

# The Moral Object of Human Acts and the Role of Reason According to Aquinas: A Restatement and Defense of My View

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***Abstract:** In this essay, the author restates and defends his interpretation of the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas on the object that morally specifies human acts. He does so in response to several critics who point to texts of Thomas that seem to say that a “thing” involved in a human act is, or can be, the moral object that determines the moral species or kind of a human act. In response to such critics, the author argues in several ways for what he calls a holistic interpretation of Thomas’s view of the moral object. These include the following; by explaining the need to distinguish the various analogous senses in which Thomas uses terms like “object” and the central role of reason in the shaping of moral objects; through a close reading of some of the key texts under dispute; by indicating the weaknesses in his interlocutor’s interpretation; by offering a more consistent reading in light of Thomas’s broader teaching; by supporting his key points through secondary sources; and through philosophical argumentation regarding the place of the object within a comprehensive moral theory.*

According to tradition, the moral specification of human acts occurs primarily and fundamentally through their objects.<sup>1</sup> The object of a human act that specifies it morally – giving it the species of a good or evil, virtuous or vicious act, of a just or unjust act, and even more specifically of an act of theft, lying, faithfulness, chastity, etc. etc. – is commonly called the “moral object.” The object is called “moral” in order to distinguish it from mere “physical objects” which, though specifying an act on its purely natural level, do not confer its moral species. During the last twenty-five years and in response to several attacks on this doctrine by adherents of consequentialism and proportionalism, I have tried to expose the notion of the moral object more systematically, mainly to defend the existence of what are commonly called “intrinsically evil acts,” and to overcome what I consider

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1. A doctrine confirmed by John Paul II’s 1993 encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, n. 78.

to be a “physicalist” understanding of the moral object, an understanding which is at the root of proportionalism.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from criticisms coming from the proportionalist camp (most of them published in languages other than English), my views have also been challenged by several American authors who defend what they hold to be the authentic Thomistic view and who are, like myself, strongly opposed to proportionalism. Some of them have adduced important arguments which merit a more detailed response.<sup>3</sup> I have already replied, albeit very briefly, to some of these criticisms in my books *Vital Conflicts in Medical Ethics*<sup>4</sup> and *The Perspective of Morality*.<sup>5</sup> Since I was not permitted to respond in the same journal where the principal critiques were published, I thought that the recent publication of my *The Perspective of Morality* might be a sufficiently exhaustive rejoinder, making things clearer. However, when Steven Jensen published his review of that book, I was surprised to see that he retrieved some of the old charges, referring to these same critical articles.<sup>6</sup> In my response to Jensen, I could not react to this new challenge to my understanding of the moral object in sufficient detail.<sup>7</sup> This is what I will now do in what follows.

## 1. Moral Objects as Objects of Human Actions That Are Acts of a Deliberate Will

As I have repeatedly tried to show, only acts considered as intentional acts can be morally specified, because human acts are essentially intentional acts.<sup>8</sup> This “holistic” perspective, as I will call it in what follows, is explicit in the *Summa*

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2. See my *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 22-42, originally published in German 1987 as *Natur als Grundlage der Moral; The Perspective of Morality: Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), originally published in Italian, Spanish and German in 1994, 1999, and 2001, respectively; and chapters 3, 4, and 8 of my book, *The Perspective of the Acting Person: Essays in the Renewal of Thomistic Moral Philosophy*, edited with an introduction by William F. Murphy, Jr. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).
  3. I refer mainly to Lawrence Dewan, “St. Thomas, Rhonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act,” *Nova et Vetera*, English edition, 6 (2008): 63-112; Stephen L. Brock, “*Veritatis Splendor* §78, St. Thomas, and (Not Merely) Physical Objects of Moral Acts,” *Nova et Vetera*, English edition, 6 (2008): 1-62, at 46-55; Kevin Flannery, review of “Die Perspektive der Moral,” in *Gregorianum* 83 (2002), 591-94; and also Flannery’s review of my *Vital Conflicts in Medical Ethics*, in *Gregorianum* 91 (2010), 641-43, especially 642-43.
  4. *Vital Conflicts in Medical Ethics: A Virtue Approach to Craniotomy and Tubal Pregnancies* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), footnotes on pages 54, 85, 140, and 145.
  5. See 149-51, including footnote 86.
  6. Steven J. Jensen, “Thomistic Perspectives?: Martin Rhonheimer’s Version of Virtue Ethics,” in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2012): 135-59.
  7. “The Perspective of Morality Revisited: A Response to Steven J. Jensen,” forthcoming in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2013).
  8. See my *The Perspective of Morality*, especially part 3.

*theologiae* right from the beginning and is already present in Aquinas's *Commentary on the Sentences*, as for example in the following text:

An act can receive moral goodness inasmuch it is human; and it is human insofar in a way it derives from reason, which is the case only in those acts which are commanded by the will.<sup>9</sup>

The moral part of the *Summa theologiae* famously starts by putting the reader into this very same perspective:

Of actions done by man those alone are properly called "human," which are proper to man as man. Now man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions. Wherefore those actions alone are properly called human, of which man is master. Now man is master of his actions through his reason and will; whence, too, the free-will is defined as "the faculty and will of reason." Therefore those actions are properly called human which proceed from a deliberate will.<sup>10</sup>

After distinguishing "human actions" from what are merely actions "of a man" – acts performed not deliberately and willingly, i.e., by reflex, while sleeping, or before having use of reason – Aquinas concludes:

Now it is clear that whatever actions proceed from a power, are caused by that power in accordance with the rationale of its object (*secundum rationem sui obiecti*). But the object of the will is the end and the good. Therefore all human actions must be for an end.<sup>11</sup>

What we are looking for, then, when we talk about the "moral object," is what specifies human acts, considered as acts that proceed from a deliberate will. Properly considered, these moral objects are *ends* and *goods*. Under this formal aspect as objects, they are objects of a choice which is the act of a rational appetite; the act of choice commands the action proceeding from it. Thus, what is called the "moral object" must be some form of "good" that is an end for the choosing will and is embodied in the act proceeding from it. The good a human act aims at gives that act a definite moral species.<sup>12</sup>

This means that human acts are, by their very essence, what we call intentional acts. They are deliberately and willingly done for an end striven after as a good, they proceed from intending that good and they terminate in its achievement. Now, in this respect it is important to understand something Aquinas men-

9. *Super Sent.* 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 5.

10. *S.T.*, II, 1, 1.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Dewan also quotes this passage, emphasizing its importance in "St. Thomas, Rhonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act," 65. This, therefore, is common ground. Dewan even writes: "Rhonheimer is quite right speaking about 'will and intentionality' being essential to the picture. The object of the will is the end" (90).

tions in the third article of this same opening question of *Summa theologiae* I-II. One of the objections argues that human acts cannot receive their species from the end because the end is an extrinsic cause, something exterior to the act itself, while everything receives its species from intrinsic principles. Aquinas responds:

The end is not altogether extrinsic to the act, because it is related to the act as principle or terminus; and thus it just this that is essential to an act, viz. to proceed from something, considered as action, and to proceed towards something, considered as passion.<sup>13</sup>

The end is extrinsic to the human act only insofar as it is something the action “is about,” or a *materia circa quam* – for example, money. As the terminus of the act, the money can be said to “suffer” the action; for example, it is possessed or appropriated. But as a good for the will, thus considered *secundum rationem sui obiecti*, it is properly an intrinsic end of the action itself. It defines the action, making it the kind of action it is: earning money, counterfeiting money, appropriating (or stealing) money, and so on. Aquinas adopts – as Dewan also mentions – the Aristotelian distinction between two ways we can consider an end: “the end. . . signifies sometimes the thing itself, and sometimes the attainment or possession of that thing; thus the miser’s end is either money or the possession of it.”<sup>14</sup> Aquinas continues:

Simply speaking, the last end is the thing itself; for the possession of money is good only inasmuch as there is some good in money. But in regard to the individual (*quoad hunc*), the obtaining of money is the last end; for the miser would not seek for money, save that he might have it.

It is clear that if money were a useless or worthless thing, there would be no reason to seek it. Yet, to understand the end of the action *considered as a human act proceeding from deliberate will* we must focus on what Aquinas says *quoad hunc*, that is, regarding the choice of that individual. The end of that choice, the good sought in it, is the *possession* of the money. Only considered as such is the money properly part of the action, an intrinsic principle of the action itself, the *end* that can specify it. It is thus impossible to understand the act (of earning, counterfeiting, or even perhaps stealing the money) by focusing only on the money itself, without including the intentionality relating to it. We will come back to this important point.<sup>15</sup>

Because, by their very essence, human acts are intentional acts, they can be properly described and understood as *human* acts only by including in their description a purpose or rationally determined order to an end – a “good.” Thus, to qualify for moral specification, an act must be described at least as what I call an “intentional basic action.” To make out the moral species we first need to make out

13. *S.T.*, II, 1, 3, ad 1.

14. *S.T.* I-II, 16, 3. For more on this distinction see *The Perspective of Morality*, 46 ff.

15. Dewan uses this text to make a different argument; see below, note 29.

its “basic intentional identity.” What, morally considered, is the physical act of “killing a man”? It may be a homicide, an execution of capital punishment, a killing in a just war, an act of self-defense: these acts, physically identical and all involving the physical killing of a human being, have nonetheless different moral species *according to their objects*. They are *not* in each case the same human act, simply carried out for different (further) ends; rather they are already different kinds of human acts at the level of their most basic moral specification, *by their objects*. Aquinas’s standard example is the distinction between fornication and marital intercourse: both are identical at the “natural” level – that is, in their natural species – but differ considered as human or moral acts – that is, in their moral species. So Aquinas famously writes:

It is possible. . . that an act which is one in respect of its natural species, be ordained to several ends of the will: thus this act “to kill a man,” which is but one act in respect of its natural species, can be ordained, as to an end, to the safeguarding of justice, and to the satisfying of anger: the result being that there would be several acts in different species of morality: since in one way there will be an act of virtue, in another, an act of vice. For a movement does not receive its species from that which is its terminus accidentally, but only from that which is its “per se” terminus. Now moral ends are accidental to a natural thing, and conversely the relation to a natural end is accidental to morality. Consequently there is no reason why acts which are the same considered in their natural species, should not be diverse, considered in their moral species, and conversely.<sup>16</sup>

In my view, many of those who are engaged in defending sound moral doctrine in the Thomistic tradition pay too little attention to this teaching of Aquinas that “moral ends are accidental to a natural thing” and that “conversely the relation to a natural end is accidental to morality.” It does not seem to fit into a metaphysical grounding of morality in human nature, one that sees human acts as morally specified by the things they relate to. Admittedly, Dewan refers to this text, asserting that this “is obviously of great importance for the discussions about the relation between an action considered as to natural principles alone and the same action as taken in ‘the perspective of the acting person.’” He also rightly notes: “Much of Rhonheimer’s concern about a possible ‘physicalism’ in Thomistic morals relates to this point.” And he concludes: “There can be no doubt that the object of the moral act is a deliberately willed end.”<sup>17</sup> But I do not see how Dewan’s appreciation of that teaching fits with his understanding of moral specification. His formulation that the “object of the moral act is a deliberately willed end” shows that there must be, on his side, some misapprehension of the point at issue. Rather than being what Dewan calls “a deliberately willed end,” the morally specifying object of human acts is “the end of a deliberately willed act” or “the end of an act proceeding from

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16. *S.T.* II-II, 1, 3, ad 3.

17. Dewan, “St. Thomas, Rhonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act,” 69.

deliberate will.” Only by using this more correct formulation we can distinguish, as I will do later, acts of “making” or “producing” (*poiesis*) from “acting” (*praxis*).

Notice that “money” is not in the same sense the end for a miser and for, say, a counterfeiter. The counterfeiter *produces* money – coins and banknotes – and it is the existence of the material “thing” which is the end of his act of producing it. So, in this (*poietical*) sense the money is in Dewan’s words a “deliberately willed end.” But as such an end it does not morally specify the human act of counterfeiting. Considering that act as a human act, as *praxis* rather than *poiesis*, the end is not the *money* he produces but the *production of money* which can be described in moral terms as a practical goal such as “fraud,” “enrichment,” or “the pursuit of power.” The miser’s end is not simply the money either (the coins, the banknotes), but the possession of them, the enrichment. So, in the cases of *poiesis* and *praxis* we speak of something being a “deliberately willed end,” to use Dewan’s expression, in two quite different senses.

In this context it is interesting how Aquinas distinguishes sins of commission from sins of omission; he asks whether they differ according to their species. He answers:

We find certain acts differing from one another in the material specific difference, which are nevertheless formally in the same species of sin, because they are directed to the one same end: thus strangling, stoning, and stabbing come under the one species of murder, although the actions themselves differ specifically according to the natural species.<sup>18</sup>

I will come back later to the difference between material and formal consideration of the object, but here we must be clear that what properly constitutes the morally specifying object is what makes the act to fall into the moral species of “murder” rather than merely physical descriptions like “strangling,” “stoning,” or “stabbing.” Let us see how Aquinas applies this to the differentiation between commission and omission, noting especially the emphasized phrase:

Accordingly, if we refer to the material species in sins of omission and commission, they differ specifically, using species in a broad sense, in so far as negation and privation may have a species. But if we refer to the formal species of sins of omission and commission, *they do not differ specifically, because they are directed to the same end, and proceed from the same motive.* For the covetous man, in order to hoard money, both robs, and omits to give what he ought, and in like manner, the glutton, to satiate his appetite, both eats too much and omits the prescribed fasts. The same applies to other sins.

What specifies morally, thus, in a formal sense is the end considered as the motive of the action or the omission. The act of robbing is constituted by an intentionality

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18. *S.T.* I-II, q. 72, a. 6.

of precisely the same kind as when one omits to give what one ought: that is, “they are directed to the same end, and proceed from the same motive.” So both belong formally to the same species of sin, even though materially considered there is a huge difference between the two cases – the one an act and the other the omission of an act.

Because he disregards these differentiations, it is not surprising that Dewan has trouble with my affirmation that “human life” or “a possession” are not moral, but rather physical, non-moral goods. He declares himself “taken aback” by this affirmation. He objects that Aquinas considers, for instance, that homicide is morally graver than all other sins against one’s neighbor because the good of human life is such a high good.<sup>19</sup> From this Dewan concludes that it is a “moral good.” Now, he fails to mention what I mean by saying that “life” or “possession” are not moral but merely “physical” or ontological goods. It does not mean that they are not morally relevant insofar as a human action relates (or “refers”) to them, making them part of its object. It does mean, however, that it is always and only the way the agent’s will relates to these goods that is “morally good” – or morally evil. If this reference is disordered, or against reason, the act will be evil – unjust or intemperate, for example; if it is according to reason, the act is morally good. So I wrote in *The Perspective of Morality*: “The moral good or evil is not in the things, but – provided ‘things’ are concerned at all – in how reason and consequently the will practically refer to things.”<sup>20</sup>

Moral good and evil are characteristics of a will, for which we use terms like “just” or “unjust,” “temperate” or “intemperate,” “chaste” or “unchaste,” “humble” or “proud,” etc. This is why according to the old dictum attributed to Heraclitus, it is better to suffer injustice than to do it. “The destruction of a human life” is not a moral evil as such, for example, if it is done by an earthquake, except insofar as it is the consequence of poorly and fraudulently constructed houses or dams so that there is moral evil – injustice – in those who did the poor and fraudulent construction. Likewise on the victim’s side, in “being killed” there is no moral evil going on either. Only he who chooses and intentionally kills his neighbor commits injustice, that is, brings about a moral evil in his will and in the actions embodying that will. This is why moral good and evil are properties of human acts insofar they proceed from a deliberate will. This is the perspective of the acting person, which is the perspective of morality. More will be said about this below.<sup>21</sup>

I have written much on this subject. In his review of my book *The Perspective of Morality*, however, Jensen declares his intention (in his first footnote) not to take my other writings into account, instead “evaluating how this book fares as a self-

19. He refers to *S.T.* II-II, q. 73, a. 3.

20. *The Perspective of Morality*, 150.

21. In my view, Stephen Brock commits the mistake of too much identifying the “physical” with the “bodily” in his “*Veritatis Splendor* §78, St. Thomas, and (Not Merely) Physical Objects of Moral Acts,” 2 and 14. When talking about merely “physical” goods, one does not necessarily refer to what is bodily, but to *ontological* goodness, in contrast to *moral* goodness; in this sense, spiritual goods such as “intelligence” or “reputation” are also merely physical goods, in that they do not render the person who possesses them morally good.

standing work,” even though in *The Perspective of Morality* I insistently refer to some of these writings, in which sense they are a part of the book’s argument.<sup>22</sup> Jensen himself – like Dewan, to whom he refers – focuses on my view that moral objects are not the *things* that actions relate to (for example, “another person’s watch,” “a man or woman who is not my spouse,”) but *acts* relating to these “things” (e.g. “appropriating another person’s watch,” “having sexual intercourse with a man or woman who is not my spouse”).<sup>23</sup> So in my view, the object that makes a given action fall under the moral species of “theft” is “appropriating another person’s property”; and the object that makes an action fall under the moral species of “fornication” (or if the person is married “adultery”) is “having sex with a person I am not married to.” Thus, according to my view, the object is what is called the “exterior act,” that is, the act that is chosen and commanded by the will for the sake of the good it realizes; which is, therefore, itself the object of the so called “interior act” of the will. Let me try to explain this in more detail.

As mentioned above, the human acts whose “objects” we are seeking to determine are, according to Aquinas, acts proceeding from deliberate will – the rational appetite or *appetitus in ratione*. This is why the “moral object,” i.e., what morally specifies a human act as this or that kind of human act, is to be considered as an object of the will; it is the “proximate end” of an act of choice. The choice, informed by reason, relates (even if not in all cases<sup>24</sup>) to a describable external behavioral pattern which itself is a kind of “doing.” This kind of doing, conceived and ordered by reason and presented to the will as a good, is what morally specifies the choice and the action performed on the basis of this choice.

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22. See especially *The Perspective of Morality*, 150, where I make reference to details in “The Perspective of the Acting Person and the Nature of Practical Reason: The ‘Object of the Human Act’ in Thomistic Anthropology of Action,” which is chapter 8 of *The Perspective of the Acting Person*.
23. See Jensen, “Thomistic Perspectives?: Martin Rhonheimer’s Version of Virtue Ethics,” 145. A related alternative to my reading of Aquinas on the moral object, which I do not treat in this essay, is the view that the object depends wholly on “natural teleology,” or the effects that the physical behavior naturally tends toward causing. For such an approach, see Steven A. Long’s *The Teleological Grammar of the Human Act*, (Naples, Fla.: Sapientia Press, 2007), especially 137. Effective criticism of this theory as a reading of Aquinas has been published by several authors: see, for example, William F. Murphy’s “Thomistic Action Theory Revisited: A Response to Steven A. Long,” in *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 9:2 (Summer 2009): 263-75; Steven J. Jensen’s “The Role of Teleology in the Moral Species,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 63 (September 2009): 3-27; and Kevin Flannery’s “Review of Long’s *Teleological Grammar*,” in *The Thomist* 72:2 (2008): 321-325.
24. Acts of understanding, feeling, imagining, or even other acts of the will can also be objects of choice. Not every morally specifiable human act implies a bodily behavior; some remain wholly internal to the subject’s mind or “heart.” But they are still “exterior acts” in the sense that an act of the will always has as its object another act, an “exterior act,” which is the *actus imperatus* by the will.

## 2. The Seeming Paradox of Actions Being Their Proper Objects

Jensen's criticism of this is simple enough (nor is he the first to advance this objection<sup>25</sup>): "the object of the act seems to be the act itself."<sup>26</sup> In fact, the object of an act of stealing seems to be "stealing"; and the object of an act of fornication, "fornicating." It might be interesting to note, however, that I anticipated this possible objection myself: "The object of an action, as paradoxical as it may sound, is this action itself."<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, Jensen does not mention this nor does he mention the way I resolve this seeming paradox, namely that after the statement he quotes I immediately add: "Objects of actions are the *contents* of actions. . . ." Let me spell this out step by step.

The proper content of an action, what makes it to be this rather than some other kind or species of action, is not merely the "thing" it relates to or "is about" (the *materia circa quam*), but also includes the *way* this "thing" is related to: if I am a policeman and I take something that is not my possession away from a thief to restore it to its owner, it is not the same action as it would be if I were not a policeman and took the same thing in order to appropriate it. The moral species of the first act is "confiscation," an act of justice, while the species of the second is "theft." But in both cases, the "thing" to which the action relates is the same: something which is not my own but belongs to another person (that is, a *res aliena*). Something belonging to somebody else is an inappropriate matter (*materia indebita*) for appropriation, but it is not an inappropriate matter for confiscation and restoration to its owner. So, what we find here is a complex of "things," qualifications of these things ("being someone's property"), corresponding rights (a right of property), circumstances (being a policeman or not), and "doing" (the behavioral pattern of "taking away"). There is even something more (and I will come back to this): taking away with the purpose of appropriation, because without such intent there is no question of theft. All this is part of the *content* of the action and thus of the object that specifies the choice to take that concrete thing away from the person who has possession of it.<sup>28</sup>

We cannot reduce this content, or the object, simply to "things," or we arrive at statements like the one made by Lawrence Dewan, who tried (in my view

25. See the same objection in Kevin Flannery's review of the German edition of *The Perspective of Morality*, "Martin Rhonheimer, *Die Perspektive der Moral*," *Gregorianum* 83 (2002): 591-94. I agree with Flannery's criticism of my affirmation that "the object of the act of seeing is the seeing itself, even if it's always 'a seeing something.'" This, as it stands, is in fact erroneous and misleading, and I have therefore omitted the sentence in the English edition; the affirmation would only be correct if we consider an act of seeing as a human act, that is, as an act proceeding from a deliberate choice (which it mostly is not). Thus, the object of the human act proceeding from and embodying the choice, "watching a movie," is not simply the movie, but precisely the *seeing* of the movie, which is what has been chosen.

26. "Thomistic Perspectives?: Martin Rhonheimer's Version of Virtue Ethics," 145.

27. *The Perspective of Morality*, 142. I had made the same remark earlier, in my *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, 424: "And so we arrive at the seeming paradox that the object of theft is really *theft*."

28. A similar point is made by Joseph Pilsner in *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 85.

unsuccessfully) to refute my position, saying: “the operation of possession gets its species as a good operation from the goodness of the thing that is its object.”<sup>29</sup> I assume Dewan intends to speak of the *moral* goodness of the operation, since otherwise his remark would be no objection to my view, but would simply state an undisputed ontological truth. However, to attribute to “things” a kind of goodness that is able to specify human acts *morally* is simply untenable. On this account, stealing a car would be a morally good action provided a car is something good; in fact, the better the car, the better and more praiseworthy the act of stealing it would become. Of course, “ontologically” it is better to possess a new car that runs perfectly than an old one that runs poorly or a Rolls Royce than an ordinary Toyota. But is it also good to possess a Rolls Royce *stolen* by someone and given to me as a gift, or to *steal* a Rolls Royce – that is, to appropriate someone else’s Rolls Royce? Here we use the term “good” in two different ways: in the second case, the term “good” does not refer to the thing, but to an *act* relating to that thing. This shows how wide of the mark is Dewan’s polemic against my distinction between the ontological (or physical) good and the moral good. Of course this is not Dewan’s whole argument; he would add that in fact a Rolls Royce that is *another’s* property cannot be a good object for an operation of possession or appropriation by someone else. Here I argue only against his rather odd claim that the moral goodness of actions derives from the ontological goodness of the things to which these actions materially relate.

Deriving moral goodness from ontological goodness, and thus equating these two kinds of goodness, is simply a mistake, an identification clearly rejected by Aquinas. According to him, a human act has a certain aspect of goodness from the fact that it is a human act and also a being; however, from this ontological goodness derives no goodness proper to the “moral good, which is conformity with reason, of which we are now treating.”<sup>30</sup> Equally, “being is not convertible with the moral good, just as neither is it convertible with the natural good. But the moral good is in certain manner a greater good than the natural good, namely, inasmuch

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29. Lawrence Dewan OP, “St. Thomas, Rhonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act,” 83. To substantiate his claim (in my view not very successfully) Dewan refers to *S.T. II-II*, q. 16, a. 3, where Aquinas says “it is evident that, simply speaking, the last end is the thing itself; for the possession of money is good only inasmuch as there is some good in money.” But here Aquinas does not speak about what is the cause of an act’s *moral* goodness, but simply about the psychology of action; moral goodness cannot be caused by the goodness of the thing desired. Aquinas, however, continues: “But in regard to the individual, the obtaining of money is the last end; for the miser would not seek for money, save that he might have it.” The phrase “in regard to the individual” can be interpreted as “regarding the concrete choice.” The miser does not choose to seek the money just because of that money or its goodness, but because he wants to possess that money. What becomes morally relevant is not the goodness of the *money*, but the goodness (or badness) of the *act of possessing it*, with respect to the means chosen to get into its possession (e.g., stealing it).

30. *De malo*, 2, 4; translation taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. J. A. Oesterle and J. T Oesterle (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995 and 2001).

as it is an action and perfection of a natural good.”<sup>31</sup> Only the moral good is good in the “absolute” sense, and it is “added to being through the virtues.”<sup>32</sup>

What critics like Dewan, and it seems to me also Jensen, overlook is the crucial role of reason for morality and moral specification, even though the former praises me for my “insistence on the primacy of reason in the situation”;<sup>33</sup> while Jensen himself, in his *Good and Evil Actions*, also emphasizes the importance of reason.<sup>34</sup> Yet they argue as if they held a view, which as Thomists they of course should not and certainly do not hold, that is, the view that human reason (or human intellect, of which reason is simply the discursive part) does not have a proper object, the intelligible, but is simply a cognitive potency subservient to other potencies – rather a Humean view of reason. So, reason would not “see” something more than other potencies do, but would simply collect and work with what is given by sense perception and is in that sense “natural.” Such a fundamentally empiricist concept of reason – to which, of course, neither Dewan nor Jensen would subscribe – implicitly rejects what not only the empiricists but also Kant rejected: the existence of *intellectual intuition*, that is, of intellectual insight into the essence of things. In truth, the human intellect, to which reason belongs, is not simply a potency which collects, orders and combines sensual data (as Locke and Hume contended), but a faculty which “sees” – intellectually grasps – what these other potencies are not able to “see” at all. Not only the theoretical, but also the practical intellect opens human beings to intelligible truth, a part of which is *practical* truth, truth according to right desire.

I have treated this important point more extensively in my response to Jensen.<sup>35</sup> In the present context, notice the following passage from *The Perspective of Morality*, 150, in which I refer to a passage from Aquinas’s commentary on the Sentences:

The “good” of an action is constituted on the basis of a certain “measuring” (*commensuratio*) of the act in relation to the circumstances and the end, a measuring that the reason brings about: *quam ratio facit* – because it is the task of reason to order. “Act,” “circumstances,”

31. *De malo*, 2, 5 ad 2.

32. *De veritate*, 21, 5, in my own translation; see *The Perspective of Morality*, “Preface to the English edition,” xi; and 270.

33. Dewan, “St. Thomas, Rhonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act,” 66. Stephen Brock also notes common ground and praises my insistence on the importance of reason: “The first point is one of the most prominent ideas in his [Rhonheimer’s] ethical writings: that the first proper principle and measure of moral acts is reason. We should be grateful to him for insisting on this and keeping it before us. There can be no doubt that it is Thomas’s view.” “*Veritatis Splendor* §78, St. Thomas, and (Not Merely) Physical Objects of Moral Acts,” 14.

34. Steven J. Jensen, *Good and Evil Actions: A Journey through Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

35. “*The Perspective of Morality* Revisited: A Response to Steven J. Jensen,” quoted in the beginning.

“goal” are formed into an object of action by the reason, which constitutes a species of action.<sup>36</sup>

This is Aquinas’s constant teaching: reason is the measure of the goodness of human acts: “In human actions, good and evil are predicated in reference to the reason.”<sup>37</sup> Reason “conceives” the object. This is also why Aquinas says: “Just as the species of natural things are constituted by their natural forms, *so the species of moral actions are constituted by forms as conceived by the reason.*”<sup>38</sup>

There is not only a parallelism between natural things and human actions, but also a clear difference:

Now in natural things an act is good which is in keeping with the nature of the agent, but evil which is not in keeping with the nature of the agent. . . . But we are speaking now of human acts. Hence good and evil in the acts we are now discussing is to be understood according to that which is proper to man as such; and this is reason. Therefore good and evil in human acts is considered according as the act is in agreement with reason informed by divine law, either naturally or by teaching or by infusion. . . .<sup>39</sup>

Reason “naturally” informed by the divine law is precisely natural reason and its fruit, natural law. Human reason is a real participation in the light of the Divine reason ordering all things to their end. It is human – natural – reason which thus understands the good and in this sense shapes the moral species of human acts. In *The Perspective of Morality* I stressed that (to quote a relevant passage) this “commensuration carried out by the reason is therefore very much an act of knowing, and very much a work accomplished by the acting subject. The taking over of the rightfully owned property of another is an injury to justice that is presented as an object only to the reason” (157). That the proper rule of morality is *reason* is a teaching constantly repeated by Aquinas; it applies to both the level of moral principles (natural law) and the level of the moral specification of human acts by their objects. The teaching grounds in the doctrine that reason (as part of the intellect) is a truth-attaining cognitive power.

36. The quoted words are from Aquinas’s Sentences commentary, *Super Sent.* 2, d. 39, q. 2, a. 1.

37. *S.T.* I-II, q. 18, a. 5. On this point, see this the classic treatment by the Dominican Léonard Léhu, *La raison, règle de la moralité d’après Saint Thomas* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Fils, 1930), who shows, against Edmund Elter SJ and Odon Lottin OSB, that according to Aquinas neither “the substantial form” nor “reasonable nature” but *reason* is the measure or rule of morality. In his 1956/57 lecture about “Norm and Happiness” at Lublin University, Karol Wojtyła (the later Pope John Paul II) referred to this book by Léhu to emphasize Aquinas’s teaching that reason is the *norma moralitatis*; see for this my “Natural Law and the Thomistic Roots of John Paul II’s Ethics of Human Life,” which is chapter one of my book *Ethics of Procreation and the Defense of Human Life. Contraception, Artificial Fertilization, and Abortion*. Edited by William F. Murphy Jr. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 10-12.

38. *S.T.* I-II, q. 18, a. 10 (emphasis added).

39. *De malo* 2, 4.

### 3. The Moral Object as the Exterior Act, Conceived as a “Good Apprehended and Ordered by Reason”

The first thing I wish to state is that with this, the apparent paradox discussed above – that the human act becomes “its proper object” – is at least partly resolved. This is because in the one case we are speaking about the act as an object of the *rational appetite* or the will, as the object of choice; and in the other we are speaking of the act as the object of *reason*, which proposes this act – e.g. “taking away, appropriating this watch,” “giving alms to this beggar” – to the will as a good.<sup>40</sup> As I see it, and as I have argued in the past,<sup>41</sup> what we should call the “moral object” is precisely the exterior act conceived by reason as a good (a practical good, something to do); and as such it is presented to the will as a good to be chosen and then performed. Aquinas writes: “The exterior act is the object of the will, inasmuch as it is proposed to the will by the reason, as a good apprehended and ordered by the reason.”<sup>42</sup> The “moral object,” as I understand it, is precisely this “object of the will” which is the object of a deliberate choice.<sup>43</sup>

Such a “good apprehended and ordered by the reason,” therefore, is properly the object which specifies a human act morally because it specifies the choice and the corresponding performance of the act, which is like the embodiment of this choice. This is why the act – i.e., the exterior act as a “good apprehended and ordered by the reason” presented to the will – is in a way “its proper object”: it is the object of the corresponding *choice* and of the action embodying this choice. In other words, what morally specifies is the object of the choice; and this object is the exterior act presented to the choosing will as a “good apprehended and ordered by reason.” This is why I also call the moral object the *intelligible content* of the choice and the action embodying this choice. So, there is a duality of perspectives: (1) the human act, as *proceeding from deliberate will* is morally specified by (2) the exterior act *presented to the will* as a “good apprehended and ordered by reason.”

As far as I have understood, Jensen would concede that this might be correct, but that it is not the whole story.<sup>44</sup> He would hold – and there are quite a few

40. Of course, a morally evil act is also a “good” for the will and is presented by reason to the will as such a good; otherwise it would not be chosen. Every agent always and only acts for some good, because everything which is willed is willed under the formal aspect of its being “good” – even though this goodness may be only apparent, as is the case in those acts which render the will that intends and chooses them evil, because they are in truth evil. This is why ultimately everything depends not simply on a “good will” (“good intentions”) but on reason being *right reason*.

41. See my *The Perspective of the Acting Person*, 216, and *passim*.

42. *S.T.*, I-II, q. 20, a. 1, ad 1.

43. I wish to note that the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, n. 78, also uses this concept of the object: “The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the ‘object’ rationally chosen by the deliberate will. . . that object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person.” The word “decision” used in the official English translation is technically not the right word; it should be “choice” (*electio*, or as in the official Latin text, the less common *delectio*, not used by Aquinas).

44. See his *Good and Evil Actions*, 120 (see also note 66 below).

texts of Aquinas, mainly *S.T.* I-II, q. 18, a. 2 and q. 18, a. 6, to which he could seemingly refer in his support, as well as a long tradition – that there must be, moreover, *a proper object of the exterior act as such*, by which the latter itself is morally specified; this object, as he would argue, is “the thing” to which the exterior act relates.

However, not only does this seem to me impossible for reasons of action theory, but as I have shown in other places, there are also important texts of Aquinas that do not fit well into such an interpretation, or – better – that invite us to consider such an interpretation as limiting itself to a merely partial aspect of what a moral object is.

Aquinas actually asserts that the goodness of the will depends on the object,<sup>45</sup> which is a good presented to the will as an object by the reason;<sup>46</sup> this object is properly the exterior act. When, in the next question, Aquinas asks where in turn the goodness of the exterior act comes from, he *does not* assert that it comes from its “object” (i.e., an object of the exterior act); he instead says that “the goodness or malice which the exterior act has of itself, on account of its being about due matter and its being attended by due circumstances, is not derived from the will, *but rather from the reason.*”<sup>47</sup> In the answer to the first objection he then adds what I have already quoted: “The exterior act is the object of the will, inasmuch as it is proposed to the will by the reason, as a good apprehended and ordered by the reason.”

The object, therefore, has something to do with “due matter and circumstances.” But a new problem arises precisely here: where does this “due” come from? Of course, it comes from the eternal law; it is part of the created order of human nature; it thus equally comes from human nature, because the good for every being is what corresponds to its nature. But the question is not this, but rather: whence comes the *knowledge* or the *understanding* of what is “due” and, consequently, what is the source of the experience of being morally obliged? Or to put it even more simply: how do we as acting subjects know the good that corresponds to human nature and perceive the obligation to strive for it? This is properly the task of reason (and as Aquinas clearly says in *S.T.* I-II, q. 94, a. 2, originally and primarily not of theoretical but of practical reason). So he teaches that there is:

A twofold goodness or malice in the exterior act: one in respect of due matter and circumstances; the other in respect of the order to the end. And that which is in respect of the order to the end, depends entirely on the will: *while that which is in respect of due matter*

45. *S.T.*, II, q. 19, a. 2.

46. *S.T.*, II, 19, 2 ad 3.

47. *S.T.*, II, q. 20, a. 1 (emphasis added). I have used the translation of *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 1920, Online Edition, copyright 2008 by Kevin Knight, [www.newadvent.org/summa](http://www.newadvent.org/summa)) but replaced “external action” by “exterior act” which is the correct term here. External action would be an action carried out by external bodily behavior, while Aquinas’s “exterior act” is the act to which the “interior act” of the will (choice, intention) relates. The exterior act can also be an act of thinking, feeling, imagining, etc., and thus an “internal act.”

*or circumstances, depends on the reason: and on this goodness depends the goodness of the will, in so far as the will tends towards it.*<sup>48</sup>

This is also why reason makes out whether a determined circumstance, e.g., the fact that a determinate horse is the legal property of somebody, enters into the determination of the object and thus contributes to the moral specification of the act. To quote again, the “species of moral actions are constituted by forms as conceived by the reason.” This is why Aquinas writes:

That which, in one action, is taken as a circumstance added to the object that specifies the action, can again be taken by the directing reason, as the principal condition of the object that determines the action’s species. Thus to appropriate another’s property is specified by reason of the property being “another’s,” and in this respect it is placed in the species of theft; and if we consider that action also in its bearing on place or time, then this will be an additional circumstance. ... And in this way, whenever a circumstance has a special relation to reason, either for or against, it must needs specify the moral action whether good or bad.<sup>49</sup>

Notice that this does not mean that the “circumstance” of the property being “another’s” is the *object* which morally specifies the act, nor is that object the “thing,” the property as such, even if we include its juridical characteristic of being a lawful possession of someone. The “circumstance” of being “another’s” is simply the decisive aspect, the rationale that makes the taking away of that thing to be a theft. It is thus not the object but, as Aquinas says, a “principal condition of the object that is repugnant to reason” (*principalis conditio obiecti rationi repugnans*)<sup>50</sup> and as such becomes the morally determinative aspect of the object. However, the object that gives the moral species is the *whole complex* “taking away another’s property.”

This interpretation seems to be contradicted by other texts; for example, “another’s property is the proper object of theft giving it species.”<sup>51</sup> It seems obvious that in passages like this Aquinas speaks of the *res aliena* as the object of the act of taking this “thing” away from the other, that is, as the object of “theft.” But as Theo G. Belmans (to whom I am much indebted) has pointed out, we have to

48. *S.T.*, I-II, q. 20, a. 2 (emphasis added). As to “obligation,” see the important text from *S.T.* I-II, q. 104, a. 1: “in every law, some precepts derive their binding force from the dictate of reason itself, because natural reason dictates that something ought to be done or to be avoided. These are called ‘moral’ precepts: since human morals are based on reason.” See also the reply to the third objection in the same article: “the reason, which is the principal in moral matters, holds the same position, in man, with regard to things that concern him, as a prince or judge holds in the state.”

49. *S.T.*, I-II, q. 18, a. 10.

50. *Ibid.* See also *The Perspective of Morality*, 150 ff. and 385-387.

51. *De malo* 2, 7, ad 8.

consider the context of the affirmation.<sup>52</sup> Aquinas is here treating exactly the same point as in the passage discussed in the last paragraph (*S.T.* I-II, q. 18, a. 10): something that is a circumstance can, because of the way it relates to reason, become a “principal condition of the object” because “to appropriate another’s property is specified by reason of the property being ‘another’s,’ and in this respect it is placed in the species of theft.”<sup>53</sup> While the *Summa* talks of the circumstance of “being another’s” as a “principal condition of the object,” in *De malo* Aquinas says simply that it is “properly the object” of theft. What is important is that the qualification of “being another’s” makes the act of its appropriation a theft. The point at issue here is simply how circumstances can morally specify a human act: by becoming (part of) its object; while other circumstances remain irrelevant for moral specification, as for example whether the thing stolen is white or black. Circumstances can also aggravate a moral act, without changing its species: as e.g. the amount of money taken away. A circumstance can also change an already specified act of theft to be also one of “sacrilege,” if the thing stolen is sacred; this thus makes for a *different* object<sup>54</sup> – but this still does not mean that the moral object, properly speaking, is necessarily the *res aliena*.

Interestingly, in the same passage of *De malo*, Aquinas teaches that similarly one can say of the circumstance called *finis*, “goal” or “end,” “that the proximate end is the same as the object and in like manner it is to be said of it as of the object.” In contrast the remote end for the sake of which an act is chosen, is not part of the object (or is not the object), but, compared with the moral substance of the act (e.g. “theft”) it is simply a circumstance.<sup>55</sup> What is alone important and what Aquinas cares about in this context (see the objection to which he replies), is that there are two kinds of circumstances: those which bear upon what is the morally specifying object of the act, and those which – though possibly aggravating the moral badness – do not and thus, compared to the morally specified act, remain simple circumstances not altering the moral species.

Joseph Pilsner has very well pointed out that “more than a basic description of an external action and its object ... is sometimes required to identify a human action’s moral kind.”<sup>56</sup> Aquinas sometimes “uses ‘object’ to refer to aspects of action which he knows are incapable of specifying, at least by themselves.” The reason for this, Pilsner adds, is “that Thomas is using the word ‘object’ analogously. This is why “he may be using ‘object’ in some contexts to refer to what in itself determines the species of an action, and in other contexts, to what provides an indispensable element for such a determination.”<sup>57</sup> In fact, Aquinas is able to call ‘object’ anything which is only part of the object, i.e. an indispensable element determining

52. *Le sens objectif de l’agir humain. Pour relire la morale conjugale de Saint Thomas* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1980), 177 ff.

53. *S.T.*, II, a. 18, q. 10.

54. *De malo*, 2, 7, ad 8.

55. *Ibid.* the Oesterle-translation is not quite clear here. The original says: “Similiter dicendum est de fine quod finis proximus est idem quod obiectum et similiter est de eo sicut de obiecto. Finis autem remotus ponitur ut circumstantia.”

56. Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St Thomas Aquinas*, 85.

57. *Ibid.* 86.

it. “Things” can only be such an “element,” but not the object as such. As Pilsner notes, “both things and actions can be willed.” But “‘things’ and ‘actions’ are not ends in exactly the same way.” According to Pilsner, Aquinas indeed suggests that “certain ‘actions’ can serve as ends in themselves, a ‘thing’ ... can serve as an end *only if a related action is taken into account*.”<sup>58</sup> This is exactly my point: a “thing” can be thought of as an object only by knowing the action relating to that thing which in turn means that the “why?” of the action is itself an element of that object insofar as it specifies morally.

According to Aquinas, therefore, reason conceives the different elements of a concrete behavioral pattern as a good and presents it to the will as an object of choice. This good is a practical good, not “money” but e.g. “the appropriation of money,” the proximate end of a choice. The object is both, (1) the *practical good* presented by reason to the will as a proximate end (an exterior act, rationally conceived, *an object of a choice*, and then *embodied in a executed human act*); and (2) the *exterior act considered in itself*, as it is conceived or shaped by the reason. This is why the apparent paradox of the object of the action being the action itself is resolved when we recognize that the object—is the *intelligible moral content of the chosen and performed action*, providing it its “moral identity.” In reality the exterior act, considered as *conceived by reason* as a practical good (an action), is at the same time – but now *considered from the viewpoint of the will* – the object of the choice of the action embodying this choice. These are two different viewpoints. The viewpoint from the will is more integral or complete; it is properly the perspective of the acting person which is the perspective of morality. In this perspective human acts are understood as acts proceeding from a *deliberate will*. This, I think, is exactly the teaching of *Veritatis splendor*, which I mention here not as an argument from authority, but simply because some of my critics have argued on the basis of that encyclical against me.<sup>59</sup> I do not want to speculate here about how far the views of my *The Perspective of Morality*, (originally written in German in 1989 but first published in Italian a year after the publication of *Veritatis splendor*), have influenced the content of that encyclical, but it is worthwhile to remember that one of the persons at that time very influentially involved in the preparation of this magisterial pronouncement, Carlo Caffarra – founder and in those years head

58. *Ibid.* 87 (emphasis added).

59. Stephen Brock, however, in his “Veritatis Splendor §78, St. Thomas, and (Not Merely) Physical Objects of Moral Acts,” in many respects concurs with my view. Yet, on page 13 f. of his article there seems to me a decisive misunderstanding of what *Veritatis splendor* says: according to the encyclical, at least in my interpretation, the “physical behavior” is not an object of the will simply *as such physical behavior*, but only insofar it is presented to the will as a good apprehended and ordered by reason. This is why, as soon as it becomes an object of the will, the “physical” (the “ontological”) is always something more than the purely physical: it is a practical good sought by the will. Brock’s problem is twofold: he still upholds the idea that there are two objects, the object of the exterior and the object of the interior act, disregarding that they only are *the material and the formal aspect of one and the same object which* we call the “moral object” (as we will see below); and, secondly, that the “physical” is not to be identified with “the bodily,” but that the category of the “physical” refers to the “ontological” and in this sense pre-moral, in difference to the “moral.”

of the “Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family” and currently Cardinal Archbishop of Bologna – precisely supported the view of moral objects being actions rather than things. Interpreting *S.T. II-II*, 18, 2, he wrote:

It is first necessary, however, to explain what Thomas understands by “object” of the act. In the first place *it is not the reality* with which I enter into a relation by my action; for example, the object of the theft of a horse is not the horse. Precisely because things are not the object, good and bad actions can exist; in fact every reality is good, and if their morality were to depend on these realities, as objects of the acts, every action would be good. Evil is not found in created realities, but in the use the sinner makes of them.

Secondly, the object of the act *is not the physical action* carried out by the subject. Recall the example of being in bed: this could assume a variety of actions (recovering from illness, resting, being lazy).

Thirdly, the object of the act *is not the effect* or the consequences of the act itself. ...

The object of the act is *that which* the person wants or intends when he acts. That is, it is the response that one reasonably gives to the question “what are you doing?”<sup>60</sup>

This, of course, is a yet rather unrefined account of the moral object, but it can be refined by showing that here we are talking of basic intentions which are shaped by reason’s grasp of the objective structure of a human act. So, all of this is not to say that reason (and much less the will) whimsically construes or “determines” the object to be good or evil. There is no danger of such capricious “intentionalism” in this view. For this, as I have explained, the reason is simple enough:

The various elements of the matter of the action are, in any case, contingent givens, which must be grasped by the reason. The commensuration carried out by the reason is therefore very much an act of knowing, and very much a work accomplished by the acting subject. The taking over of the rightfully owned property of another is an injury to justice that is presented as an object only to the reason. *That it is such, or whether it is such, the doer can only recognize, but*

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60. 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, pp. 19-20; quoted according to the English translation provided of that passage in D. Sousa-Lara, “Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act: A Reading in Light of the Texts and Commentators,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (2008): 243-76; at 270 f.

*cannot decide, or, in other words, redefine each time on the basis of further intentions or foreseeable consequences* (emphasis added).<sup>61</sup>

Jensen objects that the matter must be appropriate so that reason can subsume it under a determinate form of goodness.<sup>62</sup> Quite true, and this is exactly what I say: if someone steals someone's property in order to do an act of benevolence to C, "the matter of the action (of the chosen means to the goal of "benefiting C") is a *materia indebita*, inappropriate matter."<sup>63</sup>

Jensen and others thus conclude that, in reality, there are *two* moral objects: the object of the interior act of the will (which for me properly is the moral object considered in the fullest sense of the term), and the object of the exterior act, which would be the "thing" to which this act relates or in which it terminates. This, however, is impossible. Provided the moral object is *what primarily and fundamentally* gives the moral species to a human act, there cannot be *two* (or multiple, as at least one of these critics claim) moral objects. This is impossible in the same way as a being cannot have two substantial forms and a living organism cannot have two souls; because substantial forms establish a determinate being's or a determinate organism's species. The same applies to the fundamental specification of human acts: on the level of its primary and fundamental specification it cannot simultaneously belong to two different species. An already morally specified act can, through further intentions, fall under one or several "higher" species; but this is precisely not the question we are tackling here when talking of "the moral object" which is what "primarily and fundamentally" determines the moral species of a human act making it, independently from further intentions, this or that kind of human act. This is why Aquinas says: "One and the same act, in so far as it proceeds once from the agent, is ordered to but one proximate end, from which it has its species: but it can be ordained to several remote ends, of which one is the end of the other."<sup>64</sup>

Secondly, if the exterior act had its own species-giving object - a "thing" - which would precede the apprehension and ordering of reason, then we could no longer say, with Aquinas, that the morality of human acts is determined *by reason*. Nor would it be possible to accept Thomas's teachings that reason is the measure of the goodness of human acts or that it presents the exterior act as "a good apprehended and ordered by reason." One could not hold these Thomistic doctrines, since the exterior act is already thought to be morally specified by the "objet of the exterior act"; thus, such an apprehension and ordering by reason would be entirely superfluous, simply "arriving too late." The morally specifying object of the will would be simply and directly that supposed "object of the exterior act"! This is what I would call "physicalism" according to which we would conceive of the species of human acts exactly like the species of natural things (while there is only analogy). But did not Aquinas say, as quoted above: "Just as the species of natural

61. *The Perspective of Morality*, 157.

62. Jensen, "Thomistic Perspectives?: Martin Rhonheimer's Version of Virtue Ethics," 146.

63. *The Perspective of Morality*, 157.

64. *S.T.*, I-II, 1, 3 ad 3.

things are constituted by their natural forms, so the species of moral actions are constituted by forms as conceived by the reason"?<sup>65</sup> So, why should we introduce a "second" object, an object of the exterior act instead of conceiving this act itself as the morally specifying object?

Of course, "things" actually do specify acts in different ways. But do they specify human actions *morally*? Can we say that a kind of exterior act receives this or that moral quality simply by relating to this or that "thing," even if qualified e.g. by that it is "another's property"? Things may specify the natural species of an act; thus, the acts of "eating fish" and "eating meat" are specified (in their natural species) by the "things eaten." The fish or the meat is in fact the object and the end of the act of eating, considered in its natural species. The difference between murder and the killing of a cat, say, is constituted by the different "things" killed in each case. In this way, "fish," "meat," "a man," and "a cat" are the "objects" of different kinds of acts; the relating to such objects indeed makes a difference. Yet are these the kind of objects which *morally* specify the corresponding acts, or better: can we, by indicating these "objects," already know to which moral species the corresponding act belongs? Obviously not. For "the killing of a man" can still be (1) the execution of capital punishment, (2) killing in a just war, or (3) an act of legitimate self-defense. And killing a cat can be an innocent deed, or an act of cruelty or of injuring another's property: it depends on intentions - the "why?" of the killing - and circumstances, what I sometimes call the constellation of factors that are apprehended and ordered by reason. There is nothing in the man (or cat) *alone* - in the "thing" - which can tell us to which moral species these acts regarding, or relating to, them belong.<sup>66</sup> These things can sometimes be what Thomas calls a "principal condition of the object," as we have already seen above.

#### 4. The Object as a "Thing" in S.T. II-II, 18, 2 ad 1

However, in a key passage of the *Summa* Aquinas in fact seems to clearly say that the object which morally specifies is a "thing" (*res*): "Although external things are good in themselves, nevertheless they have not always a due proportion to this or that action. And so, inasmuch as they are considered as objects of such actions,

65. *S.T.*, II, 18, 10; see also *De Malo*, 2, 4.

66. In his book *Good and Evil Actions: A Journey Through Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 120, Steven Jensen blames me for lack of clarity when asserting that the exterior act has not itself an object, but that it is reason which specifies it (referring to due matter and circumstances). Jensen objects that "surely even the physical action must have some object that gives it species; it just does not have a moral object, nor a moral species. For clarity sake, Rhonheimer should insist that we not look for a *moral* object of the exterior act." As just shown, this objection is in a way redundant, because the topic at issue is precisely what specifies an act *morally* and, therefore, the *moral* object. I do not understand why I should be guilty of lack of clarity. On the other side, if Jensen really holds what he says, he must agree with me that the *moral* specification of the exterior act is not due to an "object of the exterior act," but rather to "due" matter and circumstances, that is, as conceived and ordered by reason; and that the object which primarily and fundamentally specifies the human act, therefore, is precisely the exterior act itself.

they have not the quality of goodness.”<sup>67</sup> For many this text is sufficient evidence that according to Aquinas moral objects are precisely “things,” not in their natural goodness, but insofar they relate to reason. Now, I never denied that in most cases we cannot conceive moral objects abstracting from the things actions materially relate to.

But to properly understand what Aquinas says in this text, we have to take into account the objection to which he is answering. The objection was (arg. 1): “It would seem that the good or evil of an action is not derived from its object. For the object of any action is a thing. But ‘evil is not in things, but in the sinner’s use of them,’ as Augustine says (De Doctr. Christ. iii, 12). Therefore the good or evil of a human action is not derived from their object.” To this Aquinas answers that things are objects which specify an act morally “inasmuch as they are considered as objects of such actions,” I think the problem is precisely the meaning of this phrase. What is a thing “considered as the object of an action”? Some, such as Lawrence Dewan, argue that this proves that for Aquinas things actually *are* the objects, even if they are objects in a special way (considered as objects of *actions*) and with further qualifications (e.g. as being another’s property). I do not deny that here Aquinas perhaps really wanted to concede to the objector that, despite the fact that moral goodness and evil are not properties of things, such physical objects can enter into moral specification when they are “considered as objects of actions.”

But we should not lose out of sight the reference to Saint Augustine contained in the objection. The objection says that the good or the evil of an act does not come from the thing used, but from the kind of use one makes of the thing. In my view, Aquinas does not want to contradict Augustine. What he seems to mean by “considering a thing as an object of an action” is to consider how a thing is *used* in a determinate case and that considering things like this, they actually do specify human acts – that is, they enter into the moral specification of the act (as we have seen in the preceding section). With other words: the object is not simply the “thing used,” but *the kind of usage one makes of a thing*. The point is not that “another’s property” is the object which renders the act of “taking away” evil, but that a “taking away” relating to “another’s property” is evil. It is the usage made of “another’s property” which “contains” or better: causes the evil, not “another’s property” as such. Therefore it is not the thing (another’s property) which morally specifies the act, but the “taking away of it.” So, “considered as the object of an action,” the other’s property is not just “that thing” (“another’s property,” which is ontologically good), but a thing *being the object of the act* of “taking it away” (which is morally evil).<sup>68</sup>

67. *S.T.*, I-II, 18, 2 ad 1.

68. In his book *Good and Evil Actions*, 199, Steven Jensen affirmatively refers to a passage in Steven Brock’s article , “Veritatis Splendor §78, St. Thomas, and (Not Merely) Physical Objects of Moral Acts,” 28, where Brock claims that “things” can be the object e.g. in the sense that for the temperate [person] things to eat are “good to curb,” and for a doctor his patient is “good to heal,” and for a murderer his victim is “good to kill.” Now, I think this is simply a linguistic fallacy, due to a peculiarity of English grammar. In the phrase “good to curb,” the word “good” actually does not refer to the “thing” curbed, but to the action of curbing. In other languages than English (e.g. Latin, Italian, German or French)

Arriving at this point, one might object: can we not just neatly distinguish the “taking away” on one side from “the thing” (taken away) on the other side; and is not the first specified by the second which, therefore, would be the object of the act of “taking away” and, as such an object, be “undue matter” (*materia indebita*) for an act of taking it away so that the act of “taking away” would be morally specified as “stealing” by the thing being another’s property (as the undue matter of this “taking away”)? However, there is a difficulty in putting things like that, a difficulty arising from action analysis, even if it seems to contradict what Aquinas explicitly says in various places about things as objects. Yet, I have already referred to *S.T. I-II*, 1, 3 ad 1: “The end is not altogether extrinsic to the act, because it is related to the act as principle or terminus.” If the end which specifies the act morally were simply the “thing” taken away, the end would remain extrinsic to the act and only relate to it considered as “suffering” the action. Yet, the end is part of the action, that is, intrinsic to it as its principle and terminus; it properly belongs to its intelligible content. Therefore it cannot be thought of as an end or object independently from the very action which relates to it.

To understand this we have to keep in mind that a problem (already discussed) arises if one presupposes that the “taking away” is simply a bodily behavioral pattern, not yet morally specified, but specified only by the thing taken away. The problem is that this “taking away” could also be an act of lawful confiscation, of borrowing, of safeguarding or of making a joke. In order to conceive the act as “theft,” and thus as morally evil, we have to interpret the “taking away” as something more than its exterior behavioral characteristic; thus, for example, we much interpret it as “appropriation,” or as “taking away with the intent of appropriation.” Now, is *this* act morally specified by the “thing” which is another’s property? I think not, because a *whole complex of factors* (a thing that is taken, circumstances such as the person to whom it belongs, a physical act of taking, an end sought in the taking) together *specifies the act of choice* of such an external behavior; therefore, this whole is the moral object of the human act of “stealing” embodying that choice (“taking away”, that is, “appropriating another’s property”). This is why Augustine is right: it is not simply the thing that morally specifies, but the thing, its relation to reason and the kind of exterior act which relates to the thing. I recall Pilsner’s above quoted statement that “a ‘thing’ ... can serve as an end only if a related action is taken into account.”<sup>69</sup>

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the sentence would necessarily have to be transformed into something like: “for the temperate it is good to curb things eaten,” “for a doctor it is good to heal his patient,” “for a murderer it is good to kill his victim.” What specifies the act morally is neither the thing curbed, nor the patient healed or the victim killed, but something which has *also* to do with the action of curbing, healing or murdering relating to these “things.” So, Brock’s examples actually support my view.

69. Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St Thomas Aquinas*, 87. Notice that what I said is analogous to the object of “seeing.” This object is not simply the thing seen, but this thing under the aspect of its visibility (due to color, light etc.). This object, however, cannot be understood independently from the act of seeing. The notions of “seeing” and of “visibility” are intrinsically correlated; while the “thing” in its natural materiality is only extrinsically correlated with the notion of “seeing.”

It is important to notice, as Pilsner does, how Aquinas defines “theft,” adducing three aspects for an action having the *ratio* of theft. The first of these three is “to take possession of what is another’s,” *usurpare alienum*.<sup>70</sup> Notice, however, the two opening sentences of S.T. II-II, 66, 3: “Three things combine together to constitute theft. The first belongs to theft as being contrary to justice, which gives to each one that which is his, so that it belongs to theft to take possession of what is another’s.”

That means: according to Aquinas, the *usurpare alienum* “belongs to theft as being contrary to justice, which gives to each one that which is his”! It is absolutely impossible to read this in the sense that only “what is another’s” is what is contrary to justice; to make sense of this passage, what opposes justice is necessarily *the taking possession or usurpation* of what is another’s; and it is this, the whole *usurpare alienum* which, according to Aquinas, therefore constitutes the *ratio* of theft. As we have seen above, the very word *usurpare* already implies that it is an action relating to *another’s* property (otherwise no *usurpation* would take place); on the other side, without relating to the action of *usurpare* the condition of being “another’s property” could not specify the action morally. The second *ratio* of theft relates to a *res possessa*, a “thing possessed” (and not e. g. a part of his body like a limb, or a person related to another); and the third aspect is that it is taken secretly. But what really constitutes the act in the species of an unjust act is its being an undue appropriation (i.e. usurpation) of something belonging to another person. As Joseph Pilsner rightly comments: “This aspect of the *ratio* demonstrates that theft is against a particular good of reason, namely justice (rather than, say, temperance).”<sup>71</sup> Of course, this *ratio* of theft being essentially against justice cannot simply consist in *something* being another’s property, but only in an *action* relating (unjustly) to another’s property, namely appropriation or usurpation.

The same applies to the notion of *materia indebita*, “undue matter”: the matter a human action “is about,” (Aquinas’ *materia circa quam*) cannot be “due” or “undue” *as such* or *in itself*. While things are good (more or less) insofar they *are*, they cannot be conceived as “due” or “undue” simply *insofar they are*. They can be “due” or “undue” only in relation to an operation or a *praxis*. The *res aliena* is “undue matter” only in relation to the action of “taking it away;” without the relation to this action, there is no “undueness” of the action in itself. Only reason is able to judge a matter to be “undue” and therefore, as Aquinas says in the Commentary on the Sentences, to commensurate the act to the circumstances and the end.<sup>72</sup>

This is what I tried to explain in *The Perspective of Morality*, and in other writings on the subject, and I think it is a better explanation which also better concurs with other affirmations by Aquinas (emphasis added): “Hence, just as *theft* and *murder* are special kinds of sin, on account of their *denoting the intention of doing a special injury to one’s neighbor*: so too, scandal is a special kind of sin,

70. S.T., II-II, q. 66, a. 3. The Latin “usurpare” means “to appropriate,” “to seize for use,” “to take possession of,” “to usurp.”

71. Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, 115 f.

72. *Super Sent.* 3, d. 39, 2.

because thereby a man intends a special harm to his neighbor...<sup>73</sup> Here, Aquinas specifies acts on the level of their object, not by the “things” (one’s neighbor) the acts materially relate to, but by the intentionality (of doing a special injury) embodied by the act relating to them (the neighbors). I concede that it would be possible to call “the neighbor” the object of such an act; but if we do so, we have not resolved the problem how the moral specification “by the object” is generated. So, if we want to uphold (with *Veritatis splendor* no. 78) that what primarily and fundamentally morally specifies a human act, rendering it good or evil, just or unjust, etc., is what we call its “object” (which is the encyclical’s foundation for addressing intrinsically evil acts), my approach seems to be more promising. And it concords with a principle held by Aquinas in different contexts: “moral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is beside the intention, since this is accidental as explained above.”<sup>74</sup> One of these texts, to which the phrase “as explained above” refers, is the passage just quoted: “moral actions take their species from their end .... just as theft and murder are special kinds of sin, on account of their denoting the intention of doing a special injury to one’s neighbor...”<sup>75</sup>

Something similar occurs with the examples of *vestire nudum*, “clothing the naked.” Aquinas proposes it as an example of a “moral object.”<sup>76</sup> Now, is the object “the naked” (a “thing,”) or the whole “clothing the naked” (an act)? Aquinas says that “clothing the naked” is an “object which implies something convenient to the reason,” but he does not specify what exactly is that “something convenient to the reason”: the *naked* (clothed,) or *the clothing* (of the naked). The problem I see is that to properly describe the act of “clothing” we need a naked person. I do not think it to be reasonable to consider an act of “clothing” *as such*, and then add the naked person as the object which makes this a morally good act. The very notion of “clothing someone” already implies (1) that there is someone in need of being clothed, and (2) that the act of “clothing someone” is done for the sake of meeting this need. One could also perfectly imagine a physical behavior of “clothing the naked” to be an act of cynical mockery. The mere *fact* that “a naked person” is “clothed” is not yet sufficient for an act of clothing him to be the morally good act of “clothing the naked” which is an act of mercy or charity (equally as the mere act of physically “taking away” someone else’s property is not yet the act of stealing or “theft,” that is, an act contrary to justice). Therefore, when Aquinas speaks of objects like “taking away someone’s property,” “clothing the naked,” “having sex with a woman which is married with another person,” I think a more plausible reading is to suppose that the “object” which specifies morally the human act, is the *whole*, that is: the act as it is presented by reason as a good and then chosen by the will and performed as the embodiment of this choice.

73. *S.T.*, II-II, 43, 3.

74. *S.T.*, II-II, 64, 7.

75. *S.T.*, 43, 3.

76. *De Malo*, 2, 5. This is an example Kevin Flannery has referred to in a more recent criticism of my view of the moral object: see K. Flannery, review of my *Vital Conflicts in Medical Ethics* in *Gregorianum* 91 (2010), 641–643, especially 642–43.

Other, more vexing examples, could be added: for example, what is the object of the act of “hating God”? Is it God (“the thing” hated)? But if the morally specifying object is God (who is the supreme good), why is hating him an evil act? Are not acts specified by their objects? Of course, no one would argue like this. In order to uphold the principle that acts are specified by their objects, we must conceive as moral object the whole “hatred of God” or the special relationship of hatred to God (who, however, is the supreme good and thus “undue matter” for an act of hatred). Therefore, it is *the way*, contrary to reason, of relating to God which is the object that morally specifies the choice of such an act. Again: the notion of “undue matter” cannot be established without relation to the act regarding which it is undue.

Duarte Sousa-Lara has counted the Dominican Cardinal Cajetan (Tommaso de Vio) among those who consider the moral object to be the act, and not the thing to which acts relate. Cajetan precisely uses the example of love and hate of God to make his point. So Sousa-Lara writes:

The object, then, formally speaking, is a proximate end of an *electio* (choice), which confers on the human act its primary moral goodness. As an example, Cajetan says that “to love God and to hate God, the marital act and adultery, and the like, receive their specific goodness and evil from the object.” It is important to note that in this example Cardinal Cajetan conceives of the object of the act as an action, even choosing two examples in which the “material” element of the object is the same. For him, “to love God” and “to hate God” are two specifically distinct objects from the moral perspective, as are “the marital act” and “adultery.”<sup>77</sup>

The textual basis adduced by Duarte Sousa-Lara for his claim that according to Cajetan the object is at the exterior act and not the thing to which the exterior act relates could have been developed more fully. Sousa-Lara’s claim becomes much stronger when we consider Cajetan’s commentary on *S.T.* I-II, 20, 1 and 2. In this commentary to article 1 of question 20, he clearly states that exterior acts can be considered not only “absolutely” (*absolute*), i.e. “in themselves,” but also “insofar they are objects” (*ut sunt obiecta*).<sup>78</sup> In his entire commentary Cajetan treats the object which gives to the human act its primary specific goodness as an object of

77. D. Sousa-Lara, “Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act”, 251; the quotes from Cajetan is from his *Commentary on the “Summa theologiae,”* in “Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita,” t. 4-12, Typografia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide, Rome 1888-1907, I-II, q. 18, a. 2 [not a. 3, as Duarte Sousa erroneously cites], cit., t. 6, p. 129: “prima bonitas moralis in actu sit ex obiecto” (the first moral goodness in the act is the one proceeding from the object), and *ibidem*: “amare Deum, et odium Dei, actus matrimonialis, adulterium, et similia, bonitatem et malitiam habent specificam ex obiectis” (love of God, and hatred of God, the marital act and adultery, and similar acts, have their specific goodness and malice from their objects).

78. Cajetan, *Commentary on the “Summa theologiae,”* p.154, col. 1.

the will, which is the exterior act.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, Cajetan never says that the goodness of the exterior act itself depends on “the object”; rather, he says, just like Aquinas, that it depends *on reason* (*haec bonitas pendet a ratione*).<sup>80</sup>

We have seen above (section 3) that, when talking in *S.T.* I-II, 20, 1 about the goodness which the exterior acts has “in itself” or “essentially” (*secundum se*) “according to due matter and due circumstances,” Aquinas actually asserts that this goodness does not derive from the will, but “rather from reason.” He does not say that it derives “from the object.” It is reason which presents to the will the exterior act as an object, and only in the apprehension of reason, is this object placed in the order of morality. This is why Cajetan comments on *S.T.* 19, 1, ad 3 to say that “although the object of the will is a good in virtue of its natural goodness, the same good, in so far it is convenient according to the order of reason, is a moral good in the way of an object (*bonum moris obiective*; which perhaps could also be translated as “a good in the sense of a moral object”).”<sup>81</sup>

Yet, I think it is not possible to definitely prove that for Cajetan there is no moral object of the exterior act, but that the moral object is precisely the exterior act itself. As Aquinas, he simply does not address this question. However, I do not remember him speaking about an “object of the exterior act.” His example about “loving God” and “hating God,” moreover, where he considers them as two acts whose specific goodness or malice comes from their objects, seems at least to suggest that the malice of the second does not derive from the “thing” hated (i.e. God), but rather from the fact that God is an undue “object” of hatred. It is not the “thing” (God) which causes the malice of the act, but precisely the act itself as relating to God. Therefore it seems reasonable to say that what renders evil the act of a will (a choice) informed by hatred of God is precisely the exterior act of “hating God.” Notice that Cajetan also asserts that an act of fornication is formally (that is, essentially) evil not only insofar it relates to an additional evil end (as e.g. enrichment by theft); as an exterior act, “it is also formally evil *in virtue of the proper evil of fornication* (*est malus etiam formaliter propria malitia fornicationis*).” What is interesting in this formulation is the fact, that he does not say that fornication is evil “in virtue of its object” but rather “in virtue of the proper evil of fornication.” The act of fornication is itself the (evil) object which confers to the act of the will (of choice) its primary moral specification as an evil act. As Aquinas would say (according to I-II, 20, 1), this malice *ex obiecto* does not derive from the will but rather from reason, and is malice according to a lack of “due matter and due circumstances.”

In my view, all of this might explain why Cajetan’s commentary on I-II, 18, 2 is extremely short and in a way disappointing. There is no sign of Cajetan reading that article in the sense that the object is to be understood as a “thing.” As for Aquinas, for him the important point of that article is *that there is a primary and specific goodness* which stems from the object that collocates the act into a basic moral species, an object which is to be distinguished from ulterior ends pursued by the acting person’s will, *additionally* specifying human acts. This, so I think,

79. See e.g. *ibid.*, commentary to I-II, 20, 2, p. 156, col. 2

80. *Ibid.*, p. 154, col. 2.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 142, col. 2.

is why Cajetan says much more about the “object” when commenting on I-II, 20, dealing with the goodness and malice of the exterior act.

Lawrence Dewan has blamed me for rejecting the teaching of *S.T.* I-II 18, 2.<sup>82</sup> I think this charge is not correct. Admittedly, I do not exclusively rely on this passage. I hold that it only expresses a partial aspect of Aquinas’ teaching on moral specification and must be integrated into the whole of the picture as presented in the *Summa Theologiae*. One problem of the *Summa* is that it treats the subject matter according to a received scheme of topics and objections. To detect Aquinas’ originality we have to try to reconstruct the entire picture (which, as I have mentioned above, is already present in the *Commentary of the Sentences*). The late Fr. Servais Pinckaers OP, to whom I am very much indebted, was a pioneer in reading Aquinas in a more holistic way, liberating himself from certain traditions coming from commentators or manualists like John of Saint Thomas and Billuart. Pinckaers has seen that in his study of human acts Aquinas “adopts an original perspective: he places himself in the inside of the act and looks at it from the side of the will from which it proceeds.”<sup>83</sup> This, precisely, is *not* (yet) the perspective of *S.T.* I-II, 18, 2.

Pinckaers’ analysis, however, does not seem to me entirely satisfying, because it shifts between a traditional conception of the object as a thing and a more “revisionist” one which conceives the moral object as something “constructed,” by human reason, out of a kind of morally not yet specified raw material, an idea which seems to me badly expressed in this way.<sup>84</sup> Pinckaers still distinguishes between two objects, one of the interior act of the will, and another of the exterior act. By trying to integrate these two aspects into the holistic picture, he arrives at formulations in my view characterized by a certain ambiguity and lack of precision. So in his landmark—and for me extremely inspiring article—*Le rôle de la fin dans l’action morale selon Saint Thomas*, published in 1961 (and only in 2010 for the first time printed in an English translation)<sup>85</sup> he asserts that there are “two principles that essentially determine morality: the object or matter of the exterior act, and the end.”<sup>86</sup> He then goes to say that, in fact, these form one single object, but that before the object can be considered in a holistic way, it can and must also be considered abstractly:

One may well study an exterior act on its own, a theft for example  
– an abstraction done with respect to the relation that it bears to an

82. L. Dewan, *St. Thomas, Rbonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act*, 92.

83. S. Pinckaers, “Notes explicatives,” in Saint Thomas d’Aquin, *Somme Théologique, Les Actes humains, Tome Deuxième* (1a-2ae, Questions 18-21), traduction française, notes et appendices par S. Pinckaers O.P., Nouvelle Édition (Paris : Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 175.

84. *Ibid.*, 189, where he writes that “the moral act is a construction by the reason that in order to shape it uses different materials” (“L’acte moral es une construction de la raison qui utilise des matériaux divers pour la former.”). See also my critical remarks in my *The Perspective of the Acting Person*, 203 f. (note 29).

85. “The Role of the End in Moral Action According to Saint Thomas,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology*, 17:2 (2010), 318-40.

86. *Ibid.*, 334.

interior act of the will. This is what is done by moralists, who are obliged by the very requirements of their science to consider actions on a universal plane. They thus study theft, adultery or charity abstractly, in themselves, and it makes sense to do so. But it would be a mistake to stop there, since the moral act only exists fully in its existential duality of interior act-exterior act; a moralist's judgment would remain seriously incomplete if he were to neglect the contribution of the personal interior act.<sup>87</sup>

Now, talking about theft, Pinckaers writes: "This act has an object, another's possession, seen as desirable. Based on this object, it would receive a primary moral specification, which constitutes it essentially on the moral plane." Upholding the traditional view that "another's possession" is the "object of the exterior act," Pinckaers nevertheless adds: "seen as desirable." It seems that Pinckaers was uneasy with the traditional reducing the object to a mere *res aliena*. He thinks it is this thing, but only insofar it is the object of a desire; I would add: insofar it is the object of a desire of appropriation, plus the corresponding choice and the action embodying this choice. It is, therefore, the "thing" insofar it is the object of an act of the will relating to a determinate *use* of that thing. This is exactly what Pinckaers says, however in a way which could be easily understood in a misleading way: "But the object of the exterior act only has a moral value if the will makes it the aim of its movement – that is, an end. The matter of the exterior act is thus simultaneously the proper object of the faculties which execute the action, and an end for the will – and it is as an end that it becomes properly moral."<sup>88</sup>

Pinckaers emphasizes that with this Aquinas says something quite different from later commentators: "instead of reducing the end, the *finis operis*, to the object, giving it an essential moral value since it is in effect combined with the object, *St. Thomas does not accord a moral value to the object of the exterior (or commanded) act unless it is established as an end for the will* – an immediate end that may be ordered to a further end by the person's intention."<sup>89</sup>

Likewise in other passages of the same article Pinckaers insists: "the object of the exterior act is not moral unless it is willed; that is, unless it becomes an end for the will."<sup>90</sup> Or: "The object of the exterior act is a decisive factor for morality, but it does not obtain a moral value unless it is established as an end for the will."<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, Pinckaers clearly states that the "object of the exterior act" is "the *materia circa quam* which preexists and imposes itself on the intention that directs the action; it is like the materials that are prior to any construction project."<sup>92</sup> He thus wants to uphold that *what* the object of an act is, does not depend on the will; Pinckaers affirms, nevertheless, that its having a *moral* quality does depend on

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87. *Ibid.*, 335.

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

90. *Ibid.*, 338.

91. *Ibid.*, 340.

92. *Ibid.*, 338.

its being something *desired*. That means, without the relationship to a desire (or – I would add – a choice, and therefore and act) the so called “object of the exterior act” cannot be conceived as specifying *morally*. This is perhaps why Pinckaers is keen on distinguishing the “object of the exterior act” from what is traditionally called the *finis operis*. What he says in this respect, referring to a text from the Commentary on the Sentences (*Sup. Sent* d. 2, q. 2, a. 1), is again surprising:

The *finis operis*, on the other hand, is not an exterior reality that precedes the intention; it is the work of the person’s practical reason, which forms the idea and which works out the plan of the house to be built with the help of suitable materials. The *finis operis*, which some would treat as a purely objective fact, is already a work of human reason and the end of a creative voluntary intention.<sup>93</sup>

In my view there is something lacking in Pinckaers work that hinders him from bringing his achievements to a fuller fruition: a theory of practical reason.<sup>94</sup> Pinckaers basic and extremely fruitful intuition was to conceive of human acts as an organic intentional unity. In his own words: “On this view, human acts are no longer seen as isolated entities, connected accidentally; they are coordinated among themselves by a truly intentional organism, dominated by their ordination to the final end.”<sup>95</sup> More than a defect, however, in the case of Pinckaers, his ambiguities seem to me to be a sign of his profound insight into the deep-structure of Aquinas’ account of the morality of human acts as something to be understood from the perspective of the acting person, i.e. by the ends towards which human agents act: *omne agens agit propter finem....*

## 5. The Material and the Formal Aspect of the Moral Object

I think we additionally can receive important lights for understanding Aquinas’ holistic position if we consider a text of his Commentary on the Sentences. There a distinction is eminent which is continuously, though not always explicitly present in the *Summa*, working as the implicit presupposition of its methodology: the differentiation between a material and a formal aspect of the moral object.<sup>96</sup> Let us first recall *S.T.* II-II, 1, 1: “it is clear that whatever actions proceed from a power, are caused by that power in accordance with the rationale of its object (*secundum rationem sui obiecti*). But the object of the will is the end and the good. Therefore all human actions must be for an end.” With other words: everything is willed under the aspect of being an “end” and a “good.” Not simply a good in the ontological

93. *Ibid.*, 338.

94. See my reply to Pinckaers “Christian Morality and Moral Reasonableness: Of What is the Law of the Gospel a Fulfillment?,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology*, 17:2 (2010), 305-17.

95. *Ibid.*, 336.

96. In later scholasticism this distinction became the distinction between the “material object” and the “formal object.” For important insights related to this entire topic see also the section “The formal aspect of objects and the specification of human actions” in Pilsner’s *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, 102-133.

sense; there are many good things we do not seek; it is not because something is good (ontologically) that it is seen as a becoming end for the will of a concrete individual and thus the object of a human act. This “goodness” and being an end is of a special, i.e. practical kind, and it is precisely the *ratio*, the rationale for its being willed.

This is very concisely expressed by Aquinas in a text of the Commentary on the Sentences Aquinas where he consistently treats the object which specifies human actions as objects not of the exterior act but of the will. So Aquinas writes:

The species of any voluntary act derives from the object, which is the form of the will which produces the act. Two things contribute to the object of an act: one which is almost (*quasi*) material, and the other which is like the formal, and which completes the rationale or aspect (*ratio*) of the object, just as light and color contribute to the visible. That which has the aspect (*ratio*) of material in relation to the object of the will is something that is wanted: but the rationale (*ratio*) of the object is completed with the aspect (*ratio*) of a good.<sup>97</sup>

This differentiation is illuminating. It appears also explicitly in Aquinas’ latest writings, e.g. in *De Malo*: “In moral matters, the object constitutes the species by reason of the formal aspect of the object, not by its material element.”<sup>98</sup> On page 247 of his study on the present issue (see note 97), D. Sousa-Lara comments:

St. Thomas makes an important distinction between two dimensions of the object of the act. The first is almost (*quasi*) material, which Thomas defines as any *res volita* (thing willed) and the other is formal, which he identifies as the *ratio boni* (aspect of the good). Thus, according to our stated purpose of examining the object of the human act, for St. Thomas it can be defined as a form of the will from which the exterior act proceeds, and that is composed simultaneously of a particular *res volita* under a particular *ratio boni*. This aspect of the good is thus like the soul of the object of the act. ...A single *res volita* under a different *ratio boni* results in a specifically distinct object.

The *ratio boni*, of course, is the rationale of the wanted thing’s goodness. And this rationale is the way one *practically* relates to that thing. In a practical consideration, the money is good, and strived after as a good, because its *possession* is considered to be good; my neighbor’s money can also be considered as an evil insofar as I experience it as something contrary to my striving, relating to it by an (inner) act of envy.<sup>99</sup> We are here in the sphere of action and morals, not of production.

97. *Super Sent*, 1, d. 48, q. 1, a. 2, c. The English translation is from Joseph T. Papa’s translation of D. Sousa-Lara, “Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act,” 245 f.

98. *De malo*, 9, 2 ad 10.

99. Recall what has been said earlier about this, referring to *S.T.* II, 16, 3.

This is another point, made by Aquinas in his *Summa contra Gentiles* and referred to in Sousa-Lara's article:

In fact, an action may sometimes terminate in something which is made, as building does in a house, and as healing does in health. Sometimes, however, it does not, as in the cases of understanding and sensing. Now, if an action does in fact terminate in something that is made, the intention of the agent tends through the action toward the thing that is produced. But, if it does not terminate in a product, *then the inclination of the agent tends toward the action itself*. So, it must be that every agent in acting intends an end, *sometimes the action itself, sometimes a particular thing produced by the action*.<sup>100</sup>

That means that "things" are properly the objects (or terminals) of acts of production (*poiesis*) only, while the object of a *praxis* is always ... an action! With this, in a way, we can perhaps understand more profoundly what Aquinas says in *S.T.* 18, 2. He first notes that what is valid for other things also obtains for human actions: its good and evil "depends on its fullness of being or its lack of that fullness." He then proceeds:

Now the first thing that belongs to the fullness of being seems to be that which gives a thing its species. And just as a natural thing has its species from its form, so an action has its species from its object, as movement from its term. And therefore just as the primary goodness of a natural thing is derived from its form, which gives it its species, so the primary goodness of a moral action is derived from its suitable object...

The object is thus the form which gives species, and it is the term of a movement. Now, considering that we are talking about human acts, that is, *praxis*, according to the text from *S. C. G.* quoted above, the term or object should not be a thing produced but is itself precisely some sort of "doing." However, *S.T.* I-I, 18, 2 continues:

hence some call such an action "good in its genus"; for instance, "to make use of what is one's own." And just as, in natural things, the primary evil is when a generated thing does not realize its specific form (for instance, if instead of a man, something else be generated); so the primary evil in moral actions is that which is from the object, for instance, "to take what belongs to another." And this action is said to be "evil in its genus," genus here standing for species, just as we apply the term "mankind" to the whole human species.

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100. *S.C.G.* III, cap. 2, n. 2 (ed. Marietti) Translation from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three Providence, Part I, Translated with and introduction and notes by Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956, 1975): 34-35* (quoted according to Sousa-Lara, 248).

Reading the text as it stands, it is difficult to deny that Aquinas here seems to talk of the action “to take what belongs to another” thinking of “what belongs to another” as the object of the act of “taking.” The same applies to “to make use of one’s own,” and other passages, as for example the following: “an action is said to be evil in its species, not because it has no object at all; but because it has an object in disaccord with reason, for instance, to appropriate another’s property.”<sup>101</sup> Even though this can be read as if Aquinas said that the object is “to appropriate another’s property” – because grammatically this latter phrase can be understood as referring to “has an object in disaccord with reason” (“for instance, to appropriate one’s other property”) – it admittedly seems more plausible to connect the phrase “to appropriate one’s other property” with the words “an action” at the beginning of the sentence. In this case for Aquinas the action is “to appropriate another’s property” whose object, “in disaccord with reason,” is “another’s property.”

On the other hand there exist passages in which the whole verbal phrase seems to denote the object. Take e.g. *De malo*, 2, 5, already discussed above:

Now there is an object that implies something in accord with reason and makes the act good by reason of its genus, for example, clothing the naked; and an object that implies something discordant with reason, for example, taking what belongs to another, and this makes it evil in its genus; but there is a kind of object which implies neither something in accord with reason nor something discordant with reason, for instance picking up a straw from the ground, or the like, and such an act is called indifferent.

“Clothing the naked” (and not “the naked”) is called the “something” which “is in accord with reason” and which “makes the act good,” and is thus the object which morally specifies the act. The same applies to the phrase “taking what belongs to another”: Aquinas calls it “an object that implies something discordant with reason” and therefore “makes it [the act] evil in its genus.” And even more clearly, “picking up a straw from the ground,” having neither accordance nor discordance with reason, is called an object which specifies the act as morally indifferent. It would be absurd to hold that the object which in this case morally specifies this act as indifferent is simply “the straw.” It rather is the exterior act of picking it up. Notice that “indifference” of an act “by reason of its genus” is a real *moral* qualification, not the *lack* of moral qualification. Let us suppose that the straw is “another’s property”: it could still be indifferent; but it could also be part of a theft, or of a good act. It depends from what the “picking up” intentionally includes.

Even if there are obvious difficulties in denying that in I-II 18, 2 and similar texts, Aquinas at least seems to speak of the object as the *res voluta* (the willed thing under a special formality which renders it appropriate or inappropriate for reason), there are other texts which suggest another reading. The lesson we have to learn from this is that simply by quoting this or that other text, we will never come to an assessment of what was really Aquinas’ mind. For this we need to do

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101 . S.T. I-II, 18, 5 ad 2.

moral philosophy, respecting its proper methodology, and not only textual exegesis. Remember also what was said above about Aquinas' analogous use of the term "object". This is why Aquinas "may be using 'object' in some contexts to refer to what in itself determines the species of an action, and in other contexts, to what provides an indispensable element for such a determination."<sup>102</sup> Without reading these texts in a conceptual framework able to make out in which sense Aquinas speaks of "object" in a determinate context, one will not arrive at a workable solution.

In passages like *S.T. I-II*, 18, 2, Aquinas is focusing on the material aspect of the object – the *materia circa quam* – in which, in many cases, "things" play a decisive role (especially in matters of justice).<sup>103</sup> But precisely referring to justice, Pilsner has noted that according to Aquinas justice is based on rules which are "*rationes* constituted in the mind, according to which the just man constitutes equality."<sup>104</sup> This *ratio*, Pilsner comments, is a "conceptual grasp of just and unjust kinds of actions. The *ratio* of an object seems to be this same formality understood as belonging to a goal of an agent's willing."<sup>105</sup> This is why, applying this doctrine to adultery, Pilsner holds that what specifies this act as unjust is the *ratio* of adultery which is "having intercourse with another's spouse" (and not only the "thing" "another's spouse"). The *ratio* of the object only appears when there is a "conceptual grasp" of the justice or injustice of an *action*, that is, when the object under its "material" aspect ("another's spouse," "another's possession") is, as Pilsner formulates, "understood as belonging to a goal of an agent's willing."

Commenting – in the Blackfriar's edition of the *Summa Theologiae* – on I-II, 18, 2, Thomas Gilby reminds us of the distinction between the formal and the material aspect of the object, saying that an object "is the 'why' of activity and causally shapes its meaning." He equates the *materia circa quam* with the material aspect of the object which is "the whole universe as it comes into the map of man, and more narrowly the physiological and psychological texture of his human acts." The second, the formal aspect, "is the special interest of an activity, the distinctive aspect of reality with which it is engaged and which differentiates it from other activities." This means that formally considered, the object is the "why" of an activity, denoting its "special interest."<sup>106</sup> It is, thus, the *ratio boni* of the object, the rationale of the wanting of the thing wanted. Ralph McInerny, commenting on the same passage of the *Summa*, simply states: "The object of the action is that which

102. Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, 86.

103. Dewan makes a major point of this against me (Dewan, "St. Thomas, Rhonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act," 79-84). As to the object of justice, see my treatment of the subject of the *medium rationis* of moral virtue which in the case of the virtue of justice is also a *medium rei*, which can be found in my *Praktische Vernunft und Vernünftigkeit der Praxis*, 94-104.

104. *Super Sent.* 4, d. 46, q. 1, a. 1c, cor. ("Regulae autem iustitiae sunt rationes in mente constitutae, secundum quas homo iustus aequalitatem constituit..."); quoted in Pilsner, *The Specifications of Human Actions in St Thomas Aquinas*, 120.

105. *Ibid.*, 121.

106. St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 18, *Principles of Morality* (1a2ae. 18-21), Latin text, English translation, Introduction, Notes, Appendices and Glossary, ed. by Thomas Gilby O.P. (Cambridge: Blackfriars, no year), Appendix II, 168 f.

the agent sets out to do, to effect.”<sup>107</sup> This, of course, is the *appropriation* of another’s possession. The formal aspect of the object, the *ratio* of its being good (to be chosen), is not the “being another’s” because the thief does not steal *because* a thing is another’s; the rationale of his desiring it is not its being another’s property, but to appropriate, to possess and use it. This, therefore, is the object *formally* considered. And the formal consideration is always the most essential one which does not exclude, but presupposes, the material consideration.

There is another text supporting this reading, but which Dewan, rather surprisingly, quotes against me: “In various things, differing in species or genus, nothing hinders our finding one formal aspect of the object, from which aspect sin receives its species. It is thus that pride seeks excellence in relation to various things; and avarice seeks abundance of things adapted to human use.”<sup>108</sup>

The objection to which Aquinas answers denies that sins are specified by their objects, because “pride is about things spiritual and material...; and avarice is about different kinds of things.” But specifically they are in all cases one and the same sins: pride or avarice, respectively. Now, the objection would precisely hold if the morally specifying objects were the things these acts relate to. Aquinas answers that this would be considering the object only materially. But acts receive their species not from what they materially relate to, but from the formality under which they relate to them. So, formally considered, Aquinas says, the object of pride is “seeking excellence,” and the object of avarice “seeking abundance.” The variety and differences of the things pride and avarice relate to makes only a material difference which is not decisive for the constitution of the *moral* species of the act. They actually do specify acts materially: pride, i.e. seeking excellence, in relation to, say, political achievements is not the same kind of pride which relates to physical beauty; the moral species of both, however, are identical because the *moral* object is the same.

It is, thus, surprising that Dewan quotes this text in his support. Why was he misled? It seems to me that each time the word “thing” appears, Dewan suspects confirmation of his view (sometimes “thing” only appears in his English translation of Latin expressions like *ea quae*). Even more surprising, however, is that he immediately afterwards quotes another text against me, which in my view rather obviously supports my position:

[A]s was said, sins receive their species from their objects. Now, every sin consists in the *appetite for some changeable good* which is inordinately sought, and consequently once it is had someone takes inordinate *delight in it*. Now, as is clear from things seen earlier, *delight* is twofold: one is mental, which is accomplished in the mere apprehension of some thing possessed at will; and this can also be called “spiritual delight”: as for example when someone *delights in*

107. R. McInerny, *Aquinas on Human Action. A Theory of Practice* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992, 81.

108. *S.T. I-II*, 72, 1 ad 3; see Dewan, “St. Thomas, Rhonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act,” 74.

*human praise*, or in something like that. But the other delight is corporeal or natural, which is *brought to perfection in mere corporeal contact*; and it can also be called “carnal delight.” Thus, therefore, those sins which are *brought to perfection* in spiritual delight are called “spiritual sins” whereas those which are *brought to perfection in carnal delight* are called “carnal sins”: for example, gluttony, which finds perfection in *the enjoyment of food*, and lust, which finds perfection in *the enjoyment of sexual pleasures*. Hence [Paul] the Apostle says, in 2 Corinthians 7:1: “Let us cleanse ourselves of every defilement of body and spirit.”<sup>109</sup>

Dewan, most surprisingly, comments on this text as follows: “Here, the object is such a thing as ‘human praise’ or ‘food’ or ‘the pleasantly contacted body.’ These are what diversify these types of delight. These are the changeable goods inordinately sought. When the thing is had, one has the delight.”<sup>110</sup> This is surprising because it is tantamount to saying that the object of theft is “the appropriated property belonging to another.” Dewan simply converts the act formally belonging to the object into a “thing”! But “human praise” is not a thing but an act; nor is “the enjoyment of sexual pleasures” a thing, but an action of “pleasantly contacting a body.” As to “food,” it can be considered as a thing, but Aquinas says “the enjoyment of food”; he does so reasonably because it is not “food” which makes an act of eating to be an act of gluttony, but a determined kind (and amount) of eating and enjoying food. I do not deny that, as the object of enjoyment, the “food” constitutes a different moral species than enjoyment of the “contacted body.” What I deny, however, is that it is only the “food” or the “contacted body” which specifies the act morally; if this were the case, every act of eating food would be gluttony, and every sexual act (including a chaste marital act with its proper and perfectly licit enjoyment) would be an act of lust. The kind of enjoyment which is proper to gluttony and lust is part of the object; it is precisely its formal aspect! So the morally specifying object of gluttony is “the enjoyment of food,” the object of lust “the enjoyment of sexual pleasures.” In eating and sex, it is precisely this inordinate seeking of the enjoyment alone that makes them acts of gluttony and of lust. Equally “human praise” is not the object of pride, but only delighting in it in a way which is precisely opposed to how the humble person relates to human praise. Aquinas says it clearly: “every sin consists in the appetite for some changeable good which is inordinately sought, and consequently once it is had someone takes inordinate delight in it.” As the text Dewan surprisingly cites against me explicitly says, the object which specifies is not simply the “changeable good,” but the “changeable good inordinately sought.” According to Aquinas and in fact, it is simply impossible to reduce the morally specifying object just to a “thing.” As to Dewan’s attempt to declare to be things what in reality are acts relating to things (like “*praising*

109. *S.T.* II, 72, 2 (I quote this text according to the translation used by Dewan, including the emphases added by him).

110. Dewan, “St. Thomas, Rhonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act,” 75.

someone,” “*enjoying* food,” “*pleasantly contacting* a body”), no further words need be wasted.

I think that my reading, which is supported by quite a few other scholars, is wholly consistent with Aquinas’ general principle that terminuses or objects of agency (*praxis*) are actions and not things (produced) as in productive activity. The point of it all is to properly understand what “agency,” *praxis*, or a human action is: it is a movement, in most cases a bodily behavior, proceeding from deliberate will, aiming not at producing some effect external to the agent but at a kind of doing something (which does not exclude the producing of effects; also technical acts of producing are always, considered under a different aspect, a doing, *praxis*, and thus moral and human acts). To look at human actions as actions proceeding from a deliberate will, a voluntary act informed by reason, is the synthetic or holistic perspective *not yet present in I-II, 18, 2*, but only developed step by step in the rest of this article and in the following two questions (19 and 20).

## 6. The Holistic View of the Human Act: S.T. I-II, 18, 6

In the *Summa*, the more holistic consideration starts with S.T. I-II, 18, 6, which however poses new difficulties, including a difficulty to my own understanding of the object. Aquinas opens his exposition by stating that “[c]ertain actions are called human, inasmuch as they are voluntary...” He then proceeds:

Now, in a voluntary act, there is a twofold act, viz. the interior act of the will, and the exterior act: and each of these acts has its object. The end is properly the object of the interior act of the will: while the object of the exterior act, is that on which the act is brought to bear. Therefore just as the exterior act takes its species from the object on which it bears; so the interior act of the will takes its species from the end, as from its own proper object.

This seems to contradict my reading insofar as Aquinas here speaks of the exterior act *as having its own object which morally specifies that act*. There would be, thus, two objects, and this is what many Thomists referring to this text hold. Now, the example given by Aquinas at the end of the article to illustrate his point is disappointing because it is an example of a “composed” act, that is, an act already morally specified according to its species, namely “stealing,” chosen for the sake of a *further* end, namely “adultery” (which is of a different species); and Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that “he who steals that he may commit adultery, is strictly speaking, more adulterer than thief.” This means that here the “exterior act” is the act of stealing as distinguished from the “interior act” which is related to adultery as being the goal of the stealing. To say, thus, that the exterior act has its proper object does not contradict my reading, but simply leads to the question of which is that object of “stealing” considered in itself (i.e. not considered as a means for the further purpose of adultery).

When looking closer at this article we detect something more in it. Before giving his example – somewhat disappointing in the context of the problem we are

dealing with – of stealing for the sake of adultery, Aquinas writes (notice the added emphasis):

Now that which is on the part of the will is formal in regard to that which is on the part of the exterior act: because the will uses the limbs to act as instruments; *nor have exterior acts any measure of morality (ratio moralitatis), save in so far as they are voluntary.* Consequently the species of a human act is considered formally with regard to the end, but materially with regard to the object of the exterior act.

Aquinas thus surprisingly affirms that exterior acts have no “measure of morality, save in so far as they are voluntary;” therefore, so we should conclude, they cannot receive their morality from what he just called “the object of the exterior act” (which as Aquinas says, however, gives species to that act). Remember the discussion of Pinckaers’ view who precisely said something very similar, namely that “the object of the exterior act only has a moral value if the will makes it the aim of its movement – that is, an end.”<sup>111</sup>

The oddity is the example given (“to steal for the sake of committing adultery”), because the act of stealing actually is already morally specified; for didactical reasons the example may be helpful, but for analytical purposes it is misleading. It rather seems that here Aquinas wants to state a more general principle namely: “the species of a human act is considered formally with regard to the end, but materially with regard to the object of the exterior act.” But this would imply, according to the logic of this article, that the “object of the exterior act” is not yet what morally specifies; it does not yet include a *ratio moralitatis*, a “measure” or “rationale of morality” but only the material element yet to be morally specified by something which gives it its formal determination. This seems to be the same doctrine we know from his Commentary on the Sentences, quoted above: “Two things contribute to the object of an act: one which is almost (*quasi*) material, and the other which is like the formal, and which completes the rationale or aspect (*ratio*) of the object, just as light and color contribute to the visible.” This suggests that what Aquinas in the *Summa* calls the “object of the exterior act” is what he called in the Commentary on the Sentences the (*quasi*) material aspect of *the object*. This makes sense, because remember that what is the material aspect is “something that is wanted” (*res volita*) while the formal aspect is the rationale (*ratio*) why this thing is wanted, and this is its *ratio boni*, the reason why it is strived after as a good. Now, the “good” is precisely the end. So we would find in the object of “stealing” a material aspect, “another’s property” (*res aliena*), and a formal aspect, that is the *ratio boni* of this other’s property which precisely relates to an action: possessing, respectively appropriating (by taking away) this *res aliena*.

I think this is an elegant solution, respecting the texts, but also meeting with the requirements of sound action theory and metaphysics of action. At any rate, we should not quarrel too much about what perhaps are only terminological ques-

111. Pinckaers, *The Role of the End in Moral Action According to St. Thomas*, 135.

tions. I would argue that we simply are in front of continuous shifts in terminology depending on the current context. The terminology of the Commentary of the Sentences seems more appropriate to found a holistic view of the human act and is capable of illuminating some texts of the *Summa*. But this holistic view is clearly present also in the latter, what becomes clear when we consider affirmations like the one in I-II, 18, 6 “*nor have exterior acts any measure of morality, save in so far as they are voluntary.*” Only when considered as a voluntary act, Aquinas asserts, can we speak of an exterior act as belonging to a determinate *moral* species. It is very improbable that Aquinas in this context refers to the rather trivial doctrine that only what is voluntary can be morally assessed. I rather suppose that he says that only inasmuch as we consider acts as proceeding from the will, which is the *rational* appetite, can they be morally specified; and that the reference to the material aspect of the object *alone* – the *materia circa quam*, or the “thing” to which the action relates (or the action “is about”) – does not suffice.

This is why I conclude that in I-II, 18, 6 there must be a missing link. In a way it is not really missing, but concealed by the very example “stealing for the sake of committing adultery” which Aquinas provides to illustrate the main thesis of that article. The point is that, according to what Aquinas elsewhere exposes, “stealing for the sake of committing adultery” implies *two* acts of the will. An act of choice (*electio*) of “taking away another’s property” and an act of intention (*intentio*) of “committing adultery.” This again is clearly explained in the Commentary on the Sentences, where Aquinas distinguishes between the *voluntas intendens* (the intending will) referring to the ultimate end, and the *voluntas eligens* (the choosing will) which relates to the “proximate object” (which is the object that fundamentally and primarily specifies morally).<sup>112</sup>

This means that the exterior act of stealing is itself a voluntary act, a good chosen by the will. Hence, this “exterior act” itself is, in the example given by Aquinas, not simply the “external action” of taking away another’s property, but properly the *choice* of that action. The act of the choice of the means (stealing) relates to the act of the intention of the (further) end (adultery) as exterior and interior act, matter and form (the choice of stealing can be understood as commanded or caused by the intention of adultery). But equally in the very “exterior act” there is a twofold aspect, a material and a formal one. One is the “thing willed” (“another’s property”) and the *ratio boni* of wanting this thing, which is its possession or appropriation. The *ratio boni* or formal part of the object, thus, relates to *action*.

With this Aquinas has properly overcome the perspective of his master Albert the Great. As Tobias Hoffmann has written, according to Albert’s view:

morality tends to be considered more from the perspective of the action itself than from that of the agent. Thus the predominantly ontological perspective obscures the specifically moral character of actions. Albert’s account of the conditions for moral goodness and

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112. See *Super Sent.*, 2, d. 40, q. 1, a. 2: “voluntas dupliciter potest considerari: vel secundum quod est intendens, prout in ultimum finem fertur; vel secundum quod est eligens, prout fertur in objectum proximum, quod in finem ultimum ordinatur.”

badness reflects this limited viewpoint. Albert is very clear about the fact that moral actions originate in reason and will. Yet he does not define the value of moral actions from this origin, but describes it rather as an accident added to the natural goodness of actions. He thereby fails to conceive of the factors that constitute the moral goodness of actions as originating from the agent and as extending towards the exterior act.<sup>113</sup>

In Aquinas instead, there is to be found “a new perspective, in which the moral character of actions is considered according to their principle (the will with its end) in light of the criterion for their goodness and badness (the object as judged by reason);” in such an approach, “the question of what constitutes the moral goodness of the actions is altered as well.” Because morality is determined by the “due proportion of an object to reason”, there “can be good or bad objects of an act.”<sup>114</sup> But Hoffmann immediately adds a precision, referring to *S.T.* I-II, 18 2, c and ad 1:

The term “object” is of course not understood in the ontological sense (in fact, all things are good insofar as they are), but as the *materia circa quam*, that is, what the agent is doing (thinking, walking, stealing, etc.). For example, the object “to make use of what is one’s own” (*uti re sua*) is properly proportioned to reason, but “to take what belongs to another” (*accipere aliena*) does not have this proportion.<sup>115</sup>

Hoffmann concludes, therefore, that according to the “new perspective” proper to Aquinas the object is not the thing an action relates to, but the action relating to a thing: “to make use of what is one’s own,” “to take what belongs to another.” He calls this the *materia circa quam* which is correct only insofar it is considered formally – something Aquinas sometimes does, as e.g. in I-II, 18, 2, ad 2: “The object is not the matter ‘of which’ (a thing is made), but the matter ‘about which’ (something is done); and stands in relation to the act as its form, as it were, through giving it its species.” This becomes clearer in a passage in which Aquinas distinguishes the consideration of the *materia circa quam* as merely relating to the exterior act, and as additionally relating to the interior act: “Objects, in relation to exterior acts, have the character of matter ‘about which’; but, in relation to the interior act of the will, they have the character of end; and it is owing to this that they give the act its species;”<sup>116</sup> this is because, as it was said in the corpus of the article, “human acts take their species from the end.”

It is true, as Dewan remarks, that this text is followed by a final sentence which says: “Nevertheless, even considered as the matter ‘about which,’ they have the character of term, from which movement takes its species (Phys. v, text. 4;

113. T. Hoffmann, “Moral Action as Human Action: End and Object in Aquinas in Comparison With Abelard, Lombard, Albert, and Duns Scotus,” *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 73-94; at 81.

114. *Ibid.*, 86.

115. *Ibid.*

116. *S.T.*, I-II, 72, 3, ad 2.

Ethic. x, 4); yet even terms of movement specify movements, in so far as term has the character of end.” In my view, Aquinas simply wants to make it clear that the object, even considered only as *materia circa quam*, is part of the specification of the act (but it cannot possibly be another object than the object of the interior act of the will, because in this case we would have two different objects as proximate ends giving species). Against the objector who minimizes the role of the “material cause” in specifying actions, Aquinas wants to uphold the role of the *materia circa quam* as a constitutive element or aspect of moral specification. But the matter “about which” the action is only specifies insofar it is an element of the object considered in relation to the interior act of the will.

So Aquinas writes in the following question: “Although the object is the matter about which an act is concerned, *yet it has the character of an end, in so far as the intention of the agent is fixed on it*, as stated above ... Now the form of a moral act depends on the end, as was shown above.<sup>117</sup> I read this in the sense that only as object of the interior act of the will, and thus as a good apprehended and ordered by reason, does the *materia circa quam* specify morally; that is, it specifies precisely under a *ratio boni* which is not inherent in the *materia circa quam* itself, but existing only “in so far as the intention of the agent is fixed on it.”

Stephen Brock, on the other hand, very much insists on the “directly” specifying role of the *materia circa quam*. He admits that in a sense “we can say that actions are specified by the intentions that they embody” – a very important point in which he thus agrees with me. But then he adds: “The matter specifies the intention too.”<sup>118</sup> This is true because an intention is always an intention “of something”. And the *materia circa quam* here plays a decisive role. Yet, what Brock seems to forget is that the will cannot “directly” relate to some “matter,” but only insofar that matter is presented to it by *reason*. This is why intentions relate to the *materia circa quam* as an object insofar it is presented to it as a “good apprehended and ordered by reason.”<sup>119</sup>

Brock in fact tackles this problem in a later stage of his argument, and there it seems that our views come very close. He rightly emphasizes that the “goodness or badness of the [exterior] act depends on the rule of reason.” And he adds: “The goodness or badness that the act has in itself is already present in reason’s conception of it, even prior to its engagement of the will. But is this to say that its goodness or badness in itself is not determined by its *materia circa quam*?”<sup>120</sup> Being aware of the problem he defends himself from the possible charge “to simply identify the ‘object’ spoken of here with the *materia circa quam* of an exterior act.”<sup>121</sup> He then quotes a key affirmation by Aquinas, to which I have referred above: “the goodness

117. *S.T.*, III, 73, 3 ad 1.

118. Brock “Veritatis Splendor §78, St. Thomas, and (Not Merely) Physical Objects of Moral Acts,” 21.

119. In my view the defect of Stephen Brock’s otherwise helpful book *Action and Conduct. Thomas Aquinas and the Theory of Action* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) is that it completely lacks a treatment of the role of reason in human action; “reason” is hardly even mentioned in the whole book and there is no entry in the index referring to “reason.”

120. *Ibid.*, 34.

121. *Ibid.*, 35.

of the will depends on reason, in the same way (*eo modo*) as it depends on the object.<sup>122</sup> Surprisingly, and as far I have not misunderstood him, Brocks' interpretation in the following concords with mine to a considerable extent. He affirms that in order to be an object of the will, "[t]he exterior act, *with its materia circa quam*, exists first in reason's conception. In this way it moves the will as the will's object." Brock's conclusion is that "the exterior act is good or bad in kind in virtue of its *materia circa quam* even as it exists in reason's preconception. Exterior acts are truly *moral* acts, not just objects and consequences of them; and their objects, which are their *materia circa quam*, are moral objects."<sup>123</sup>

Brock, therefore, tries to "save" the idea of exterior acts having a proper object, the *materia circa quam*, which specifies them morally and has to be distinguished from the object of the interior act. In my view, however, the *materia circa quam* is only the material aspect of one and the same object which is, in its wholeness, the object of the interior act of the will, "enriched" by the formal aspects stemming from the *materia circa quam* or the exterior act *as conceived and ordered by reason*.<sup>124</sup> This is why Pilsner, as I see it correctly, writes that "the reality bearing the name 'matter' is shown to be specifying, not in so far as it is matter, but rather in so far as it can be engaged by the will as a good to be sought through action; in short, the matter here is specifying precisely by virtue of its being an end."<sup>125</sup> This, again, is the perspective of the acting person, the perspective of practical goods which cannot be conceived without including in their notion a relation to some purpose or basic intentionality.

## 7. S.T. I-II 18, 2 Revisited: The "Suitable Object"

So, step by step we are getting the full picture. Let us now once more turn back to *S.T. I-II 18, 2*, and more precisely to its famous *Sed contra*, the authority referred to by Aquinas to support an affirmative answer to the question asked in this article ("whether the good or evil of a man's action is derived from its object"): "It is written (Hosea 9:10): 'They became abominable as those things which they loved.' Now man becomes abominable to God on account of the malice of his action. Therefore the malice of his action is according to the evil objects that man loves. And the same applies to the goodness of his action."

122. *S.T. I-II, 19, 3*.

123. Brock, "*Veritatis Splendor* §78, St. Thomas, and (Not Merely) Physical Objects of Moral Acts," 37.

124. Maybe the difference, in practice, between Brock's and my view is marginal, and perhaps only a quarrel about words. In any case his thoughtfully argued article would need, and merit, a separate and more detailed examination.

125. Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, 167. Pilsner admits (169) that there exist passages in which "matter" as such appears as "precisely that formal component which is distinctive of objects and which accounts for their contribution to specification; in short, matter in this context appears and functions like an object." Yet, this can again be explained by the analogous use of terms. "Matter," as "things," is in many cases clearly an element of the object and in this sense *participates* in the formal role in moral specification which has the object as a *whole*.

Is the response simply a confirmation of this supportive argument as Dewan and others suggest? First let us ask: what about a possible opposite affirmation “They became abominable as those things which they *bated*?” Assuming they *bated* the idols, and idols are really evil things: does this mean that also hatred of idols is evil because acts are specified by their objects? And conversely, does it mean that hatred of God is good? With other words: is the act of loving idols evil simply because idols are evil? Let us assume someone *collects* idols (e.g. for scientific reasons) or he *destroys* them (in order to withdraw them from use). Are these evil actions because idols are evil? Is the object of the act of collecting and destructing an “idol” not the very idol which is an evil thing? But, then, every action relating to idols as its “object” would be morally evil. This, however, obviously is not the case. And it is not the case because – to repeat it once more – the *moral* evil is not in the thing, nor is it caused by the thing; the moral evil is in the way the agent relates to the thing which is the *ratio* of its being related to as an object (like the evil is obviously not in a *res aliena*, but in the way the agent relates to it, that is the *ratio* of its being considered a practical good). This is why the hatred of God is evil despite the goodness of the “object” which is God; it is the way of relating to God (by hatred) which is evil.

So, where does evil or malice of an *action* come from? It cannot come from the thing related to (the “object”), but only from the way one relates to the thing. Now, what does Aquinas really say in the response of I-II, 18, 2? He says: “the primary goodness of a moral action is derived from its suitable object.” Notice the expression “suitable object” (*ex obiecto convenienti*). Where is this suitability or convenience to be found? Is it a property of the thing? I would say it is a property of a thing *considered as relating to some act or operation*, such as to love, to hate, or to appropriate. It is unsuitable to love idols, as it is to hate God or to take away (appropriate) another’s property.

If it were really true that it is the object related to (the idol, another’s property) which is the proper cause of the corresponding action’s malice, then we should find in Aquinas a teaching like the following: “in human actions, good and evil are predicated in reference to the goodness or evilness of things they relate to.” However, Aquinas teaches something quite different: “in human actions, good and evil are predicated in reference *to the reason*.”<sup>126</sup> This is because only reason is able to grasp the relationship between things, on one hand, and actions (including choices, intentions etc.) which relate to these things, on the other hand. And this is also the teaching of *S.T.*, I-II, 18, 2 ad 1, already mentioned: “Although external things are good in themselves, nevertheless they have not always a due proportion to this or that action. And so, inasmuch as they are considered as objects of such actions, they have not the quality of goodness.” Therefore, “things” only specify morally insofar they are considered as objects *of an action*. And this means that part of the very notion of something being a *morally specifying* object is the action relating to it. As Pilsner noted, “a ‘thing’ ... can serve as an end only if a related action is taken into account.”<sup>127</sup> To make out this “commensuration” with regard

126. *S.T.*, II-II, 18, 5.

127. Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, 87.

to an action is precisely the task of reason, which makes out the *ratio obiecti*, the rationale of the object, which is its *formal* aspect.

Therefore, reason comes in already on the level of what Aquinas in I-II, 18, 6 calls “the object of the exterior act” (and which according to the Commentary on the Sentences is the material aspect of the object). The reason “formulates” the *ratio boni*. And therefore to consider “good” “the taking away (appropriation) of another’s property” (or the loving of idols) appears to reason as a moral evil. And because human actions are specified by “forms as they are conceived by reason,”<sup>128</sup> it is not the things which specify, but reason’s relating the thing to an act which is “about” that thing (as its *materia circa quam*). For reason, there is an objective moral unsuitability of another’s property to its being appropriated, against the will of the possessor, by a person who is not its owner. Likewise there is for reason an objective moral unsuitability between idols and acts of love relating to them, or between God and hatred towards him. Only reason can detect this unsuitability, as—of course—only reason is able to formulate the proposal of taking away another’s property or to love idols.<sup>129</sup>

So there is coherence, despite what I think to be a certain terminological lack of precision, due not only to Aquinas’ analogous use of terms but also to his sticking to authorities and respecting of a more or less received order of exposition in different contexts. The coherence is confirmed exactly by what Aquinas says in I-II, 19 and 20 where he speaks about the goodness of the interior and the exterior act *separately*. Notice again the famous statement in I-II, 19 1, ad 3: “Good 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*: because the reason is the principle of human and moral acts, as stated above.” Equally he says (in article 3 of the same question) that “the goodness of the will depends on reason, in the same way as it depends on the object.” On the other side, in question 20, 1, we will read that “the goodness or malice which the exterior act has of itself, on account of its being about due matter and its being attended by due circumstances, *is not derived from the will, but rather from the reason*.” So the exterior act is the object of the will – in my view what we most properly should call “moral object” – “inasmuch as it is proposed to the will by the reason, as good apprehended and ordered by the reason.”<sup>130</sup> The goodness, in turn, which is in the exterior act “in respect of due matter or circumstances, depends on the reason.” And “on this goodness depends the goodness of the will, in so far as the will tends towards it.”<sup>131</sup>

128. S.T., I-II, 18, 10.

129. In the context of the book of Hosea as quoted in the *Sed contra*, there is a contradiction between “love” and “idols,” only because the worship of idols is an infidelity to Yahweh and his covenant. For a Jew (and later a Christian) the idols were knowingly *false* divinities, and this is why reason can detect their worship and love towards them to be evil. Thus again, it is not the “thing” as such which makes this action evil; because those who, without knowing of their falseness, worship the idols, perhaps do not sin, provided they act in good faith.

130. S.T., I-II, 20, 1, ad 1

131. S.T. I-II, 20, 2.

Remember what I have said above about “due matter”: to understand the idols as “undue matter” we have to include a notion of the act relating to them; they are, according to the logic of the prophet Hosea, only undue matter to acts of love and worship; but not for acts of destroying them. This is again why Aquinas asserts that the godness of the exterior act “in respect of due matter or circumstances, depends on the reason” – and not simply on the things the exterior act relates to.

This is the consistent holistic view in which the moral object which specifies a *human* act, an act proceeding from deliberate will, does not anymore merely appear as an “object of the exterior act” *but as the exterior act itself* proposed to the (choosing) will as a “good apprehended and ordered by the reason.”<sup>132</sup> Abstracting from the interior act of the will (choice) relating to it, the exterior act as conceived by reason is a complex unity of matter and form: the “thing” (provided there is a thing involved) and circumstances in which the thing is posited, and a *ratio boni* which is the rationale of its being striven for (or what I call the “basic intentional content” of the action). A “thing” can be wanted practically, that is, giving rise to an action, only under a *ratio boni* which is not derived simply from its ontological goodness (though presupposing it), but which relates to a kind of action like “appropriating,” “possessing,” “using” etc.

With what I have set forth so far I did not deny – but have rather explicitly asserted – that sometimes it is properly the thing an action relates to which makes the difference in moral specification so that the “thing” actually *seems* to be the morally specifying object. The fact that someone appropriates himself *someone other’s property*, that he clothes *a naked person in need of cloths* or that he sleeps with a *woman he is not married with* is, from the side of the *materia circa quam*, what makes all the difference! But this does not mean that “someone other’s property,” “the naked in need of clothes” and “the woman I am not married with” are the *objects which morally specify* the corresponding acts of “taking away,” of “clothing,” and of “having intercourse with.” As I have already explained above, the “taking away,” if we do not want to reduce it to a mere external behavioral pattern (which could also belong to acts like “confiscation” or “borrowing”) already *includes* a purpose of appropriation and thus the relation to the *res aliena*; only in this way it constitutes an act of “theft.” And the “clothing,” if we also do not want to reduce it to a merely physical behavioral pattern (which could be part of an act of, say, mockery), includes some reference to the goal of this clothing: covering a need. So we cannot really dissociate the “act” from the “thing” it refers to (as its supposed “object”) without losing sight of the very significance of the act and its moral specification.<sup>133</sup>

132. As argued above (section 4), Cardinal Cajetan precisely seems to hold such a holistic view; see especially his Commentary on *S. T. I-II*, 20, referred to above.

133. The case of “sleeping with a woman I am not married with” is somewhat different: here in fact the very act of having sex, insofar it is a determinate physical behavioral pattern, is already an act specified as a determinate *kind* of act (“sexual copulation”), but only on the level of its “natural species”. Whether “having sex,” as such, is morally good or evil cannot be decided; it can only be said that on the ontological level it is good as far as it is an action and the act is performed according to its natural pattern. But with this we are on the level not of moral but of natural (or “physical”) specification of acts. But even

## 8. Final considerations: from “physicalism” to “proportionalism”

To provide an appropriate account of what according to Aquinas is the “moral object” it is not sufficient to simply select those texts which fit into the one or the other interpretation. We must instead try to understand the comprehensive view which unites all the different elements to be found in different passages of different works of Aquinas dating from different periods. Precisely if we are convinced that Aquinas presents a coherent view – which I firmly think he does – we have to try to *make sense* of these texts, integrating them in an overall picture which is coherent and able to unify all the different aspects to be found in the corpus of Aquinas’ work. Aquinas has never himself exposed such an overall theory of moral specification and practical reason. His method possesses all the advantages and the limitations of the scholastic method: he proceeds by questions and answers to objections (not invented by him, but really existing). Moreover, in Aquinas’ moral theory there are implicit presuppositions which we should try to make explicit instead of only sticking to those texts which support one or the other alternative reading. Aquinas has never dealt in a separate question or article what exactly the moral object is, nor has he given a definition of the term “moral object.” We should not, therefore, read him as if he actually did provide such definitions and accounts.

As I have written elsewhere,<sup>134</sup> moreover, I do not think that Aquinas really considered the questions we are concerned about today. His terminology depends on contexts, the authorities he refers to, and the objections to which he is replying in each case. He is using terms, moreover, especially the term “object,” analogously.<sup>135</sup> His doctrine is consistent, but that does not mean that his terminology is uniform and without occasional shifts of meaning (mainly between speaking

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in this case, “the woman” or “the man,” respectively, is not the object of the act “having sex,” because the act of “having sex” (at least this kind of sex) cannot be described without the woman (or the man) with which it is performed. However, all of this does not yet say anything about the *moral* specification of the act, about whether, as such, it is good or bad that two persons of different sex have sexual intercourse. Here we need what Aquinas calls a further circumstance which turns out to be a “principal condition of the object that is repugnant to reason,” that is a determinative condition, relevant for reason and thus for the moral specification of the act. This is, in the present case, the fact that the man having sex is not married to that woman (which, alone, would simply constitute the act as an act of fornication) or that this woman is married to another man or the man is married to another woman (which makes it an act of adultery). The object of a marital sexual act is not a thing: it is not the other spouse, nor his or her body. The object of the sexual act of copulation between a man and woman which specifies it as a marital act, and an act belonging to the virtue of chastity, must be described as the content of an action, the object of a choice. I have described the object of the marital act between two spouses as “to give themselves with their whole spiritual, affective, emotional, and sexual being to loving union,” understanding this “union” physically as copulation, but considering that it is not the physical copulation as such that spouses chose when having sexual intercourse; for this see also my *Ethics of Procreation and the Defense of Human Life. Contraception, Artificial Fertilization, and Abortion*, ed. by William F. Murphy, Jr. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 83.

134. See my *The Perspective of the Acting Person*, 197.

135. See Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, 86.

“materially” and “formally,” i.e. focusing one time on the material and other times on the formal aspect of what an object is). Those who hold that for Aquinas “moral objects” are things to which exterior acts relate, and for this provide certain textual evidence, disregard *other* texts where Aquinas rather seems to hold that the object which specifies an act morally is the *whole*, that is, the exterior act as conceived by reason and as such proposed to the will (which, of course, in many cases also includes “things”). Most importantly, finally, these interpreters fail to integrate their conception of the object into an overall picture of human action, practical reason, the moral virtues and natural law,<sup>136</sup> which is needed to vindicate Thomistic ethics in light of its various rivals.

In many regards, it is not decisive whether we think of the object as the *whole* of the exterior act conceived by reason, or as “things” to which this act relates to – provided, however, these “things” are always considered in proportion to reason which judges the convenience of the act relating to them. In most cases, both approaches will yield identical results of moral assessment. Differences, if ever – and without doubt not necessarily –, will perhaps arise in some very special and difficult cases in which also adherents of moral realism, to which I count myself, can still hold different views. In case this is true, and I think it is, the question of whether the moral object is the “thing” the exterior act relates to or “the exterior act itself as conceived by reason,” has not the importance many of my critics think it to have, overdramatizing the differences. They think it is so crucially important to uphold that the morally specifying objects are “things” because otherwise, so they contend, it would be impossible to defend an objective morality, rooted in real human nature and not flawed by the virus of proportionalism or some other “intentionalist” methodology which undermines the possibility of there being intrinsically evil acts or so called “moral absolutes.”

Notice that even by considering the object of a human act as essentially a kind of proposal – an end of the will – this does not necessarily lead to “intentionalism,” that is, to a position which makes the goodness of a human act dependent only on the intentions of the acting subject, disregarding what is sometimes called “the physical nature of the act.” The decisive question is only how one thinks of intentions, mainly how one thinks of intentions coming to be *formed*. For Aquinas it is clear that any purpose or end sought by the will receives its primary and fundamental goodness from the exterior act as it is proposed to the will as “a good apprehended and ordered by reason.” In this apprehension and ordering, the physical nature of the act is a constitutive, and in many cases the decisively limiting, element. This is why I have written:

Even though every “object” is in fact a type of intentionality – a “proposal” – we must not forget that these proposals are also naturally conditioned. The object of an act is not therefore only “what I want” or “what I propose to do”; rather, a materiality proper to the “physical” nature of the act is also present, a materiality which enters

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136. In my view this is also what is lacking in Joseph Pilsner’s important and extremely useful book *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*.

into the constitution of the object. In particular cases, this natural matter of the act can have a special importance for reason, due to the fact that we are speaking of a nature that doesn't merely surround us, but that we ourselves *are*.<sup>137</sup>

This is how we can also understand that there are acts which are intrinsically evil – Aquinas calls them “per se evil” – , because as such, independently from further intentions, they are incompatible with the human good, contradicting what human beings naturally are and are called to live up to. Here we are speaking of nature “that doesn't merely surround us, but that we ourselves are.” I often used an example which is inspired by a passage of the Commentary of the Sentences where Aquinas writes that “a matter which is not proportionate to the form will never, when the cause acts on it, achieve that form, as a stone through the digestive virtue never will become flesh.” In the same way, Aquinas adds, “also something wanted which is not proportionate to goodness, however good the end may be, will never receive goodness: and such are actions which are per se evil, like stealing and similar things...”<sup>138</sup>

What I hold, finally, is not that “natural conditions” or “things” are not determinative components of the object, but that the object which morally specifies a human act is always *more* than only these “material” factors. It also includes a formal part, the *ratio boni* which is a basic intentionality: an order of reason to an end, without which no human act can be even conceived as a human act and thus morally specified. In my view, a theory of moral specification which disregards this is “physicalist,” while mine in no way is “intentionalist.” Most importantly, it is erroneous to believe that the one or the other view already decides the positions one holds in questions like e.g. the use of condoms for prophylactic reasons. What I have written on this subject does not necessarily derive from my conception of the moral object, but from how one thinks of natural patterns involved in sexual behavior (in this case the physical process of insemination). Also starting from a conception of the object as a “thing” one can arrive at the conclusion that this physical process is not necessarily determinative of the moral specification of the act; conversely, based on my approach it is very well possible to hold that it belongs to that nature “we are” and constitutively enters into the moral specification of the act.

Despite the *relative* unimportance of the question of whether the moral object is a thing or the exterior act conceived by reason, I still think that the understanding advocated by me has the advantage of providing a more coherent and attractive moral theory based on Thomistic grounds, including a doctrine of the virtues and of moral principles (natural law), that is, a unified theory of practical reason leading to a virtue ethics which is *rational* virtue ethics, and thus a kind of moral realism, that is, not the subjectivist virtue ethics commonly set forth in contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy. I do not think that this claim has been really challenged by criticisms like the one set forth by Jensen, Dewan and others. I get the impression that they are not even interested in this kind of moral theory.

137. *The Perspective of the Acting Person*, 241.

138. *Super Sent.*, 1, d. 48, q. 1, a. 2 ad 5.

On the other hand, I am convinced, and have argued for this in several places, that the problems and incoherencies arising from considering the moral object as a “thing,” lead to the kind of physicalism which is characterized by the attempt of directly deriving moral specification from the level of ontological (“physical”) properties of things being unable to give a proper account of how “things” relate to actions and which is the role of reason in conceiving this relationship. This view requires the defense of positions which seem counterintuitive and easily lead to the discrediting of traditional moral realism. For example, it leads to the view that those who were hiding Jews and falsely denied to Gestapo officials (knocking at their door) that there were Jews in their house, committed the sin of lying.

Moreover, the view advocated by me and many others overcomes a traditional “extrinsicist” view of morality as presented in the classical manuals and which in *The Perspective of Morality* I have characterized as follows:

What is peculiar, significant, and decisive here is that the *human act* is described as something carried out exclusively on the “physical” plane; the relation to the plane of morality is merely added by the action theory as a relationship to a norm, and appears to have nothing to do with the act as such. The morality of the action – as constituted in the relationship to the *norma moralitatis* – remains fully external to the action itself. The morality is only constituted *through* the norm (and it is quite understandable that the concept of the “moral law” as norm comes into the foreground, and ultimately as well the concept of God as Lawgiver, and in such a way that all morality and normativity sink into nothingness apart from that conceptual anchorage).<sup>139</sup>

What is typical for this kind of traditional “physicalism” is that morality is held to be established by a *regula moralitatis* which is something outside the organisms of human agency and the practical reason that guides it. This “norm of morality” is seen like an exterior “law” regulating and restricting human freedom. Even those manualists who kept sticking to the Thomistic tradition tended to understand “reason,” as the norm of morality, simply as “right reason” whose “rightness” was established by submitting to “the law,” understood as a norm not springing from within the organism of human agency and practical reason, but rather as coming from the outside (in the form of divine positive law, or as laws of the physical nature, etc). This view was lacking an understanding of practical reason and its principles – mainly in the form of natural law, the participation in the eternal law through human reason – which reveals to the acting subject *from within*, and not simply in the form of an exterior guidance, the moral good he ought to realize. As John Paul II in his encyclical *Veritatis splendor* has taught about natural law, “God provides for man differently from the way in which he provides for beings which are not persons. He cares for man not ‘from without’, through the laws of physical nature, but ‘from within’, through reason, which, by its natural knowledge of God’s

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139. *The Perspective of Morality*, 346.

eternal law, is consequently able to show man the right direction to take in his free actions.”<sup>140</sup>

This is the origin of the “norm of morality”. Only in this perspective can one understand what is meant by the claim that reason is properly the *measure* or *rule* of the morality of human acts, and what expressions like *convenientia ad rationem* or due proportion to reason really mean. Proportionalists have set out to answer this question, but they started from the grounds of traditional physicalism. Proportionalism is actually a theory of practical reason, but an erroneous one. It is practical reason remaining extrinsic to what constitutes moral choice, a reason which simply tries to formulate, instead of an exterior “moral law,” criteria of optimizing consequences of human acts understood in purely physicalist terms (as causing “physical,” that is only pre-moral or “ontic” good and evil).

Traditional physicalism, tending to confuse ontological and moral good – as we still can see in authors like Lawrence Dewan – was not only the point of departure for proportionalism, but is still the rationale of its justification. According to proportionalism, what we—apart from the overall intentions—relate to in choosing this or that action are only things with their “ontic,” “physical,” “pre-moral” value; this theory holds that acts or choices are not able to be morally specified unless one consider all the further intentions with which they are chosen, that is, from what Richard McCormick used to call the “expanded object.” This is precisely the doctrine rejected by the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*.<sup>141</sup> In fact, I think that proportionalism is precisely an attempt to overcome the problems and inconsistencies of physicalism, the confusion between the moral and the merely ontological; they attempted to do so, not by eliminating what gives rise to these inconsistencies, but by using the very “physicalist” approach as the foundation for a new theory of moral specification: proportionalism.

To consider the morally specifying object as a content of the very action considered as intentional action means to overcome extrinsicism and physicalism, and to provide a basis for overcoming proportionalism. Human acts are good or evil not by referring them to some “norm,” but for some property inherent in themselves. Human acts are good or evil in virtue of the goodness or evil of the choice which they embody; and the choices, as acts of the will, receive their moral specification as good or evil, or this or that species of goodness or evil, from the *reason* which

140. *Veritatis splendor*, No. 43.

141. No. 79: *One must therefore reject the thesis, characteristic of teleological and proportionalist theories, which holds that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil according to its species – its “object” – the deliberate choice of certain kinds of behavior or specific acts, apart from a consideration of the intention for which the choice is made or the totality of the foreseeable consequences of that act for all persons concerned.* That means that “the choice” (of a particular behavior or exterior act) can be morally specified independently from the [further] intention for which that choice is made. Notice that the basic moral specification (according to the species or the object) of which *Veritatis splendor* speaks, is moral specification not simply of a “kind of behavior” but of a *choice* (of such kinds of behavior). Choices, thus, can be morally specified independently from further intentions (“stealing,” “murdering,” “blaspheming” etc. can be morally specified as evil actions even if they are chosen for good ends; they remain what they are: evil choices, and thus cause malice of the will).

conceives what the agent sets out to do as a practical good – which, of course, sometimes is not good according to truth because reason has been deceived by the influence of disordered passions or the pride of the will. This is why in order to always and easily have a right appreciation of the good – *recta ratio* – we need the moral virtues.

As I have mentioned, there are many who fear that considering the object of the human act not as the thing related to by an action but rather as an act itself, informed by a “basic intentionality,” leads to arbitrariness and even to “intentionalism” and the abandonment of an objective morality. This, however, is not the case. Admittedly, different presentations and criticisms of my position published in the course of the last years may give the impression that such a danger actually exists. But, in my view, these criticisms instead tend to miss the point. They all presuppose that what I call the “basic intentionality” of a human act, belonging to its object and grounding this moral specification is a kind of *finis agentis* while I think it is part of what Aquinas – though spuriously – calls the *finis operis*.<sup>142</sup> This basic intentionality belongs to the very objective structure of human acts; it is something depending on reason’s grasp of the reality of the configuration of a set of circumstances in which human *praxis* takes place – including the things actions materially relate to –, and not something simply “made” or “constructed” by the agent’s will.

Part of a moral object’s identity is also – in a great many cases – the things actions relate to; and in certain cases the relationship of these things to a kind of doing, a relationship grasped and judged by reason, may be the decisive element in determining the moral specification of the act. In this way, a thing being “another’s property” is a circumstance which is decisive for rendering the act of appropriation of this thing an act against justice, a theft; in Aquinas’ words, such a circumstance is a “principal condition of the object that is repugnant to reason” (and therefore it is not anymore a mere “circumstance” of the act already morally specified by its object).

Some, in my view mistakenly, think that this is why the “thing belonging to another” is properly the moral object (the object which morally specifies). As we have seen, they actually do have support by some texts of Aquinas, which however arguably can also be read in the sense that Aquinas here only wants to stress the fact that, e.g. in the case of theft, the stolen thing being a *res aliena* is the decisive element rendering the act morally evil by its object, but not the object itself.<sup>143</sup> If I hold the “thing being another’s property” is only an *element*, though decisive (i.e. the material part) of the object, which in a holistic perspective, and also including the *ratio obiecti* (i.e. the formal part) in truth is “appropriation of another’s property,” this in no way renders this approach more “subjectivist” or “intentionalist.”

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142. It is interesting that in the Commentary of the Sentences (*Super Sent.* 4, d. 16, q. 3, a. 1, q. 2 ad 3) Aquinas actually calls the object *finis operis* which he distinguishes from the *finis agentis*. The former, Aquinas adds, is the end which gives species to the act, while the latter is the further intention or goal for which an action, already morally specified, is chosen and by which it receives not its proper species, but a “quasi common” species, deriving from the commanding act chosen for the *further* goal.

143. This was also the interpretation of Theo G. Belmans in his *Le sens objectif de l’agir humain*. 177 f.

In fact, for reasons of making out the moral species of the act it makes no difference at all. Also in this case, the moral object is something “given,” which imposes itself on the will of the agent.<sup>144</sup> No agent can, by his own will or further (perhaps laudable) intentions, change the fact that the appropriation of someone else’s property is *theft*, that is an act against justice and thus morally evil.

The advantage of my position, however, seems to be that it puts a stop to what is the possible result of a shortcoming of the more traditional “physicalist” reading of the object as a thing: its resulting in a proportionalist use of physicalism. Proportionalism takes all its force from the fact that things cannot morally specify a human act if we abstract from a rational choosing will relating to them. Only considered as being part of an action chosen by a rational appetite do things become relevant for morality. To stick to the standard example: a *res aliena*, a possession, is, morally speaking, neither good nor evil; it is, as proportionalists say, an “ontic” or “non-moral” good. From this they further conclude that rightfully holding a possession, respecting it or the taking it away (like the destruction of a human life, killing) can at most be considered as causing a “physical” or “pre-moral” evil to be morally specified by the *further* intentions with which such an act is performed.

The error is to start from the assumption that the things are what morally specifies a human act and not a determinate *choice* relating to that thing (as appropriating it or, in the case of killing, taking away another person’s life, i.e. injuring this person which constitutes the *ratio boni* relating to the thing). By considering moral objects as objects of acts of choice, they have to be considered precisely as the action chosen (Aquinas’s exterior act), as a “good apprehended and ordered by reason.” As such, they are already morally good or evil. This, what I call the “holistic perspective,” makes any form of proportionalism impossible and moreover reveals its intrinsic falsity: the error of describing actions by abstracting from their characteristic of always embodying a (morally specified) choice. According to the holistic view, therefore, we can always morally specify the choice of concrete exterior acts, or determinate behaviors, as morally good or evil *independently* from the further intentions of the agent; this means that the will of the agent, being evil by its choice, cannot be rendered good by intending further goals, however laudable they may be.<sup>145</sup>

144. This was also emphasized by Belmans, *Le sens objectif de l’agir humain*, 184.

145. Notice that the encyclical *Veritatis splendor* always speaks, as in No. 79, of “the deliberate *choice* of certain kinds of behavior or specific acts.” See also No. 78: “In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*. The object of the act of willing is in fact a freely chosen kind of behaviour. ... By the object of a given moral act, then, one cannot mean a process or an event of the merely physical order, to be assessed on the basis of its ability to bring about a given state of affairs in the outside world. Rather, that object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person.” Equally, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1761, says: “there are certain specific kinds of behavior that are always wrong to choose, because choosing them involves a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil”, which means that the objects are “kinds of behavior” which morally specify the act of choice.

The fact that – because of my focusing on the more holistic perspective of considering morally specifying objects as objects of a choice – I share with proportionalists their rejection of traditional physicalism, has led some more traditionally minded Thomists to understand my views as close to proportionalism. They, however, failed to notice the entirely different ways in which physicalism was rejected by me, on the one hand, and by proportionalists, on the other. Proportionalists reject or “overcome” physicalism by making out of its vice a virtue, that is, by *using* the physicalist point of departure as an argument for constructing on its grounds an alternative, hybrid methodology which combines, on different levels, physicalism and “intentionalism”<sup>146</sup>; my way of abandoning physicalism was instead by rejecting precisely these grounds, that is, the idea that choices relate to physical (ontological) goods (or evils) – good or evil “things”, “natural realities,” etc. –, being morally specified by them. To overcome this physicalist view, the crucial element for me was understanding the role of reason in moral specification, and the way this works. Aquinas never explains this in detail.<sup>147</sup> By focusing on reason as the proper specifying measure of human acts and their morality, I am certainly on secure Thomistic grounds, as the best of my interlocutors readily admit.<sup>148</sup>

In my view, the task to be fulfilled by today’s disciples of Thomas Aquinas is to give a more integrated account of moral specification of human acts, practical reason, moral virtues and natural law. What Aquinas wrote, and especially what he wrote in his *Summa Theologiae* and the way he exposed the subject matter, cannot be the last word. We have to rethink all this, being faithful to the doctrine of the Master, but also having the courage to detect deficiencies, not in his thought or doctrine, but in the way he exposed it. To repeat it: Aquinas’ methodology, in the end, possesses not only the advantages but also the deficiencies of the scholastic method: an exposition which is very much stuck to authorities and to a received order of exposition and terminology, which in quite a few cases is a hindrance for elaborating a systematic and fully coherent account.

Although as a philosopher I have always considered St. Thomas Aquinas – together with Aristotle – my principal master, I never studied him with the aim of simply understanding his *texts* or being his faithful “exegete.” Even though I am convinced that following Aquinas is a secure way of finding philosophical truth, I consider his thought to be only a privileged *tool* for finding truth, but not the ultimate philosophical truth itself. I think that in the debate about the moral object

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146. See for this my *The Perspective of Morality*, 127-138; 397-417; and chapters 2, 3 and 4 of my *The Perspective of the Acting Person*.

147. This is also asserted, and regretted, by Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas*, 119.

148. In his review of Jensen’s *Good and Evil Actions (The Thomist)*, 76:2, 2012, 321-24), Christopher Kaczor, after having stated that “the texts of Aquinas cannot support proportionalism,” adds what might be helpful for rendering the debate more serene and respectful towards diverging positions: “But in terms of adjudicating between the views of Rhonheimer, Brock, Long, Flannery, and Finnis on the specification of the object of the human act, I wonder if the texts of Aquinas are open, legitimately open, to a variety of plausible interpretations, which – though incompatible with each other – are reasonably credible readings of the Angelic doctor” (323 f.).

and similar topics many seem only concerned to understand what the master said, sticking to texts, yet only referring to those which fit well into one's own picture. Thereby they easily lose sight of the deeper inspiration which lies behind the texts and unifies them. This truly Aristotelian "deep structure" of Aquinas' moral theory is a more synthetic or "holistic" view which can be understood only in the context of authentic philosophical thinking. Merely exegetical analysis of texts will never be sufficient.

Was Aquinas himself a "physicalist"? I would not deny that in some passages his argument indeed is, or at least seems to be, what I called physicalism. Yet, I think none of these passages is his last word. In a determinate text, mostly in his *Summa Theologiae* which, as he says in the Prologue, is a textbook for beginners, Aquinas always says one thing, focusing on the question asked or on a specific objection, always trying to concede as much as possible to his interlocutors. If we do not try to reconstruct the holistic view behind these single texts – as Servais Pinckaers has so fruitfully and exemplarily endeavored to do – we get lost in sticking to single texts, losing the wider context of a moral theory which, as the one Aquinas presents us, is an integrated whole of action analysis, theory of practical reason, of natural law, and of the moral virtues. What I am interested in, and what I have tried to do, especially in my *The Perspective of Morality*, is to better understand and to render attractive this integrated whole.

I have always defended Aquinas as a true Aristotelian who, however, did not hesitate to develop Aristotelian thinking and integrate it into a higher synthesis, creating what I have called "advanced Aristotelianism."<sup>149</sup> Even if this may sound somewhat boastful, I also think an "advanced Thomism" is possible and very much needed in face of the challenges to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of moral realism by modern moral thinking like proportionalism, and other forms of utilitarianism and consequentialism, but also by Kantian and discourse ethical approaches to ethics. ■

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149. This is the main thesis of my *Praktische Vernunft und Vernünftigkeit der Praxis*, referred to above.