

LI Ethics Seminar: March 9, 2014
Kieran Dickinson Notes

The Perspective of the Acting Person and the Nature of Practical Reason

The “Object of the Human Act”: In the Perspective of the Acting Subject

VS: the morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the “object” rationally chosen by the deliberate will. In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies [an] act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*.

VS: an object is not “a process or 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. Objects are not mere givens or things. The object of a human act is always the object of an act of the will and a “freely chosen behavior.” Examples of objects include: “to kill an innocent person” and “to steal.”

VS: The object is the *proximate end* of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person.

Per R, therefore, *the object is the end of the act of the will*, and thus a practical good, presented by reason to the will. Per R, the object is a particular type of end: it is what the will chooses faced with options presented to the will be reason, and thus it is full of moral significance. p. 196

For R, the object answers both the question what and why. (bottom p. 196) The object indicates what one does when one does something and for this reason it also indicates in a basic and fundamental way why one does what one does, given that a human act cannot be understood as a specific kind of act without the end to which it is directed.

Per R, Thomas himself never gave a definitive answer to the question, what is the object of a moral act. Thomas gives such an answer to the question, whether an act is morally good or evil. Thomas taught that the object is the element that confers on the human act its primary and fundamental moral specification. p. 197. VS invites a clarification of meta-ethical presuppositions of Thomas and recommends a personalistic direction, i.e., integrating the point of view of the subject (the acting person) more explicitly in the understanding of the human act and the evaluation of its morality. Such an approach means to understand the object of a human act as an end of the will.

The Object: A “Thing” or an Action?

Per R, Thomas is insufficiently clear in failing to distinguish between the object as a thing versus the object as an action. For example, is the object of “to take what belongs to another” the thing taken (*res aliena*) or is it the action of taking what belongs to another. For R, it's clearly the action, not the thing. Example of the police taking property in possession of a thief to restore it to its owner—this action has the same *res aliena* as a theft, and yet the action of the police is a different act from the act of the thief, precisely because the object is different. p. 198-199. Further example of “observing an eagle” and “killing an eagle.” In one sense, in both cases the eagle is the object, but the acts are different again by virtue of having different objects. In this example, there are insufficient facts to specify the act morally and therefore R seems to suggest that we cannot determine the object (because the object is the element of a moral act that specifies it morally). We do know that killing an eagle is the species of “eagle-cide,” but we don't know from the facts given whether the object is morally good, evil or

indifferent.

Exterior Act as Object of the Will: St. Thomas (ST I-II, 19&20)

R explicates Thomas' distinction between the object of the interior act of the will (known as the “end”) and the object of the exterior act. The object of the exterior act, Thomas says, is to the end as matter is to form. p. 200. (Example of the bodies of the men in the room or participating via Skype and the “form” man.) Thus, from the taking of that which belongs to another (which is the object of an exterior act), it is possible to discern the end, which might be, to feed one's family, to enjoy the thing taken for oneself, etc. But perhaps Thomas means by object of the exterior act in this example, the thing taken (*res aliena*). See Thomas's puzzling example: he who steals that he may commit adultery, is strictly speaking, more adulterer than thief. R reads Thomas to mean that the object of the will is the end (here, to commit adultery) while the object of the exterior act is the means (here, the bodily action of taking something that belongs to another and the thing taken).

R disagrees with Thomas' analysis as stated above. First, because the *res aliena* as such is neither good nor evil and therefore cannot specify the physical act of taking it as morally good or evil. Second, because it implies that the exterior act (that is, bodily movements in question) is immediately and as such the end of the will. This is impossible because of the truth of the Thomistic principle: “the will cannot desire a good that is not previously apprehended by reason.” p. 201.

R suggests that elsewhere Thomas makes arguments that are at odds with Thomas's mistakes cited above. For example, Thomas rightly states that the goodness and evil of act depend solely on the object, because that which specifies the will is the end, but every object of the will is precisely also an end. p. 202. In other words: any act of the will, and therefore also the act that chooses a concrete action, is specified by that which is called an “object,” which is essentially also an end of this act of the will. The end, however, is a good rendered present and desirable to the will by means of reason, the principle of human acts.

R believes that Thomas emphasizes a coincidence between *objective* determination and *rational* determination of the will and that this is decisive. First, when human action is considered formally, that is, according to that which is of its essence – the object of a human act is precisely the exterior act itself or, more precisely, the intelligible significance of the exterior act of the will. p. 202.

Thus, the question is: from where does the goodness (or the evil) of the exterior act originate? We might expect Thomas to say that it originates from the object of the exterior act, but instead he says that it originates from reason. p. 203. Elsewhere, Thomas also insists that the goodness of the exterior act does not come from the will but “from the commensuration of the circumstances, according to which the exterior act is proportioned to attain the goal of man.” The commensuration is a work of reason. p. 207.

[Example: hunter aims cross-bow at companion, shoots, and kills him. Object of the interior act of the will or “end” is unknown: could be revenge, contempt, perhaps self-defense. The object of the act is homicide, which is also the exterior act itself. There are not enough facts to specify the act morally, thus there are not enough facts to identify the object in the strict formal sense. If we added the following facts – the companion owed the killer a gambling debt and the killer had used the hunting invitation as a pretext to isolate and make the companion vulnerable, and the companion was unaware that he was being targeted – then we could define the object of the act as murder and specify it as morally evil. Why morally evil? Not morally evil because of the object of the exterior act, that is, the

companion, but morally evil because killing an innocent person is contrary to reason.]

R gives the example of theft, which is itself an object that confers on the sum of bodily movements of which the exterior act of theft is composed its moral specification. This exterior act causes a disorder in the will of thief; it renders him unjust. Rhonheimer concedes that materially the object of the act is the object of the exterior act and all its attendant circumstances. p. 204 However, these cannot specify the act morally: instead, they are the elements from which the object is ordered and understood by reason. Top p. 206. The exterior act as the object of the will that chooses it is a *good understood and ordered by reason*.

Note that Rhonheimer rejects any confusion of the object with the end. The object cannot, unlike the end, be separated from its material conditions. pp. 206-207. [Example: end could be revenge, but object could be diverse: calumny, vandalism, physical assault, etc. The end does not depend on material conditions, but the object does.] Why does the object depend on material conditions? Because the object or exterior act is a choice of the will understood and ordered by reason, and reason must take into account the material conditions present. Therefore, for example, if the end of an action is, to show love, and the object of the action is adultery, the goodness of the end does not render the act as a whole morally good—because the object is irrational at least in the sense that, of itself, it is not proportioned to the attainment of the good of man. [See also example from fn 42 of blowing up airplane full of passengers to collect the insurance money. See also example of married woman giving herself up to occupying soldiers to save the virginity of two teenage girls.]

“We cannot define or redefine the objective significance of our actions in function of what we propose. Rather, that which an agent can reasonably propose (and consequently choose) in a given situation is understood by reason, not simply as a function of “proposals” or “intentions” that can be freely oriented by the agent, but subject to the concrete circumstances in which the choice is carried out, according to the criteria of reasonableness inherent – in virtue of the natural law – in practical reason, criteria which are therefore also objective.” p. 207.

Tonight's reading ends with R explaining that for Thomas reason is not just a tool but a law itself: it is the measure of the morality of human acts, it is inherent in man, and it is a participation in divine reason. Man is man because he has a rational soul. Therefore reason has the role of regulating what is conformity with man's nature and is therefore good for man. Actions are good or moral in as much as they proceed from reason. p. 209. As for nature, it is the principle that establishes the norm of reason (given that man by nature is in essence a creature with a rational soul). Reason, however, not nature, determines whether an action is evil or good.