Good and Evil in Human Acts

Daniel Westberg on Thomas Aquinas

1. Introduction
   1. Handbook of theology -> priests are trained to view sins and treat human action and virtue using a framework which assesses the ‘relative sinfulness of various acts’
   2. Modern scholars -> move towards emphasizing the agent and character over the passage of time as opposed to a limited focus on their mere actions; and viewing actions as neutral before they are situated in a set of real and actual circumstances (with purpose an goal). Such a belief led to the rejection of the notion of intrinsically evil acts
2. Three-Part Moral Analysis Of Human Action
   1. Theory of Good – connects the good to being, desire, and completion
      1. When a being is complete (as determined by its nature), it is deemed to be good
      2. When a being is lacking a good that it should possess, it is deemed evil
      3. Goodness, applied on human beings, is the right relationship and ordering among the will to reason and the person to created reality and to God
         1. When this order/relations are not complete, then evil is present
      4. Circumstances, overall purpose, and nature of action determine the whether an act is good or evil
      5. Intention is “the inclination of the agent—the movement of the will—to an object perceived as good, which may be directed to an ultimate end or to a proximate end…intention covers both the desired goal and the means, the specific action, leading to it” (Thomas Gilby)
3. Object of Action
   1. According to Thomas, the central defining feature of any given action is its objectum or objective – “what a person is planning to achieve in an immediate sense,” it is different from the ultimate end or the overall purpose
   2. An intentional act is when a person acts with a reason in mind
   3. The object is usually viewed as the immediate reason for action.
   4. Usually, the object of the action and the purpose of the agent is the same, but it isn’t always the case. The object of the action = finis operis; the purpose of the agent = finis operantis
4. Circumstances
   1. Circumstances can be viewed as accidents (ie qualities of shape)
   2. The full moral goodness of a deed is not merely dependent on action but also on the circumstance
   3. Circumstance is summarized in who, what, where, by what aids, why, how, when
5. End
   1. Exterior objective – object of the act itself
   2. Interior purpose of agent – the end
   3. End of the act (finis operis), end of the agent (finis operantis)
   4. If and when an object is not aligned to the end, then “the specifying feature of the objective is not determinative of the end, no does the end shape the object of action”
      1. Example: a person steals in order to commit adultery 🡪 one cannot subsume theft under adultery because they are two different acts of evil
   5. Thomistic view of action – intention for an end 🡪 specific action is chosen as a means to the more general goal
   6. Revisionists – “subsume intentionality and morality into the general goal”
   7. Traditional scholastic – “stresses the centrality of the objective moral character of the act”
   8. Revisionists and traditional scholastic tend to make motivation subjective and it sometimes neglects the relation between the object and the end (means and end brought together through human choice)
6. Are there actions that are always evil?
   1. Proportionalist approach – “actions done from the point of view of the objet are pre-moral”
      1. They are not good or evil until identified with an intention or a set of circumstances
      2. Knauer: “No moral significance should be attached to any physical evil”
         1. Denies intrinsically evil acts
      3. Treating al actions as pre-moral before its evaluation in the context of circumstance is not true nor feasible for Thomas
         1. There are terms which are used to describe evil acts and they should be accepted as always wrong (ie murder, perjury, blasphemy, etc
   2. Thomistic Position
      1. “intention cannot be separated from object”
      2. Actions cannot undergo moral evaluation until viewed in relation to circumstance and intentions
      3. If words used to pertain to specific kinds of action and its object imply a certain intention, then intrinsically evil acts can exist
      4. You cannot do an evil act in the hopes of a good end, “the end does not justify the means”
7. Conscience
   1. “The goodness of the will depends on the goodness of the object proposed by reason. The will is not drawn to a good unless it is first apprehended as such by the intellect”
   2. Light of human reason is rooted in the light of God 🡪 it allows people to recognize what is good and it regulates the will
   3. Thomas: the will sees and accepts only what is presented by the intellect; when a person is in the right mind, “the will should be drawn to (or from) that object.”
   4. If the will is unable to follow the judgment of the conscience, then an there is an unhealthy aspect in the will
   5. An intention’s quality usually determines whether the will is good or evil in choosing particular actions 🡪 actions are made when a person has a specific end in mind 🡪 leads to determining which means to use and what action to take
   6. If you devote or offer an action to God, it can add an element of goodness to the action
   7. There are times when a disproportion among the intended end, the choice of action, and other external factors beyond the person’s control
   8. Standard good from the point of view of God 🡪 common good of the whole universe
   9. Fundamental principle of the harmonization of partial viewpoints and different orders of charity 🡪 everyone loves God above all else, everyone will get what is rightfully his according to God’s justice
8. Consequences and Results
   1. Willing a good end is not enough to make an action good
   2. A person who perseveres in accomplishing an act despite knowing that the act is bad does not get praise and recognition for perseverance. Rather, it increases the evil of the act
   3. The consequences of an action are not fully related to its being good or evil. However, it may be part of it (ie if a person persists in doing a bad act, then the level of badness increases)
   4. When consequences are not evidently or easily foreseen, then a more careful and critical analysis is needed
   5. Criteria for judging whether acts are good of evil
      1. Role of intention is crucial
      2. To understand the nature of what has to be done
      3. To recognize the circumstances of the act
   6. “Theological values orient the mind and the heart to recognize and rejoice in God’s sovereignty, and to be able to decide and carry out all our actions for God’s honor and glory.”