Is Every Action Morally Significant?

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Abstract
One form of scepticism about the possibility of *moral theory* does not deny that there is something describable as 'the conduct of life', but it argues that there is no special ethical account to be given of this since conduct has no identifiably *moral* dimension. Here I explore the possibility that the problem of identifying distinctively moral aspects of action is explained by the thesis that the moral is ubiquitous; that *every* human action *is* – not 'may be' – morally significant. To say, however, that morality is all pervasive is not to say anything about how *demanding* moral considerations may be. Reasons for action ultimately relate to promoting or protecting the human good, and their relative strength and urgency derives from the manner, extent and immediacy of their bearing upon this end and not from belonging to some logically distinct category.

> 'It is a mistake of morality to try to make everything into obligations.'
>
> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 180.

> 'Every individual human action that proceeds from deliberate reason must be good or bad.'
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> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, IIae, q. 18, a. 9

1. Some varieties of moral scepticism

Within contemporary moral philosophy there is broad agreement concerning what, in general terms, moral theory is about, namely: as *ethics*, the fields of value and of right action, or, more widely, the conduct of life; and, as *metaethics*, the structure and status of our thoughts and descriptions of these matters. Here such agreement ends, however, giving way to rival and often highly divergent accounts of the precise form and content of moral theory, the epistemological status of moral claims, the metaphysical character of their satisfaction conditions, the relative priority of concepts of virtue, obligation and value, the relation between particular judgements and general principles, and so on.

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Such, indeed, is the extent of disagreement over these fundamentals that some have been drawn to the idea that the very project of modern moral philosophy may be misconceived, inasmuch as part or even all of its presumed subject matter is non-existent. This unsettling thought takes several forms.

Some of these involve versions of relativism, or of 'situationalism': according to which norms and values are either so culturally, historically and personally dependent, or are so existentially particular as to defy subsumption under any coherent system of categories. A radical hermeneutic version of the latter idea is expressed by John D. Caputo who writes that 'the discourse on the end of ethics means setting off the ends, limits and boundaries of ethics. It means to insist upon the provisionalness of ethical rules, the inaccessibility of the singular to ethical universals, the unforseeability of the future to ethical mandates'.[1] A related position advanced within analytical philosophy, viz. 'particularism', does not eschew such ethical universals as moral concepts, but it similarly denies that there are any true, substantive, general moral principles.[2]

Another, familiar form of moral 'scepticism' or revisionism construes the subject matter of ethics as illusory, rather in the manner of the objects of superstitious beliefs concerning the powers of effigies. John Mackie famously introduced the expression 'error theory' to describe this idea 'admitting that a belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language, but holding that this ingrained belief is false'.[3] Adopting Mackie's suggestion, and speculating that the appearance of objective value is a result of the objectification of attitudes and affections, David Gauthier then reconstrued the subject of 'moral discourse' as being in reality the field of individual preference, and attempted to show that agents have reason to restrict themselves in accord with principles of mutual advantage.[4] As with Mackie's description of a

[1] John D. Caputo, 'The End of Ethics' in Hugh LaFollette (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 127. For an extended presentation see Caputo *Against Ethics* (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1993).

[2] For several discussions of positions of this sort see B. Hooker and M. Little eds. *Moral Particularism*, Oxford: OUP, 2000) and for some criticism of paticularists' efforts to give an alternative account of generality in moral thought see Rebecca Lynn Stangl, 'Particularism and the Point of Moral Principles' *Moral Theory and Practice* **9** (2006), 201–229.

[3] J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 49.

[4] David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: OUP, 1986).

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practical system of morality including devices for counteracting limited sympathies, in Gauthier's scheme conventions and self-imposed constraints take the place of moral realities.[5]

A third version of the idea that moral philosophy rests on a mistaken conception is unsettling in a special way, for it questions the assumption that the subject has a distinctive field of inquiry: *moral* value and prescription. This challenge may or may not deny that there is something describable as 'the conduct of life' which might properly be the subject of evaluation, but it is concerned to argue that there is no special definable aspect of this: the *moral* dimension of action, and hence that there is no subject matter for *moral* philosophy *per se*. Some authors trace this idea to Nietzsche's attack upon what he describes as morality in 'the narrower sense'; by which he means a system of evaluating actions not in terms on consequences but by reference to the value of the intentions that lie behind them. He writes: 'it is under the sway of this prejudice that one has morally praised, blamed, judged and philosophized on earth almost to the present day'.[6]

Across the range of his writings, however, Nietzsche moves between different characterizations and criticisms of morality, and recent scepticism among analytical philosophers about there being a distinctively moral dimension of action is more clearly traceable to Elizabeth Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy'[7] and to Bernard Williams' 'Morality the Peculiar Institution'.[8] Anscombe observes that while the term 'moral' derives from Aristotle (*ethikos* via *moralis*) its modern use does not easily fit his sense of ethics; and she goes on to question the intelligibility of that modern use as indicating some sort of absolute verdict, praising Hume for showing that 'no content could be found in the notion 'morally ought"'. Anscombe's point, however, is not to undermine the idea

[5] The effect barely saves the phenomena, however, since it eliminates constraints that do not assume reciprocity and amounts to a change of subject - from morality to rational choice.

[6] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 63.

[7] 'Modern Moral Philosophy' *Philosophy* **53** (1958), 1–19; reprinted in *Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe. Vol. 3 Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

[8] 'Morality, the Peculiar Institution' ch. 10 of Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins, 1985). For an analysis of Williams' position which relates it to that of Anscombe see Stephen Darwall 'Abolishing Morality', *Synthese* **72** (1987), 71–89. Darwall undertakes a defence of morality against Williams' attack.

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that there might a coherent ethical system that consisted of moral obligations regarding which absolute verdicts are in order, indeed she believed there are such systems (and that at least one of them is true: the Decalogue of Hebrew scripture). Rather she wanted to insist that the idea of such a system has no reasonable sense outside of a divine command or other law conception of ethics.

Unlike Nietzsche, Williams was not averse to the idea that an agent's intentions, affections and dispositions might be proper objects of ethical evaluation, but unlike Anscombe he did not think that an account of human nature could provide an adequate alternative foundation for ethics. In this respect his challenge to the idea of the *moral* is presented not with an interest in substituting some other general system of values and norms but in order to question the idea that there could be a unified account of rightness in deliberation and action. Williams concludes his attack on 'morality, the peculiar institution' by observing that 'Many philosophical mistakes are woven into morality. It misunderstands obligations … it misunderstands practical necessity … it misunderstands ethical practical necessity … . Its philosophical errors are only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life.'[9] The starting point of his criticism, however, is the thought that no good sense can be made of the idea that there is 'one especially important kind of deliberative conclusion – a conclusion that is directed towards what to do, governed by moral reasons, and concerned with a particular situation'.[10]

One way of understanding Williams' version of the third kind of moral scepticism, or at least a major element of that scepticism, is as doubting that there is a moral dimension.[11] Certainly once this doubt is raised it can seem compelling and unsettling. The earlier suggestion by Anscombe that the morality-defining 'moral ought' is simply an echo of a divine law conception of ethics did not succeed in exorcising among most philosophers the sense that there are such things as moral reasons for, and moral evaluations of action. Hence moral philosophy, otherwise untouched or unpersuaded by radical relativism or irrealism, has largely proceeded untroubled by fears that it might not have a distinctive subject matter. A common effect of Williams' very secular scepticism, however, is to supplement criticisms of formal definitions of morality (in terms of other-regardingness,

[9] Op. cit. 196.

[10] Op. cit. 174–5.

[11] My use of the term 'scepticism' follows that of recent times in covering both claims about what exists as well about what can be known.

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over-ridingness, universalisability, and so on) and produce a doubt that one can so much as identify moral reasons and evaluations, and this even if 'the moral' is understood more broadly than by reference to the strong deontological categories of the obligatory or the prohibited.

2. Recovering the moral dimension

By way of countering the tendency of such scepticism to undermine the very idea of objective value and requirement, and of associated notions such as those of moral consciousness and deliberation, I wish to consider the possibility that the problem of identifying distinctively moral aspects of conduct is explained not by the suggestion that they are nowhere to be found, but rather by the thesis that the moral is ubiquitous; that *every* human action is (not 'may be') morally significant.[12] My purposes are expository as well as philosophical; since I wish to present and defend against initial objections a view of the moral realm as co-extensive with the field of voluntary intentional action, and to indicate a rich source of this idea in the ethical writings of Thomas Aquinas. It is surprising that this aspect of Aquinas's moral theory has rarely been explored, even among Thomists and those who have studied his writings.[13] That is one

[12] This then allows that actions may also be evaluable on other non-moral grounds, as efficient, effective, ingenious, fruitful, skilled, timely, and so on.

[13] For general treatments of Aquinas's moral philosophy that are sensitive to analytical thought see John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political and Legal Theory* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), Anthony Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), and Ralph McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1982), *Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1992). More specific and detailed studies are provided by Denis Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington DC.: CUA Press, 1997), Stephen Brock, *Action and Conduct: Thomas Aquinas and the Theory of Action* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), Kevin Flannery, *Acts Amid Precepts: The Logical Structure of Thomas Aquinas's Moral Theology* (Washington, DC.: CUA Press, 2001) and Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue* (London: SPCK, 1994). For an extensive treatment of Aquinas in the context of a magisterial account of the history of ethics see Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: From Socrates to the Reformation* (Oxford: OUP, 2007). Aquinas's claim that every human action has worth is considered and defended by Ralph McInerny in 'Ethics' in Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*

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reason to present it here; another is to display its intrinsic philosophical interest. A third may be added, namely, to encourage further, particularly among younger philosophers, the sort of movement between analytical and Thomist approaches to moral philosophy that began half a century ago in the work of thinkers such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot and Peter Geach and continues in that of Alasdair MacIntytre, John Finnis and others.

In the fifty years since Anscombe's strikingly original and enduringly valuable analysis of 'Modern Moral Philosophy' ethical theory has grown in sophistication and complexity, yet for the most part it remains in the quandary she identified. Consequentialism is unable to account for the complexity and diversity of values and for the idea of moral inviolability, and it is itself intrinsically too implausible to sustain the denial of the former and the rejection of the latter. Meanwhile, Neo-Kantianism remains bedeviled by the fact that the idea of pure practical reason appears either to be an illusion or else to provide at most the form but not the content of ethics. Contrary to Kantian deontology morality seems to make sense only to the extent that it has a point beyond the satisfaction of a formal practical principle; and contrary to consequentialism that point seems insufficient to warrant, and often appears to run counter to the aggregation and maximisation of benefit.

Anscombe wrote that 'it might remain to look for "norms" in human virtues', and others have developed this as if it were a proposal for a third kind of ethical theory on a par with, but as a competitor to consequentialism and deontology. I doubt this was Anscombe's intention, but in any case theories of virtue do not *per se* constitute a third option, for *every* ethical theory has to address the issue of character and disposition, and the ethical writings of Mill and Kant certainly do just this.[14] More radical than the thought that virtue

(Cambridge: CUP, 1993) ch. 7, and touched upon briefly and incidentally by Philippa Foot in *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 76. The idea is discussed and defended, by Anscombe though without reference to Aquinas in 'Good and Bad Human Action' in M. Geach and L. Gormally (eds) *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by GEM Anscombe* (Exeter: Imprint, 2005).

[14] Mill writes 'does the utilitarian doctrine deny that people desire virtue, or maintain that virtue is not a thing to be desired? The very reverse. It maintains not only that virtue is to be desired but that it is to be desired disinterestedly, for itself.' *Utilitarianism*, ch IV, para 5, various editions. Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* was originally published in two separate volumes: *The Doctrine of Right* and *The Doctrine of Virtue*. In the latter,

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matters, however, would be the suggestion that it is the *sole* locus of value: that the good of actions and that of outcomes are nothing but the reflection of goodness of heart or intellect or will. But that is at best implausible and at worst incoherent, for what could make a good heart or will good other than their orientation towards a good or goods independent of them, or the influence of such a source of goodness upon them?

Evidently these three points of focus each address an aspect of the truth about morality. What is called for is an *integration* of these aspects; an account of how the goodness of action is the upshot of its *kind*, of the agent's *orientation* including his judgement, and of the *circumstances* attending its performance, including but not limited to its intended and foreseen consequences. I shall not be attempting the task of full integration here, but as the discussion develops it should at least become clear that the ethical theory of Aquinas has the merit of recognising the constitutive role of these different aspects.[15]

In her book *Natural Goodness*, the late Philippa Foot acknowledged this point drawing upon elements of Aquinas's analysis of the role of act-type, goal and agent in determining the goodness or badness of action; and earlier she invoked him in discussing the nature of practical reasoning. It has rarely been noted how highly Foot regarded Aquinas, yet in her well-known essay 'Virtues and Vices' she had written 'It is my opinion that the *Summa Theologica* is one of the best sources we have for moral philosophy, and moreover that St Thomas's ethical writings are as useful to the atheist as to the Catholic or other Christian believer.'[16] For all the respect properly accorded Foot as one of the main figures responsible for returning

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moral duties are treated teleologically, with a duty of virtue being an end which it is our duty to have. For an account of the relation of this to the more familiar parts of Kant's ethics see Allen Wood, 'The Final Form of Kant's Practical Philosophy', in Mark Timmons ed. *Essays on Kant's Moral Philosophy* (New York: CUP, 2000).

[15] For a detailed discussion of Aquinas's account of the classification of actions according to their end, object, matter, circumstance, and motive, see Joseph Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

[16] P. Foot, 'Virtues and Vices' in *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 2. Foot's obliging references to Aquinas are cited and discussed by Fergus Kerr 'Aquinas and Analytic Philosophy: Natural Allies?' in J. Fodor & F.C. Bauerschmidt eds, *Aquinas in Dialogue* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

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English-language moral philosophy to cognitivism, few who cite her with approval have followed the course she recommends and actually used Aquinas as a resource for their own work. Indeed, for all the good efforts of those already mentioned and others, it still largely remains for Aquinas to be 'discovered' by moral philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition. Some Thomists might be inclined to say that this shows something about the failings of analytical philosophers; but it might as easily be said that it records the general failure of Thomists to engage with, let alone to contribute to the mainstream of English-language philosophy.

3. Aquinas on the moral character of action

Attempts to delineate a *moral* field within the wider area of action, so as to leave a margin of indifference, are supported by two complementary intuitions. First, that some kinds of action are clearly morally wrong and ought never to be performed; or, on some views, they are practically tolerable only under highly exceptional conditions when to fail to perform them would be in dereliction of some weightier obligation).[17] Second, that certain forms of behaviour are neither required nor forbidden: going for a walk, or washing one's face, say. Of course, it is compatible with the latter intuition that a particular walk might be obligatory or prohibited if it were also a token of a morally significant type of action, e.g. it would be prohibited if it constituted the gratuitous abandonment of an injured child. Absent such a circumstance, however, going for a walk or washing one's face are paradigmatically the sorts of voluntary intentional action whose instances are morally indifferent.

The idea that there is an area of, or scope for moral indifference has been taken to provide an argument against act (and perhaps also rule) utilitarianism and related forms of consequentialism.[18] Since such

[17] Michael Stocker argues that 'ethical theories can and should account for the existence of moral choices involving acts that are justified, even obligatory, yet nevertheless wrong, shameful, and regrettable', see 'Dirty Hands and Ordinary Life' in Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), 9.

[18] See in this connection Bernard Williams, 'Persons, Character and Morality', in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981); and Susan Woolf, 'Moral Saints', *Journal of Philosophy* **79** (1982). For a good discussion of the properties of stringency, pervasiveness and overiddingness as these may be thought to apply to morality see Samuel Scheffler, 'Morality's Demands and Their Limits: Competing Views', ch. 2 of *Human Morality*

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theories elucidate the notion of ethical requirement in terms of benefit–maximisation, and there are in any circumstance of choice one or more options which (among those available) have maximum benefit, it follows that *every* action is either required or prohibited. But this conclusion is deeply counter–intuitive; and thus is extended the list of unacceptable implications of utilitarian theory. It might now seem that the objection may be generalised beyond consequentialism and directed against any view which regards all actions as morally significant. This is not so, however, for a reason to which I shall return below. It is important at the outset, however, to distinguish two claims: first, that some actions are morally neither necessary nor impossible, and second, that some actions are morally indifferent. Rejection of the latter does not imply denial of the former, provided that the notion of moral significance is not identified with those of obligation and/or prohibition.

It is also argued against utilitarianism that it fails to give adequate account of the category of the *right*. More precisely, by reducing it to the maximisation of the *good* it fails to give sense to the idea that some kinds of behaviour (other than maximising or non-maximising ones) are right or wrong in and of themselves. This is a failure common to all forms of maximising consequentialism.[19] There is also reason, however, to object to theories of this sort which define strong deontic notions (such as obligation or moral necessity) in terms of axiological concepts: for it is not at all clear how the fact that a state of affairs would be *good* is sufficient for the truth of the impersonal claim that it is *morally obligatory* for an appropriately-sited agent to bring it about.

This and the previous objection rest on the belief that while ethical necessities and impossibilities may obtain partly in virtue of values, nonetheless they are logically different phenomena, and hence cannot be explained in terms of the good alone. This problem might properly be termed the '*is*/*must* (*is*/*must not*) gap'. It does not concern the supposed fact/value distinction, for the '*is*' in question already attaches to value predicates. Nor is the problem that of how to pass from a statement that something is 'good' to another

(Oxford: OUP, 1992). See also T. Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism* (Oxford: OUP, 2001) who defends a hybrid theory combining rule consequentialism and a modified version of Scheffler's agent-centred prerogative.

[19] This said the consequentialist is able to treat one kind of action as intrinsically right, i.e. that which constitutes the realisation of his favoured value. In this sense such varieties of consequentialism are deontological.

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statement prescribing action directed towards it. This latter transition may be effected by invoking the fundamental principle of practical reasoning sometimes referred to as the '*synderesis* rule' and stated by Aquinas as the prescription: 'Good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided' (*bonum est facienum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum*).[20] Thought directed towards action presupposes this general principle of 'good-favouring', just as theoretical thought (directed towards belief) presupposes the principle of 'true-believing'. Just as truth is normative and partly constitutive for belief, so good is normative and partly constitutive for action.[21] Accordingly, when deliberating, to think of something as being in some way valuable is *ipso facto* to have a (*prima facie*) reason to pursue it. Evidently there is an ambiguity in the formulation 'good is to be done' between the view that the proper object of rational willing is the good *simpliciter*, and the claim that what is to aimed at is the good for the agent. The former is endorsed by Kant, but Aquinas's position begins from the perspective of an agent engaged in the rationally directed realization of his or her own natural powers and tendencies. Thus, he introduces the *synderesis* rule as follows:

> [T]he first principle of practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that "good is that which all things seek after." Hence this is the first precept of law, that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided." All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this: so that whatever the practical reason naturally apprehends as man's good (or evil) belongs to the precepts of the natural law as something to be done or avoided.
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> Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which

[20] *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, IIae, q 94, a 2. References to the *Summa* (hereafter *ST*) are either to the older Dominican edition (London: Washbourne, 1912–15) or to the modern Blackfriars edition (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963–75). The *synderesis* principle as Aquinas conceives of it seems to be jointly inspired by Aristotle, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, Ch.1 and Bk. VI Chs 11–13, and by scripture: *Psalm* 33: 14 reads: 'turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and avoid evil'.

[21] In this connection see J. David Velleman, 'The Possibility of Practical Reason' *Ethics* **106** (1996), 694–726, reprinted in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); also the essays in Sergio Tenenbaum (ed.) *Desire, Practical Reason and the Good* (Oxford: OUP, 2010) which explore the claim that desire, or intention, or intentional action aim at the good.

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> man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Therefore, according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law. … [first] inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature: and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law. [22]

This suggests, what is elsewhere made apparent, namely that for Aquinas in the context of practical reasoning 'good' is to be understood in the first instance reflexively as 'good for the agent', then as relative to the condition of another as 'good for the patient', with further attributive occurrences ('… is a good K') being interpreted in relation to these prior forms.[23]

The value/motivation gap is closed in the context of practical deliberation because to be engaged in the latter *is* to be committed to the idea that (other things being equal) one ought to do what one perceives (or learns) to be in some way good. Consider the context of choosing items from a restaurant menu and being told by one's companion that a particular item is excellent. In context this is both delivered and received as a *practical* judgement. It is not just factual information, but provides specificity to the practical orientation towards the good, rather as in an automated steering mechanism a compass bearing may function to redirect the already moving vehicle or vessel.

This noted, however, the space between *is* and an unconditional *must* remains unbridged. The *synderesis* rule is not a categorical imperative, and it therefore fails to yield conclusions stating what must or must not be done, absent reference to some end. Nor, however, is it what Kant terms a *problematic* hypothetical imperative.[24] Rather it is *assertoric*, and exhibits an internal connection between the concepts of action and value in general, with further specific precepts exhibiting similar connections between courses of

[22] Ia, IIae, q 94, a 2. response.

[23] For a recent discussion of these issues, not in relation to Aquinas, see Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 2007), ch. 2.

[24] *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, translated as *The Moral Law* by H.J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1948), 78–9. Compare the teleology of moral imperatives in Aquinas's scheme with that schematized in Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue*, see supra note 14.

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action and specific elements of the human good. In Kant's schema imperatives of this non-problematic sort have antecedents that refer to factors that are necessary or otherwise non-optional, and since they always obtain they do not need to be stated. Yet it remains the case that these factors provide the antecedents of conditionals the consequents of which are not free-standing. Accordingly, assertoric hypotheticals cannot serve to analyse genuinely categorical judgements, ones without any stated or suppressed conditional antecedent.

Noting that the *synderesis* principle is presupposed in *all* practical reasoning, some commentators take it to follow that it cannot either be intended, or properly regarded, as a distinctively *moral* rule.[25] If, however, my claim concerning Aquinas's commitment to the view that all actions are morally significant is correct, then this interpretation of the rule is mistaken – but for an interesting and unobvious reason. Those who advance the 'non-moral' interpretation rightly stress that the principle is not to be compared with specific ethical formulae ('secondary moral precepts') such as those Aquinas offers elsewhere concerning, for example, sexual relations and truth-telling. They also emphasize its complete generality as the normative assumption of all practical thought, doing so in order to undermine Humean doubts about the *is*/*ought* transition. For if it can be shown that outside the area of traditional sceptical suspicion (i.e. the 'moral realm') practical deliberation yields conclusions prescribing action on the basis of statements about what is the case, then a general Humean claim to the effect that reason is inert will have been shown to be false. One might then expect to extend this result to the moral case by adverting to the special character of the values involved.

All of this, however, presupposes that there is a distinction to be drawn among intentional actions between those which are and those which are not morally significant, and it is apparent from what Aquinas writes in the *Summa Theologiae* and elsewhere that he denies any such distinction. For example:

> … acts are called human inasmuch as they proceed from a deliberate will. Now the object of the will is the good and the end. And

[25] This view is taken by Germain Grisez in the important and influential article 'The First Principle of Practical Reasoning: A Commentary on *The Summa Theologiae*, 1–2, Question 94, Article 2', *Natural Law Forum*, **10** (1965) 168–201, a shortened version of which appears in A. Kenny (ed.) *Aquinas* (London: Macmillan, 1970) 340–82. Grisez's view is indirectly endorsed by J. Finnis in *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) Notes to III, p. 6.

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> hence it is clear that the principle of human acts, in so far as they are human, is the end.
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> … And since, as Ambrose says (*Prolog. super Luc.*) morality is said properly of man, moral acts properly speaking receive their species from the end, for moral acts are the same as human acts.[26]
>
> If anything whatsoever is done when it should, where it should, as it should, etc., then this kind of act is well-ordered and good; but if any of these be defective, the act is badly ordered and evil.[27]

Where the commentators are correct is in their judgement that by itself the *synderesis* rule does not yield moral obligations as these might be expressed by statements of absolute requirement independent of any reference to the protection of a good. Indeed, I doubt that the *is*/*must* (or for that matter, the *ought*/*must*) gap can be crossed – if '*must*' is understood as marking an unconditioned categorical – without bringing in the dictates of a special moral authority or legislator, or, if such makes sense, by self-command; or by voluntary contract. Aquinas himself appears to suppose that prohibitions and duties simply follow as conclusions from practical reasoning involving various precepts. Since these have the general form of directives it is easy enough to see how conclusions may be expressed as positive or negative requirements, but this remains within the context of pursuing the human good. To question whether Aquinas's scheme provides for the derivation of wholly non-hypothetical imperatives frames the matter in modern Kantian terms, yet the issue of the status and source of obligations was debated in the medieval period and followers of Duns Scotus maintained that *absolute* requirements are not derivable from consideration of nature and hence, if they are to be acknowledged at all, must be traced to a different source.[28] This raises the question: of whether the moral '*must*' is naturally intelligible, or whether recognition of it depends upon first recognising and acknowledging the authority of some person's will? The latter is, I think, the more plausible alternative, but unless one believes in, and accepts oneself to be bound by such a moral authority there is reason to doubt the coherence of the idea of impersonal obligation.[29]

[26] *ST*, Ia, IIae, q1, a 3.

[27] *De Malo*, q 2, a 5; see also: *ST*, Ia, IIae, q 17, a 9.

[28] For further discussion of this issue see John Haldane 'Voluntarism and Realism in Medieval Ethics', *Journal of Medical Ethics* **15** (1989).

[29] See again Anscombe 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.

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This conclusion may be pressed into the service of a form of moral scepticism.[30] Yet it lends the same kind of indirect support to the claim that all human actions are morally significant. It serves both because (setting aside appeals to divine or other personal authority) it undermines the attempt to identify part or whole of the moral field as the region of obligatory action. If no actions are of and by themselves such as categorically must be performed or omitted (apart from any implicit reference to an independently specifiable good) then one way of defining the area of supposed indifference, i.e. by exclusion, is not available. This being so it is appropriate to consider how it could be the case that there are no *indifferent* actions. Here I return to Aquinas.

4. Every action is morally significant

The *synderesis* rule underlies all practical reasoning, and insofar as it is indifferent to the particular subject matter of deliberation it might be described as a 'transcendental' principle of practical thought. In the formulation: *bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum*, '*bonum*' and '*malum*' are employed as the most general evaluative terms, hence the disadvantage of rendering *malum* as 'evil' given the modern connotations of the latter. Furthermore, the connection between acting towards the achievement of some end and regarding it as good is a conceptual one. This is not to say that every action is good, but only that insofar as behaviour is action it is directed towards something thought to be of worth by the agent. There is then an *internal* connection between the notions of action and value. Clearly, however, this fact alone is insufficient to show that all actions are morally significant. It only establishes that they are directed at ends conceived of as desirable by those involved; not that they are in reality desirable, or that the goodness which they are thought to have, and may possess, is moral goodness. As Aquinas writes: 'He who desires a good seeks to have it as it really is in nature, not as it is in his consciousness.'[31]

To see why he nonetheless claims that every action is morally significant (and why we might wish to follow him in this) we should ask what distinguish human deeds from mere bodily movements. In the *Summa* this distinction is rendered as that holding between *actus humani* – 'human acts', i.e. intentional performances (be they

[30] As by Williams' in 'Morality the Peculiar Institution'.
[31] *Quae shones Disputatae de Veritate*, q. 17, a 3, and 4.

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mental, as in an 'interior judgement', or physical) and *actus hominis* – 'acts of a man', i.e. events which have a human cause but are not intentional. Accordingly:

> Those acts alone are properly called human of which a man is master. Now, a man is master of his acts through his reason and will. Therefore, free will is said to be a faculty of the will and the reason. Thus, those acts are properly called 'human' which proceed from deliberate choice.[32]

Later, when discussing further the issue of freedom of the will, Aquinas considers and rejects objections to the claim that 'voluntariness is found in human acts'. Again he points out that not all of our behaviour is properly speaking human action. Only that of which one is the immediate cause and which one chooses, either for its own sake or for the sake of some further end, is intentional and thereby voluntary action (which, of course, may yet be reluctant) . This involves two components: *desire* and *knowledge*. The former is itself a type of act the spring of which is 'inside' the individual but which aims at some good. What knowledge adds to desire is a conception of the end towards which the appetite is directed.

> Accordingly, whenever a thing so acts or is moved by an inner principle, viz., as having some awareness of the end, then it holds within itself the principle of the activity, and not of the acting merely but of the purposive acting as well …
>
> Those things which have some grasp of what an end implies are said to move themselves because within them lies the source not only of acting, but also of acting with a purpose.[33]

Having given account of the nature of intentional action, Aquinas proceeds to discuss the theme of 'Good and Evil in Human Acts in General'[34] As regards *types* of actions he maintains that since acts derive their character from what they aim at, then inasmuch as its intended goal accords with 'the reasonable order of life', a type of action aimed at some species of good is thereby itself good.[35] He cites as an example the giving of alms to the needy. In saying that acts derive their specific character from what they aim at, however, Aquinas

[32] *ST*., Ia, IIae, q1, a1.
[33] Op. cit.
[34] *ST*., Ia, IIae, q 18, a. 8–9.
[35] 'If the object of an action includes something in accord with the order of reason, it will be a good action according to its species' *ST*., Ia, IIae, q. 18, a. 8, *responded*.

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also goes on to distinguish between the (intentional) object of an action, the goal intended by its performance, and further ends towards which an agent may be aiming through performing such an action.

This relative and contextual distinction between the 'object' and 'end' of action is relevant to the refutation of one of Hume's arguments for moral non-cognitivism. Hume addresses the opening part of Book III of *A Treatise of Human Nature* ('Of Morals') to arguing that 'Moral Distinctions are not Derived from Reason'. Invoking the principle that 'reason has no influence on our passions and actions' he argues that 'since morals have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be derived from reason'. For Hume the inertness of reason derives from two purported facts: a) that it concerns only the discovery and truth and falsity, which themselves relate exclusively and exhaustively to relations of ideas or to matters of fact; and b) that statements evaluating or commending motives and actions belong to neither category. There are several familiar lines of response to Hume's general argument but one suggested by the earlier discussion of the *synderesis* rule is that he illicitly excludes practical rationality from the sphere of reason. For Aquinas, as for Hume, truth is the proper object of speculative determination, but the good is an equal object for practical deliberation and *qua* practical the latter is intrinsically directive. At this point, though, I am concerned with a particular line of argument deployed by Hume to show that moral judgement is not cognitive. He writes:

> I would fain ask any one, why incest in the human species is criminal, and why the very same action, and the same relations in animals have not the smallest moral turpitude and deformity? If it be answered, that this action is innocent in animals, because they have not reason sufficient to discover its turpitude; but that man, being endowed with that faculty, which *ought* to restrain him to his duty, the same action instantly becomes criminal to him; should this be said, I would reply, that this is evidently arguing in a circle. For before reason can perceive this turpitude, the turpitude must exist; and consequently is independent of the decisions of our reason, and is their object more properly than their effect. … Animals are susceptible of the same relations, with respect to each other, as the human species, and therefore would also be susceptible of the same morality, if the essence of morality consisted in these relations. Their want of a sufficient degree of reason may hinder them from perceiving the duties

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> and obligations of morality, but can never hinder these duties from existing; since they must antecedently exist, in order to their being perceived. Reason must find them, and can never produce them. This argument deserves to be weighed, as being, in my opinion, entirely decisive.[36]

There are two points in the Thomistic response to this 'decisive argument'. First, Hume assumes that the only difference that reason can make is in the discernment of an independently existing relation, which is constant as between rational and non-rational creatures. For Aquinas, however, predications across significantly different categories are generally analogical not univocal, and the rational form of life typically reconfigures (or 'renatures') the activities it subsumes. Put another way, descriptions of intergenerational relations and of sexual activity are only analogously applied to both human and non-rational animals, and 'the want of a sufficient degree of reason may precisely hinder these moral relations from existing'; reason makes a difference to the facts as well as to their discernment. Second, even where an action may be describable by reference to an intention (its immediate object) and under that description be presumptively bad, it may also be correctly redescribable by reference to a further end which renders it permissible and even required. Aquinas illustrates this point in the course of distinguishing 'object' and 'end' in answer to the question whether 'Whether human acts are specified by their end':

> One and the same act, in so far as it proceeds once from the agent, is ordained 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. It is possible, however, 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 of different moral kinds [*secundum speciem moris*]: 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 end *per accidens*, but only from that which is its *per se* end. Now moral ends are accidental to a natural thing, and conversely the relation to a natural end is accidental to morality [*Fines autem*

[36] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (ed.) L.A. Selby-Bigge various editions, Book III, Part I, Section I.

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> *morales accidunt rei naturali; et e converso ratio naturalis finis accidit morali*]. Consequently there is no reason why acts which are the same considered in their natural species [*secundum speciem naturae*], should not be diverse, considered in their moral species [*secundum speciem moris*], and conversely.[37]

Type–individuation of actions (*secundum suam speciem*), therefore, classifies them according to immediate intentional content (proximate object) and further end. Some purposes are good while others are bad; accordingly, some action types have moral significance. As Aquinas observes, however, there are kinds of objectives that are not *per se* either in harmony or in discord with the rational conduct of life. Consequently, action types characterised by reference to objectives of these sorts are themselves morally neutral. Here the examples he offers are: to pick up a straw from the ground, and to go for a walk in the fields.[38]

The issue that now arises is that of the possibility of neutrality in the individual case (*secundum individuum*).[39] It might be thought that an act of a neutral type or species is thereby itself neutral. Aquinas blocks this inference, however, by adverting to the fact that every particular has characteristics additional to those belonging to it in virtue of its kind. Consider the parallel with substantial particulars – a comparison suggested by Aquinas himself employing the example of humanity and the many qualitatively different instances of it. The material realisation of human nature involves

[37] *ST* Ia IIae, q. 1, a3

[38] Interestingly, the example of picking a straw from the ground features as an instance of religious devotion in the work known as *Le Practique de la Presence de Dieu*. In it the Abbé Joseph de Beaufort reports Brother Lawrence as saying that 'having taken as the end of all his actions, to do them for the love of God, he was well satisfied therewith. He was happy he said, to pick up a straw from the ground for the love of God, seeking him alone, purely, and nothing else, not even his gifts.' Conversation Two, 28th September 1666, see Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. E. M. Blaiklock (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), 21. This comes in a passage that seems to bear the mark of the Abbé's interpolations and it may be that the example was suggested by him, recalling Aquinas's discussion. Br. Lawrence was unlikely to have read the *Summa* and says that he did not find his way of life in books. In the essay 'Good and Bad in Human Action' cited above Anscombe discusses actions presumed to be 'morally neutral' and gives as an example 'picking a dandelion flower as I go along'. Although she does not refer to it, she knew of Aquinas's discussion and probably had it in mind.

[39] Op., cit., a 9.

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properties which admit of accidental variation. Likewise with the tokening of actions types.

> In this manner each individual act should be invested with some circumstance, not least of motive, which draws it into the field of right and wrong.
>
> For since it is the office of reason to control, if an act issuing from deliberate reason is not shaped by due purpose it will be against reason, and so will have the character of evil, while if it is so shaped …[it will] have the character of good. A human act is bound to be one or the other, either having or not having this direction to a fitting end.[40]

5. Dropping 'morally' is not abolishing morality

From these sections of the *Summa* two related ideas emerge.

First, we require some account of the difference between, on the one hand, merely colliding with objects in the environment, or being pushed and pulled this way and that by various forces, and, on the other, being aware of the world around one, identifying features of it, evaluating them, deliberating, and then, in the light of this, pursuing various objectives. What marks this distinction is implicit in the latter part of the list of responses. It is that one conceive of things as in various ways frustrating, falling in with, or advancing the movement of life in oneself and in others; or as Aquinas has it: "befitting [its] reasonable order'. And, of course, *every* individual human action is open to this mode of assessment; a fact which simply follows from the characterisation of *actus humani* as voluntary intentional performances.

> Consequently all activity of human beings which proceeds from deliberate reason must needs be good or bad in the individual case. Anything, however, that is not done deliberately but absent-mindedly, as when you rub your chin or move your hand or shift your feet, is not properly speaking a human or moral act … and so it will be neutral as being outside the category of moral acts.[41]

Second, this latter 'neutrality' evidently differs from that discussed previously, for the cases Aquinas mentions are mere bodily

[40] Op., cit.
[41] Op., cit.

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movements not human actions and hence fail to be candidates for moral evaluation. The earlier neutrality or indifference concerned some action *types*, and here again Aquinas gives good account of the matter. Type–individuation can tell us whether the relevant way of behaving is, as in the case of healing, play, friendship, education, etc., disposed towards the realization of those natural inclinations the satisfaction of which constitutes human goods; or whether as with murder, rape, torture, narcotic addiction and the such like, it is at odds with it. In some cases, however, the action type need not of its nature incline one way or the other, although its instantiation in actual cases of choice brings with it features that dispose it in favour or against the progress of life. Moreover, on such an understanding of the nature of human activity it follows that in the expression '[A's øing was] *a morally good human action*', 'morally' is pleonastic. The superfluity of the term does not of course lend support to the cause of scepticism. It is not that it fails to find application, but rather that since morality concerns human well being inasmuch as this is affected by what we *do*, and every individual action contributes to or detracts from the orderly development of life, therefore the conditions for its application are ubiquitous.

Accordingly, in evaluating action from the perspective of the human good there is a sense in which there is strictly no need to include 'morally' in one's judgements, and there are reasons for not doing so.[42] First, its inclusion suggests that something more is being said about what has been done than that it was performed with the intention of advancing or damaging human life and perhaps was successful in its aim. And it is this suggestion which encourages the chase after additional facts about moral requirement over and above such truths as that in the circumstances there are goods available to be realized, or evils to be avoided or eliminated, and that this being so one has reasons to act. Setting aside again any reference to the obligation-generating will of God, or of others, or of oneself, this chase leads either to the introduction of free-floating requirements, what Mackie described as 'objectively prescriptive', or else, in recognition of the difficulties facing this proposal leads to

[42] One has, however, to recall that the evaluation is of this sort as pertaining to the human good, as contrasted with ones of efficiency or effectiveness relative to some purpose that might itself be at odds with human well-being. Thus Aquinas observes 'In this way good is found even in things that are bad of themselves: thus a man is called a good robber, because he works in a way that is adapted to his end.' *ST*. Ia IIae, q. 92.

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its rejection and thereby to the espousal of scepticism about the idea of an objective moral domain.

The use of the term 'morally' in conjunction with an evaluative expression creates the impression that something beyond goods and practical reasoning about them is at issue, and when no such distinctively *moral* feature can be discovered the (fallacious) inference is drawn that morality is an illusion. This is one kind of bewitchment which language can effect: recognising the presence of an expression in a context one becomes convinced that it has its own special significance there; and then, failing to locate this, one rejects the whole context as senseless. If we follow Aquinas, however, we see that the eliminability of the expression 'morally' in contexts of action-evaluation is due to the necessary *presence* of morally relevant qualities, not to their *absence*.

The second reason for omitting the redundant term when judging action to be good or bad from the point of view of human life, is that attention is thereby directed towards the particular features of the case which commend or condemn it, and is not distracted from them. The importance of this, beyond avoiding a fallacious inference to scepticism, is that it keeps to the fore the (internal) connection between moral evaluation and the identification of factors bearing upon human well–being. To describe a human act as (non-accidentally) good, is to say that in performing it the agent realised some value. The insertion of 'morally' adds nothing by way of specifying the particular value and it risks distraction by suggesting that the warrant for applying the term is provided by something over and above the contribution made by the action to human flourishing. If we follow Aquinas's account of the nature of intentional action and of the way in which goodness is predicable of it *per se*, then we should conclude that there is neither need nor benefit in speaking of morally significant human actions: 'morally' adds nothing and risks losing everything.

6. The determination and asymmetry of the good in action

It may be useful to review how, according to Aquinas, the goodness or badness of individual acts is determined, for two features of this account are of special interest. First, while it is teleological, having as its central concept the notion of human flourishing and relating moral value to the promotion of this, it is nevertheless *not* consequentialist and allows the intrinsic relevance to evaluation of *intention*,

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motive and *context*. Here a further point regarding the proper end of human action is also worth noting, especially as in one reading of what Aquinas says (an interpretation which I regard as exegetically plausible and intrinsically compelling) it contrasts with a common, though certainly not universal feature of consequentialist theories.

At the outset of the part of the *Summa* that is concerned with action and value, the '*Prima Secundae*', Aquinas addresses the theme of the end (*finis* / *τλος*) of human life and asks the question 'whether all men have the same last end?'. He writes:

> We can speak of the last end in two ways: first, considering only the aspect of last end; secondly, considering the thing in which the aspect of last end is realized. So, then, as to the aspect of last end, all agree in desiring the last end: since all desire the fulfillment of their perfection, and it is precisely this fulfillment in which the last end consists, … But as to the thing in which this aspect is realized, all are not agreed as to their last end: since some desire riches as their consummate good; some, pleasure; others, something else. Thus to every taste the sweet is pleasant but to some, the sweetness of wine is most pleasant, to others, the sweetness of honey, or of something similar. Yet that sweet is absolutely the best of all pleasant things, in which he who has the best taste takes most pleasure. In like manner that good is most complete which one with well-disposed affections desires for his last end.[43]

Setting aside the implicit dismissal of spurious ends, the import of the conclusion of this passage is ambiguous between single and plural interpretations of the highest good. Either there is one end for humanity which those of best judgment identify, or else there are many ends identified by diverse but equally good judges. Here, it should be emphasised, we are concerned only with *natural* ends and not with the higher but rationally undeterminable *supernatural* end that is participation in the life of God via the beatific vision.[44]

There is no doubt that Aquinas proposes as an ideal of practical rationality the orderly and concordant integration of diverse goods within a conception of a final end, be that a state or an activity, but this proposal allows of both dominant and inclusive end

[43] *ST*. Ia IIae, q.1, a.7.

[44] See Denis Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington, DC.: CUA Press, 1997).

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conceptions.[45] Much has been said regarding the interpretation of Aristotle on this latter issue, and since Aquinas is indebted to him in his characterization of the final end as an object of universal desire one might seek to construct an interpretative case by way of identifying parallel points. Here, however, I proceed directly to a part of the same question (*ST*. Ia IIae, q. 1) where Thomas considers the suggestion that 'one man can have several last ends'. He begins (q.1, a. 5) by quoting Augustine:

> It would seem possible for one man's will to be directed at the same time to several things, as last ends. For Augustine says (*De Civitate Dei* xix, 1) that some held man's last end to consist in four things, viz. "in pleasure, repose, the gifts of nature, and virtue". But these are clearly more than one thing. Therefore one man can place the last end of his will in many things.

Aquinas then replies to this saying 'All these several objects were considered as one perfect good resulting therefrom, by those who placed in them the last end.' If we now move forward to the passage previously quoted in which he introduces the synderesis rule (Ia, IIae, q.94, a2) and read further in his response we find Aquinas listing various goods:

> Since good has the nature of an end, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit … preserving human life, and warding off its obstacles, … sexual intercourse, education of offspring and so forth. … living in society … shunning ignorance, avoiding offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things.

What this introduces is a limited list of headings of value relating to aspects of life. It is neither intended to be comprehensive nor, given what he says elsewhere, can it be taken that all the goods mentioned are necessary ingredients of every possible good life, and finally it is not, nor could be it be specified how such abstractly identified goods might be determinately realised. Again leaving aside the issue of a supernatural end, the highest good for the sake of which all act is an inclusive not a dominant end: there is more than one kind of good life.

[45] The terminology of 'dominant' and 'inclusive' ends was introduced via discussions of corresponding issues in Aristotle by W.F.R. Hardie see his 'The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics' *Philosophy* **40** (1965), 277–295.

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Secondly, given the way in which the several aspects of an act-token determine its moral character there is a greater chance of one's acting badly than acting well. Why this should be so emerges with the elaboration of the contributing factors. Something of these was indicated by earlier quotations in which it is suggested that the moral worth of an action depends upon its *kind* or species, its *purpose*, and the *circumstances* of its performance. There is, in addition, a fourth respect in which an action may be said to be good, but this is so pervasive across the whole ontological domain as to be set aside when considering any particular field. This is the idea, inherited by Aquinas and other medieval authors from neo-Platonism via Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, that *being* as such is good. Aquinas introduces this thesis early in the *Summa* (Ia, q.5, a1) and provides an argument for it via the notion of the end of action:

> Goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea; which is clear from the following argument. The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the Philosopher [Aristotle] says (*Ethics*. i): "Goodness is what all desire." Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists; for it is existence that makes all things actual, as is clear from the foregoing (Ia q. 3, a. 4; and q.4, a.1). Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really. But goodness presents the aspect of desirableness, which being does not present.[46]

With regard to the other three moral value-determining factors, Aquinas identifies these aspects by means of the vocabulary of *form*, *end*, and *accident* thus:[47]

(1) *Formal* aspect: the specific type of action as designated by its intentional or proximate object.

[46] See also Ia IIae, q. 18, a. 4.

[47] *ST*. Ia, IIae, q. 18, a. 4. This taxonomy also overlaps with and can be reformulated in terms of the four Aristotelian causes (formal, material, efficient and final). One important issue, which I do not discuss, save incidentally, here, is the basis on which one should determine what belongs to the form of an act, what to its end and what to its circumstances. Suffice it to say that Aquinas would not regard this as either arbitrary or up to us to decide. For some discussion of this issue see Stephen Brock, *Action and Conduct*, ch. 2 'Agency as Efficacy' and for the general framework of determinants Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St Thomas Aquinas*.

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(2) *Final* aspect: the specific end towards which it is directed.
(3) *Accidental* aspect: the manner or context in which it is performed, and those consequences which though foreseen lie outside its object or end.[48]

To illustrate by examples: one might (as a nurse, say) be feeding a hungry child (*form*), in order to restore her strength (*end*), having been changed to do this by a doctor, and foreseeing that this will consume scarce resources (*accident*); or again, one might provide shelter to a homeless stranger (*type*), with the aim of being regarded as benevolent (*intention*), when one's own family are not properly housed (*context*). In the first case each component is good and consequently the particular deed is a virtuous act. In the second case, however, while housing the homeless is a good type of action, one's vainglorious intention is bad, as are the circumstances in which one would be neglecting to do what one ought with regard to antecedent needs for which one has a special contextual responsibility. Hence, this instance of a good species also exemplifies unworthy characteristics and thereby is a bad action.

Aquinas claims quite generally that an act is only good if *each* aspect of it is good, and correspondingly but not symmetrically that an action is bad if any aspect of it is bad: 'if any of these be defective the act is badly ordered and evil [*malum*]' (*op. cit.*). Two features of this call for comment. First, the requirement that all determinants of an act be good may seem to be in tension with the earlier claim that there can be neutrality at the level of types although every token of an indifferent type is either good or bad. For if, given a suitable intention and context, an instance of a neutral type is good this appears to refute the claim that in order to be virtuous every aspect of what one does must have positive value. One might be inclined to reply to this objection by qualifying the requirement so as to allow that an action is good if none of its aspects are bad and some or all of them are good. This would eliminate the apparent tension with the type–neutrality thesis and retain the asymmetry between the determining conditions of the goodness and badness of actions: an act is bad 'if any of these be defective'.

[48] *ST* IIa. IIae, q.64, a7, response: 'Nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended, while the other is outside the intention [*praeter intentionem*]. Now moral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is outside the intention, since this is accidental.' This, of course, is the place cited in the *Summa* as the origin of the doctrine of double effect.

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In fact, however, this qualification to the original claim is neither necessary nor desirable. The reason for avoiding it is that it raises doubts about another of Aquinas's theses mentioned above and with which I am here principally concerned, *viz*. that there are no indifferent act–tokens. The doubt arises since the qualified requirement imposes no restriction on where neutrality may be found among the constitutive aspects of an action and so allows the possibility of insignificance in any one of its type, intention or manner. But if *each* of these may be neutral there seems no reason to suppose that in some cases they may not *all* be so, and hence that such individual actions are morally indifferent; which is, of course, precisely what Aquinas denies.

I shall consider in conclusion a further quasi-formal objection to Thomas's view that everything we do is significant, but for the moment my concern is with its content. The difficulties presented above can be avoided if one recognises that why Aquinas allows neutrality as a value for certain action-types (and *only* for these) is precisely because as abstract they lack features of concrete acts such as the agent's intentions and the manner and context of performance (including foreseen but unintended consequences), features which direct them towards or away from the perfection of human nature. Some types, however, are such that any instances of them, no matter what other features they exhibit, including goodness of intention and consequence, are essentially at odds with well-being and hence are always and everywhere bad. Others, by contrast, are in accord with the 'rational order of life', e.g. housing the homeless, and consequently their instances are good unless corrupted by features of their occurrence.

Action types can be understood in either realist or further terms, as sortal universals or as general terms or concepts. Whichever view one favours, the type-neutrality and token significance theses are compatible one with another and with the requirement that if a token action is to have positive value then all aspects must be good. Aquinas's claim is that while an action may be morally neutral insofar as it instantiates the event-universal *going–for–a–walk*, (or falls under the corresponding general description), in virtue of the agent's intentions and contextual factors such a particular also instantiates a morally significant type, e.g. taking beneficial exercise, or neglecting one's family. Thus, while there may be neutral types, any token of such is *also* a token of a significant type, and it is only when the factors which, together with its type, determine its value are all of them good, that a token action is good.

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The latter conjunct leads to the second of the two features of Aquinas' claim that call for comment. This is his insistence that the determinations of acts as good and as bad are not symmetrical. Why should it be the case that being bad in a single respect entails overall badness while having a good aspect is not sufficient for being good? The answer is given by the nature of action as intentional. As was discussed, Aquinas distinguishes human acts from other events by reference to deliberative teleology. As animate beings, humans are possessed of natural potentialities and dispositions, and the orderly development of life involves the realisation and exercise of these in fitting relation to one another and to the proper end of life itself, viz., flourishing. As sentient and intelligent creatures they are able to direct their behaviour towards these ends, as they perceive them. Thus movement is action if intentional, i.e. if it involves aiming at some real or imagined good. Of course, 'imagined' in this context is not part of the intentional content of agents' attitudes (no-one could act in pursuit of an end conceiving it simply as 'an imagined good'). Only if one regards something as being somehow valuable can one move oneself towards achieving it.[49] Thus reference to the idea of real goods is implicated in the analysis of the concept of action. Accordingly, the asymmetry in the evaluation of acts can be traced to the direction in which action is aimed i.e. towards the good.

A further feature of this structure is that while in any situation of choice there may a number of options that are definitely excluded, as falling under types directly at odds with the agent's or the broader human good, there will not in general be a best course of action let alone an obligatory one. The primary role of specific moral precepts in Aquinas's scheme is not to direct the agent towards a good that is particular to their nature and circumstances but to direct them away from courses of action that would be bad for any agent to follow. The inclusiveness of the good recognizes the possibility of indefinitely many particular ways of proceeding towards a flourishing and fulfilled life, and the pursuit of these descends from the level of principles to highly particular prudential

[49] In saying this it is not being assured that prior to, or in the course of acting (or even subsequent to it) one must entertain some thought to the effect that the intended end is desirable. This may simply be presupposed, rather as one who addresses a stranger presupposes certain things about them without necessarily giving thought to these beliefs. Even so, a criterion of behaviour being intentional action is that an agent could identify with it as expressing his or her favourable view of the end towards which it is directed.

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judgements. Thus while the pursuit of knowledge is as such a good and always to be commended it cannot and should not always be pursued given the contingencies of circumstance; but the principal headings of human value directly imply that some kinds of action would be always and everywhere wrong without regard to circumstances (*semper et ad semper*).

7. A fallacious proof of indifference

Finally, one might try to reject the non-indifference thesis directly by showing that it is somehow contradictory, or by refuting it through demonstrative counterexample. In the course of a short study of Aquinas's moral theory, D.J. O'Connor mentions Thomas's claim that individual acts cannot be morally insignificant only to dismiss it as 'implausible'. He then adds an argument supporting this rejection:

> Suppose I quite deliberately perform some trivial act, say, for example picking up a straw from the ground, in order to try to provide a counter-example to this assertion. This can hardly be an evil action if it is undertaken with the sincere desire of establishing a philosophical point, namely, refuting Aquinas's assertion. And can it be a good action if it is undertaken with the intention of being a morally indifferent one? Yet, being deliberate, it is certainly a human action. It seems that St. Thomas' theory lands him in a paradox here.[50]

O'Connor's reference to a paradox suggests that he thinks of his argument as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Conceived as such it might be structured as follows:

(1) Every particular act is either good or bad.
(2) This picking of a straw from the ground in order to provide a counter-example to 1) – by being undertaken with the sincere desire of establishing a philosophical point, but with the intention of being morally indifferent – is a particular act.
(3) Therefore, this picking of a straw from the ground is either good or bad.

[50] D. J. O'Connor, *Aquinas and Natural Law* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 40–1.

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(4) But if this picking of a straw from the ground is undertaken with the sincere desire of establishing a philosophical point, then it is not bad.
(5) And if this picking of a straw from the ground is undertaken with the intention of being morally indifferent, then it is not good.
(6) Therefore, this picking of a straw from the ground is neither good nor bad.
(7) Hence, (contrary to 1) it is false that every particular act is either good or bad.

So put, it is easy enough to see one way (at least) in which the argument may be countered, for 5) is unwarranted, and it looks to rest on the fallacious principle that if one intends an action to be morally indifferent then it is so. As a general point that is evidently false, and in the particular case it is clear that the act in question falls under a good act-type, viz. seeking-to-demonstrate-philosophical-truth, itself an instance of promoting the aim of significant knowledge, which is a realisation of a positive human capacity, and hence in turn is a contribution to the human good – and not just the good of the individual (O'Connor) but that of his readers also. One might, perhaps, treat the argument not as a purported *reductio* but as a simple refutation by counterexample; but even then it is open to the same objection: for meaning an act to be indifferent does not make it so; and (ironically) in the special case of meaning it to be indifferent for the sake of advancing philosophical truth this intention determines it to be of a (defeasibly) good type.

8. Conclusion

The thesis of the moral non-indifference of every voluntary intentional action cannot easily be dispatched. It is not paradoxical, and nor is it liable to the familiar charge brought against consequentialist theories on grounds of their being intrinsically excessively demanding. In the latter connection it is important to be clear about two points: first, that to say that morality is all *pervasive* in the sense indicated above is not to say anything about how *demanding* moral considerations may be; and second, that so far as concerns the question of how far moral considerations *override* other good reasons for action this issue does not arise, for all good reasons ultimately relate to promoting or protecting the human good, and their relative strength and urgency derives from the manner, extent and immediacy of their

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bearing upon this end. That is what it means to say that every action is morally significant, at least as I have presented that claim. It may well be as Williams suggested that a mistake of morality is to make everything into obligation, but it does not follow that it is a mistake to think that everything we do should be informed by an understanding of agency as being always and everywhere under the ordinance of the good.[51]

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[51] The fact that Anscombe accepted the latter point should give reason to doubt that her criticism of the idea of morality, and her urging us to drop the moral 'ought', was essentially the same as Williams' critique and recommendation.

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