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WHAT IS THE USE OF *USUS* IN AQUINAS' PSYCHOLOGY OF ACTION?

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The general aim of this paper is simply to draw attention to a certain theme in St Thomas' psychology of human action, one not often treated at much length in discussions of Aquinas on action. This theme is his notion of *usus*, "use", as a stage or component in the accomplishment of a complete human act. I shall begin by indicating some possible reasons for the general disregard of the theme, and shall then briefly note some rather striking affirmations by Aquinas concerning use, affirmations which suggest that it is probably more interesting, both for him and for us, than it might at first seem. The core of the paper focuses upon a set of problems about the coherence of Aquinas' notion of use. There my interlocutor will be Professor Alan Donagan, who has been one of the few writers on action-theory in Aquinas to dwell on this subject. The proposed resolution of these problems will, I think, make it at least plausible to assign to the act of use a rather central role in the account of Aquinas' mature way of conceiving the human will, as a faculty distinct from the intellect and as primarily a faculty of agency. The paper closes with a nod to one of the more significant features of Aquinas' moral philosophy that I think his doctrine of use helps us to keep in mind.

Reasons for the lack of interest in usus

At least three reasons may be surmised for the apparent lack of interest in what Aquinas says about use. The first, based on the sheer amount of treatment he gives to it, is that Aquinas himself seems not to have found the subject especially interesting. As far as I have been able to determine, he takes it up thematically in only two places; and of these, one is governed (at least to some extent) by the work upon which he is in the process of commenting, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard.¹ The other place is the Question on use in the *Prima secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*, the penultimate Question in the so-called Treatise on Human Acts (qq.6-17). To be sure, the devotion of an entire Question to it is noteworthy, especially within a treatise whose very originality lends its contents and structure further significance. Yet even

this point is somewhat weakened by the fact that the Question on use contains but four Articles, only the last of which introduces an issue not already treated in the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences*. That issue is whether use precedes choice.

A second possible reason why Aquinas' doctrine of use has not attracted much attention is that use itself is not felt to be intrinsically very problematic. In relation to St Thomas' account of the structure of human action, there seems to be a sort of consensus that most of the philosophical problems about action concern elements prior to use, particularly the elements of intention, deliberation and choice. (For instance, these were listed among the suggested topics for the Section on the psychology of action at this Congress; use was not.) These operations all belong to the process by which a person becomes determined or formed to engage in some action. Once you are fully determined to do something, all that remains, as a matter of psychology, is (to put it rather crudely) to set yourself to doing it; and the act of "use", as Aquinas understands it, is nothing other than "setting yourself to" some chosen deed. What could be more straightforward than that? We might almost conclude that one of the philosophically least provocative aspects of action is: action itself.

It is not only from the point of view of the psychology of action that use seems to offer scant material for study. Moral theory, too, might be thought not to have much use for it. This is because what is normally regarded as the chief matter for moral evaluation is not what someone actually does, but what he wants or intends or chooses to do. Assuming that you really do want (intend, choose) to do something, it is taken to be more or less incidental, morally speaking, whether you actually do it or not. St Thomas provides some support for such a view. He holds that the exterior act adds directly to the goodness or badness of the will only in the sense that if you have the opportunity to do something and do not do it, then your will to do it is itself not complete or full-fledged. The exterior act, he says, is the term and end of the will to perform it, and so the will to perform it is brought to completion or perfection precisely in performing it--*when that is possible*. But when it is not possible, your will to do it may still be full-fledged, and then your merit or demerit is the same as if you had done it (I-II q.20 a.4).

Some remarks on use in the Summa theologiae

At this point I would like to adduce a few scattered remarks on use from places in the *Summa theologiae* outside the "Treatise on Human Acts". It will require little or no comment, I think, to see in these remarks a more fundamental role for the notion of use, in Aquinas'

understanding of human action and its morality, than what it would be assigned on the basis of the foregoing considerations.

The first comes from the *Prima pars*, Question 5, on "the good in general". In the fourth Article, on "whether the good has the nature of a final cause", the third objection maintains that the good in fact has the nature of an *efficient* cause. Its argument is that Augustine says that "because God is good, we are", and that we are from God as from an efficient cause. St Thomas replies in the following way.

Whoever has a will is called good insofar as he has a good will; for through the will, we use all the things that are in our power.² Hence not the man who has a good intellect, but he who has a good will, is called good. But the will bears upon an end as its proper object; and in this way, the saying "Because God is good, we are", refers to a final cause.

The second text, or rather group of texts, is from the section of the *Prima secundae* on the virtues in general. These form a significant application of the thought just expressed. Representative of them is the following passage, from Question 56, Article 3, on whether the intellect can be a subject of virtue.

A virtue is a habit by which someone acts well. But a habit is ordered to a good act in two ways. In one way, insofar as through such a habit, a man obtains a capacity for a good act [e.g. the habit of grammar]... In the other way, a habit not only makes a capacity for acting, but also makes one use the capacity rightly; as justice not only makes a man have a prompt will for doing just things, but also makes him act justly.

St Thomas then lays down that it is this second sort of habit, which gives the right use of a capacity, that makes a man to be good *simpliciter*, and so constitutes a virtue *simpliciter*. The Article continues:

The subject of a habit that is a virtue *simpliciter* cannot be any thing but the will, or some power insofar as it is moved by the will. The reason for this is that the will moves all other powers that are somehow rational to their acts...; and therefore, a man's acting rightly comes about from this, that he has a good will.

I shall only mention, without quoting them, the several other texts (at least seven) in this section of the *Summa* which, in one way or another, invoke this same principle: that the question of a person's goodness is primarily a question of his use of his capacities and powers, or of the way in which he "moves them to their acts", by his will. Besides using it to explain why moral virtues make a man simply good, while intellectual virtues and crafts (q.57 a.4) do not, these texts also exploit the principle in other ways. It is what gives the reason why the cardinal

virtues are all moral virtues (q.61 a.1) and why faith and hope do not have the complete nature of virtue without charity (q.65 a.4); similarly, "good use" serves not only as the distinctive effect of what is a virtue *simpliciter* (I-II q.57 a.3), but also as the criterion of merit (q.57 a.1) and the difference between perfect and imperfect moral virtues (q.65 a.1).

Problems about use

Now, even if what I called "setting oneself to a chosen deed" is, in itself, altogether unproblematic, I do not think the same can be said of what St Thomas has to say about it, little as this is.

For instance, one small problem concerns the place of use within the general division of interior and exterior acts. Earlier, in discussing impeded exterior acts, I spoke as though use were itself an exterior act of the will. This supposition has some basis in Aquinas. For him, an "exterior" act is the same as a "commanded" act; and in Article 3 of Question 17 of the *Prima secundae*, on the order between command and use, he insists that use follows upon command, and he speaks of it as the very act of the one subject to command, as such. It sounds as though acts of use and commanded acts are the very same thing.

However, the Question devoted to use in the Treatise on Human Acts, Question 16, falls within the section on *interior* acts. Besides, if acts of use were, by definition, simply identical with exterior or commanded acts, the order between use and command would hardly even be a question. So, which is use, an interior or an exterior act?

To recall St Thomas' terminology, an interior act of the will, which he also calls an elicited act, is an act which has the will as its immediate or proximate source; an exterior or commanded act of the will is one produced by the will remotely, through its acting upon some power (normally, other than the will) and moving it to produce the act (I-II q.6, *proemium*). On these terms, the "quick" answer to our problem seems to be contained in the fourth Article in the Question on use. Having earlier defined use as the application of a thing to some operation, and noted that we *also* call use the very operation to which a thing is so applied (q.16 a.1), he here raises the issue of the order between use and choice. The first objection, according to which use must precede choice, argues thus: after choice there remains nothing but execution; but use, since it "belongs to the will", i.e. is an elicited act of the will, precedes execution, which is an act of an executive power commanded by the will; so use can only precede choice. The reply does not deny that use "belongs to the will"; rather, it says simply that the motion by which the will moves something to execution precedes the execution itself, but follows choice. In short, the term "use" has two senses, one

of which (the primary one) refers to the interior act of the will applying or moving something to the execution of a command, while the other refers to the execution itself, the act carried out by the thing so applied.³

This distinction makes Aquinas consistent in his way of speaking about use in relation to the categories of interior and exterior acts of the will. However, Professor Donagan, in his article on human action in Aquinas,⁴ has raised a more substantive problem for the thomistic notion of use as an interior act of the will.

Donagan is well aware that, as he puts it, Aquinas' theory of action, like Aristotle's, is "causal"; specifically, in that theory, to perform a human act is to cause something, chiefly through the exercise of the powers of intellect and will. Toward the end of his survey of the various operations of intellect and will which, for Aquinas, enter into the formation of a complete human act, Donagan takes up use; and, drawing upon the Article on the order between use and choice (q.16 a.4), he concludes that the very distinction between choice and use, to say nothing of the question of the order between them, contradicts Aquinas' own principles (p.652). It seems to me that it is fairly easy to show that this is not so; but it also seems to me that this issue brings out noteworthy features of Aquinas' conception of action, features not at all easy to delineate with precision, especially when approached with contemporary preoccupations and presuppositions. These features have to do with the causality of the will in human action.

In the Article at issue, Aquinas lays down a twofold relation between the will and what is willed. One, he says, is according to a certain way of existing that the thing willed has in the one who wills it. He calls this a certain proportion or order of the one willing to the thing willed. The other is what he describes as tending toward really possessing the thing willed. He regards such a tendency as the natural complement of the first relation between the will and its object. If the proportion established between the one willing and the thing willed does not result in this tending toward really having the thing willed, the reason can only be that the proportion itself is imperfect; it cannot be a full act of willing, but only a velleity.⁵

This is one of the differences between willing and understanding, as Aquinas conceives them. To understand also involves a sort of existence of the thing understood in the understanding subject, a proportion between the subject and what is understood. But the act of understanding is brought to its proper completion, not through any tending toward really possessing the object to which it is proportioned, but in the conception and judgment of it.⁶ Although both willing and understanding are operations concerning things existing somehow in the soul of the subject, the operation of understanding terminates in the soul, and according

to the soul's mode of being, whereas the operation of willing terminates in the thing itself, according to the thing's own mode of being.

Now Aquinas holds that choice pertains to the first relation of the will to its object, a relation of proportion or order between the willing subject and what he wills. This means that choice, as such, remains wholly in the soul of the chooser. For this very reason, choice does not bring the will's operation to its proper completion. A further act is needed: use.

Use, he says, bears on the same kind of "willable" object as choice, namely what is *ad finem*, and most precisely, action (see I-II q.13 a.4); but it is an instance of the second relation of the will to its object, the tending toward actually realizing the action chosen. One first deliberates, then chooses to do something, and then applies himself to doing it. Use, as an interior act of the will, is this very application.

Donagan has simply misread Aquinas on the nature of the "second relation" of the will to its object.⁷ He thinks that this relation *results* from "really having" the object. It is on this basis that he judges that Aquinas contradicts himself; for the use of some power is an act *directed toward* that power's exercise, i.e. toward the actual performance of an action, and so it can hardly presuppose the actual exercise of the power or the actual performance of the action chosen.⁸ Donagan therefore concludes that use must pertain to the first relation of the will to its object, and that it must in fact be identical with choice. Aquinas' distinction, however, is between two sorts of acts, *both* of which are "directed toward", i.e. completed by, the actual exercise of one's power or the "really having" of an action. The first one, choice, is directed toward it in the sense of making the subject "proportioned" to it. The second one is his tending to accomplish it, and this is his using the due executive power or applying it to the chosen operation. This distinction entails no overt self-contradiction.

Use and the action of the will

Although Donagan's charge of self-contradiction rests on a misreading,⁹ nevertheless his attempt to identify use with choice seems to me to be instructive. In effect, Donagan wants the mere "proportion" or order set up between an agent and his action, through choice, to do all the work of constituting the agent as the action's cause.¹⁰ He does so to such a degree that he cannot even imagine that Aquinas thinks it necessary to identify a further moment of "tendency", an "impetus"¹¹ or "impulse"¹² by which the agent applies himself to the execution of the action he has chosen.

Perhaps the real philosophical issue between Donagan and Aquinas can be expressed by way of the following question. Just what is the difference between the choice of

something and the "tendency toward really having that thing" which is use? It is certainly not a difference in the content of their objects; what is initiated by the act of use is precisely what was previously chosen. This is why Donagan thinks that use is superfluous. If the ultimate determination of the object of one's will is a choice, then what place is left for any further appetitive act prior to the sheer realization of the object, the sheer "execution"?

To answer this question, it is necessary to recall that Aquinas conceives of the will as a "moved mover", that is, as both patient and agent, and patient before agent. It is moved by its object, through the object's existence in the intellect; once determined according to the object, it begins to move the powers of the soul, as regards the "exercise or use" of them, toward the realization of the object.¹³ I would suggest that the proper distinction between choice and use is according to the will's functioning first as a passive power, then as an active one, in the process of a person's coming to perform a human action. A choice is a sort of passion of the will,¹⁴ an act by which a person gets "proportioned" to some action, gets made to be one who needs to perform an action of that kind. The ensuing act of use is his first actively undertaking the real performance of that kind of action, by setting the appropriate instruments to work.

Why does Donagan overlook the theme of action and passion in Aquinas' theory of the will? Limitations of space prevent documenting it fully here, but my suspicion is that his reading is conditioned by certain features of his own thought on action. Donagan holds, perhaps despite himself, to a quasi-Humean notion of causation as a mere relation of order or sequence.¹⁵ There is no such thing as a causation which is an event or an act. For one thing to be truly said to "act upon" another, it is sufficient that the one be the subject of an event, upon which follows (in a certain way) an event in the other. What seems to compel him to take this view is that he accepts Davidson's position that actions are always entirely immanent to their agents.¹⁶ An action, so conceived, cannot be identical with a causation; for sometimes what an agent is the cause of, through its action, is outside of it. The causation extends to something outside; but, on this view, the action cannot.

In the case of human action, this means that nothing that occurs "outside" the will can be (part of) the will's own action. At most it can only be the effect of the will's action; though it can be the man's action, to the extent that it remains in him. Hence, for the will to be a genuine cause of an exterior act, e.g. the raising of one's arm, which consists in the exercise of the motor power in one's arm, it suffices that the latter follow in a certain way upon something that takes place in the will, namely a choice to raise one's arm. No further act of the will is necessary, or possible.

For Aquinas, there must be a further act, bridging the choice and the execution, an act

by which the power to raise one's arm is "informed" by the choice to raise it. This event, the applying of the power to the act of raising the arm in accordance with the choice, is not at all a mere relation; it is the will's very action upon the motor power. This is use.

Aquinas' notion of an action, in the sense of the correlate of a passion or a "being acted upon", is precisely that of an act or event which is a causation. An action is an event by which the agent is constituted the cause of some feature of that which is acted upon; the action is the very causing. Moreover, in further contrast with Donagan, Aquinas follows Aristotle in holding that an agent's action starts in the agent, but is brought to completion in whatever it is that is acted upon; it terminates in the agent only if the agent also happens to be what is acted upon. It appears that Donagan's own theory of action excludes the very existence of what Aquinas means by "action", at least within the domain of "acting and being acted upon".

My conjecture is that it is in virtue of such a concept of action that, for the specific sort of acting-and-being-acted-upon which is human action,¹⁷ Aquinas judges it necessary to posit use as a further elicited act of the will, subsequent to choice, and prior to the act commanded by the will and proper to whatever power executes the choice. The will is a cause of what the executive power does, because and insofar as that power is instrumental to it and therefore passive relative to it. The application of the power to the act's execution is both an action by the will and a passion undergone by the power; it is an act which at once belongs to and "overflows" the will, into the power whose operation has been chosen, impelling the power toward that operation.

Of course, for Aquinas, human or moral action is immanent action.¹⁸ The difference between Davidson's view and his is that he does not deny that action also sometimes transcends the agent.¹⁹ To the extent that the will itself is a quasi-agent, its action *must* transcend it. The form that the transcendence of the will's operation takes is the act of use. It is through this act that the "executive power" is appropriated by the will. By virtue of it, the "exterior act" not only follows upon, but also is continuous with and derivative from the will's own operation, and hence is truly attributable to the will as to its agent.²⁰ Thus use is what makes it possible for acts of powers besides the will *also* to be voluntary, moral, human acts. It is only because something of the will's own action is "in" the other powers that what they do can also be counted human actions, not just effects thereof. Without use, the other parts and powers of a human being would have no true share in his human actions.

Conclusion

It may be that for students of Aquinas, insisting so much upon "use" may seem little more than belaboring the obvious point that Aquinas thinks of the will mostly in terms of efficient causality. But this may be a point that is easily lost sight of, in a context of moral philosophy in which the chief preoccupation is the *specification* of the will's act, the way in which it is or ought to be brought to bear upon its object. This concerns the will insofar as it is something moved (by the intellect, the passions, etc.), that is, the will as a kind of passive principle.

Now it is true that, as mentioned earlier, the actual efficacy of a person's will may, in a given case, not correspond to its inner quality, which comes from its object. Nevertheless, if we ask the general question, concerning the moral order as a whole, about what it is that makes the quality of one's will to be of unique importance, the answer given by St Thomas is precisely: its efficacy. Usually, what you *really* want to do *is* what you do; and moreover, what is "natural" is that what you do be what you will to do. To be sure, room must be made for the fact that a man can be truly good, and have a truly good and "full-fledged" will for what is good, and yet be thwarted in the accomplishment of something he wills. But Aquinas does not seem to want to allow for this by making "accomplishment" to be on the whole incidental to the value of the will. In this or that case, what is actually accomplished may indeed fail to express the will's quality; but St Thomas seems to regard failures of this sort as, so to speak, "casual", *ut in paucioribus*, not decisive for the general account of the moral order. The value of the will is in its efficacy, and this is exercised through the act of use, which has the act of what is used as its end and proper effect. It is because the will is "naturally" efficacious that it is what makes you good or bad. Otherwise, it would be useless, or harmless.

NOTES

¹*In I Sent.*, dist.1 q.1 a.2, a.4. Lombard's explanation of the division of his work, according to the Augustinian distinction between things to be enjoyed and things to be used, serves as an occasion for St Thomas, as for other theologians of the period, to raise a few issues about the nature and due object of use. See e.g. St Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, dist.1 a.1 qq.1-3.

²See I-II q.9 a.1: *voluntas movet alias potentias animae ad suos actus; utimur enim aliis potentiis cum volumus.*

³In later scholasticism these come to be termed active and passive use. Nothing resembling this distinction is found in the articles on use in the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences*. There, in fact,

he says that use is sometimes an elicited act of the will, sometimes a commanded act (*In I Sent.*, dist.1 q.1 a.2); but by this he means simply that what the will uses is sometimes itself, sometimes another power. Thus in the *Scriptum*, "use" is confined to the act produced by (elicited from) the power *used* by the will; this power merely happens to be the will itself, sometimes. He makes no mention of an act of use elicited from the will itself qua *using*, "active" use. This is the new element in the account of use in the *Summa*, and the one Donagan questions (see below).

⁴Alan Donagan, "Thomas Aquinas on Human Action," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny & Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) pp.642-654.

⁵See I-II q.13 a.5 ad 1; also I-II q.20 a.4: *non est perfecta voluntas, nisi sit talis quae, opportunitate data, operetur*. This means that the elicited operation of the will is, by nature, an incomplete operation. It requires, as its intrinsic, natural term, the performance of the activity or the attainment of the thing willed. To repeat, an elicited act of will has a commanded act for its proper term or end, and it is the composite of the two, the willing and the deed willed, that constitutes a complete human or voluntary act. Hence the completion of the elicited "phase" of a voluntary act is precisely in the initiation of the commanded phase.

⁶"This therefore is what is understood primarily and through itself: that which the intellect conceives within itself about the thing understood, be that [conception] a definition or a proposition... And this thing so conceived by the intellect is called an interior word" (*De potentia* q.9 a.5). See also I q.16 aa.1-2. We might say that the "proportion" between soul and thing established through understanding is the proportion of a representation to what is represented, whereas the proportion set up by willing is that of a need to what is needed. This is why the proportion of willing naturally yields movement toward the object.

⁷See Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas on Human Action. A Theory of Practice* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992) p.182.

⁸See I-II q.16 a.1 obj.2: *actus autem voluntatis non sequitur actum executivae potentiae, sed executio est ultimum*.

⁹Indeed, his criticism is substantially identical with the Article's first objection, the reply to which he does not even consider.

¹⁰This is in striking consistency with the manifest tendency, shown in Donagan's own work (and that of many other analytical philosophers) on action, to conceive of "acts of will" on the model of "mental words", i.e. of acts that "terminate in the soul" of the subject. This makes it difficult for him to conceive of any act of will as the sort of operation described earlier, one whose proper, intrinsic completion is not in the will itself but in "things." See Alan Donagan, *Choice: The Essential Element in Human Action* (New York: Methuen Press, 1988), esp. pp.141-156, on willing as a "propositional attitude".

¹¹See I-II q.16 a.1 obj.2.

¹²"This is the difference between understanding and willing, that understanding comes to be in act through the fact that the thing understood is in the understanding according to its likeness; but willing comes to be in act, not through the fact that some likeness of the thing willed is in the will, but from the fact that the will has a certain inclination to the thing willed. Therefore the procession [in the Godhead] which is in accordance with the nature of understanding [the Son] is according to the nature of a likeness... But the procession which is according to the nature of the will [the Holy Spirit] is not according to the nature of a likeness, but rather according to the nature of something *impelling* and *moving* toward something" (I q.27 a.4, my emphasis). Along this line, note Bonaventure's defense of Hilary's appropriation of use to the Holy Spirit: *In I Sent.*, dist.1 a.1 q.3.

¹³See esp. I-II q.9 a.1.

¹⁴This is not to say that the will does not also in some way bring it about, remotely, by way of initiating deliberation.

¹⁵See Donagan, *Choice...* pp.28-29.

¹⁶Donald Davidson, "Agency", in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) p.59; Donagan, *Choice...* pp.35-38.

¹⁷See I-II q.1 a.3.

¹⁸See I-II q.74 a.1.

¹⁹See e.g. II-II q.58 a.3 obj.3 & reply: external things can be subject and instrumental to one's very action, not just to effects of it.

²⁰"It is not unfitting that the act of one thing be in another, because [for example] teaching is the act of the teacher, but nevertheless tending from him toward another *continuously and without any interruption*; whence the same act is "of this one", that of the agent, as that from which; and it is nonetheless in the patient, as received in it." St Thomas, *In III Physicorum* lect.v #316; my emphasis.