



Aquinas on Free Will

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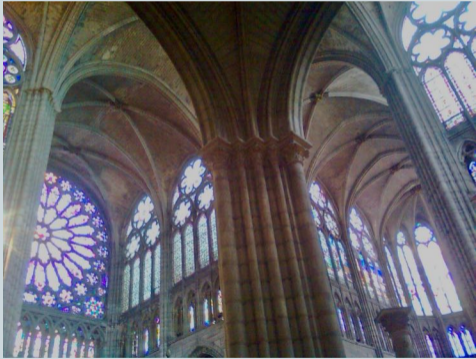
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Aquinas (1224/25–1274)



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- Commentaries on Aristotle
- *On Essence and Existence*
- Commentaries on the sayings of the Church Fathers (ed. by Peter Lombard; the *Sentences*)
- *Summa Theologiae*
- *Summa contra Gentiles*



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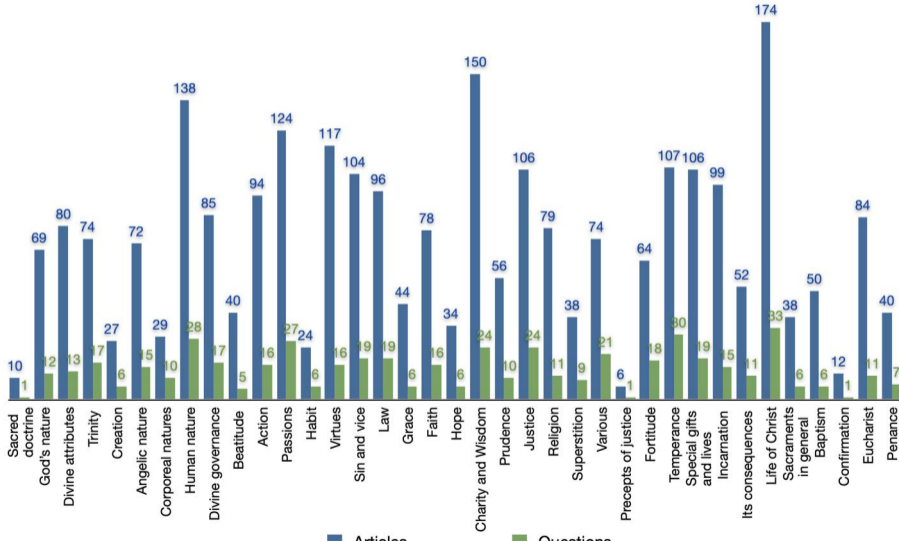
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How to Read the *Summa*?

The general structure:

- ① The title: usually a yes/no question
- ② Objections to Aquinas's own position:
 - ① Obj. 1
 - ② Obj. 2
 - ③ etc.
- ③ "But on the contrary..." (*sed contra*) – some consideration, often by authority, why we should take Aquinas's view seriously
- ④ Aquinas's own view and his arguments for it
- ⑤ Response to the objections
 - ① Response to obj. 1
 - ② Response to obj. 2
 - ③ etc.

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Preliminaries: Some Aristotelian Metaphysics

- Things consist of matter + form
- Form is what makes the thing the kind of things it is, while matter serves a substrate for change.
- We can discover what a form of a thing is by looking at what distinguishes its kind from other things. – The form of humans is the soul, more precisely the rational soul.
- Things can also be divided into essence + accidents. Your essence is humanity, which is your soul + the kind of matter that a soul can inform (flesh and bones).

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Aquinas on Human Action in General

- *actus humanus* vs. *actus hominis* ('human action' vs. 'action of a human')
- Human actions are *purposive*: they are done for the sake of attaining some goal, which is cognized as good.
- The will is not a natural "steering wheel"; it is an inclination for what we see as good.
- We can only have one ultimate end (happiness), and this end is common for all humans. But we can have various intermediate ends, and we can also perceive the ultimate end differently.
- Once we know the end, we can deliberate about how we want to get there.

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Aquinas on Human Action in General

So here is what the structure of a human action looks like:

- the intellectual apprehension of some object as good for the agent in the specific circumstances;
- an act of will (*voluntas*) desiring this end as a good in itself;
- a further act of will (*intentio*) that desires the good that can be attained in the particular circumstances;
- an intellective investigation (*consilium*), considering the various means by which the end can be attained;
- the judgment of the will (*iudicium*), endorsing what it sees as the best means to attain the end.

Of course not all (or perhaps not any) of these steps need to be conscious or even temporally distinct.

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Practical vs. Theoretical Reasoning

What's so special about the judgment of the will?

A practical syllogism works very differently from a theoretical one!

Consider a theoretical syllogism:

- 1 Humans are mortal.
- 2 Socrates is a human.
- 3 Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

If the argument is valid, then I can add all kinds of further premises, the conclusion won't change. E.g., I can add that

- Socrates has white hair;
- That angels aren't mortal;
- Or that Socrates has a soul.

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Practical vs. Theoretical Reasoning

But look at this practical syllogism:

- 1 I want to get home quickly.
- 2 The shortest way to home is by the District line.
- 3 Therefore, I should take the District line going home.

This looks like a valid argument. But what if I learn the following information?

- There is a tube strike affecting the District line;
- There is a big chance I will run into someone on the District line I really don't want to see.

All in all, practical reasoning is a messy business.

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Will as Rational Desire

Everything, in its own way, tends towards the good.

- natural things, like stones: tend towards their natural place (heavy downwards, light upwards) – **natural desire**
- lower animals: flee danger, pursue food, etc. – **animal desire**
- things with understanding (humans, angels): **rational desire = will.**



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The Will as Compared to Other Desires

- The will is similar to other principles (like the heaviness of a stone) in that it is an **active principle**, from which the thing's movements originate. All these principles are given by the forms the things have.
- BUT, in stones and cats the tendency is fixed to one course, because the form from which it originates is an individual (material) form. The forms that move the will are universal forms.



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Freedom of the Will

How can the will be free as a rational desire?

- “the way agents have form determines the way they are active” – e.g., a stone’s substantial form determines that it will fall down; a cat’s form determines that it will meow, etc.
- In these examples, the forms are not produced by the agents themselves but are given (a cat did not produce itself as a cat). So in these cases, the agents are not masters of their actions.
- But the form that moves the will is different! It is produced by the understanding.

“The understood form by which intellectual substances are active issues from the intellect itself, as something conceived and in a sense thought up by itself. . . . So intellectual substances move themselves to activity, and are masters of their own action” (SCG II.47).

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“All things with understanding have freedom of will deriving from the judgment of the understanding, and that is freedom of decision, which is defined as free judgement of reason” (SCG II.48).

- Things that lack freedom lack it either because they don't have judgment (*iudicium*) at all (like stones, etc.); or their judgment is fixed by nature (e.g., a sheep can't but flee the wolf).
- So, where the judgment is *not* fixed by nature, there is freedom.
- The understanding *is* fixed on the general good as such (you can't desire but what you perceive as good), but it is *not* fixed on any particular good.
- Notice that freedom is primarily due to the way the intellect works!

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Can the will be compelled?

We have to distinguish 2 questions here:

- compelled to willing / not willing (“subjectively,” in A’s sense);
- compelled to will X (“objectively,” in A’s sense, i.e., related to an object).

“So then sometimes the will can be compelled by an object, but not always; but to exercise its act it can never be compelled” (*De malo*, q. 6).

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So is the will compelled either with regard to its exercise, or with regard to a specific object?

- ① Exercise: “the will clearly moves itself just as it moves our other powers” (*De malo*, q. 6).
 - The will moves itself by deliberation, which is not compulsory
 - But if it wasn't at first willing at all, the first stimulus must come from the outside (recall Anselm's argument about why the first volition must have been created!).
- ② The object, i.e., something apprehended as good:
 - something apprehended as good, entirely, in all circumstances, would compel the will – this is why we *are* compelled to will happiness.
 - But particular goods in particular circumstances don't compel

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- **Augustine**: free will is a power for opposites.
- **Damascus**: free will is the ability to choose the good (no-coercion + sourcehood).
- **Anselm (OFC)**: free choice is the power to preserve rectitude of will for the sake of rectitude itself.
- **Al-Ghazali**: free will is what can discriminate and choose between altogether similar things.
- **Aquinas**: free will is rational deliberation about the best means to a desired end.

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