

STEVEN J. JENSEN, *Good and Evil Actions. A Journey through Saint Thomas Aquinas*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 2010, pp. xiii + 324.

IN recent years a very great deal has been written (mostly in English) about Thomas Aquinas's understanding of the moral specification of human actions. What does it mean, for Thomas, to say that a human action is of a certain species or kind? How does he think its kind is determined? What is it that he thinks makes the kind morally good or bad? Thomas's own treatments of such questions are complex, and the interpretations of them have often been even more so. Steven Jensen has taken on the daunting task of synthesizing this bulk of material, answering the questions, and explaining why he finds the major alternative answers unsatisfactory. In my opinion he has carried out the task with great success, substantially advancing our understanding of the matter. His book is rigorous and dense, but it is also very clear, concrete and linear, and it is not at all technical. Its readability and relative brevity belie the amount of labor and thought that must have gone into it.

The book comprises seven chapters, a bibliography, and an index of names and topics. The first chapter aims to establish a balanced view of human action as involving both the will's interior act and the exterior or commanded act. Many of the ideas, both here and in later chapters, are illustrated with reference to two specific and highly controversial issues: the morality of a craniotomy performed on a baby *in utero* in order to end a life-threatening labor, and that of a hysterectomy performed on a pregnant woman with a cancerous uterus. In this chapter Jensen also sets up an ingenious strategy, to which the book owes much of its effectiveness, for navigating the texts and the interpretations and getting at Thomas's mind. He invents two simplified approaches to the specification of action, neither of which corresponds exactly to any real author, but in terms of which the various interpretations can be laid out and compared very straightforwardly.

One approach, which he calls "Abelardianism," treats the specification of action as a function of the agent's will or intention. The other traces it to the matter or subject – often something quite physical – upon which the agent's exterior act bears; he calls this "physicalism." Some authors, for instance German Grisez, John Finnis, and Martin Rhonheimer, are more on the Abelardian side. Others, such as Kevin Flannery, Jean Porter and Steven Long, are more physicalistic. Still others, the proportionalists, use significant elements of both approaches; Jensen however finds their position to be far from a happy medium. His own account is rather on the physicalistic side. But he contrasts it, to varying degrees, with the others on this side. Of those named, Flannery is by far the closest. Indeed I wonder whether Jensen's and Flannery's accounts are really opposed in any substantial way, or simply (but instructively) complementary. As far as I can tell, they do tend to yield the same judgments on specific cases.

Chapter Two concentrates on the idea that actions are specified by intention. Here a main concern is the nature of intention itself and the determination of what falls within it. Does it include only the formality under which the intended action is desirable, that is, the action's conduciveness to the agent's desired end? Or does it also

include the causal efficacy that the agent understands the action to possess? Jensen argues for the latter. But he also finds that even understood in this way, intention cannot function as the primary basis for identifying the species of human actions. This is because intention itself is specified by the exterior action intended – the very action whose species is in question.

So in Chapter Three the exterior action is examined more closely. Here Jensen stresses the very important distinction between the exterior action as conceived and the exterior action as actually performed. What specifies the agent's intention is the action as conceived. So the question is how the action as conceived is specified. The quick answer is that it is specified by the "matter" – the *materia circa quam* – that it is conceived to have. But what exactly is this, and how does it serve to specify the action? The answer requires careful reflection both on the way in which practical reasoning, or deliberation, arrives at its conception of the action, and on how the agent's understanding of the real causes in the world factors into this process. Jensen insists that the relation of practical reason to action has both an active and a passive dimension. There is the form or the order that reason itself introduces into the action, and there are also the features of the matter that reason simply apprehends. The latter are key in determining the matter's proportion to or suitability for the order that reason introduces.

Explaining how the matter specifies also requires another distinction. It is very simple, but it is also the one that Jensen considers most fundamental for understanding the moral specification of actions: the distinction between the order that the agent's reason actually gives to the action, and the order that the action should have, *because* it proceeds from reason. An action is good in kind if its relation to its matter is such that these orders coincide; if not, it is bad in kind. The rest of the book develops and defends this thesis.

At first one may be surprised by the title of Chapter Four: "Love of Others." What has this got to do with the specification of actions? A great deal, as it turns out, because the order that an action should have, on account of its proceeding from reason, is always in some way an order toward the *common good*. Here Jensen focuses on Thomas's account of the morality of killing another human being, arguing that for Thomas the difference between good and bad kinds of killing rests in large part upon the victim's own relation to the common good – the victim being the *materia circa quam*. In Chapter Five he considers some difficulties that this account faces. One, stressed by the proportionalists, is that in his treatment of killing Thomas does not always seem to be concerned with the *materia circa quam*. Another is that Thomas holds that sometimes a condition of the matter can render good what would otherwise be a bad action. This seems to exclude the possibility of exceptionlessly bad kinds of action. Yet another difficulty, which brings us back to cases such as craniotomy, concerns the problem of how to distinguish between actions whose species is killing and actions that merely have death as an effect or a result. Jensen handles all these difficulties quite deftly.

In the sixth chapter he takes up the question whether natural teleology is involved in the specification of actions. He finds that crucial roles are played by *two* natural teleologies, that of the *materia circa quam* and that of the human agent's own will to-

ward the common good. These however do not supplant the role played by the order of reason. Rather they are factors that must be taken into account in determining whether the order that reason is introducing into the action is what it should be for an act that proceeds from reason.

Chapter Seven brings it all together, laying out how it is that human actions can be good or evil in their very species. The most proper source of specification in human actions is neither intention nor nature – although these are important – but deliberative reason. But again, reason has both an active and a passive dimension. Because of the passive dimension, especially with respect to the *materia circa quam*, an action's being morally good or bad in species is not merely tautological, and moral absolutes are not merely formal; in other words, proportionalism is excluded. And a feature of an action that puts it out of order in relation to reason makes it bad in species even if it is not a formal object of intention or a motivating factor in the choice of the action. This excludes the more "Abelardian" positions.

Along the way Jensen draws several other crucial distinctions which, as far as I know, are either not to be found elsewhere or at least have not previously been brought to bear on this topic. These include the distinction between a truly common good and a mere aggregate of goods; between a subject of a good and a part; between harming a good and offending against one; among senses of 'for its own sake'; and among various kinds of teleology belonging to actions. Distinctions are the very stuff of philosophy, and this is a very philosophical book.

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ROBERT SPAEMANN, *La diceria immortale. La questione di Dio o l'inganno della modernità*, Cantagalli, Siena 2008, pp. 220.

SI tratta di una raccolta di saggi, scritti in diversi periodi, omogenei alla domanda su Dio: dicono che è morto, ma intanto si continua a parlare di lui anche oggi, donde il titolo della raccolta. Il breve commento segue i vari saggi, non nell'ordine d'esposizione del pregevole volume della Cantagalli, ma rigorosamente in ordine cronologico.

Il più datato, ma sempre attuale, risale al 1985: *Motivo funzionale della religione e religione* (pp. 81-105). Il titolo rinvia alla pretesa sociologica di assegnare alla religione un mero scopo funzionale, che urta con la pretesa veritativa che la religione le oppone, quando riflette su sé stessa. Funzionalismo e positivismo scientifico vanno a braccetto nel vedere ogni comportamento umano come condizionato dall'ambiente, dal sistema. Filosofia e religione invece sottolineano la possibilità che esista anche un fine in sé, che sottrae il comportamento umano individuale e sociale ad una logica deterministica e funzionalista, senza negare con ciò l'esistenza di condizionamenti al nostro agire. Tuttavia quando la funzione latente viene esplicitata da una spiegazione sociologica o positivista, ecco che scompare la latenza, ponendo varie questioni problematiche su quello che sarà il comportamento futuro dei singoli individui, ora coscienti della loro parte, ma quindi capaci anche di opporvisi per i più svariati motivi. Ogni spiegazione funzionale annulla un eventuale significato trascendente (un fine in sé) della persona. L'Autore introduce ciò che definisce come inversione teleo-