

## **The Agency Question in Thomas Aquinas**

**Jeffrey Hause**

**Abstract:** Despite the increased attention both religious and secular thinkers have given to Aquinas's philosophy in the past sixty years, few studies have brought out the interdependence of his theories of agency, virtue, and moral responsibility. As a result, the existing secondary literature often represents Aquinas's ethical views incompletely or inaccurately, and scholars find themselves unable to resolve questions about such key issues as the nature of virtue or the explanation of moral responsibility. In this study, I will explore one of these three topics—human agency—in the light of my recent investigations into his accounts of virtue and responsibility in order to resolve hitherto intractable problems preventing scholars from understanding Aquinas's theory of human action and its relationship to his ethical thought.

## Statement of the Problem

The project I am proposing is to write an article (which would in turn be revised as a book chapter) that would resolve what I will call “the agency question” in Thomas Aquinas’s action theory: What, if anything, makes me, and not some agent outside of me, the source of my action? Furthermore, what justifies imputing my actions, including their moral features, to me? The uncontroversial and uninteresting answer to the agency question is that it is my rational faculties: reason, which grasps potential ends, makes plans and passes judgments, and will, which wants these ends, initiates deliberation and makes choices. An interesting and informative answer would explain *how* reason and will co-operate to produce a responsible action, but Aquinas is notoriously ambiguous on just this issue. This vagueness has spawned dozens of attempts to settle the question in the past half century alone. The reason scholars have failed to find a satisfactory answer is that their studies suffer from a flawed methodology: a circular reasoning that is hard to detect and even harder to escape. What I propose, therefore, is a new method of proceeding that will escape the circularity, one my recent scholarship has put me in a perfect position to undertake.<sup>1</sup>

## The Project’s Significance

What I have noted so far should underscore the significance of this project for Aquinas studies. Answering the agency question will furnish scholars with a clear understanding of the foundation of Aquinas’s theory of moral responsibility, which forms the basis of his ethical system. In turn, that understanding will enable scholars to resolve still other long-standing puzzles in Aquinas’s philosophy, such as (a) What makes me responsible for my negligent omissions to act? (b) How can those who act not out of passion or ignorance, but with a clear head and a cool heart, will what they know is bad when Aquinas contends that one always wills what one takes to be good? (c) How is it possible to act responsibly and yet out of character? Because these problems are still under debate among contemporary ethicists, resolving these problems in Aquinas’s ethical system will provide a model for contemporary thinkers to follow.

Scholars working on the history of medieval and early modern philosophy will also profit from this study. It was once generally thought that Aquinas’s action theory played only a small role in subsequent medieval thought because some of its key views were condemned by Bishop Stephen Tempier in 1277. However, Bonnie Kent [1995] has recently shown that this is far from true: Medieval thinkers were not as dissuaded by the condemnation as previously thought. Scholars working on the history of action theory in the Later Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period will need an accurate interpretation of Aquinas’s influential action theory if their studies are not to be skewed throughout.

Contemporary action theorists will benefit from this study for a different reason. In the early 1960s, Oxford’s Anthony Kenny and Cambridge’s G.E.M. Anscombe re-introduced large portions of Aquinas’s theory of action into the contemporary philosophical discussion, where it has had a lasting impact. I believe that Aquinas’s views on agency, accurately conveyed, can be of further service to the contemporary debate. For instance, many philosophers, following Donald Davidson [1963], agree that our reasons for acting are (efficient) causes of our actions. Others, such as George Wilson [1989], hold that reasons explain actions teleologically, that is, by being our actions’ objectives. Because Aquinas has a well developed account of the ways in which efficient and teleological explanations are linked in the production of human action, a clear, accurate interpretation of Aquinas’s views could help to clarify and resolve contemporary worries, as such interpretations have done in the past.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Methodology section below.

## Summary of Pertinent Literature

Over the past seven centuries, scholars have offered five distinct solutions to the agency question. The first four presuppose the consensus view that Aquinas works with a faculty psychology (that is, they presuppose that, in his view, each human being has certain natural faculties or capacities for acting and being acted upon). These include our capacity to think rationally (reason), to cognize the particular, concrete features of the world (the senses), to feel affections of love and desire (the concupiscible appetite), to feel emotions of anger and hope (the irascible appetite), and to desire things on rational bases (the will). It is in the interaction of these various capacities that human action is produced. The question, then, is what about these various capacities and their interaction explains human agency?

In the secondary literature, scholars have taken Aquinas to be arguing that what makes me an agent is

1. chiefly my will which, undetermined by any cause outside itself, spontaneously determines itself to act or not [e.g., John Capreolus 1900-1908; Lottin 1942-1960; Stump and Kretzmann 1985]
2. chiefly my will which, undetermined by any cause outside itself, spontaneously determines itself to will *x* rather than *y* [e.g., Finnis 1991; Gallagher 1994; Hoffmann 2007; Michon 2009]
3. chiefly my reason which, undetermined by any cause outside itself, passes a free judgment to do or pursue *x*, and the will follows reason's judgment by wanting to do or pursue *x* [e.g., MacDonald 1998; DeYoung et al. 2009]
4. chiefly my reason which, whether determined or not by some cause outside itself, passes a free judgment to do or pursue *x*, and the will follows the reason's judgment by wanting to do or pursue *x* [e.g., Scotus 1639; Hause 1997; Pasnau 2002; Eardley 2003].

However, each of these studies (my own included), despite their different conclusions, suffers from the same methodological flaw: Each engages in an insidious circular reasoning, as I will explain below in the section on Methodology.

Recognizing the impasse scholars have met with in trying to resolve the agency question, a few researchers have recently taken a radically new approach [Shanley 2007; Michon and Hoffmann n.d.]. Arguing that Aquinas only *appears* to support a faculty psychology, they assert that the agency question is in fact a pseudo-problem. Our capacities to reason, to will, to sense, and to feel emotions all stem from the same source: the human being. It is a mistake, then, to ask which of our capacities or constellation of them explain our agency, since our agency is simply a consequence of our human nature. This interpretation would indeed resolve the agency question by cutting the Gordian knot of faculties and their interrelationships. Nevertheless, it faces two serious difficulties. The first is that its resolution makes agency, at bottom, utterly mysterious. The second is that Aquinas himself insists that humans act through their capacities, each of which has its own distinct nature, that is, its characteristic ways of acting and being acted on. Therefore, the assertion that Aquinas does not really support a faculty psychology seems to be an *ad hoc* solution to a problem that seems otherwise intractable.

These prior studies, while flawed, are far from useless. As I will explain below in the unit on Methodology, the crucial task will be to approach the same data from a new perspective, one informed by Aquinas's thought on moral responsibility and virtue. Since these topics have been my primary research focus over the past ten years [see Hause 1998, 2006, 2007, 2010, and forthcoming], I have precisely the background needed to conduct this new study.

## Methodology and Schedule

In my view, the reason scholars have failed to resolve the debate over the agency question is that their methodology is flawed. The authors of the relevant secondary literature follow this procedure: They collect proof texts from Aquinas's writings that purport to show that the will operates independently of reason in this or that respect, or texts that purport to show that the intellect operates independently of the will in this or that respect, and they answer the agency question on this basis. However, there are serious problems with this approach. The first is that these proof texts are often short comments in discussions meant to establish some further point about human action, responsibility, moral character, grace, or some such. Although Aquinas devotes several discussions to reason and will, even some on which power is "higher" than the other, he never devotes a discussion to settling the agency question. Because the proof texts are assertions made in the context of other issues, when scholars neglect these larger contexts they risk distorting Aquinas's thought.

The second problem is less obvious and more insidious: The typical approach to answering the agency question is circular. As the mountain of secondary literature has shown, the so-called "proof texts" are susceptible to various readings that support the various answers to the agency question. Scholars take these texts in the light of their theoretical presuppositions, and then use these very texts to argue for those presuppositions. For example, Aquinas's claim that the act of will "follows" reason's judgment is sometimes taken to imply that this judgment determines what the will wants, but it could mean simply that the content of the will's act is supplied by reason, even if reason does not in any way determine that the will wills this content or anything at all. It is no wonder that, even after more than 60 years of intense debate over the matter, scholars have not reached agreement. What is needed, then, is a new approach to the matter that does not rely on ambiguous claims that, like a wax nose, can be bent to point in any direction one wants.

To escape this circularity, I intend to approach this problem by a different method. Instead of collecting proof texts from discussions devoted to disparate subjects and reconstructing Aquinas's view on that basis, a "bottom-up" approach, I propose a "top-down" approach. I will start by articulating as fully as possible Aquinas's account of practical reason, drawing not just from discussions of free choice, but from those on virtue, conscience, the practical syllogism, weakness of will, and the influence of passion and ignorance on decision and choice. Since many of these topics have been the focus of my recent research projects, I will not have much preparatory work to do. With a theory of practical reason well developed in advance of addressing the agency question, I will be in a position to see which interpretation of the disputed texts best fits the rest of Aquinas's account of practical reason. I will, in other words, be in the position of someone who has nearly completed a jigsaw puzzle: With only a few pieces left, I will be able to see what shapes are required to complete the picture.

### Schedule

**Fall 2010-Spring 2011:** Finish book chapter on Aquinas on justice (under contract with Cambridge University Press); review my research on Aquinas on moral responsibility and the virtues in conjunction with my teaching this material.

**6 June-19 June:** Review all relevant texts in Aquinas's works in the light of my research on responsibility and virtue.

**20 June-26 June:** Read secondary literature on unanticipated questions arising in the course of this research.

**27 June-25 June:** Write rough draft of article; write detailed notes for a chapter on this material in the monograph I am writing on Aquinas (on virtue, action, and moral responsibility). Hillary Gaskin, the philosophy acquisitions editor at Cambridge, has asked me to submit my monograph to Cambridge when it is completed.

**26 June-15 August:** Circulate draft among Aquinas scholars; write polished draft.

**Fall 2011:** With a complete set of comments from the scholars who have read the draft, I will make final revisions in September and October 2011, submitting the article for publication by November 2011.

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**Biographical Sketch**

Jeffrey Hause earned a B.A. in English Literature from UCLA, and a second B.A. (with majors in classics and philosophy) from U.C. Irvine. He attended graduate school at Cornell, but moved to Boston for his wife Deborah's work. He taught in Boston for several years at nearly every conceivable sort of institution of higher learning: a business-oriented school (Bentley), a Catholic liberal arts school (Merrimack), Boston's inner-city university (UMass Boston), an engineering-oriented university (UMass Lowell), a Catholic seminary (St. John's), and the nation's oldest university (Harvard), with wandering stints at Cornell and the University of Virginia. In Boston, he and Deborah welcomed two sons, Jonathan and Alexander. Jeffrey found a post at Creighton in 2002. Receiving his first sabbatical ever in 2009-10, Jeffrey applied for grants and won a Fulbright Fellowship to France. Unfortunately, the grant and his salary together covered only half his expenses (although his children can now speak French and know all about gothic architecture!).