

Moral Questioning in Aquinas: A Reciprocal Relation between Ends and Means

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Since, as human beings, we normally intend ends, objectives, or goals under the precept of good (our seeking of goods) and means which would function as secondary goods if we are to achieve our desired ends, because we must choose which means are to be employed to achieve a given end (since we can achieve a given end through using different means, the means being relative¹), our moral inquiry really and properly begins only as we move toward making some kind of wise, rational choice (an *electio*) when we first deliberate about different possible means and the aptness or utility of one means instead of another.² The question of aptness is especially crucial since, here, aptness cannot be understood in a manner that relies on material analogies. In some situations, yes, a means can be more immediately effective than another in order to accomplish a short term result but, if the end to be achieved is to exist as an enduring kind of morally good thing (for instance, a beneficial change in the character of a given human person), and if a connatural relation should exist between means and ends (the meaning of a means would exist as a function of the meaning of a desired end),³ the selection of appropriate, apt means functions as a kind of suggestive heuristic: it should better reveal or to point to the meaning of a desired end.⁴ Selecting a means and implementing it improves our apprehensions of meaning as we more clearly grasp a good which we desire as a specific, intended end. As any desired good is more clearly understood, its attainment then becomes more likely and probable. We can make better decisions about where to begin. Thus, through a right disposition of things which serve as means that are directed toward an end, previously unknown meanings are found and discovered for goods or ends that, initially, had been less adequately grasped and understood.⁵ And then, as this happens, our growth in understanding changes us as human agents and subjects as we find that we are more able to make better decisions on the means that we will use to achieve an end that has become more well known to us. The relation between means and ends forms and moves into its own form of interdependence as our understanding of one enhances our understanding of the other. Prudent choices select both means and ends in an ordering of them and we can begin to learn more how means and ends are to be related to each other in the context of the different inclinations which exist as virtues where here, reasonably,

¹*De Veritate*, q. 22, a. 6; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 5, a. 6.

²*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 12, a. 4, ad 3; 2a2ae, q. 47, a. 7.

³*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 18, a. 6; 2a2ae, q. 181, a. 1, ad 3; a. 2.

⁴*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 7, a. 2, ad 1 on the utility or fitness of employing an action as a means that leads toward a desired end. Utility belongs to Aquinas’s understanding of practical reason as one explanatory principle although it is combined with others in a way which mitigates against its primacy. In his *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 378, n. 3, Martin Rhonheimer quotes from Cicero, *De Officiis*, III, 30 to indicate how the principle of utility is to be understood in the context of Aquinas’s analysis:

Nothing can be useful that is not at the same time morally good. And it is not morally good because of its utility, but because it is good, it is also useful.

⁵*Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 47, a. 7.

in the context of our inquiry, a different mean needs to be selected within a given set of conditions and circumstances.⁶

The changes which occur within us as human agents, and which necessarily vary as we move among ourselves (as we go from person to person) in turn explain why the means that we choose to effect a desired end will always vary among us as we move amongst ourselves from one to the other. No one means will work for all of us⁷ when the end (as it understood) and also the means (that are chosen), ultimately entail changes in who we are as functioning human beings and how we differ as living human subjects.⁸ As, individually, we relate to ourselves as changing subjects in a context which is also itself constantly varying and changing, with greater clarity and obviousness does our prudence emerge as a form of knowledge and behavior that is essentially defined or which is influenced by the changing relations which exist among all the elements that are changing in themselves within a larger context of relations which is itself also changing.⁹ Changes in one affect another in a context that is defined by a form of mutual conditioning which can be identified in terms which speak about a modified form of reciprocal causality. As changes, for instance, occur in the external world of our environment, we are not necessarily forced to make a change in ourselves although, admittedly, the press of circumstances would seem to suggest that a given particular change should, in fact, be made. The good of our prudence points to the degree of understanding which, ideally, we should have.

⁶*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 66, a. 3, ad 3.

⁷*De Veritate*, q. 22, a. 6.

⁸*Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 47, a. 7, ad 3. Citing Frederick E. Crowe's translation, *Three Thomist Studies*, supplementary issue of *Loneragan Workshop*, vol. 16, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Loneragan Institute, 2000), p. 59, n. 67, "the mean is not found in the same way in everyone." As earlier Aquinas had noted earlier in the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 64, a. 2, "men vary in their tempers," in the relation which they have with their passions (see *St. Thomas Aquinas Philosophical Texts*, trans. Thomas Gilby, p. 310, n. 880).

⁹*Sententia libri Ethicorum*, 6, 6, 1187.