

## Aquinas on the Fixity of the Will After Death

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### Abstract

Aquinas holds that after death, the human soul can no longer change its basic orientation either toward God or away from him. He takes this to be knowable not only from divine revelation but by purely philosophical reasoning. The heart of his position is that the basic orientation of an angelic will is fixed immediately after its creation, and that the human soul after death is relevantly like an angel. This article expounds and defends Aquinas's position, paying special attention to the action theory underlying it.

### Keywords

action, angels, Aquinas, death, heaven, hell, will

### I.

According to the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church, after death the soul can no longer change its basic orientation either toward God or away from him.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas takes this doctrine to be knowable not only from divine revelation, but also through purely philosophical reasoning. What follows is an exposition and defense of that reasoning.<sup>2</sup>

The heart of Aquinas's position is that after death, the human soul is relevantly like an angel, where the basic orientation of an angel's will is fixed immediately after its creation. So, in order to understand Aquinas's reasons for thinking that the orientation of the human will becomes unchangeable after death, we need first to understand his reasons for thinking that an angel's will becomes unchangeable immediately after its creation. But in order to understand that, we must in turn

<sup>1</sup> This teaching is classified as *theologically certain* in Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1974), at p. 474. That is to say, it is 'a doctrine, on which the Teaching Authority of the Church has not yet finally pronounced, but whose truth is guaranteed by its intrinsic connection with the doctrine of revelation' (pp. 9-10).

<sup>2</sup> And only of that reasoning. I will not be addressing here those of Aquinas's arguments that presuppose divine revelation.

know something of Aquinas's account of action – an account developed in a discussion of human action, specifically, but an analogue of which applies to angelic action.

In the next section, then, I will sketch out the relevant themes from Aquinas's action theory. The subsequent section will turn to his account of the fixity of angelic wills. We will then be in a position to understand why he takes the human will to be fixed after death.

## II.

Following Boethius, Aquinas takes a person to be an individual substance of a rational nature.<sup>3</sup> The difference between angelic and human persons is that angels are *incorporeal* substances of a rational nature and human beings are *animal* (and thus corporeal) substances of a rational nature.<sup>4</sup> For a substance to be rational is for it to possess intellect, the power to grasp concepts and their logical relationships. Human beings form concepts by abstracting universal natures from the individual things instantiating them that are revealed to us in sensory experience.<sup>5</sup> For example, we form the concept of *being a man* by attending to what is common to the different particular men we perceive around us. We then put concepts together into complete thoughts or judgements (as when we judge that *all men are mortal*), and reason discursively from judgement to judgement (as when we reason from the thoughts that *all men are mortal* and that *Socrates is a man* to the conclusion that *Socrates is mortal*).<sup>6</sup>

Since angels are incorporeal and thus lack sense organs, their concepts are not acquired in this way. Instead, Aquinas holds, they are con-natural or innate to them.<sup>7</sup> Nor do angels need to put concepts together into complete thoughts or reason discursively from one thought to another.<sup>8</sup> Rather, all at once, in a single act, they grasp the relationships between concepts and between premises and conclusions.

For Aquinas, all substances are naturally inclined or directed toward distinctive goods. For example, a tree is directed toward the goods distinctive of plants, such as taking in water through its roots. A squirrel is directed toward goods such as gathering nuts and acorns, and unlike a tree, the squirrel has sensory knowledge of these goods. A person or rational substance, unlike a squirrel (let alone a tree), can

<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.29.1.

<sup>4</sup> Cf., respectively, *Summa Theologiae* I.50.1 and *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* VII.3.1326.

<sup>5</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.79.3 and I.85.1.

<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.85.5.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.55.2.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.58.3-4.

conceptualize the goods toward which he is inclined, and thereby have intellectual knowledge of them. The will, for Aquinas, just is the inclination of a rational substance toward what the intellect judges to be good.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the will inclines of necessity toward what the intellect judges to be good, and in particular at what we judge will bring happiness.<sup>10</sup> That does not entail that we cannot will what we judge to be in some way bad. Aquinas's view is rather that whenever we will some end, it is because of some good we judge it to have, even if the intellect acknowledges it to be bad in other respects. At the moment of choice, it is the good that the intellect sees in it that it focuses on, and the will opts for it *under that* aspect.

Though I follow here the common practice of speaking about what the intellect sees, what the will opts for, and so on, it is important to emphasize that strictly speaking, it is only the *person* or rational substance who does these things. The intellect and will are powers or capacities of this substance rather than substances in their own right. When it is said that the intellect knows something, this is for Aquinas to be understood as a shorthand way of saying that the person knows it, by virtue of his intellect. Similarly, when it is said that the will chooses some end, this is a shorthand way of saying that the person chooses it, by virtue of his will.

Now, many ends are pursued for the sake of further ends. You labor in order to earn an income, you want to earn an income in order to feed your family, and you want to feed your family in order to ensure that they survive and flourish. But Aquinas holds that there must be one *ultimate* end toward which all our actions are directed, and that that end is happiness.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he argues that what alone can bring happiness is to know and love God.<sup>12</sup> That is not to deny that people disagree about what will bring happiness, and that many seek it in something other than God. The point is that whatever ultimate end they seek, they seek it *as* that which they suppose will bring happiness. And, Aquinas holds, what alone can really bring it *is* in fact God, even if some do not see that.

John Lamont helpfully characterizes Aquinas's conception of action as 'life-driven', by contrast with the 'goods-driven' conceptions that predominate today.<sup>13</sup> For on Aquinas's account, 'the goal that ultimately rules human action is that of living a life of a certain sort' such that one's choices 'give life a certain pattern... a complete

<sup>9</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.19.1 and I.59.1.

<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.82.1-2.

<sup>11</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I-II.1.

<sup>12</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I-II.2.

<sup>13</sup> John Lamont, 'The Justice and Goodness of Hell', *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (2011): 152-73.

narrative structure, a structure that is the story of a person as such'.<sup>14</sup> A goods-driven account, by contrast, does not conceive of actions and the goods they are directed towards as fitting into any larger narrative structure. In effect, it takes these actions and goods to amount to just one thing after another. 'Life goals' of the kind one might aim at on a life-driven account include 'those of a revolutionary or a monk, but there are [also] many everyday kinds of human lives', as when 'people decide to get married and raise children, or to dedicate themselves to a certain career'.<sup>15</sup> Now, there are also people who do not consciously entertain any such life goal, whose pattern of actions approximates the model that the goods-driven conception attributes to human action in general. But this pattern too, Lamont argues, amounts to a tacit choice of a life goal, namely that of 'a shallow irresponsible wastrel'.<sup>16</sup> Such a life in fact has a narrative structure no less than that of someone who consciously tried to construct a life narrative.

Conceiving of action in such narrative terms elucidates why Aquinas and like-minded thinkers put such emphasis on virtues and vices when analyzing the moral life. Virtues are habits of action that facilitate the realization of the true end of human life, and vices are habits that frustrate the realization of that end. Hence the story of a life well lived will be a narrative of the acquisition of the virtues, and the story of a bad life will be a narrative of enslavement to the vices. This also contributes to making intelligible how a person's will can become fixed on either good or evil. Richard Swinburne's account of the matter emphasizes how repeatedly giving in to the temptation to do evil can gradually dull one's ability even to perceive what is truly good, let alone to want to do it.<sup>17</sup> The basic idea is familiar from Aristotle, who contrasts the incontinent or weak-willed man (the *akratēs*) from the licentious man (the *akolastos*).<sup>18</sup> The former does wrong with regret and is capable of reform, whereas the latter has become so thoroughly addicted to immoral pleasures that he can no longer repent of pursuing them.

However, to leave it at that might give the impression that it is only gradual habituation into evil, as a result of a series of immoral acts, that can result in orientation toward the wrong life goal. As Lamont notes, that is not the view of Aquinas, for whom 'the commission of one mortal sin constitutes the rejection of friendship with God as one's

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 141-47. A similar account is defended in Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), chapter 5.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII, Chapters 7 and 8. For a useful discussion that relates Aristotle's analysis both to Aquinas and to work in contemporary philosophy, see Kevin L. Flannery SJ, 'Anscombe and Aristotle on Corrupt Minds', *Christian Bioethics* 14 (2008): 151-64.

life goal'.<sup>19</sup> To be sure, such a sin can be repented of, and for Aquinas this is true even with the *akolastos*, though his sins are more grave and repentance more difficult.<sup>20</sup> The point, though, is that *unless* it is repented of, even a single mortal sin will suffice to take one's life narrative in the wrong direction.

For Aquinas, a necessary condition for repentance is the recognition of a higher good the realization of which is frustrated by the action of which one repents.<sup>21</sup> He compares this to correcting an intellectual error by reasoning back to first principles (an example of which would be the law of non-contradiction). If one is correct about which principles are truly first, then rectifying the error is possible. But if one is incorrect about that, rectifying an error is far more difficult, because one will not have anything more fundamental to appeal to in order to correct one's mistake about which principles are truly first. Similarly, if one correctly understands which ultimate end will conduce to human happiness, repentance of sin will be much easier than if one is wrong about the ultimate end. This is why the *akolastos* is in much greater spiritual danger than the *akratēs*, though Aquinas thinks that at least in this life the former can still discover his error about the ultimate end. But if it should somehow become impossible to correct that fundamental error, so too will repentance become impossible. That is exactly what Aquinas thinks occurs at death.

### III.

The reason he thinks this occurs at death is, as I have said, because he takes the disembodied human soul to be in relevant respects like an angelic intellect. Let's now turn, then, to Aquinas's reasons for thinking that angelic intellects are fixed in their orientation toward either good or evil immediately after their creation. He addresses this topic in several places, and at greatest length in four works: his *Commentary on the Sentences* of Peter Lombard; *De Veritate*; *Summa Theologiae*; and *De Malo*.<sup>22</sup>

In the *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas explains the obstinacy of the demons on analogy with the *akolastos*, who in Aristotle's view cannot repent because his passions have locked him into pursuing an immoral end.<sup>23</sup> Human beings, Aquinas says, settle upon their ultimate end by

<sup>19</sup> Lamont, 'The Justice and Goodness of Hell', p. 161.

<sup>20</sup> *De Malo*, Question III, Article 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Shorter discussions can be found in *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.95.8 and *Compendium Theologiae* I.184, but these essentially summarize points developed at greater length in the works referred to.

<sup>23</sup> *Commentary on the Sentences* II.7.1.2.

way of a path of inquiry, and the influence of passion can lead them astray. But they can repent and get back on the right path as long as they remain alive, because the disordered passions can in that case still be changed. And for Aquinas, this is true even of the *akolastos*. However, an angel does not settle upon its ultimate end by way of inquiry, but knows whatever it knows in an immediate way. Moreover, being incorporeal, it has no passions the correction of which might allow the reorientation of its will to a different end. Hence, whereas human beings settle upon their ultimate end through a process of inquiry during which reason competes with passion, angels settle upon their ultimate end all at once in a single intellectual act. There is in them, unlike in us, no leeway for course correction.

In my view, the main thrust of the argument developed in the *Sentences* commentary is preserved in the accounts given in *De Veritate*, *Summa Theologiae*, and *De Malo*, even if these later accounts add further details.<sup>24</sup> Like the *Sentences* commentary, the relevant passage in *De Veritate* makes use of Aristotle's account of habituation. Aquinas notes how the reform of vicious habits is possible for human beings, either because the disordered passions that lead to sin are calmed, or because bad habits associated with one appetite are counterbalanced by good habits associated with another, or because erroneous judgments made by the intellect are corrected via further inquiry. Aquinas then contrasts the situation of the fallen angels as follows:

In an angel, however, sin cannot be from passion, because, as the Philosopher says, passion is only in the sensitive part of the soul, which an angel does not have. In the sin of an angel, therefore, only two influences concur: a habitual inclination to the sin and a false judgment of the cognitive power about a particular object of choice. Now, since angels do not have a multiplicity of appetitive powers as men have, when their appetite tends to something, it inclines to it altogether, so that it does not have any inclination drawing it to the contrary. And because they do not have reason but intelligence, whatever they judge, they accept in the manner of understanding. But whatever is accepted in the manner of understanding is accepted irreversibly, as when one accepts the proposition that every whole is greater than its part. As a consequence angels cannot

<sup>24</sup> That the passages from Aquinas I am discussing contain importantly different arguments for the obstinacy of demonic wills is suggested in Joseph Suk-Hwan Dowd, 'Aquinas on Demonic Obstinance', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 89 (2015): 699-718; and Tobias Hoffman, *Free Will and the Rebel Angels in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), at pp. 244-49. It seems to me, though, that the differences concern matters of detail and emphasis rather than the basic thrust of the arguments. In any event, I am less interested here in questions of exegesis than in what I take to be the most plausible argument that can be gleaned from Aquinas's texts.

put aside a judgment which they have once accepted, whether it be true or false.<sup>25</sup>

As in the *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas here notes that whereas we can reform vicious habits by correcting either disordered passions or erroneous reasoning, this is not possible for angels since they lack any passions needing correction and know what they know in an immediate way rather than through a process of reasoning. That kind of cognition is what he means by ‘intelligence’ as opposed to ‘reason’, and what he compares to our grasp of a first principle (such as that a whole is greater than its parts), which involves simply taking something to be self-evident rather than drawing an inference. Because there is no *process* in angelic cognition, there is no *correction* of a process. In the *De Veritate* passage, though, Aquinas adds the new detail that whereas we have several appetites subject to habituation (namely, the concupiscible and irascible sensory appetites as well as the rational appetite or will), angels have only the will. Hence, unlike us, they have no competing appetite that might pull the will away from what it has fixed upon.

Yet another detail to the story is highlighted in the version of the argument Aquinas gives in the *Summa Theologiae*. The key passage is the following:

The appetitive power is in all things proportioned to the apprehensive, whereby it is moved... Now the angel’s apprehension differs from man’s in this respect, that the angel by his intellect apprehends immovably... whereas man by his reason apprehends movably, passing from one consideration to another; and having the way open by which he may proceed to either of two opposites. Consequently man’s will adheres to a thing movably, and with the power of forsaking it and of clinging to the opposite; whereas the angel’s will adheres fixedly and immovably. Therefore, if his will be considered before its adhesion, it can freely adhere either to this or to its opposite (namely, in such things as he does not will naturally); but after he has once adhered, he clings immovably. So it is customary to say that man’s free-will is flexible to the opposite both before and after choice; but the angel’s free-will is flexible to either opposite before the choice, but not after. Therefore the good angels who adhered to justice, were confirmed therein; whereas the wicked ones, sinning, are obstinate in sin.<sup>26</sup>

As noted earlier, the will, for Aquinas, of necessity inclines toward what the intellect judges to be good. Because the human intellect arrives at this judgement through a reasoning process, what is judged to be good can change as we ‘pass from one consideration to another’

<sup>25</sup> *De Veritate*, Question 24, Article 10. Quoted from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, Volume III, translated by Robert W. Schmidt SJ (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), pp. 179-80.

<sup>26</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.64.2. Quoted from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, in five volumes, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948), at p. 322 of vol. I.

in the course of this process. The will, accordingly, will change its inclination. But again, angels do not arrive at their judgments through a reasoning process, but in a single act. Hence there is no opening for a correction of the will's inclination. This much is familiar from the discussions in the *Sentences* commentary and *De Veritate*, but what this passage from the *Summa* emphasizes is the resulting difference between human and angelic free will. Even after opting for some end, a human being can still come to opt for another instead, because the reasoning process can lead to a reconsideration of the initial choice. But since angels opt for an end in a single act rather than by way of a reasoning process, there is no avenue for reconsidering that choice.

A final detail of Aquinas's account is added by the presentation of the argument he offers in *De Malo*. Here is the crucial passage:

It belongs to the angels' nature to have actual knowledge of everything they can know naturally, as we by nature have actual knowledge of first principles, from which we by a process of deductive reasoning proceed to acquire knowledge of conclusions. But angels do not have such a process of reasoning, since they intuit in the principles themselves all the conclusions proper to natural knowledge of them. And so as we are permanently disposed regarding knowledge of first principles, so the angels' intellect is permanently disposed regarding everything it knows by nature. And since the will is proportioned to the intellect, it follows that their will is also by nature irrevocable regarding what belongs to the natural order. But it is also true that they have potentiality regarding movements to supernatural things, whether by turning toward them or by turning away from them. And so they can only have the change of moving from the order of their nature to things transcending their nature by turning toward or away from them. But since everything added to something is added to it according to the mode of its nature, it follows that angels persist irrevocably in turning from or toward a supernatural good.<sup>27</sup>

We can know a first principle in a single intellectual act, though we know the things that follow from first principles only by way of a reasoning process. But an angel knows not only first principles, but also what follows from them, in a single act. Here again we see the theme that angelic cognition does not involve any kind of reasoning process, the redirection of which might lead to a reconsideration of the choice of an ultimate end. But Aquinas now adds the thesis that with angels, the choice that could initially go one way or another concerns, specifically, a *supernatural* end (which would be the beatific vision), rather than any natural end. Having once opted either for or against this supernatural end, an angel cannot reconsider this choice.

When we combine the elements from these different passages, the resulting overall account of the obstinacy of the demonic will is, I

<sup>27</sup> *De Malo*, Question XVI, Article 5. Quoted from Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, translated by Richard Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 472.



suggest, as follows. A fallen angel is analogous to the *akolastos* as Aristotle conceives of him, so thoroughly hardened in evildoing that he is incapable of reconsidering the ultimate end that orders all his actions. In particular, once he has forsaken the supernatural end of the beatific vision, an angel is incapable of repenting of this choice. For whereas the *akolastos* can in fact repent, the prerequisites to repentance, which exist in the *akolastos*, are absent in an angel. For one thing, unlike a human being, an angel does not arrive at judgements about the ultimate end through any sort of reasoning process. Hence there can be no correction of such a process, as there can be in the *akolastos*. For another thing, the factors that lead human beings into culpable errors in the reasoning process in the first place are also absent in an angel. In particular, an angel lacks either passions that might surge or be calmed, or sensory appetites that might be habituated. Hence he lacks the avenue to repentance open to the *akolastos*, namely the reform of disordered passions and sensory appetites. There is in an angel simply the single appetite of will, which after the angel's creation locks either onto the beatific vision as its ultimate end, or onto something else, depending on the intellect's judgement. Precisely because whatever it locks onto becomes the *ultimate* end, there is no end more fundamental by reference to which the angel might go on to alter this judgment.

That, as I say, is the basic argument. But there are some interpretive issues to be addressed. One of them concerns the precise nature of the error made by the demonic intellect. It might seem that this must involve ignorance of a true proposition or even the affirmation of a false proposition (as is indicated by the reference in the *De Veritate* passage to a 'false judgment of the cognitive power'). But while that occurs in the case of human sin, Aquinas holds (at least in the later version of his argument) that angelic error is of a different character. Because of the influence of passion or habit, the human intellect can wrongly judge something evil to be good. But 'in this way there can be no sin in the angel; because there are no passions in the angels to fetter reason or intellect... nor, again, could any habit inclining to sin precede their first sin'.<sup>28</sup> There is, however, a further way the intellect can go wrong:

In another way sin comes of free-will by choosing something good in itself, but not according to proper measure or rule... as if one were to pray, without heeding the order established by the Church. Such a sin does not presuppose ignorance, but merely absence of consideration of the things which ought to be considered. In this way the angel sinned, by seeking his own good, from his own free-will, insubordinately to the rule of the Divine will.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.63.1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

In other words, when the fallen angels willed wrongly, it was not because their intellects either affirmed some falsehood or lacked knowledge of some truth, but rather because they culpably did not *attend to* a truth they knew. In particular, it is not that they were ignorant of the beatific vision or wrongly denied its possibility, but rather that in their pride and envy they did not attend to the fact that it can be attained only by grace and not by their own power.<sup>30</sup>

A second issue concerns whether the various differences between human beings and angels noted in Aquinas's argument are equally fundamental to it. Again, Aquinas notes that human beings, unlike angels, arrive at judgments through a reasoning process, and that this process can be affected by fleeting passions and badly habituated sensory appetites. But it seems clear that the angels' lack of passions and sensory appetites is more fundamental to the argument than the fact that they do not go through a reasoning process. For one thing, passions and sensory appetites are corporeal, whereas the human intellect, even given its differences from the angelic intellect, is, in Aquinas's view, like the angelic intellect in being incorporeal. And as we will see, Aquinas emphasizes that it is only insofar as we retain our corporeality that we are capable of repentance, while he also sometimes emphasizes that it is the angels' lack of corporeality that makes them incapable of it.<sup>31</sup>

For another thing, it is precisely because human intellection depends on the body that it involves a *process* in the first place. For Aquinas, though angelic intellects possess 'intelligible species' or concepts innately, the human intellect 'has no innate species, but is at first in potentiality to all such species'.<sup>32</sup> This potentiality is actualized by way of sensory experience, and thus sense organs, over time. Moreover, even after concepts are acquired, the intellect makes use of 'phantasms' or mental imagery when applying them, and these too involve corporeal organs.<sup>33</sup> This includes 'composition, division and reasoning' or combining concepts into judgements and drawing inferences, and 'forasmuch as it turns to the phantasms, composition and division of the intellect involve time', and thus a process.<sup>34</sup> Aquinas indicates that after death, the soul's mode of cognition will be more like that of the angels. In *De Veritate*, he says that 'when it will have its being free of the body, then it will receive the influx of intellectual knowledge in the way in which angels receive it'.<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere he adds that 'separated souls

<sup>30</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.63.2-3.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Compendium Theologiae* I.184. As Dowd notes (p. 703), the thesis that the demons' obstinacy derives from their incorporeality was also put forward by the church father John of Damascus.

<sup>32</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.84.3.

<sup>33</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.84.7.

<sup>34</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I.85.5.

<sup>35</sup> *De Veritate*, Question 19, Article 1. Quoted from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, Volume II, translated by James V. McGlynn SJ (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), p. 390.

acquire this knowledge all at once by an influx, and not successively by instruction'.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, when Aquinas addresses the fixity of the human will after death in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the argument focuses on the separated soul's lack of passions and sensory appetites, rather than on anything directly to do with human versus angelic modes of intellection (even though there is a passing reference to that). So, again, it seems that what is doing the main work in Aquinas's argument for demonic obstinacy is not the thesis that angels know what they know all at once rather than as a result of a reasoning process, but rather the fact that angelic intellection is free of any influence of passions or habituated sensory appetites.

These interpretive issues are important not only for the proper understanding of Aquinas's argument about the fixity of angelic wills, but also for the question of the fixity of the human will after death. For if angels can become impenitent even just as a result of a failure to attend to some truth they know, how much more susceptible of impenitence are human beings, who are not only ignorant of truths known by the angels but also positively affirm falsehoods? If even creatures whose mode of intellection is neither discursive nor reliant on the senses can fall into permanent error, how much more likely is such error in the case of human beings, who know what they know through a fallible reasoning process and limited empirical evidence? Even before we consider the specifics of Aquinas's argument for the fixity of the human will after death, the thesis that even angels can become obstinate in evil makes it *a priori* likely that human beings can do so as well.

#### IV.

Let us turn at last, then, to Aquinas's philosophical argument for the fixity of the will after death. The key passage is in *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

The desire of this thing or that thing under the aspect of beatitude and ultimate end arises from some special disposition of nature; hence, the Philosopher says that 'as a man is, so also the end appears to him'. Therefore, if that disposition in which something is desired as ultimate end cannot be removed from the man, neither will his will be able to be changed in respect to desire of that end.

Dispositions like these, of course, can be removed from us so long as the soul is united to the body. For, that we desire a thing as the ultimate end sometimes happens from our being so disposed by a passion which

<sup>36</sup> *De Anima*, Article XVIII. Quoted from St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Soul*, translated by John Patrick Rowan (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1949), p. 237.

quickly passes; hence, too, this desire of the end is easy to remove, as appears among the continent. Sometimes, however, we are disposed to the desire of a good end or a bad one by a habit, and that disposition is not easily taken away; hence, such a desire for an end persists rather strongly, as is clear among the temperate. For all that, an habitual disposition can be removed in this life.

Thus, therefore, it is manifest that so long as the disposition persists in which a thing is desired as ultimate end, the desire of that end is not changeable, because the desire of the ultimate end is an extreme; hence, one cannot be called from desire of the ultimate end by something more desirable. The soul is, of course, in a mutable state so long as it is united to the body, but it will not be after it has been separated from the body. A disposition of the soul is changed incidentally with some change in the body, for, since it is at the service of the soul for its very own operations, the body was given to the soul by nature with this in view: that the soul existing within the body be perfected, be, as it were, moved toward its perfection. When it shall, then, be separated from the body it will not be in a state of motion toward the end, but in a state of rest in the end acquired. The soul's will, therefore, will be immovable regarding a desire for the ultimate end.<sup>37</sup>

Note first that we see here, once again, the Aristotelian theme that an agent can become so habituated to the pursuit of some end that it is no longer possible for an alternative end to *appear* to him as more ultimate. We also see again the thesis that such habituation is not absolutely fixed in a bodily agent, because fleeting passions or even deeply habituated desires that aim one toward a certain end can still be changed, resulting in a change in the ultimate end that is aimed at. And we see once more the idea that where there are no such bodily influences on the will, its orientation toward an ultimate end is *not* changeable. With angels (as Aquinas repeats a little further on in this chapter from *Summa Contra Gentiles*), their orientation is not changeable because they never had bodies in the first place. What Aquinas argues here is that the human soul is similarly unchangeable once it loses its body at death.

The key idea, here as in the case of angels, is that in the absence of the body there is only a single appetite, the will, which is directed at what the intellect judges to be good. Now, where the good in question is judged less than ultimate, the will might be changed in its orientation if some other lesser good comes to seem to the intellect to be a better means to the ultimate end. If my ultimate goal is to get to San Francisco, I might change my initial plan to take an airplane there if I find out that the bus would be much cheaper and the extra travel time

<sup>37</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book IV, Chapter 95. Quoted from Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Four: Salvation*, translated by Charles J. O'Neil (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 343-44.

not onerous. As Aquinas goes on to say after the passage quoted above, the will of the separated soul ‘is changeable from this object of will to that so long as the order to the same ultimate end is preserved’. But where the *ultimate* end is concerned, no change is possible where there is only the single appetite of the will. For there is in that case nothing that might pull the intellect away from its judgement that some end is highest.

Hence, suppose that reasoning leads me to conclude that the highest end would be a life of political activism. But suppose also that I have a weakness for alcohol. The pull of the bottle might distract my intellect from the considerations that led me to judge political activism the highest good, and repeated indulgence might even lead me no longer to pay them any attention at all, so that drinking comes to seem a worthier pursuit. All other factors being equal, had I not had that distracting bodily appetite for alcohol, my intellect would have remained focused on the end of political activism.

A critic of Aquinas might object that it is not only fleeting passions and habituated bodily appetites that might pull the intellect away from a judgment like the one in question. For obviously, I might change my mind about political activism for reasons having nothing to do with a weakness for alcohol or the like. For example, I might read a book that convinces me that some other pursuit would be more worthwhile, or I might have a conversation with someone who convinces me of that. But reading a book or holding a conversation involves sensory experience, which requires a body. So, just as the absence of the body would prevent an appetite for alcohol from altering the intellect’s judgement, so too would it prevent a book or a conversation from doing so. In general, sensory experience cannot influence the judgements the human intellect makes after death any more than it can influence the judgements made by an angelic intellect.

The application of the basic thrust of Aquinas’s argument concerning angelic wills to the case of the human will after death is straightforward enough. But there is a crucial new element to the story added in the passage from *Summa Contra Gentiles* quoted above. Note that Aquinas does not say merely that the body influences the judgements of the intellect. He makes a stronger claim. He says that by nature the body exists for the sake of moving the soul towards its perfection or completion, and that at death this task will be completed. The body’s influence on the intellect is therefore *necessary* and *teleological* in character. It’s not that the intellect operates in a free-standing way, where bodily influences contingently might (but also might not) influence its operations. Rather, the intellect is initially in an unfinished state with respect to its basic orientation, and requires corporeal influences to direct it to its completion. This completion occurs when these influences drop away at death. The soul with its intellectual powers is like wet clay, which initially can be molded into any number of shapes. Bodily

influences are like the hands that mold the clay into some particular configuration, and death is like the kiln fire which hardens the clay permanently into that shape.

Thus, even though the body is the source of the human will's initial changeability with respect to its ultimate end, Aquinas holds that the restoration of the body after death would not make the will once again changeable. He writes:

For all that, one should not think that the souls, after they take up their bodies again in the resurrection, lose the immutability of will; rather, they persevere therein, because... the bodies in the resurrection will be disposed as the soul requires, but the souls will not be changed by means of the bodies.<sup>38</sup>

Wet clay is malleable, but after it has been hardened by the fire of the kiln, it cannot be made malleable again by wetting it. Before firing, the clay will conform itself to the water you apply to it; after firing, the water will conform itself to the clay, rolling off its surface or, if poured into a pot the clay has been fashioned into, taking on the shape of the pot. Similarly, though the soul conforms itself to bodily influences before death, after death it becomes like clay which has set or hardened into a certain shape. The body, if restored to it, will then conform itself to the soul rather than the other way around.

Aquinas's conception of the influence the body has on the soul thus reflects what Lamont calls a 'life-driven' rather than 'goods-driven' account of human action. Passions and habituated appetites are not merely one set of factors among others that may or may not influence the intellect's choice of an ultimate end, and at any point in its existence. Rather, they play an essential role within a *narrative* that is the story of a soul, a narrative that has a climax at death.

An interpretive controversy among Thomists concerns whether, given Aquinas's account, we should think of the intellect as making its immutable choice of an ultimate end before death or immediately after death.<sup>39</sup> Cajetan held that it is just after death, when the human will becomes relevantly like that of an angel, that the fatal choice is made. Sylvester of Ferrara held that the choice is made before death but that it is fixed after death. To explain the latter view by way of the analogy of the clay, the fatal choice before death would be like the final motions of the hands which form the clay into the shape of a pot, say, rather than a figurine. Death is like the fire which hardens the shape in place. The choice has a permanent effect even though it was made before death, just as the hands have a permanent effect even though their action stopped before the fire was applied. Or to take another analogy

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>39</sup> For a brief overview of the debate, see Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Life Everlasting* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1991, chapter IX.

sometimes used to explain Sylvester's position, if a tree falls either toward the north or the south, it will, of course, lie wherever it lands.<sup>40</sup> The falling of the tree in a certain specific direction is like the choice made before death, and the tree's landing in a certain definite spot is like the fixing of this choice after death.

The dispute over these interpretations is in part motivated by theological concerns, but it seems to me that Sylvester's position is more plausible even on purely philosophical grounds. The thrust of Aquinas's argument is that, after death, the choice of ultimate end cannot be altered. Hence, if one has opted for some ultimate end before death, how could that choice be reversed after death, consistently with Aquinas's position? For that would require some bodily influence on the will, and all such influences are absent. So, it must be the final choice made while still alive, and not (contra Cajetan) a first choice made after death, that fixes the will immutably.

Another interpretive question concerns the specific reason why the choice of end cannot be altered without bodily influences. Abbot Anscar Vonier appears to hold that it has to do with the separated soul's taking on an angelic mode of intellection, and in particular, it's knowing what it knows all at once rather than through a process of reasoning.<sup>41</sup> Now, as we have seen, when discussing the obstinacy of the angelic will, Aquinas does indeed repeatedly emphasize that angelic cognition is not successive or processual as ours is. We have also seen that Aquinas does indeed indicate that the soul's cognition after death will be more like that of the angels. However, in the passage from *Summa Contra Gentiles* quoted above, Aquinas himself does not actually appeal to the distinction between knowing all at once *versus* knowing by way of a process of reasoning. And as I suggested earlier, even in the case of angelic obstinacy, this distinction is not in fact what is most fundamental to the argument.

What *is* fundamental, I would suggest, is the absence of both any new information and any competing appetites that might effect a change in the will's basic orientation. In the case of an angel, these are absent because an angel knows what it knows all at once and lacks any sensory appetites. In the case of the human soul after death, they are absent because it no longer receives any input from the senses and loses its sensory appetites. And that would remain the case whether its cognition continues to be successive in nature or instead takes on the non-successive character of angelic cognition. Hence the question of whether the soul's cognition after death is successive or non-successive is, it seems to me, not really essential to Aquinas's argument for the fixity of the will after death.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65 and 67. The analogy is inspired by Ecclesiastes 11:3.

<sup>41</sup> Abbot Vonier, *The Human Soul* (Bethesda: Zaccheus Press, 2010), chapter 29.

Now, David Bentley Hart alleges that Aquinas's thesis that the will is immutable after the loss of the body is 'just a blank assertion', and raises two objections to it.<sup>42</sup> First, if it were true, then the fallen angels, lacking bodies, could not have made even their initial choice of ultimate end, let alone chosen differently later on. Second, even if it were true, the restoration of the body at the resurrection would nevertheless restore the will's mutability.

But all of this misses Aquinas's point. Given Aquinas's account of action, all choices are for the sake of what the agent takes to be the ultimate end, and thus wills as such. But what is willed as an ultimate end is whatever the agent's intellect attends to in the first moment it is able to operate without distractions from competing appetites. For an angel, this occurs immediately upon its creation. For a human being, it occurs immediately upon death. Let's label the end in question *E*. The only way an agent could abandon *E* is if there were some other end it took to be more ultimate, and in light of which it judged that *E* was not ultimate after all. But the whole point, of course, is that the agent does *not* take any other end to be more ultimate than *E*. If it did, then *E* would not in fact be in the first place the end it takes to be ultimate. Hence, supposing that an intellect takes some end *E* to be ultimate, it can never revise this judgment, because any revision would presuppose that some end *other* than *E* is taken to be ultimate – which contradicts the initial supposition.

But isn't it Aquinas's view that what the human intellect takes to be the ultimate end can and does in fact change, at least before death? I would say that this is true only in a loose sense but not in a strict sense. Strictly speaking, it is not that the will, before death, first fixes on one end as ultimate, and then fixes on another. Rather, before death, it doesn't fix on any end at all. It's not like a bullet that reaches one target but can be pulled out, reloaded, and fired at another. Rather, it's like a bullet that has not yet reached any target at all, and which is on a *trajectory* toward some particular target but might yet be diverted. And, like a bullet, once it reaches its target – at creation in the case of an angel, at death in the case of a human being – it *cannot* be fired again.

In light of these considerations, we can see that all three of Hart's claims are mistaken. First, Aquinas's position is by no means 'just a blank assertion', but is grounded in a theory of action. Second, there is no contradiction in Aquinas's view that the angels can opt for an ultimate end immediately after their creation but cannot opt for some other ultimate end afterward. For the initial act involves precisely the attended to and willing of something as the ultimate end for the sake of

<sup>42</sup> David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 46.



which all other choices will be made. To say that this can happen once but only once is no more incoherent than saying that a bullet can be fired once but only once, or that a bit of clay can be molded into a pot once but only once. Third, there is also no contradiction in holding that the will is mutable before death but will not regain its mutability when the body is restored at the resurrection. For mutability is possible only where the will has never settled on an end. The will is mutable before death because it has not yet settled on an end, and is immutable after death because it then does then settle on an end, and this remains the case whether or not the body is ever restored.

This is by no means the end of what Aquinas has to say about the fixity of the will after death. There are further considerations, concerning the effect of the beatific vision on the saved and the effect on the damned of the exclusion from grace, which presuppose divine revelation. Again, I have not been addressing those, but have confined myself to what might be known from purely philosophical reasoning. I have tried to show that what Aquinas has to say about that remains interesting and defensible.

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