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The Moral Structure of Action

THE ANATOMY OF ACTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the moral structure of the human act. Thereby we may gain a clearer grasp of the moral relevance of the various factors which contribute to an act's goodness or rightness. In the course of this exploration the starting points of the different types of moral theory that we have distinguished will become clearer and a number of key questions in moral philosophy and moral theology will be addressed.

Good discussions of the moral anatomy of action are hard to find. The basis of my treatment will be a survey of St Thomas Aquinas' account of these matters in the *Summa Theologiae* 1a 2ae Questions 18–21 (Aquinas 1966a). In many respects his treatment remains the best available, and though I do not offer my discussion of him as in any sense a true interpretation of his intentions, his account can be used to introduce, explain and discuss all the main distinctions and issues relevant to the topic. After setting out an anatomy of action based loosely on Aquinas' words various important critical questions about the moral appraisal of action will be considered in turn.

Aquinas' account provides a basis of for the three-fold analysis of the morally relevant parts of action that we found in Dent. Thus we have:

i. The nature of the act itself determined by its objective (or intention).

ii. The end of the act (or motive).

iii. The circumstances of the act (or consequences).

Aquinas in fact teaches that there are four features of a human act that are relevant to its moral worth. In addition to the above
three, there is its ‘real quality as an action’ (1966a:19), by which he means the notion that all acts just in being voluntary performances of a rational creature have a measure of goodness or worth. Acts, as distinct from mere behaviour or bodily movement, embody choice and intention, and thus reason to some degree. Though in this minimal sense all intentional human performances have some worth, we can quickly forget this aspect of worth, for since it is present in all acts in so far as they are acts at all it is of no relevance to the task of distinguishing between which acts are choiceworthy and which are not. What is significant about this fourth, universal feature of acts as acts is that it points to Aquinas’ thesis that what makes an act good tends also to complete its full reality as an act. An act is distinguished from mere behaviour or movement because it embodies reason (in the form of purpose and intention). When its other three, variable elements – objective, end and circumstance – are fully in accord with reason then it becomes a good act and thus attains its full reality as a human act, that is: a bodily performance embodying reason. We will meet the thought that the perfection of action relates to its nature as rational performance again in Chapter 6.

Aquinas contends that, in general, goodness in a human act is due to an integrity of all of its features: it is good when all three features distinguished contribute out of their individual goodness to the goodness of the whole. There is thus an asymmetry between goodness and evil in action: ‘each single defect causes evil, whereas complete integrity is required for good’ (1966a:19). Aquinas is right to set before us an ideal for good action: one in which we seek to have all elements of action adjusted in the light of reason. However, the doctrine that failure in one element of action makes action evil is over-strenuous, unrealistic and probably inconsistent with things he affirms elsewhere. Once we allow that the goodness or rightness of an act may be a matter of degree then the doctrine that all elements must be correct to have goodness in the whole is seen to be empty. Granted that perfection in a human act comes only when we have this complete integrity, we can see that an act whose circumstances, for example, are not morally ideal may nonetheless be choiceworthy, better than any alternatives and even morally obligatory. We may feel that it is very rare indeed that circumstances allow human choices to be made which have the ‘complete integrity’ that Aquinas’ seeks. There may indeed be occasions when moral defect in one particular facet of action makes an act evil (that is,