

History of Philosophy

26 Aquinas' Moral Psychology and Ethics

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Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes provides an analysis of **Thomas Aquinas's moral psychology**, emphasizing how human behavior is rooted in a **teleological worldview**. Unlike modern concepts of a "causal vacuum," Aquinas views the **will as an intellectual inclination** that is naturally directed toward the **ultimate good**, which is God. This framework integrates the **intellect and emotions**, suggesting that while the will is the efficient cause of action, it must be informed by reason to avoid misperceiving lesser goods as the highest end. Holmes further explains how these internal inclinations develop into **virtues and habits**, bridging the gap between natural human tendencies and the pursuit of holiness. The lecture concludes by detailing the **four types of law**—eternal, divine, natural, and human—which provide the metaphysical foundation for Thomistic ethics. Ultimately, **natural law** serves as a universal guide for human flourishing by aligning our innate desires with the rational order of creation.

Briefing Document:

Aquinas' Moral Psychology and Ethics: A Comprehensive Briefing

Executive Summary

The moral philosophy of Thomas Aquinas is rooted in a teleological worldview, where human nature, agency, and ethics are defined by an inherent orientation toward God as the ultimate good. Unlike modern "libertarian" concepts of free will operating in a causal vacuum, Aquinas views the will as an **intellectual inclination**. In this framework, the will acts as the efficient cause of human action, but it is always informed and directed by the intellect's perception of what is "good."

Key takeaways from the analysis of Aquinas' system include:

- **The Teleological Will:** Human action is not mechanistic but end-oriented. The will naturally inclines toward the "ultimate good," though it may choose "perceived goods" (which may be evil) due to intellectual misperception.
- **Hierarchy of Law:** Ethics is governed by a fourfold structure of law: Eternal, Divine, Natural, and Human. Natural law is universal and based on the biological and rational inclinations of human nature.
- **Virtue as Habit:** Moral development is the process of forming habits (virtues) that restore the "likeness of God" lost in the Fall. This includes the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues.
- **Double Intention:** Aquinas introduces a distinction between primary and secondary intentions, allowing for complex moral judgments where a good primary end may result in unavoidable, yet not culpable, secondary "collateral" damage.

I. Moral Psychology: The Nature of the Will

Aquinas' moral psychology centers on the relationship between the intellect and the will. To understand his view, one must distinguish it from post-17th-century mechanistic views of the universe.

The Will as Intellectual Inclination

In the Thomistic view, the will is the **efficient cause** of human behavior, but it does not operate in a vacuum. It is defined as a "rational appetite" or intellectual inclination.

- **Contrast with Indeterminism:** Unlike modern libertarianism, which often views free will as independent of all causes, Aquinas sees the will as influenced by formal and final causes.
- **The "Heart" Analogy:** The will can be compared to the biblical concept of the "heart"—the guiding core and moving force of the entire personality.
- **Freedom through Direction:** Freedom is not the absence of influence but the "inner directedness" toward an end that an individual "gladly" and "spontaneously" pursues.

The Role of the Intellect

The intellect provides the direction for the will. While the will is the power that moves a person to act, it only moves toward what the intellect perceives as "good."

- **Perceived Good vs. Actual Good:** The will naturally hungers for the ultimate good (God). However, due to the Fall or deception, the intellect may misperceive a lesser or evil end as a "good."
- **Idolatry:** When a person pursues money, power, or material goods as their highest end, they are treating a "perceived good" as a substitute for God.

II. Human Nature and the Hierarchy of Inclinations

Aquinas distinguishes between the different "souls" or levels of existence within a human being, each having its own set of inclinations.

Sensory vs. Rational Inclinations

1. **Sensory Soul (Animal Soul):** Contains spontaneous emotional responses or "passions."
 - **Concupiscible:** Inclinations toward what is perceived as pleasing or desirable.
 - **Irascible:** Inclinations to ward off obstacles, threats, or danger.
2. **Rational Soul:** Contains the intellectual inclination toward the known good. The will operates here, allowing humans to transcend or redirect sensory impulses through reason.

The Three Levels of Natural Inclination

Aquinas identifies a hierarchy of inclinations that inform the **Natural Law**:

| Level | Nature Shared With | Specific Inclinations |
|-------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Simple Substance | All created things | Self-preservation; resisting destruction. |

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|------------------------|---------------|--|
| Animal Nature | Other animals | Sexual intercourse; education and raising of offspring. |
| Rational Nature | Only humans | Seeking truth about God; living in a just society; shunning ignorance. |

III. Virtue Ethics and the Goal of Human Life

For Aquinas, the goal of ethics is not merely following rules but the actualization of a specific kind of person.

From Philosopher to Saint

While Aristotle's highest ideal was the "practical-minded philosopher," Aquinas' highest ideal is the **saint**. The goal of human life is to be "like God," restoring the moral "likeness" lost during the Fall, even while the "image" (the functional intellect) remains intact.

The Virtues

Virtues are "habits of the heart"—settled dispositions developed through repeated choice and action.

- **Cardinal Virtues:** These are natural virtues achievable through natural processes:
 1. Justice
 2. Wisdom
 3. Courage
 4. Self-control (Temperance)
- **Theological Virtues:** These are "infused" by grace and cannot be achieved by nature alone:
 1. Faith
 2. Hope
 3. Love (Charity)

IV. The Fourfold Structure of Law

Aquinas defines law generally as "an ordinance of reason, made by him who has the care of the community, for the common good." He breaks law into four distinct but interrelated categories:

1. **Eternal Law:** The archetypal law in the mind of God; the divine wisdom that governs the entire causal order of the universe.
2. **Divine Law:** Revealed law found in Scripture (e.g., the Ten Commandments) and entrusted to the Church. It directs humans toward their "eternal good" and touches on internal motives.
3. **Natural Law:** The participation of the eternal law in the rational creature. It is "written in the heart" and accessible to all people through reason and natural inclination. Its first precept is: "**Good is to be done and evil is to be avoided.**"
4. **Human Law:** The application of natural law to specific societal circumstances by secular rulers (e.g., traffic laws or civil codes).

V. Moral Application: The Doctrine of Double Intention

A significant contribution of Thomistic ethics is the **Doctrine of Double Intention** (or Double Effect). This is used to evaluate morally complex actions that have both good and bad effects.

- **Primary Intention:** The ultimate end or goal the agent is pursuing (e.g., the restoration of peace in a just war).
- **Secondary Intention:** The immediate means or "collateral" effects that are known to happen but are not the primary goal (e.g., the destruction of a bridge that results in civilian casualties).
- **Moral Culpability:** If the primary intention is good and the bad effect is an unavoidable "collateral" consequence of pursuing that good, the agent may not be morally culpable for the bad effect. However, if the primary intention is the bad effect (e.g., targeting civilians), the act is morally evil.

VI. Impact of the Fall on Moral Psychology

The Fall of man primarily affected the "moral likeness" to God.

- **Intellectual Functionalism:** The "image of God" (the intellect) remains functional, but it is prone to extreme misperception.
- **Vagueness:** Humans retain a "vague sense" of the divine and a natural hunger for the good, but without revelation (Divine Law) and grace, this sense is too clouded by fallenness to lead to the ultimate good.
- **Nature and Grace:** Grace does not destroy nature but "presupposes" and "sustains" it. It adds the necessary causal influence (via the Holy Spirit) to inform the intellect and incline the will toward its true end.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Aquinas' Moral Psychology and Ethics

This study guide explores the intersection of human nature, agency, and morality within the thought of Thomas Aquinas. It covers the psychological foundations of the will, the teleological structure of human action, and the hierarchical nature of law and virtue.

Part 1: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. How does Aquinas view the relationship between God and human agency?
2. What is the primary difference between the 17th-century concept of "free will" and Aquinas's concept of the will?
3. What are the two types of inclinations belonging to the "sensory soul"?
4. How does the intellect influence the will's inclination toward an object?

5. According to the text, how does the operation of grace relate to human nature?
6. Why do human beings sometimes choose evil if they have a natural inclination toward the good?
7. What is the "doctrine of double intention" in Thomistic ethics?
8. What distinguishes the "cardinal virtues" from the "theological virtues"?
9. How does Aquinas define "law" using the framework of the four causes?
10. What are the three levels of natural inclination that inform the precepts of natural law?

Part 2: Quiz Answer Key

1. **How does Aquinas view the relationship between God and human agency?** Aquinas views God as the first efficient cause of the entire causal order, who empowers all secondary causes. Human agency is considered a secondary cause that operates within this order, meaning God is continually the cause of human nature and action.
2. **What is the primary difference between the 17th-century concept of "free will" and Aquinas's concept of the will?** The 17th-century concept suggests a "free will" operating in a causal vacuum, independent of influences or determination. In contrast, Aquinas views the will as an "intellectual inclination" that is directed by formal and final causes within a teleological worldview, rather than a mechanistic one.
3. **What are the two types of inclinations belonging to the "sensory soul"?** The sensory soul possesses "concupiscible" inclinations, which are desires for what is perceived as pleasing or desirable, and "irascible" inclinations, which are responses to what is perceived as threatening or dangerous. These are spontaneous emotional responses that the rational soul can transcend.
4. **How does the intellect influence the will's inclination toward an object?** The intellect informs the will by perceiving things as either good or

bad, attracting the will toward the former and repulsing it from the latter. While the will is the efficient cause of action, it is the intellectual inclination that provides the specific direction and orientation for those actions.

5. **According to the text, how does the operation of grace relate to human nature?** The operation of grace presupposes nature and the normal functioning of human psychology, just as revelation presupposes reason. Grace sustains these natural operations and adds divine causal influences, such as the work of the Holy Spirit, to help the soul reach its ultimate end.
6. **Why do human beings sometimes choose evil if they have a natural inclination toward the good?** Human beings choose evil because of misperceptions or "deception" where something evil is mistakenly apprehended as a good. While the "image of God" (intellect) remains after the Fall, the "likeness of God" (moral orientation) is lost, leading individuals to pursue "God substitutes" or lesser goods.
7. **What is the "doctrine of double intention" in Thomistic ethics?** This doctrine distinguishes between a primary intention (the ultimate end) and a secondary intention (the immediate means or consequences). A person may not be morally culpable for the "collateral damage" of a secondary intention if their primary intention is directed toward a morally appropriate ultimate end.
8. **What distinguishes the "cardinal virtues" from the "theological virtues"?** The cardinal virtues (justice, wisdom, courage, and self-control) are natural virtues achievable through repeated action and the natural processes of moral psychology. The theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) are additional virtues that are dependent on and infused by divine grace.
9. **How does Aquinas define "law" using the framework of the four causes?** Aquinas defines law as an "ordinance of reason" (formal cause), made by the ruler who has care of the community (efficient cause), for the people (material cause), aimed at the "common good" (final cause). This definition applies to eternal, divine, natural, and human laws.
10. **What are the three levels of natural inclination that inform the precepts of natural law?** The three levels include the inclination for self-preservation shared by all substances, the animal inclinations such as procreation and

raising offspring, and the rational inclinations proper to humans, such as knowing the truth about God and living in a just society.

Part 3: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the Source Context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Teleological vs. Mechanistic Worldview:** Contrast the "billiard ball" mechanistic universe of the 17th century with Aquinas's teleological universe. Explain how these differing views change the definition of human freedom.
 2. **The Intellect-Will Interrelationship:** Analyze the claim that the will is an "intellectual inclination." Discuss how the "heart" serves as a guiding core and how environmental or intellectual factors might lead to the pursuit of "misapprehended goods."
 3. **The Impact of the Fall on Moral Psychology:** Discuss Aquinas's distinction between the "image of God" and the "likeness of God." How does this distinction explain the persistence of human reason alongside the loss of moral orientation?
 4. **The Hierarchy of Law:** Explain the relationship between Eternal, Divine, Natural, and Human law. How does Divine law supplement the gaps in Natural law, particularly regarding the "interior matters of the heart"?
 5. **Virtue as Habit:** Explore the Aristotelian roots of Aquinas's virtue ethics. Detail how repeated choices form dispositions and how these habits are necessary for a person to achieve the "highest end" of becoming like God.
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Part 4: Glossary of Key Terms

| Term | Definition |
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| Cardinal Virtues | The four classic Greek virtues (Justice, Wisdom, Courage, and Self-control) achievable by natural moral processes. |

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| Concupiscible | Sensory inclinations or desires directed toward what is perceived as pleasing or desirable. |
| Divine Law | The law promulgated in Scripture and entrusted to the Church; it addresses both natural law and internal matters of the heart to guide humans toward their eternal good. |
| Double Intention | A moral principle where an action is judged by its primary, ultimate end rather than its unintended or secondary effects (collateral damage). |
| Efficient Cause | The agent or force that brings something into being or initiates an action; Aquinas identifies the Will as the efficient cause of human action. |
| Eternal Law | The archetypal law existing in the mind of God; the divine wisdom and counsels that govern the entire creation. |
| Final Cause | The end, goal, or purpose (telos) toward which a thing or action is oriented. |
| Irascible | Sensory inclinations or passions directed away from what is perceived as threatening, unpleasant, or dangerous. |
| Natural Law | The universal moral law accessible to all humans through reason; it is based on natural inclinations toward the good. |
| Secondary Cause | An agent (like a human being) that acts according to its nature but is ultimately empowered and caused by God, the primary cause. |
| Sundaresis | Also referred to as conscience; the developed network of natural inclinations to live for the good in accordance with reason. |
| Teleology | A worldview or system that understands things in terms of their ends, goals, or built-in purposes rather than just mechanical forces. |
| Theological Virtues | The virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love, which are infused by grace rather than achieved through natural habits alone. |

Will

Defined by Aquinas as "intellectual inclination"; the faculty that moves toward what the intellect perceives as good.