



**DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, LINGUISTICS AND THEORY  
OF SCIENCE**

**THE ROLE OF CIRCUMSTANCES IN HUMAN ACTION ACCORDING TO AQUINAS**  
The Hierarchy of Circumstances in Moral Evaluation

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Circumstances are the attendant properties of human action. Aquinas asserts that the end and object are the main factors in determining the moral value of human action, however, he also states that circumstances can play a role in evaluating moral actions. The purpose of this paper is to show how Aquinas develops a moral theory that allows the circumstances of human action to play a role in the specification human actions. Specific circumstances overlap with the end and object of human action and individual circumstances can become a main feature of human action. Circumstances have the potential to influence moral specification.

*Keywords: circumstance, accident, human action, moral action, end, object*

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## Introduction

Human actions may be considered in various ways in order to determine their moral value. Examining the action itself does not provide enough information to ascertain if the action is morally good or bad. There are other factors to consider when determining the moral value of an action such as the agent's will, the motive behind the action, and the circumstances surrounding the action. Many different medieval explanations of moral goodness include these factors, but often one factor is more significant than the others in determining moral worth.

For Thomas Aquinas, the moral worth of human action is predominantly determined by the end the action intends rather than the action itself. The object of a human action is the deed that is performed. When the object is the determining factor of a moral theory, the moral value of human action relies heavily on the deed performed. The end of the agent is the motivation behind why the agent acts. When the end is the determining factor for a moral theory, the focus of moral value shifts from the deed performed to the agent. Within Aquinas's moral theory, the agent is placed at the center of morality. This shift in the focus of morality from the action to the agent is significant within his account because Aquinas considers moral action as human action. Only human actions can be moral because humans have the ability to control their own actions through will and reason.<sup>1</sup> Not all actions performed by a human being are properly human actions. Breathing, for instance, is an action performed both by humans and non-human animals, but does not require will and reason so that even when it is a human that is breathing, the action is not considered 'human' or 'moral'.<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, human action and moral action will be used interchangeably to refer to actions that humans perform as only they can be evaluated for moral goodness.

Human action must be performed deliberately and freely. These two conditions are key in understanding Aquinas's moral theory. The agent's will must be free of coercion when it pursues an end.<sup>3</sup> The end is consciously pursued, regardless of whether every step towards that end is carefully considered or if only the final end is in focus.<sup>4</sup> The end of human action is directed by the will, which can be simply described as rational desire; the agent must be voluntarily pursuing

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, ST I-II q. 18 a. 6 co.

<sup>2</sup> Examples include unconscious movements and reflexes. Read more: Terence Irwin, "Aquinas: Will." In *The Development of Ethics: Volume 1*, The Development of Ethics: Volume 1, Chapter 16. Oxford University Press, 2007: 443.

<sup>3</sup> Any action that is not involuntary would be considered as performed voluntarily. One of the few examples considered as involuntary is an action that is compelled by force, such as a person holding the agent's hand and forcing the agent to sign a contract. If a tyrant pressures an agent to perform a specific action under threat of violence, the agent still has an option to voluntarily perform the action. In that case, the action would be the result of the agent choosing the path that avoids violence. Read more: Kevin L. Flannery, "The Field of Moral Action According to Thomas Aquinas." *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 69, no. 1 (2005): 12-15.

<sup>4</sup> There are various stages to willing human action to an end. Some ends require careful consideration, such as graduating college, in which classes are carefully considered to ensure receiving a diploma. Some actions do not require much deliberation, such as preparing breakfast. Often, the agent's focus is mainly on the desired goal and not every phase of the will is consciously acknowledged in the process of reaching the goal. The process of willing an action to an end is complex and a deeper analysis of the phases can be read from: John Finnis, "Object and Intention in Moral Judgments According to Aquinas." *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 55, no. 1 (1991): 1-27.

an end with knowledge of that end. Despite stating that the end determines the moral quality of human action, Aquinas does continue to examine the other features of human action that play a role in determining moral value. He places the starting point for moral specification on the end but also considers the object of human action and the circumstances around the action. The object is judged by the agent's reason for its objective moral quality. The circumstances, which are also judged by reason, are the attendant properties of the action performed, as such they can be considered 'exterior' to the action. They are the various additional details that can affect the way the action performed is perceived, and therefore affect the moral evaluation of human action.

The purpose of this paper is to show how Aquinas develops a moral theory that allows the circumstances of human action to play a role in specifying human action as good or bad. At its foundation, Aquinas's moral theory is based on the interaction between the object and the end. However, by considering the circumstances which surround human action, he opens the door for human actions to be evaluated based on something apparently exterior to them. A moral theory based on just one factor can be a simple and unifying theory. In contrast to this, Aquinas's moral theory is complex and can even look contradictory by including a factor that is by its definition variable.

The first section of this paper will be a brief look at two other accounts of moral theory because they will clearly demonstrate how Aquinas's evaluation of human action is different; the second section will be an analysis of circumstances with subsections that will address (a) why they should be considered a factor, (b) what their nature is, (c) what Aquinas identifies as circumstances, and (d) what their hierarchy is in the evaluation of moral goodness; the third section will explain the role of circumstances in (a) affecting the end and the object and (b) affecting moral specification; the last section will be a short conclusion.

## Medieval Explanations of Moral Actions

A consideration of other medieval explanations will be briefly summarized to best understand how the end or the object can be the predominant factor for specifying human actions and demonstrate how Aquinas's theory is different. Two of the predominant moral theories before Aquinas (1225-1274) belonged to Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and Peter Lombard (1096-1160). The determinant factors for the goodness or badness of human actions were mainly the end and the object. Each philosopher considered both factors in his theory but came to different conclusions for which factor to place at the center of morality. Abelard's theory has the intention of the agent at the center of morality while Lombard's theory concludes that the object has the most moral weight in human actions. Through examining how the end and the object play a role in these two opposing moral accounts, it is possible to see how Aquinas's moral theory evaluates these factors in a different way.

Abelard emphasizes intention as the only factor for evaluating the moral goodness of human action. For intention to be good, two criteria must be met: (1) the motivation for the deed must "spring from a love of God for his own sake and not merely because of the goods that He provides" and (2) the deed performed must be pleasing to God and not hinder God's plan.

Abelard's consideration of the object is problematic for two reasons. First, although Abelard considers the deed performed, the moral goodness of the deed relies on God's will, which means the agent must be able to assess what actions agree with God's plan.<sup>5</sup> Second, by including the object in the criteria for good intention, the value of the deed performed does not have an impact on the moral value of human action, it only affects the intention. Therefore, regardless of what action the agent performs, the moral evaluation of human action depends solely on intention.<sup>6</sup> Abelard places the agent's intention (the end for human action) over the performed deed (the object of human action) so that when the intention is good, human action is morally good.

For Lombard, on the other hand, intention remains an important factor for evaluating moral goodness but the object itself has moral value that is evaluated outside of intention. Good intention is necessary for human action to be considered good but it is not sufficient. There are two aspects of action: an interior act (the mental act of the intention) and an exterior act (the performed deed).<sup>7</sup> By differentiating between the two acts, Lombard is able to discuss the goodness of the will separately from the goodness of the deed performed. Starting with the interior act, the will is good if the end it pursued is good; the end is good if it is informed by a love of God. For the exterior act, the intrinsic value of the object must also be taken into account when considering the moral goodness of human action. The deed itself has an objective value of moral goodness that lies outside of the agent's will. Murder and theft, as examples, are always bad deeds regardless of the agent's intent. A human action, performed with a good will and towards a good end, is still morally bad if the deed performed is morally bad itself.<sup>8</sup> The will, the end, and the object must all be considered in regards to moral value, but the moral goodness of the object is the determining factor.

For its part, Aquinas's moral theory is based on the interaction between the object and the end so that there is not one determining factor for the moral value of human action. There are two components to human action: the interior act and the exterior act. The exterior act is the object of human action- the deed performed. The interior act is the object of the will- the end. The end toward which human action is performed is good if it is motivated by the good (this will be examined further in the following section). The object is judged for its moral character by reason. The two acts are able to interact with each other; the goodness or badness of one influencing the other. Aquinas argues that human action is directed towards an end, so that the agent's will directs the execution of the exterior act towards the end. Because human action begins from the interior act, the goodness of human action depends on the end. However, because the two acts work together, the exterior act can affect the moral value of human action. If the exterior act is theft, it

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<sup>5</sup> God's plan might be known through Scripture and the commandments. As Hoffman states: "To be truly pleasing to God requires a full assessment of the situation at hand. One must foresee how one's actions may or may not be in line with God's designs." Tobias Hoffmann, "Moral Action as Human Action: End and Object in Aquinas in Comparison with Abelard, Lombard, Albert, and Duns Scotus." *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 67, no. 1 (2003): 76.

<sup>6</sup> For example: a mother accidentally smothers her baby while asleep but this action is not properly called a sin. Read more: Peter Abelard, *Peter Abelard's Ethics*. Translated by D. E. Luscombe. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1971: 39.

<sup>7</sup> Hoffman, "Moral Action," 78.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Lombard, II *Sent.*, d. 40 cap. un., n. 12.

affects the interior act and makes the human action morally bad. If the exterior act is good, but the motivations for the end is bad, then the human action would also be morally bad. To have a morally good action, the object and the end must both be good.

In contrast to the other authors discussed, Aquinas's theory does not rely on one factor to determine whether a human action is morally good or bad. While Abelard considers the object of human action, the deed performed is not good or bad on its own moral character but is informed by the intention behind the deed.<sup>9</sup> He allows intention too much authority to sway the moral character of human action. Lombard's theory does consider the end of human action, but the end was outweighed by the moral quality of the object, which became the defining characteristic of its moral theory. Aquinas's moral theory considers the interrelationship between the end and the object to evaluate the moral goodness of human action. He shares with both prior philosophers the attention to the end. Following Abelard, importance is given to the agent's motive for performing certain human actions. But a motive is not good enough; there must be an evaluation of the object of human action. Similar to Lombard, he realizes the deed performed must have its own moral character that affects the whole human action. Therefore, Aquinas develops a moral theory that demonstrates a complex dynamic between the end and the object of human action. However, there are other factors that affect the moral goodness of human action and they must be considered.

## Circumstances

The moral value of human action is affected by more than just one factor as has been established within Aquinas's own moral explanation. The end and the object are among the factors that affect moral actions. Each of which has been examined as the determining factor for moral goodness in different explanations for their role in human action. For Aquinas, there are a total of four elements that contribute to the moral goodness of human action: (1) its existence as a completed action, (2) its object having been informed by reason, (3) its circumstances and (4) its end.<sup>10</sup> The previous section gave a brief summary of the roles of the object and the end in specification. In this section, the action's existence as such will be addressed and the role of circumstances, which are the details that accompany human action, will follow. Aquinas states very clearly in his *Summa Theologiae* that in order to specify human actions, the circumstances must be considered:

To be fully good [human action] must have not only what defines it, but something is added from these which come to it as certain accident: and such are its due circumstances. (*Nam plenitudo bonitatis eius non tota consistit in sua specie, sed aliquid additur ex his quae adveniunt tanquam accidentia quaedam. Et huiusmodi sunt circumstantiae debitae*).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> On objective conditions for Abelard's ethics, read more: John Marenbon, "The Rediscovery of Peter Abelard's Philosophy." *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 3 (2006): 331-351.

<sup>10</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 4 co.

<sup>11</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 3 co. trans. McDermott, with changes.

As with any substance, there are properties that are not essential but that complete the substance in some way.<sup>12</sup> Just as substances have accidents (people, for instance, have color as an attendant property), human actions have circumstances. Simply stated, circumstances are what stand around an action. The Latin term, *circumstantia*, comes from *circum* (around) and *sto* (stand), so that in Latin ‘circumstances’ literally means ‘things that stand around.’ Aquinas mentions that the term *circumstantia* derives from descriptions of spatial relations, where something is located outside of another, but still touches it and is near it.<sup>13</sup> By relating this example, Aquinas illustrates the connection between human action and circumstances. Human actions do not exist as just a deed performed toward some end; they are touched by the details which can affect how the action is viewed.

a. Why are circumstances a factor?

Aquinas has stated that the moral goodness of human action is specified especially by the end because human action is performed to achieve some end.<sup>14</sup> Actions are properly called human actions when they arise from the distinctive power that belongs to humans, which is the ability to direct their own actions through reason and will.<sup>15</sup> Humans direct their actions towards an end because they are able to (1) rationally recognize a goal, (2) deliberate the means to reach that goal, and (3) put into motion the necessary steps towards the goal. Once the goal has been reached, the agent is able to achieve (4) enjoyment, the final phase of human action.<sup>16</sup> The agent moves from one step to another through use of reason, while the agent’s will directs the execution of actions towards the end. The end is something that must be rationally recognized as good. Reason gives humans the capacity to grasp what is good *qua* good, or a universal good, and the will directs the end toward this universal good. Aquinas argues that each individual human action is performed towards some end, but the ultimate end of all human action is the universal good.

The moral value of human action in a universal sense would be determined by the ultimate end as Aquinas has put forward. It is determining the moral goodness of each individual action that is more complicated. The end of an individual human action is not a universal good but a particular thing recognized as good. This end is what gives each action its moral specification. Reason enables the agent to make a connection between a universal good and a particular good and relate the particular good to the end of individual human actions. When human action is no longer an abstract idea moving toward the ultimate end, it becomes a tangible action that is weighed down with additional details directed toward a particular end. The particular end of

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<sup>12</sup> Aquinas’s understanding of substantial forms is influenced by Aristotle. Read more: Brian Davies and James Doig, "Aquinas and Aristotle." In *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas, Chapter 3. Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> ST I-II q. 7 a. 1 co.

<sup>14</sup> ST I-II q. 7 a. 4 ad 2.

<sup>15</sup> Compared to actions performed by humans that are not properly called human actions as mentioned in the Introduction. See footnote 2.

<sup>16</sup> Finnis, "Object and Intention," 4.

individual human actions can be the determining factor of the action but the details surrounding the action must be considered because the action no longer exists without a specific agent outside of time and space. Particular human actions cannot exist without these details and there must be an agent who actualizes the interior act to an exterior act. These details are the circumstances that accompany human action.

The circumstances must be considered because the specification of human action can change as the circumstances change. Circumstances give a fuller depiction of human action and each particular human action is surrounded by individual details that can be relevant to the goodness of human actions. Each circumstance can contribute to the moral goodness or badness of a human action and has the ability to influence its moral specification.

b. What is the nature of circumstances?

Thus far circumstances have been described as the details surrounding human action, but more accurately they should be called accidents of human action. Aquinas clearly establishes how circumstances are attached to human action in the *Summa Theologiae*:

Whatever conditions are outside the substance of an action, and yet in some way touch human action, are called circumstances. Now what is outside the substance of a thing, while it belongs to that thing, is called its accident. Wherefore the circumstances of human actions should be called their accidents. (*Quaecumque conditiones sunt extra substantiam actus, et tamen attingunt aliquo modo actum humanum, circumstantiae dicuntur. Quod autem est extra substantiam rei ad rem ipsam pertinens, accidens eius dicitur. Unde circumstantiae actuum humanorum accidentia eorum dicenda sunt.*)<sup>17</sup>

Circumstances stand around human action as accidents or attendant properties belonging to that action. Although it is not an essential property of the action, it carries weight when the whole action, starting from the will all the way to the execution of the action, is analyzed for moral value. To understand how circumstances have any impact on the moral relevance of a human action, the notion of accidents and how Aquinas understands it in conjunction with human actions must be addressed.

Aquinas understands human action analogically as a substance. In his description of circumstances, they are the conditions outside the “substance of an action (*substantiam actus*).” Actions are not really substances, but considered as such insofar as it helps Aquinas’s explanation. The goodness of human action is judged in the same way that substances exist. For an action to be good, it must exist fully. A human being is said to “fully exist in the complex of soul and body endowed with every ability and organ needed for knowledge and movement” and if a person were to lack any of this he would not exist fully.<sup>18</sup> Existing for substance as such would be good, and

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<sup>17</sup> ST I-II q. 7 a. 1 co. trans. Fathers, with changes.

<sup>18</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 1 co.

not existing fully would lack this goodness and therefore be bad. In the same way, actions are called ‘good’ when they exist fully and when they exist less fully, they are ‘bad’. For a substance to exist fully it requires a form and matter to define it, so too would an action. The analogous form of human action is the end, while the analogous material is the object.

And the species of human action then is defined formally by their end, and materially by the object of the external action (*Et ideo actus humani species formaliter consideratur secundum finem, materialiter autem secundum objectum exterioris actus*).<sup>19</sup>

Human actions can be understood as a substance because of the interaction between the interior and exterior acts. The end is the proper object of the interior act, as such the goodness of the interior act is dependent on the goodness of the end. Just as a substance receives its species from its form, an action receives its species from the end of the action. The end controls and gives form to the action and in that way, it corresponds to the form of a substance. The object corresponds to matter from the interaction of the interior and exterior acts. Aquinas describes the object as the “material about which (*materia circa quam*)” and therefore the object can give species.<sup>20</sup> This *materia circa quam* explains that the object is not simply the material, but one that is especially concerned with human action, and has input towards specification.<sup>21</sup> The object of an action has the ability to make the action good or bad relative to reason, which is how it can influence specification of human action. The interior act of the will gives form to the external activity, whose proper object is the object (or performed deed) of human action. The interior act of the will can actualize the potentiality of the exterior act to be the object of human action.

By describing human action analogously as a substance, Aquinas demonstrates how circumstances can be called accidents of human action. The circumstances stand around human action as non-defining properties of the action just as accidents attend substances as non-defining properties. These properties add details to substances that they do not have by definition. Circumstances are accidents of human actions in that they do not specify the actions in the same manner as the end (form) and object (matter), but not all non-defining properties of a substance are incidental. It is in this non-defining but also non-incidental way that circumstances influence specification, along with the end and object. When the circumstance loses its incidental aspect, it becomes a key factor in human action. This analogy of human action as a substance emphasizes the attachment of circumstances as accidents to human action.

Another important aspect that is highlighted by this analogy is how human actions can be described as morally good or bad. Substances receive specification from their forms because the form is what defines the essence of a substance. Without this analogy, human action would not

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<sup>19</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 6 co. trans. McDermott, with changes.

<sup>20</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 2 ad. 2.

<sup>21</sup> There are three types of matter according to Aquinas: “substantial potency (*materia ex qua*), accidental potency (*materia in qua*), and that towards which an action or virtue is oriented (*materia circa quam*).” Read more: Joseph Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St Thomas Aquinas*. Oxford Theological Monographs. 2006: 147.

warrant moral specification because accidents do not exist outside of their subjects. Accidents do not receive specification because they neither have a form nor independent existence. Human actions considered analogously as substances can be specified. Aquinas uses on this analogy to ensure that human actions are viewed as candidates for moral specification.

Accidents are the attendant properties of a substance. Substances exist in themselves, meaning that their essence does not exist as a part of anything else. Some examples of substances include cats, trees, and notably, humans. A substance is composed of form and matter, so that anything outside of these two are accidents.<sup>22</sup> The substantial form is what makes the subject *qua* subject. Substances have essential properties, which define what the substance is permanently, and accidental properties, which modify the substance. Accidents are incidental to the substance, so that with or without a particular accident, the essence of the subject does not change. They exist as a part of a substance but do not exist in themselves. Examples of accidents include green, soft, and round. An accident of a tree is the color green. Green exists in the tree and other objects but the color green cannot be found by itself. Because it always exists as a part of a substance and not of itself, it is an accident.

While substances can have more than one accident, substances themselves cannot exist in some other substance. Humans are substances in and of themselves, so the question of how Aquinas can describe circumstances as accidents of human action arises. Human actions are accidents of humans and cannot be the substances for circumstances, which are themselves accidents. Aquinas does recognize that both human actions and circumstances are accidents of humans. Humans as substances can have more than one accident and these accidents can be accidents of each other, so that circumstances are accidents of human action.

Aquinas puts forward two explanations for how two accidents of one subject can be related to each other. First, properties can be accidents of each other by being in the same subject. The example Aquinas provides is that whiteness and the ability to play music both exist in Socrates. Both are accidents of Socrates, but are also accidents of each other since they exist in the same subject. For instance, a subject can have the ability to run and be brown-eyed. Ability to run and being brown-eyed are accidents of each other by existing in the same subject. Second, the attendant properties can relate directly to one another. Here, the example given by Aquinas is that of a body that receives color from its surface. They are accidents of each other because one exists within the other. A subject can be running quickly. Running and the quickness of running are accidents of each other, even though the subject is quick by means of running, and quickness exists in the subject because of the running. It is in these two ways that circumstances exist as accidents of human action. Having clarified how human action and circumstances are related to each other accidents, the next topic is what exactly the circumstances are considered in themselves and not through an analogy.

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<sup>22</sup> This broad account is intended simply to clarify the role of circumstances as accidents in the analogy. For a summary of form and matter, see: Thomas Ainsworth, "Form vs. Matter", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/form-matter/>.

c. What does Aquinas identify as circumstances?

Aquinas begins with well-known sources, Aristotle and Cicero, for what he identifies as the circumstances around human action. Aristotle states in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that circumstances are important in judging actions and enumerates the items that should be considered circumstances of human action: the agent (*quis*), the action (*quid*), the object of the action (*circa quid*), in what the agent works (*in quo operatur*), the instrument the agent uses (*quo instrumento*), the end of the action (*gratia cuius*), and the manner of the agent (*qualiter*).<sup>23</sup> In the *De inventitione*, Cicero identifies circumstances as “*quis* (who), *quid* (what), *ubi* (where), *quibus auxiliis* (by what aids), *cur* (why), *quomodo* (how), *quando* (when)”.<sup>24</sup> On both lists are who, what, by what instrument, why, and how. Aristotle has *circa quid* and *in quo*, while Cicero includes *ubi* and *quando*. Aristotle’s *in quo* can encompass Cicero’s *ubi* and *quando*. The list of circumstances for Aquinas is:

- *Quis*- the agent performing the action
- *Quid*- the deed performed
- *Cur*- the motivation for performing the action
- *Circa quid*- the object or people affected by the action
- *Quomodo*- the manner in which the action is carried out
- *Quibus auxiliis*- the instruments or people (besides the agent) who assists
- *Ubi*- the location of the action
- *Quando*- the moment of the action

Aquinas includes all the items on Cicero’s list and adds the *circa quid* from Aristotle’s list. To best understand each circumstance in a human action, an example will be examined:

On a Friday afternoon, a man quickly robs a charity by holding a gun at a volunteer staff so that he might increase his own wealth.

The *quis* is the man. The *quid* is the robbery. The *ubi* is the charity. The *quibus auxiliis* is the gun. The *cur* is to increase his own wealth. The *quomodo* is quickly. The *quando* is a Friday afternoon. And the *circa quid* is the volunteer staff.

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<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1111a2-6; Thomas Aquinas, *Opera Omnia* (Paris: Vivès, 1871–80), xxv. In *Aristotelis Stagiritae Nonnullis Libros Commentaria*; In X Libros ad Ethicorum (1875), p. 327, col. 1. *Forsitan igitur non malum determinare haec, quae et quot sint: et quis utique et quid et circa quid vel in quo operatur, quandoque autem et quo, puta instrumento, et gratia cuius, puta salutis, et qualiter, puta quiete vel vehementer.* “A man may be ignorant, then, of who he is, what he is doing, what or whom he is acting on, and sometimes also what (e.g. what instrument) he is doing it with, and to what end (e.g. he may think his act will conduce to some one’s safety), and how he is doing it (e.g. whether gently or violently).” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by J. A. K. Thomson. Penguin Classics, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> For the circumstances from Cicero, see ST I-II q. 7 a. 3 co. See footnote 43 in Flannery, “The Field of Moral Action,” 17.

In Aquinas's view, there are three ways in which the circumstances are a property of human action: they belong to the deed performed, to the cause of the deed, or to the effect of the deed. The *quando*, *ubi*, and *quomodo* belong to the deed itself; *cur*, *circa quid*, *quis*, and *quibus auxiliis* belong to the cause; and *quid* belongs to the effect. His organization demonstrates how the circumstances touch every aspect of a human action. They also touch on the essential properties of human action and the factors that determine moral specification. The circumstance of *quomodo* shows how the agent is carrying out the action, illustrating voluntary action. The circumstance of *cur* addresses the agent's motivation and the will's intent towards an end, therefore demonstrating deliberate action. The circumstance of *quid* touches the object of human action. The circumstances are relevant because they address the factors that are important for Aquinas's moral theory.

The circumstances of *cur* and *quid* overlap with the end and object of human action. The object is encompassed by the *quid* while the end is incorporated into the *cur*. Although they are the accidents of human action, and by definition are non-defining properties, they are properties that are characteristic of moral action.<sup>25</sup> Human action is specified by its essential properties, that it is voluntary and deliberate. As both circumstances of *cur* and *quid* are directed by will and reason, they make a difference morally and have weight in the moral evaluation of human actions. The end is intended by the will so that the circumstance of *cur* is no longer incidental to the interior act of human action.<sup>26</sup> For the exterior act, the object is informed by reason and its execution in the body is directed by the will, so that the circumstance of *quid* loses its incidental quality. A circumstance that is incidental for one human action, may be essential for another action, and so it becomes morally relevant. When the circumstance is treated as the difference in a human action, it can decide the moral kind of the action. The circumstances of *quid* and *cur* are no longer incidental, or circumstantial, but become the main factors in determining the moral goodness of a human action.<sup>27</sup>

#### d. What is the hierarchy of circumstances?

Each circumstance touches some aspect of human action, but some more than others because they can become the determining factor of moral worth in that action. The circumstances can be arranged in a hierarchy of how much they affect the moral worth of human action. The most important circumstances are the *cur* and the *quid* of human action. The remaining circumstances are arranged in importance according to how much they affect human action, although the importance of each individual circumstance can move up or down in the hierarchy when every detail of human action has been considered.

1. *Cur*: The motivation behind the agent's action. It is the most important circumstance because it touches the end of human action. The end is the cause of the action since it moves the agent to perform the deed and it is the predominant factor for moral specification. Human action is

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<sup>25</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 3 ad. 2.

<sup>26</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a 6 ad 2.

<sup>27</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a 10 co.

driven by the *cur* circumstance so that for every human action, there is always an attending circumstance that answers the question of why.

2. *Quid*: The deed that was performed. It is second in importance because it touches the object of human action. The *quid* is a necessary circumstance of every human action. A deed must be performed for moral specification to be assigned.<sup>28</sup> If there were no actual deed, the exterior act of human action has not been executed and therefore there is no action to label as morally good or bad.
3. *Quis*: The agent who performs the deed. He is important in regard to carrying out a deed as the efficient cause of the action. There must be an agent for every moral action. The *quis* circumstance touches a number of the other circumstances, for example: the *cur* touches it by moving the agent to act; the *quibus auxiliis* describes the tool that the agent uses to carry out the action.
4. *Quomodo*: The manner and quality of the agent's action. It is not an especially important circumstance in the hierarchy nor a necessary circumstance in evaluating the moral quality of human action. The circumstance of *quomodo* is an especially good example of Aquinas's explanation on how accidents can relate to one another. It is an accident of the agent by means of existing in the action (which is also an accident of the agent) and it is also an accident of the action, which makes it a circumstance of human action.
5. *Circa quid*: The people or objects that are affected by the action. Like *quomodo*, it is not especially important in the hierarchy nor necessary in evaluating the moral action. This particular circumstance explains the material cause of the action.<sup>29</sup>
6. *Quibus auxiliis*: The instrument that the agent uses to carry out the action. Similar to the previous two circumstances, it is not especially important in the hierarchy nor necessary in evaluating the moral action. Similar to the *quomodo* circumstance, it touches the action as an accident of the agent. This circumstance explains the instrumental cause of the action.
7. *Quando*: The time of the action. The moment of an action is not especially important in the hierarchy nor necessary in evaluating the moral action. However, *quando* belongs to the action in that human action cannot exist without occurring at a moment in time.
8. *Ubi*: The location of the action. The place of an action is not especially important in the hierarchy nor necessary in evaluating the moral human action. However, *ubi* belongs to the action in that human action cannot exist without occurring in a location.

In organizing the circumstances in order of importance, it is possible to see how each one actually touches the action and can potentially affect moral evaluation. *Cur* and *quid* are necessary circumstances as they overlap the end and the object of human action. *Quis*, *quando*, and *ubi* are necessary circumstances of human action because human action must be carried out by an agent,

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<sup>28</sup> Flannery clarifies why the *quid* is an important circumstance of moral action: "Moral blame comes back to acts or it makes no sense at all. If someone blames another simply for being possessed of a certain vice, the accused can reasonably say, "but what have I done?" or "how do you know I possess that vice?" See more: Flannery, "The Field of Moral Action," 24.

<sup>29</sup> For more on *circa quid*, see footnote 16 in Pilsner, "The Specification of Human Actions," 179.

at some time and in some place. However, they do not necessarily affect the moral quality of the action. *Quomodo*, *circa quid*, and *quibus auxiliis* are not necessary circumstances of human action and do not necessarily affect the moral quality of the action. The hierarchy provides an outline of how each circumstance can potentially be a factor in moral evaluation. The importance of each circumstance can change depending on individual human actions.

Returning to the example in the previous section, it is possible to examine how changes in circumstances can potentially affect moral specification.

On a Friday afternoon, a man quickly robs a charity by holding a gun at a volunteer staff so that he might increase his own wealth.

The circumstance that especially determines the moral worth in this example is the *cur* (which overlaps with the end). The interaction between the *cur* and the *quid* (which overlaps with the object) together specifies this action to be labelled morally bad. The other circumstances, such as the *quando* and *quomodo*, do not affect the moral specification. The robbery could have happened slowly (*quomodo*) or on a Monday morning (*quando*) and the species of the human action would remain the same. A modification of the example would demonstrate how the importance of individual circumstances can increase.

On a Friday afternoon, a man quickly robs a church by holding a gun at a volunteer staff so that he might increase his own wealth.

The *cur* (end) and the *quid* (object) and all the other circumstances, except the *ubi*, remain the same. The *ubi* is now a church. The deed of robbing for the purpose of increasing his own wealth is still considered morally bad but the *ubi* has become another important contributing circumstance. By stealing from a church, the man is not simply committing a robbery, he is committing contempt of God, which is a far worse deed. This example demonstrates how one circumstance can move up in the hierarchy to become a contributing factor in evaluating moral goodness. Another modification of the example demonstrates how the hierarchy of circumstances can change completely.

On a Friday afternoon, a man quickly robs a charity by holding a gun at a volunteer staff so that he might buy food to feed his kids.

The *quid* (object) and all the other circumstances, except the *cur* (end), remain the same. The *cur* is now to feed his kids. The deed of robbing is still bad but the purpose of feeding his kids is good. Because human action takes into account the interaction between object and end, the whole human action is bad because of the *quid*. This example demonstrates how the circumstance of *quid* can take precedence over *cur* in evaluating moral goodness. Each circumstance has the possibility of influencing moral specification, but the hierarchy is useful in reaching a standard for evaluating the circumstances of moral action.

Aquinas again emphasizes how the end and object of an action is especially significant regarding the moral value of human action. The end is the starting point for evaluating moral action and if the object is also good, the whole human action would be good. By placing so much weight on the end of the action, Aquinas emphasizes the agent's will in specifying moral value. The agent's will is important because it emphasizes the two properties of human action that are essential for moral action to be considered human: voluntary and deliberate actions. The deed performed is not the primary focus of moral relevance. A possible drawback to blurring the importance of the deed performed in favor of the end is that the deed does not hold any moral weight. Aquinas is able to counter this objection by saying that the deed performed does have its own moral character outside of the realm of human action. Its moral character is judged by reason. Another drawback to favoring the end as the primary focus is that the whole weight of the action is placed on the will. If the intention of an action were good, but the deed was bad, the bad deed would not be accounted for in this action. However, the deed is an essential part of human action as a whole and must be considered in combination with the end and the circumstances. With a change in the focus of moral relevance, the field in which human action is relevant widens and allows for circumstances to play a larger role in the specification of human action.

## Role of circumstances

Human action, according to Aquinas, can only be fully good if both the object and the end are good. The specification of the moral action is dependent on these two communicating their goodness to each other. However, Aquinas also states that human actions are good or bad according to the circumstances (*actiones humanae secundum circumstantias sunt bonae vel malae*).<sup>30</sup> The circumstances include the *cur* and *quid* which correlate to the end and object, respectively. Yet these two circumstances are not the only ones that play a significant role in influencing moral specification. In the previous section, circumstances were discussed in terms of how they are attached to human action, what they are, and the order in which they can potentially affect moral specification. This section will look at the various ways in which the circumstances, besides the *cur* and *quid*, affect specification.

### a. Do circumstances affect the end and the object?

There are overlaps among the circumstances of *cur* and *quid* and the end and object of human action. The overlap explains how the *cur* and *quid* are the main features of the action and determine the moral worth of moral human actions. For Aquinas, human action is made up of the interior and exterior act and the goodness of the action as a whole is dependent on both being good. The end is the object of the interior act and the object of the exterior act is the deed itself (or the object). Unlike the end (*cur*) and object (*quid*), the other circumstances cannot be morally good or bad themselves. The other circumstances are set apart from the object and end, even if they play a

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<sup>30</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 3 s. c.

role in influencing moral value. An interesting question arises whether the surrounding circumstances have any effect on the goodness of the end and the object.

As the end is the object of the will, its goodness is dependent on the will. The will is rational desire and pursues what reason has perceived to be good.<sup>31</sup> For the will to be bad it would have to refuse to follow reason, whether it is right or wrong. Mistaken reason presents itself as true so that willing it would seem good. Therefore, the will is good if it follows good reason, and is still good if it follows mistaken reason. So willing good or bad does not depend on circumstances. If the will is good, circumstances cannot change the will. However, ignorance of the circumstances can excuse a bad will, this means that not knowing some particular detail of the object can excuse the agent from not willing an end, whether it follows right reason or not. Ignorance of the circumstances affect knowledge of the object, which is what reason judges for its moral character. By not knowing the circumstances of the object, the will is not bad for pursuing that end. An example of such a situation:

A woman has sex with a man she thinks is her husband. She later finds out it was his twin brother.

Because she did not know that she was having sex with the wrong man at the time, her action is not morally bad. Reason presented the man as her husband and her will followed that reason, even though it was mistaken. Ignorance of the *circa quid* (the twin brother) led to mistaken reason, and the will followed it. At the time of her action, the end and the object were good, leading to a morally good human action. The will, and therefore the end, are directed by reason, but circumstances only influence how the object is perceived by reason.

To consider how the object can be influenced by the circumstances, the basis for its objective moral character must be considered. The goodness of an object is derived from reason. When an object is judged outside of human action, it is not directed by the will. The deed itself can be good, bad, or neutral. For a deed to be good, it agrees with reason. To be bad, the deed offends reason. A neutral deed is not informed by reason. All these objects have circumstances outside of the *cur* that can affect their kind. These deeds necessarily involve a *quis*, *quando* and *ubi*. The goodness of donating food can be increased when it is learned that the *quibus auxiliis* is the agent's last can of soup. The badness of stealing can be increased if the stolen goods were taken from a church. The circumstances of objects that already have an intrinsic moral character can increase or decrease that quality.

For neutral deeds, the circumstances do not affect the object in the same manner. Walking happens during the day, on a sidewalk, and with tennis shoes; these circumstances do not alter the moral neutrality of the action. The only circumstance that can affect the moral kind of a neutral deed is the *cur*. Neutral deeds must be combined with an interior act for human action to be specified morally good or bad. Neutral deeds are not the same as deeds carried out by humans,

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<sup>31</sup> ST I-II q. 19 a. 3 ad. 1.

such as sleeping. Sleeping has circumstances such as at night, in a bed with a blanket, but does not involve will or reason. Such a deed is not properly called a human action.<sup>32</sup>

Circumstances do not affect the end towards which human action is directed. Objects can be affected by the circumstances in that the degree of kind is increased or decreased. However, the object is not qualified by the circumstances in the same manner as a moral action that involves the will. The object is judged by reason and depends on reason for its moral kind. Deeds can be neutral insofar as the will or the circumstance of *cur* is not involved. Particular human actions cannot be morally neutral. The object of any human action can be directed to good or bad by some end.<sup>33</sup> The goodness of human action is composed of both the interior and exterior act, each of which has its own moral character. Changes in either the object or the end do not necessarily affect the other, but necessarily affects human action as a whole.

b. Do circumstances affect moral specification?

There are three main ways in which circumstances can play a role in specifying moral actions: circumstances can (1) determine the species of human action, (2) increase or decrease the degree of specification, and (3) have no moral relevance.

In the first case, the circumstance determines the specification of the action. For Aquinas, this circumstance is typically the *cur* or the *quid*, but other circumstances can also determine the species, such as the *circa quid*. Changes in the *circa quid* can affect how an action is perceived. A married man having sex with his wife is different from a married man having sex with a woman who is not his wife; the first man's action would be considered morally good while the second man's action would be morally bad. The circumstance of *circa quid* becomes the determining factor of the action being labelled good or bad. Another notable example is that of the virtuous pagan, which is a concept in the Middle Ages that addressed the problem of pagans who were not saved during their lifetime but lived virtuously. The circumstance of *quando* would be most important here. If the pagan lived before Christ's resurrection, they did not have a chance to be saved and should not be damned because of this. If the pagan lived after Christ's resurrection, he had the opportunity to be saved but did not receive salvation. The *quando* plays a large part in the justification for the damnation of the pagan. Individual circumstances have the ability to determine the moral relevance of a human action.

In the second case, the specification of the action has already been determined but the circumstances can further the degree of goodness or badness. If the circumstance of *quomodo* (quickly) in the example of a man quickly robbing a charity with a gun were modified so that he robbed the charity repeatedly, the specification of the act would still be morally bad, but the degree of badness has increased. If the circumstance of *quibus auxiliis* (by holding a gun) were not included in the description of the robbery, the action would still be morally bad but the degree of badness would decrease. Circumstances can affect the goodness or badness but do not necessarily

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<sup>32</sup> Properly human actions compared to actions carried out by humans, as mentioned in the introduction. See footnote 2.

<sup>33</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 9 ad 1.

alter the species when it has already been determined. This is important because it goes back to the notion of how accidents are not essential properties of the substance. Accidents do not affect the specification in the same manner as changes in the form (end) or matter (object) would affect specification.

In the last case, human action is not affected by the circumstance. In the example with the man robbing a charity, the *quis* does not necessarily affect the moral goodness of the robbery. The *quis* could be a woman and the robbery would still be carried out for the same purpose with the same surrounding details. In this situation, the circumstance of *quis* is simply an attendant property and remains incidental to the action without affecting specification. Not all circumstances are relevant in defining the moral quality of an action.

Although circumstances stand around human action, they touch every aspect of human action and can contribute to moral evaluation in different ways. The circumstances besides *cur* (end) and *quid* (object) can determine the moral specification of human action and when they do, they become a differentiating characteristic of the action. Individual circumstances are also able to determine the degree of specification without altering the species of the action. When a circumstance does not affect the specification or degree of specification, it remains circumstantial. It is important to note that Aquinas has mentioned that it is the right circumstances (*circumstantiae debitae*) that are required for human action to be good.<sup>34</sup> Not every circumstance must play a role in specifying human action, but every circumstance must be considered for its potential to affect the moral value of the action.

## Conclusion

Medieval explanations for evaluating the goodness of human actions have the end and object as factors for specification. Aquinas's theory has the end, object, and circumstances as factors for evaluating moral action. He clearly states that the leading factor for moral specification is the end and the object is second to that. However, he also says that circumstances can decide what kind of good or bad action a moral action is (*circumstantia constituit actum morale in aliqua specie boni vel mali*).<sup>35</sup> He resolves this apparent contradiction by having the end and the object overlap with the circumstances of *cur* and *quid*. This overlap also demonstrates that, although they are details that appear exterior to the action, the circumstances can potentially become the main factor for that action.

Circumstances enhance the description of human action and every action has these attendant properties. Human action is not complete without the right circumstances (*circumstantiae debitae*) which are the factors that matter when determining the moral worth. The right circumstances often are the *cur* and *quid*, but can include the other circumstances depending on that particular action. They are important factors for moral action because they have the potential to specify moral goodness or badness and to increase or decrease the degree of that

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<sup>34</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 3 co.

<sup>35</sup> ST I-II q. 18 a. 10 ad 3.

specification. Aquinas outlines a hierarchy of how the circumstances can potentially affect the goodness of the action.

This hierarchy places the end (or *cur*) as the leading factor for specification and second in determining goodness is the object (or *quid*). This is an important aspect of Aquinas's theory because he is placing the agent at the center of morality. By ensuring that the object is second to the end, moral action is not simply a list of deeds that are allowed and prohibited, it becomes a topic of why some actions are pursued and others are not. This change in perspective addresses the reasons why certain ends are pursued and goes to the core of what makes an agent human. The particular end of individual actions leads up to the ultimate end, or the universal good. For humans, the ultimate end and universal good is the perfection of humans themselves. By putting more significance on the end and not the object, the perfection of humans themselves is the motivation for every moral action.

A moral theory that includes circumstances is far more complex than a theory that depends solely on one factor. The way that Aquinas has organized circumstances in regard to human action demonstrates how wide he makes the field for moral action. Morality does not rely on an object of human action, or the end toward which human action is directed, it relies on the interaction of these two factors and their overlap with the circumstances, which are themselves multiple and variable. A wider approach to evaluating moral actions is preferred because human actions are themselves nuanced and complex, not a mere list of actions and their consequences. By developing a theory that includes a hierarchy of how circumstances can affect moral actions, Aquinas takes into account the circumstances that might influence the value of a moral action as a human action.

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