it may happen that an action which is good in its species or in its circumstances is ordained to a bad end, or vice versa. However, an action is not good simply, unless it is good in all those ways: since ‘badness results from any single defect, but goodness from the complete cause,’ as Dionysius says.”—Ia2æ, 18.4 ad 3
St. Thomas’ Moral Principles:
2. The Three Determinants of Morality

- What are the respects that constitute the integra causa of a human action?
- The (foundational) Fourfold Goodness Principle:
  - There are four aspects of goodness in an action:
    - genus
    - species (object)
    - end
    - circumstances
- There are three things that determine the goodness or badness of a human action:
  - the object
  - the end
  - the circumstances.

The Genus
- The genus of every human action is just “human action.” That is generally the kind of thing we are talking about.
- Every human act is good with respect to its genus.
  - No action is bad as a human action.
  - All bad actions are bad because of their object, their end or their circumstances. These three remain as the determinants of whether an action is morally good or bad.

The Object
- The object of a human action
  - This can also be characterized as
    - the species (or kind) of action or
    - what the agent did
  - In sentences that say “I am doing, performing, or committing X”:
    - X is the direct object of the verb.
    - X names the kind (species) of action, or the object of the action.
  - E.g., killing an innocent person, visiting the sick, picking up a leaf
- The object of a human action corresponds to
  - the immediate intention of the agent
  - more than a basic bodily action (e.g., moving one’s trigger finger)
  - less than the reason for the action (e.g., getting revenge)
  - so, in a killing the object is killing another human being
  - the act as intended & affected by those other features that are so logically close as to be practically indistinguishable from it (“specifying circumstances”)
  - Beheading is a kind of killing (even if the decapitator says, “I didn’t intend to kill him. All I intended to do was to cut off his head.”).
  - Bombing military targets is not a kind of killing innocent neighbors of the target.

The End
- the reason the act is performed
  - the aim, not the outcome (or actual consequences)
  - why the agent did what he did
- kinds of end
  - ultimate end
    - always the same formally—to attain happiness
    - but various materially—to attain something that is seen as a constituent of happiness
      - e.g., friendship, getting revenge
  - proximate end
    - Various—e.g., money, health

Object & End Distinguished

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Act (= what the agent did)</th>
<th>Means (= how the end was achieved)</th>
<th>The End of the Act (= finis operis)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End</td>
<td>Motive (= why the agent did it)</td>
<td>End (= why the act was done)</td>
<td>The End of the Agent (= finis operantis)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Object & End Distinguished: A Complication

- St. Thomas’ Analysis in terms of object & end seems oversimplified:
  - Analysis reveals more complexity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Action</th>
<th>Means to Performing the Act</th>
<th>The Act Itself (the Object)</th>
<th>The Intermediate End</th>
<th>The Ultimate End</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexing One’s Trigger Finger</td>
<td>Firing a Rifle</td>
<td>Killing Someone</td>
<td>Ending their Suffering</td>
<td>Greatest Happiness for the Greatest Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexing One’s Trigger Finger</td>
<td>Firing a Rifle</td>
<td>Killing Someone</td>
<td>Making the Victim’s Relatives Unhappy</td>
<td>Attaining the Sweet Feel of Revenge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Solution: “Object & End” together name the whole spectrum.
  - Often, distinguishing two points is sufficient for moral analysis.
  - Sometimes it is not.
Circumstances

- Definition—Features that are not part of the act itself (i.e., the act as intended or chosen by the agent), but surround it.
- What is part of the act itself?
  - Clearly everything intended by the agent (object & end).
  - These are the things on the basis of which the thing was chosen.
  - Those circumstances that change the moral nature of the action, whether the agent intended them or not (because the agent should have considered them), i.e., specifying circumstances (see next slide).

St. Thomas' Moral Principles: Kinds of Circumstances

- There are two kinds of circumstances:
  - Specifying Circumstances—which change the moral nature of the action from one kind to another (& possibly from good to bad) & thereby become part of the object (associated with the will by its neglect of them) rather than remaining part of the circumstances
    - Stealing from a church is sacrilege, even if the location of the action had nothing to do with why the thief stole there.
    - Adulterers may only intend to satisfy their lust, but if one of them is married, the act is ipso facto adultery.
  - Aggravating or Mitigating Circumstances—These make the action more or less bad than it otherwise would be, but do not change its nature (or change it from good to bad).
    - Stealing from the poor may be worse than stealing from the rich, but both are just cases of stealing.

The List of Circumstances

- Who
  - execution by public hangman or private vigilante
  - correction of children by a parent, a sibling, or a stranger
- What (the effect)
  - with certain side effects as consequences
- When
  - killing a deer in hunting season or out of season
- Where
  - target practice on Main Street or in the country
- How
  - correcting children harshly or gently
- [Why—but this is equivalent to the End]

The Reason Principle

- What do we look for in object, end, & circumstance?
- Human actions, as opposed to mere “actions of man” are the product of deliberative will, i.e., of reason
  - So we ask whether the object, end, & circumstance are in accordance with reason.
    - in accord with reason (& therefore good)
      - E.g., just, temperate, courageous actions
    - contrary to reason (& therefore bad)
      - E.g., unjust, intemperate, cowardly, rash actions
        - injustice—treating someone in a way that he doesn’t deserve
        - intemperance—
          » gluttony—eating in a way that cuts the act off from nutrition
          » lust—engaging in sex in a way that cuts it off from procreation & love
    - neither (“indifferent”)—Some actions are too generally described to be relatable to reason. (See next slide)

Evaluating the Object

- The object specifies the act (i.e., makes it the kind of act it is)
  - Some acts are wrong because of the kind of act they are
    - in accord with reason (& therefore good)
      - E.g., just, temperate, courageous actions
    - contrary to reason (& therefore bad)
      - E.g., unjust, intemperate, cowardly, rash actions
        - injustice—treating someone in a way that he doesn’t deserve
        - intemperance—
          » gluttony—eating in a way that cuts the act off from nutrition
          » lust—engaging in sex in a way that cuts it off from procreation & love
    - neither (“indifferent”)—Some actions are too generally described to be relatable to reason. (See next slide)
Evaluating the Object (cont’d.):
“Indifference”

- Some kinds of actions are too generally described to be relatable to reason.
  - Easy examples are trivial actions:
    - E.g., picking up a leaf (as such) is neither in accord with reason nor contrary to reason.
  - But non-trivial actions can also be “indifferent” (i.e., by their nature neither good nor bad):
    - E.g., killing someone
      - Killing whom? Do they deserve it? (= Are they necent or innocent?)
    - Contrast—executing a dangerous murderer (just; good object)
      - killing innocent Japanese citizens at Hiroshima (unjust; bad object)
    - So, the characterization “killing someone” did not give us enough information to determine whether the object of the action was in accord with reason or not.

- However, no individual action is indifferent.
  - An individual action may be indifferent as a kind of action.
  - But the circumstances could make an indifferent action bad
    - E.g.—Singing is indifferent.
      - Singing during philosophy class is bad (time & place unreasonable).
  - The end will always be in accordance with or contrary to reason.
    - indifferent object + good end → good act
      - (unless circumstances are bad)
    - indifferent object + bad end → bad act
      - (regardless of circumstances)

Evaluating the End

- Ends in accord with reason (good)
  - Ends that are a part of real happiness (ultimate ends)
    - e.g., friendship, contemplation
  - Ends that are a means to it (proximate ends)
    - e.g., money, health

- Ends contrary to reason (bad)
  - Things desired for their own sake though not part of real happiness
    - e.g., getting even with everyone
  - Things desired as a means, though not compatible with happiness
    - e.g., sneakiness?

N.B. All ends are either in accordance with reason or contrary to it.
- None are ever indifferent.

Evaluating Circumstances

- Circumstances in accord with reason
  - Who (done by the right person)
    - E.g., criminal punishment by the proper authorities
  - What (having acceptable consequences)
    - E.g., bad side effects not outweighing the intended good effects
  - When
    - E.g., packing up one’s papers after the professor has finished the lecture
  - How (done in the right way)
    - E.g.—breaking bad news gently
      - using only the force necessary to restrain a criminal during an arrest

Evaluating Circumstances (cont’d.)

- Circumstances contrary to reason
  - Who (done by the wrong person)
    - E.g., criminal punishment by vigilantes
  - What (having unacceptable consequences)
    - E.g., bad side effects outweighing the intended good effects
  - When
    - E.g., packing up one’s papers while the professor is trying to summarize the lecture
  - How (done in the wrong way)
    - E.g.—breaking bad news crudely or inconsiderately
      - police brutality

Summary

- Thomistic ethics as intrinsicalist.
  - It is not enough to look at the consequences of the action.
  - One must determine what kind of an action one is doing.
    - The Three Determinants of Morality require this
- Thomistic ethics as absolutist.
  - Evaluation of the object as bad is sufficient to make the action bad
    - To be good, it must be good in all respects
  - Evaluation of the object as good is necessary to make the action good
    - but it is not sufficient
    - An action good with respect to its object could still be bad with respect to end or circumstances
    - Acts that are bad should never be done.
    - But, to avoid improperly stringent application of this principle, see next lecture.

Moral Absolutes
• Keys to understanding St. Thomas on absolute moral prohibitions
  – The doctrine of absolute moral prohibitions is that some kinds of act are bad because of the kind of act and should never be done
    • *Fiat justitia, ruat coelum,* “Let justice be done though the heavens may fail.”
    • i.e., Injustice is wrong
      – regardless of the good consequences that might come from doing an injustice
      – & even if it is “the lesser of two evils” (which generally comes to the same thing)
    – The argument is always that certain acts are bad by their very nature & therefore absolutely prohibited
    • It is never that certain acts are good by their very nature & absolutely required
    – For each kind of act that is always prohibited, the absolutist must show why that kind of act is intrinsically bad.
    – One must understand the exact scope of the prohibition

– Sometimes, principles of justice
  – E.g., killing might be
    • contrary to reason, because it is not due to the person
      – this would include
        » someone who wants to be killed (assisted suicide & voluntary euthanasia)
        » someone who is willing to risk being killed (duelling)
      – in general, anyone who is innocent
    • in accordance with reason, if the person is
      » guilty
      » innocent
    – Here killing might be what is necessary to stop or punish
    – Even in these cases the end & circumstances would also have to be good (see below)

– Sometimes, principles about the proper use of one’s faculties
  – the sexual powers are for reproduction (& the good of marital friendship that is associated with reproduction)
    • so violated in one way by homosexual & contraceptive acts
    • violated in another way by fornication & adultery
  – the power of speech is for expressing one’s thoughts
    • violated by lying

– This means intentional killing of the innocent
  – This would not automatically include these, which may or may not be wrong (depending on end & circumstances)
    • letting someone die (cf. failure to give medical treatment)
    • doing something that one foresees may (or will) cause a death (cf. aerial bombardment)
  – This means making assertions that are contrary to what one thinks
    – This would not automatically include these, which may or may not be wrong (depending on end & circumstances)
    • refusing to say anything at all
    • saying something ambiguous
  – This means taking deliberate steps to prevent conception
    – This would not automatically include these, which may or may not be wrong (depending on end & circumstances)
    • refraining from marital relations during fertile periods, but not refraining at other times (“natural family planning”)

“The end doesn’t justify the means.”
Cases in which the phrase might be used

- Consider two recent statements as though they were complete justifications for a controversial policy
  - Pres. Obama in defense of allowing federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research, said:
    - "scientists believe these tiny cells may have the potential to help us understand, and possibly cure, some of our most devastating diseases and conditions. To regenerate a severed spinal cord and lift someone from a wheelchair."
  - Michael Hayden (former DCI) & Michael Mukasey (former AG) in defense of using aggressive interrogation techniques wrote:
    - "even with the growing success of other intelligence tools, fully half of the government’s knowledge about the structure and activities of al Qaeda came from those interrogations [in which harsh interrogation techniques were used]."

- Critics of each statement might say, "The end does not justify the means," meaning …
  - the prospect of finding new cures does not itself justify any means of finding them
  - the prospect of getting intelligence about the enemy does not justify any means of extracting it
  - The means used (destruction of embryonic human beings, the techniques in question) need to be assessed independently
  - Is the destruction of human embryos murder?
  - Do these interrogation techniques constitute "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment"?

- Note that the passages quoted are not a complete justification
  - Pres. Obama does not think that killing human embryos is itself wrong.
  - Messrs. Hayden & Mukasey do not think the techniques in question are "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment."

“The end does not justify the means” & Moral Theories

- Utilitarians & the slogan
  - A few utilitarians say that the end justifies the means
  - They need not do so
    - They might better characterize their position as saying that the consequences justify the action
    - the end = what one is aiming at
    - the consequences = what actually results (both one’s end & any side effects)
  - They might say that the slogan “the end does not justify …” warns against neglecting side-effects.
    - but, though they look at more than the end, they deny that the act itself requires any evaluation independent of the consequences

- Thomists & the slogan
  - Thomism most explicitly rejects the idea that “the end justifies”
  - According to Thomists, the end and the object (i.e., the means to the end) are explicitly objects of independent evaluation

- Presumptivists
  - will look to Thomists like utilitarians (i.e., justifying the means by the ends) whenever they let beneficence override non-maleficence
  - & look like Thomists (i.e., denying that the ends justify the means) whenever they let other duties override beneficence