

Aquinas: Compatibilist or Libertarian?

Kevin M. Staley
Saint Anselm College

Both compatibilist and libertarian models of human freedom suffer from certain deficiencies. The former, in which an agent's actions are determined by intrinsic causes, seems to undermine moral responsibility. The latter, in which an agent's actions are not determined, seems to flout the principle of sufficient reason. In this essay I endeavor to show that Aquinas' theory of human freedom, which is grounded in the disproportion between the formal object of the human will (goodness as such) and the finite goods that are the objects of human choices, skirts the difficulties of both compatibilism and libertarianism.

My presentation is inspired by Katherin A. Roger's essay, "Augustine's compatibilism."¹ Compatibilism is a species of determinism. It holds that "choice is the inevitable product of causes which do not originate from the agent." It also holds that an agent acts freely when the proximate causes of his or her choices lie within. For example, were God to create in Pharaoh's heart an irresistible desire to enslave the Hebrews, Pharaoh will necessarily choose to enslave them. However, his choice is still free because it proceeds from within, from the desire in his heart. Opposed to compatibilism is "libertarianism." Libertarianism holds that free, morally significant choices must originate "solely in the conscious agent." Moreover, a choice is free if and only if the agent could have chosen otherwise.

Both compatibilism and libertarianism are problematic positions. Were God to cause in anyone's heart an irresistible desire to enslave, I think that God's goodness would be in question and that the enslaver could not be held responsible for his actions. I agree with Rogers: "If sin is really blameworthy and God is good and just, compatibilism is false." On the other hand, if human choices are not determined by anything at all, are they not eerily arbitrary? As Rogers puts it, "If it is true that at some key choices in your moral career you faced literally open options, then there is no answer to the question, But why did you opt for this over that?" Metaphysically speaking, are not acts of libertarian choice exceedingly odd exceptions to the theist's claim that all non-divine beings are caused to exist by God? If the agent is the sole cause of his choices, has not God's causality been excluded?

Since both compatibilism and libertarianism are problematic, asking whether Aquinas is one or the other seems like asking someone whether her spouse is a murderer or a thief! But ask I must! Is Aquinas a compatibilist or a libertarian?

Passages attesting to Aquinas' compatibilism abound. One of the clearest occurs in *Summa Theologiae, Prima Secundae* VI, 1, which asks, "Is there anything voluntary in human acts?" Aquinas raises the following objection: All human acts are new and non-eternal. But all

¹ Katherin A. Rogers, "Augustine's compatibilism," *Religious Studies* 40:4 (December, 2004), 415-435.

new, non-eternal motions require an external cause. Therefore, since the principle of every human act is outside of it, no human act is voluntary. Aquinas replies unequivocally: “Not every principle is a first principle. Therefore, although it is of the nature of the voluntary that its principle be within the agent, nevertheless, it is not contrary to the nature of the voluntary act that this intrinsic principle be caused or moved by an extrinsic principle, for it is not of the nature of the voluntary that its intrinsic principle be a first principle.”²

Two extrinsic causes act upon the will according to Aquinas. The first is God. God moves the will in the same way as he moves falling rocks in Aristotelian place. Just as God creates rocks with natural inclinations to reach their natural places, God creates the will with a natural inclination to the good as such, or happiness (indeterminately conceived). God does not push pre-existent rocks around. He endows them with a certain nature that gives rise to certain inclinations. Similarly, God does not force the desire for goodness upon an already existing will; rather he creates the will as a dynamic impetus towards goodness as such. But God does not implant the notion of goodness as such directly into the will; rather God operates through a secondary cause, the human intellect. Human beings are structured in such a way that reason, which grasps the concept of being as such, presents this intuition to the will as something to be desired, that is, as good. In any act of willing, then, two distinct causes extrinsic to the will are at work, God and the human intellect. Thus, the will for Aquinas is not an unmoved mover. Like the sensible appetites it is moved by an apprehended good. And like all natural powers, its scope of operation is specified ahead of time by its formal object. Just as the eye is limited to the perception of color, the will is limited to inclining towards things inasmuch as they are good. Aquinas puts it this way “as the intellect of necessity adheres to first principles, so the will must of necessity adhere to the last end, which is happiness.”³

Unlike the compatibilist, however, Aquinas thinks that all genuinely free choices, save one, could have been otherwise. Free agents always have options; and having selected one, they could have selected another. Aquinas grounds this indeterminacy of the will in the space, gap, or the difference that exists between the formal object of the will [the good as such or happiness (indeterminately conceived)] and finite goods, the only goods that can be brought about and enjoyed through human action. Man naturally and necessarily desires to be happy, but he does not naturally and necessarily tend to any given finite good (money, wealth, power, knowledge, virtue, etc.) as constitutive of happiness. The will is always on its way to the good; but in ordinary experience it encounters only this or that good, never goodness itself. The following passage from *Summa Theologiae* neatly sums up Thomas’ position:

Now just as the actually colored is the object of sight, so is good the object of the will. Therefore if the will be offered an object which is good universally and from every point of view, the will tends to it of necessity...it cannot will the opposite.

² Unless otherwise specified, translations are taken from Anton Pegis’ *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Random House: New York, 1945).

³ *ST*, I, 81, 1, resp.

If, on the other hand, the will is offered an object that is not good from every point of view, it will not tend to it of necessity...that good alone which is perfect and lacking in nothing, is such a good that the will cannot not-will it: and this is Happiness. But any other particular goods, in so far as they are lacking in some good, can be regarded as non-goods; and, from this point of view, they can be set aside or approved by the will, which can tend to one and the same thing from various points of view.⁴

Note that Aquinas allows for one determinate human act, which is both necessitated and free. Were man to meet something good in every respect, he or she could not but will it. Such is the state of the blessed who see God face to face. They freely choose to gaze and yet they cannot do otherwise. Heavenly freedom is of the compatibilist sort. But in regard to every finite good, man may choose to pursue it or not. He may rationally reflect on either its goodness or on some aspect in which it fails to be goodness itself, and thus will it or not will it accordingly. Finite goods are deficient; none is in itself sufficient to move the human will.

We might conclude, then, that Thomas has managed his way around the difficulties attendant upon compatibilism and libertarianism. He has allowed for the indeterminacy of will that the libertarians insist is essential to freedom, but he has not disconnected acts of willing from their connection to the first cause. Some Scotists disagree.

In an article entitled “The Libertarian Foundations of Scotus’ Moral Philosophy,” Thomas Williams charges that “Aquinas does not adequately account for the indeterminacy of willing.” Thomistically conceived, agents do not have open possibilities for choice, he argues, because the will is determined by judgments of the intellect. But intellectual judgments are determined by other factors. Williams asserts:

The intellect...operates deterministically. To put it in more modern terms, in a given set of circumstances, we have no control over how things look to us. If in a given set of circumstances my intellect presents the life of aesthetic experience to me as the perfect and complete human life, it is not physically possible for it in that set of circumstances to present any other life to me as embodying happiness.⁵

In responding to this objection Colleen McCluskey refers us to an interesting passage from the *Prima Secundae* in which Aquinas ponders the unfortunate man who, though starving, finds himself before “two portions of food equally appetizing at equal distances.”⁶ The objection contends that this man would starve, which implies that when confronted with two alternatives, one of which is better than the other, one must choose the better. Since one must choose what is better, there are no real options and therefore no real freedom.

⁴ *ST* I-II, q.10, art2, resp.

⁵ Williams, Thomas; “The Libertarian Foundations of Scotus’ Moral Philosophy,” *The Thomist*, 62 (1998), 193-215; p. 205.

⁶ See *ST* I-II, q. 13, 6, obj. 3.

Aquinas' response to the objection is interesting. He states, "If two things are proposed as equal under one aspect, nothing hinders us from considering in one of them some particular point of superiority, so that the will is turned towards that one rather than towards the other." In other words, the criteria by which the intellect judges alternative goods are not fixed. If our hungry man could employ some criterion other than tastiness or distance in his deliberations, he could choose one plate of food over the other. Reason and intellect are at the root of freedom because they not only make judgments about goods according to certain criteria; they also make judgments about which criterion to employ.⁷ Thus, in McCluskey words:

I can view the Hershey Special bar from the standpoint of pleasure and judge it to be good in that regard. Or I can view the candy bar from the perspective of my health, which I also see as good, and judge that it is not good in that regard. At this point I need to judge which conception of the good I will choose in accordance with, make my judgment, and choose accordingly. I can also rethink my judgment and reconsider my reasons for choosing....⁸

I think McCluskey has successfully defended Aquinas against William's charge of intellectual determinism. In any event, her description of her deliberations about chocolate bars seems truer to my own experience as a deliberator. When I was younger, I may have been overcome by the sort of intellectual enthusiasm which Williams attributes to persons making rational judgments, but over the years I have gotten very good at quickly second-guessing myself.

However, if McCluskey is right, I think there is another potential problem with Aquinas' account of freedom. If one can shift from one criterion to another while deliberating and if, given this shift, any finite good can be judged to be deficient in some way, can any deliberation come to an end? What is it that ultimately elicits choice?

Consider, for example, the following scenario: It is early morning. Dan wakes to the smell of pancakes. His appetite, with the consent of his will, drags him out of bed. He goes to the kitchen. Unfortunately, he finds himself at equal distances from two piles of delicious pancakes. Dan is a rational guy. He deliberates, "choosing one pile over the other is choosing arbitrarily. Arbitrariness is bad. I cannot choose between them." Still hungry, Dan reflects on other possible criteria for making the choice; he settles on one and reasons as follows: "If I do not arbitrarily choose one over the other, I will not eat. To eat is good. So I'll just pick the pancakes on the left." "But," replies his conscience, "other criteria are yet available; remember that while the sorrows of hunger can purify the soul, arbitrary choices corrupt the mind."

⁷ See *De Veritate*, q. 24, art. 2; *ST I-II*, q. 17, a. 1.

⁸ McCluskey, Colleen, "Intellective Appetite and Freedom of Action," *The Thomist* 66 (2002) 421-456; pp. 443-444.

Few of us find ourselves in Dan's predicament very often. Our acquired habits usually dispose us to one action or another with little forethought. We also follow rules that we have formulated beforehand, rules like "Never deliberate before breakfast" or "Place all pancakes on a single platter before serving." Still, Dan's predicament is interesting because one wonders just what bit of practical reasoning will finally put him on his way towards one plate or the other. Each is a deficient good, and can be judged by Dan as lacking. What will put an end to his deliberations? What will elicit an act of election?

The answer, I think, is nothing except Dan himself and God. Let me explain. First, given the incommensurability between any finite good and the formal object of Dan's will (the good as such) no finite, deficient good is sufficient to terminate his deliberation. Second, there are indefinitely many criteria Dan can adopt in his deliberations. Among them are morally urgent ones. He ought not to waste his time. He is being overly scrupulous. Surely he has other obligations to fulfill. But even morally urgent goods are themselves deficient in that they too are finite goods. Finally, there is no criterion or perspective, moral or non-moral, according to which eating the pancakes on the left rather than the right will appear as good "universally and from every point of view." If Dan is waiting for some intellectual insight to impel him to act, he waits in vain.

In order to act, Dan must first settle upon some criterion that enables him to see that eating the pancakes on the left as a good. Perhaps the pancakes on the right are reserved for his brother; perhaps the pile on the left is bigger. Second, he must allow his natural desire for happiness or the good as such carry him across the room to the left-handed pancakes as a means to that end. In this way, Dan moves himself. His will, having willed an end (goodness as such, happiness), can move itself to will the means to that end (the pancakes).⁹ Dan's moving himself is not a violation of the principle that nothing is the cause of itself for, as Thomas explains, "The will is not mover and moved in the same respect...insofar as it actually wills the end, it brings itself from potency to act with the respect to the means, so as to will them actually."¹⁰

Recall, however, that Dan's being the state of actually willing the end is not his doing. Dan's inclination towards happiness or goodness in its universality is a function of his nature, a nature which is God's gift to Dan in creating him. For Aquinas, the very fact of Dan's tending to goodness in its universality is sufficient evidence for claiming that God is the immediate cause of this impetus. He argues: "nothing else can be the cause of the will except God Himself, Who is the universal good, while every other good is good by participation, and is some particular good; and a particular cause does not give a universal inclination."¹¹ So it is just as true to say that God moves Dan towards the pancakes as it is to say that Dan moves himself to the pancakes. Dan's capacity to move himself in one direction or another is grounded in God's moving him towards the good as such.

⁹ See *ST I-II*, q. 9, art. 4, resp.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ad 1.

¹¹ *ST I-II*, q. 9, art. 6, resp.

So what of my question: is Aquinas a compatibilist or a libertarian? In fact, he is both and manages to avoid the problematic elements of each. Aquinas is a compatibilist because he argues that humans act on an intrinsic desire that is caused by an extrinsic agent, a natural desire for the good as such implanted in the human heart by God. Were it not for this desire, humans would not act at all. Aquinas is also a libertarian. Humans move themselves to act in choosing the means by which they are to strive for goodness, and they are open to a bewildering array of alternative choices. Whatever is good in any way at all, whatever participates in the Good itself, presents an opportunity to act. There is nothing which man cannot in some way enjoy. Alternatively, there is no finite good that is so good as to compel man to enjoy it. So all human choices could have been otherwise, but they are not random. Since choosing requires that one settle on a criterion in light of which something can be apprehended as good, every human choice has a reason. There can be no choice without some reason for it. Since settling on this or that criterion is the responsibility of the moral agent, God cannot be 'blamed' or 'praised' for the agent's actions. God cooperates with the agent in each of her choices (inasmuch as God is the source of man's impetus towards the good as such), but He is not responsible for an agent's actions (which always bring about this or that good in accordance with an agent's deliberations).

Still, there is something unsettling about Aquinas's account. Human agents are free because no finite good suffices to slake their desire for goodness as such. No finite good is so necessarily bound to happiness as a means to an end that man must will it. So humans must pick a point of view or settle on some criterion according to which they may see a particular action or object as good and to be pursued. Is not this settling on a criterion or picking a point of view an arbitrary act? Is it not, in the final analysis, without sufficient reason?

Settling on one criteria rather than another need not be random as long as there is reason to consider one criterion as superior to another in a given situation. Judging one criterion to be better than another requires an appeal to yet another more universal criterion. If there is no universal, self-evident criterion of goodness with which to assess the multiplicity of less universal criteria upon which an agent might settle in a particular situations, Aquinas' account of freedom is still open to the charge of introducing an eerie arbitrariness into human willing. What could this ultimate criterion be? Three candidates present themselves.

First, there are the first principles of practical reasoning (conceived along the lines of the Finnis-Grisez interpretation of the natural law). These principles assert the self-evident goodness of certain determinate and finite goods universally conceived: life is good, health is good, knowledge is good, aesthetic experience is good, and so forth. But fundamental goods are said to be incommensurable; that is, all things being equal, one fundamental good cannot be said to be better than another. So, in those situations in which it is possible to pursue one of two fundamental goods (play or knowledge), it seems that the agent must simply pick one or the other. So, the first principles of practical reason (conceived as self-evident knowledge of a plurality of incommensurable finite goods) cannot serve as that ultimate criterion that might rescue Aquinas' account of freedom from charges of eerie arbitrariness.

A second candidate for this ultimate criterion might be happiness determinately conceived. If one knows which sort of life is best, then one might assess less universal criteria in light of this sort of life. Aquinas does argue that the life of contemplation is best. The difficulty, however, is the fact that he has to argue for it. That is to say, even if it is true that the contemplative life is man's highest happiness, that it is so is not self-evident. Moreover, any determinate conception of happiness entertained by human agents must fall short of the formal object of the will, goodness as such. The contemplative life does not appear to be good from every point of view. No determinate conception of the best life can therefore serve as the ultimate criterion that might rescue Aquinas' account of freedom from charges of arbitrariness.

The only remaining candidate would be determinate knowledge of goodness as such, that is, of the divine essence. Unfortunately, such knowledge is not available this side of the grave.

Aquinas' doctrine of human freedom, therefore, remains open to the charge of eerie arbitrariness. This does not, as I see it, mean his account is flawed. Rather it suggests that human freedom, as we experience it, really is eerily arbitrary. Rational animals, capable of desiring the good as such and who inhabit a universe that is only finitely good, will always experience themselves as somewhat out of place.