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# The Reflexivity of Incorporeal Acts as Source of Freedom and Subjectivity in Aquinas

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**Abstract** Although Aquinas is often believed to approach the human person from a purely metaphysical perspective, I argue that he actually has a keen awareness of the phenomena associated with subjectivity. I propose that in his theory of reflexivity as a metaphysical property of incorporeal beings and the necessary condition for self-awareness and free judgment, we can find his efforts to accommodate the experience of the human being as self or subject. The paper begins by examining what it means to be reflexive for Aquinas, and why he thinks something is completely reflexive if and only if it is incorporeal (the Reflexivity Premise). It then studies how reflexivity affects the “self-possessed” character of our experience, in implicit self-awareness and the freedom of our judgments about what is to be done.

Did a thinker like Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), from his perspective predating the archetypically “modern” notion of the transcendent “Ego,” have anything to say about the human being as a self or subject? The question is seldom asked, due to a prevailing assumption that Aquinas takes a purely metaphysical approach to the human person. This misconception is due partly to a historical shift in the meanings of terms such as ‘subject’ and ‘person.’ Whereas today these terms designate entities with certain psychological characteristics such as self-awareness and freedom, in the medieval vocabulary they designate entities that have a certain metaphysical status. ‘Subject’ (*subiectum*) in Aquinas refers generically to a substrate, whereas

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'person' (*persona*), evolving out of Trinitarian and Christological debates, designates the individual of a certain kind of nature, i.e., a rational nature. Consequently, the search for a theory about human subjectivity in Aquinas's texts on personhood can only lead to disappointment.

Instead, I contend, it is Aquinas's treatment of the reflexivity of incorporeal acts that offers insight into his view of human subjectivity. For Aquinas, reflexivity grounds two major sets of phenomena that we would today identify as constitutive of subjectivity: i.e., self-awareness (encompassing various first-personal phenomena) and freedom (encompassing phenomena having to do with deliberation, choice, and moral responsibility). Thus while Aquinas does not address human subjectivity as a distinct topic of inquiry in the way that a modern thinker might, I will argue that his theory of reflexivity is his response to the constitutive phenomena of subjectivity, showing what he thinks it means to be the kind of agent that is a "self" or "subject."

In excavating Aquinas's theory of reflexivity, we will first examine reflexivity as a metaphysical property associated with incorporeality (first section), and then explore how it shapes human subjectivity by its psychological manifestation in the self-aware (second section) and free character of our thinking and willing (third section). At present, the task is one of "charting the territory," and thus I will focus largely on interpretation. A separate study would be needed to evaluate how Aquinas's account of reflexivity as a necessary condition for first-personality and free decision (not to mention its role in his arguments for the human soul's incorporeality) holds up against objections.

## The Reflexivity of Incorporeal Acts

Aquinas applies the term 'reflexion' (*reflexio*, literally "bending back") broadly to any action in which the principle of action becomes the terminus of action: "Wherever there is a reflexion, there is a returning to what is first, such that what is first the origin is subsequently the end."<sup>1</sup> Applied more narrowly to intentional acts of cognizing or desiring, 'reflexion' refers to a self-encompassing, such that the acting principle is identical to the object of action—e.g., when the intellect understands itself or the will wills itself.<sup>2</sup> Aquinas describes this self-encompassing as a "returning" (*reditio*) or "reflecting" (*reflexio*) upon oneself, in which the agent becomes

<sup>1</sup>In *libros Metaphysicorum* 2.3 (with reference to the cyclical conversion of fire into air and air into fire); see also *DV* 22.12, ad 1.

<sup>2</sup>See for instance *ST* Ia.60.3, ad 3, stating that love "does not necessarily tend toward something other (*aliquid aliud*), but can be reflected upon the lover so that he loves himself, just as cognition is reflected upon the cognizer, so that he cognizes himself"; *SCG* 4.11.

unified with itself.<sup>3</sup> Thus beyond the metaphysical self-unity of simply "being one-self," reflexive acts achieve a self-unification on a more perfect level, in the realm of "second act" or operation.<sup>4</sup> I will use 'reflexivity' in this narrower sense, to refer to both the capacity for and the actuality of self-encompassing (but it is worth keeping in mind that as we will see in the next section, for Aquinas, all acts that *can* reflect, *do* reflect at least implicitly).

Reflexivity in the sense of self-encompassing, for Aquinas, is a property of incorporeal actions: *A* is reflexive if and only if *A* is incorporeal (we can call this the Reflexivity Premise).<sup>5</sup> The relevant concept of incorporeality is best grasped in relation to the contrasting mode of being, corporeality. Corporeal acts, for Aquinas, exist only as expressed in and through material (*viz.*, spatially- and temporally-extended) configurations, with each kind of action requiring its own kind of material configuration. For instance, the act of digestion consists in the dynamic, teleologically-oriented reorganization of material structures such as food, enzymes, and acid in the digestive tract. There can be no "digesting" apart from the dynamic reorganizing of these material structures. In fact, digestion *just is* a certain dynamic reorganizing of certain material structures. The same applies to static accidental forms: An exact likeness of Napoleon can only exist as realized in material structures, specifically in, say, wax or painted wood—but not in water. Incorporeal acts, in contrast, cannot be realized in spatially- and temporally-extended configurations, any more than the act of digestion can be realized in the optic nerve. For Aquinas, the human being is capable of exercising two incorporeal actions: the "rational" acts of intellectual thinking and decision-making. It is therefore these actions alone that are perfectly reflexive, *per* the Reflexivity Premise.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Key sources for this Neoplatonic doctrine in Aquinas include: (1) Augustine's doctrine of the circumincession of the powers, e.g. *De Trinitate* 10.11.18; (2) Pseudo-Dionysius's doctrine of the "circular motion" of intelligent beings in his *De Divinis nominibus* 4.7; (3) the Persian philosopher Avicenna's explanation of why sense-powers acting in corporeal organs cannot reflect upon themselves, in his *Liber de anima* 5.2; (4) the doctrine of *reditio completa* or "complete return to one's essence" from the *Liber de causis*, props. 7 and 15 (see note 10 for details on the latter). There is very little literature on reflexivity in Aquinas; see Wébert (1930), Fetz (1975), Putallaz (1991), Brower-Toland (forthcoming), and Cory (2014).

<sup>4</sup>See especially *SLDC* 15, where Aquinas states that self-knowledge "should be called a return or turn (*reditus vel conversio*), as is clear from the fact that when the soul knows its essence, knower and known are one thing, and therefore the science—that is, the intelligible operation—by which it knows its essence is from itself insofar as it is knowing, and toward itself insofar as it is known." In *Sent* I.26.2.3, ad 4, Aquinas explains that this operational self-unification does not effectively split the subject-as-cognizer and subject-as-cognized, because a reflexive operation establishes only a relation of reason between cognizer and cognized, not a real relation which would imply a real distinction; see also *Sent* III.28.1.6, ad 4.

<sup>5</sup>See for instance *DV* 22.12: "Because they are immaterial, it belongs to the higher powers of the soul to reflect upon themselves..."; as well as *Sent* I.17.1.5, ad 3; II.19.1.1; III.23.1.2, ad 3; *DV* 1.9; *SCG* 2.49; *SLDC* 7 and 15.

<sup>6</sup>See *Sent* II.24.1.3, ad 3; and see *Quaestio disputata De virtutibus in communi* 1 for intellect and will as the "rational powers." Note that for Aquinas, there is also a third group of acts, i.e., acts of the senses and sense-appetites, which are only partly realized in material structures, and which he sometimes describes as imperfectly reflexive, but space does not permit discussing them here.

We find in Aquinas two arguments for the Reflexivity Premise: an earlier one appealing to the restricted scope of corporeal sense-powers, and a later one appealing to the nature of spatio-temporal extension. Early on (c. 1256–1258), in *Sent* and *DV*, Aquinas appeals to the different “scope” of corporeal vs. incorporeal powers. Acts that take place through corporeal organs (the ear, the eye, etc.) cannot be reflexive because the material structure of the organ determines a limited proper object for the act, excluding the act itself from its scope.

A material power does not reflect on its act because of its being determined according to the structuring of the organ. Indeed, the individual sight-power can only cognize things whose species can be received spiritually in the pupil; and therefore sight cannot comprehend its own act.... And therefore it must be said that immaterial powers reflect upon their objects; for the intellect understands itself to understand, and similarly the will wills itself to will and to love. The reason is that the act of an immaterial power is not excluded from the account of their [proper] object. For the object of the will is the good; and under this account the will loves everything that it loves; and therefore it can love its act insofar as it is good; and the same applies to the intellect.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, seeing takes place by means of a certain neuro-physiological structure that is receptive to light-waves at certain frequencies. This physiological structure is unreceptive to other kinds of stimuli, such as sound waves, the act of seeing and the essence of sight. Thus sight cannot reflect upon (encompass) itself because neither it nor its act nor its essence fall within the scope of objects for which the eye is receptive. The incorporeal intellect and will, in contrast, can reflect on themselves because they themselves *are* included within their own proper objects, i.e., respectively, the universal true and the universal good.

This earlier justification of the Reflexivity Premise, then, runs as follows: If an operation is mediated by a corporeal organ, its scope is restricted to objects which the organ is structured to receive. No organ is structured such that it can receive a sense-power itself or an act of sensing. So, the possible objects for an organ-mediated operation do not include either the operation itself or the operating power. But for an operation to be reflexive is for it to encompass itself and the power of which it is the operation. So if an operation is mediated by a corporeal organ, it is not reflexive. And if an operation is reflexive, it is not mediated by a corporeal organ—which is to say that it is incorporeal.

The problem with this line of reasoning is that Aquinas seems to intend a much stronger causal claim by the Reflexivity Premise: namely, that whatever is reflexive is reflexive *in virtue of its incorporeality*.<sup>8</sup> These early texts, however, do not show

<sup>7</sup>*Sent* I.17.1.5, ad 3. See also the compressed versions elsewhere in *Sent*: Acts that employ a corporeal organ cannot be reflexive because “for any power operating by a corporeal organ, the organ must be the intermediary between [the power] itself and its object” (appealing to Avicenna); and therefore in a reflexive act the organ would have to serve, *per impossibile*, as an intermediary between the power and its essence (*Sent* II.19.1.1), or between the power and the acting organ itself (*Sent* III.23.1.2, ad 3). In *DV* 1.9 and 10.9, however, Aquinas allows that the sense-power can grasp its own act, but not itself or its essence because of its dependence on the organ; I discuss this anomaly elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup>This is clear from *DV* 22.12, as well as from Aquinas’s references to *Liber de causis* 15 in *Sent* I.17.1.5, ad 3; *Sent* II.19.1.1; *DV* 1.9; and *SLDC* 15, which present reflexivity as the operational completion of incorporeality (i.e., all incorporeal beings are by nature reflexive).

that *the nature of materiality as such* is what restricts the scope of operation so as to block reflexivity. Indeed, the inability of a corporeal organ to receive its own act is merely posited without being explained.

Later, however, Aquinas advances a different—and in my view more promising—justification of the Reflexivity Premise, appealing to the properties of spatio-temporal extension. While the argument appears as early as *SCG* 2.49, its fullest explication appears in his commentary on the *Liber de causis* (c. 1272–1273).<sup>9</sup>

In the lengthy prop. 6 (7 in some manuscripts), the author of the *Liber* had argued, somewhat cryptically, that a being’s indivisibility (and hence independence from multitude, magnitude, motion, and time) is manifested in the reflexivity of its operation. “And the signification of this is its return upon its essence (*reditio sui super essentiam suam*), namely, because it is not extended with an extended thing in such a way that one of its extremities would follow another.”<sup>10</sup>

In interpreting this text, Aquinas enlists the assistance of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology* (correctly identified as the *Liber*’s main source-text), noting that Proclus had identified the *spatio-temporal extendedness of parts* as the precise obstacle to reflexivity in corporeal substances:

[Proclus] proves it thus: No body naturally turns to itself (*Nullum enim corporum ad seipsum natum est converti*). For since what is turned to something else is conjoined (*copulatur*) to that to which it is turned, obviously all the corporeal parts of a body that is turned to itself will have to be conjoined to all [the parts]—which is impossible in things made up of parts because of the separation of the parts, with different parts lying in different places (*aliis earum alibi iacentibus*).<sup>11</sup>

Aquinas concludes that anything corporeal lacks reflexivity because it is spread out part-by-part in space and time:

And [the author of the *Liber*] here adds [Proclus’s] proof rather confusedly, when he says: *And the signification of this*, namely, that an intelligence is not a body, *is the return upon its essence*, namely, that it is turned back upon itself by understanding itself, which befits it (*convenit sibi*) because it is not a body or magnitude having one part distant from another. And that is what he adds: *Namely because it is not extended*, i.e., with the extension of magnitude, *with an extended thing*, i.e., with something having magnitude, *such that one of its extremities would follow the other*, i.e., as distinct from the other with respect to position (*ordine situs*).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup>The anonymous Arabic *Liber de causis* is a treatment of the first causes, reworking propositions from the fifth century Neoplatonist Proclus from a creationist/monotheist perspective. Translated into Latin in the late twelfth century, it became immensely influential on thirteenth century thinkers. See Saffrey, “Introduction,” in *SLDC*; and Fidora and Niederberger (2001).

<sup>10</sup>*Liber de causis*, prop. 6(7).

<sup>11</sup>Aquinas, *SLDC* 7, citing almost verbatim from Proclus, *Elementatio theologica*, prop. 15, which is the first of a number of propositions on the properties of reflexive beings.

<sup>12</sup>*SLDC* 7. “Intelligences” refers to the “separate substances” or subsistent intellects of the Aristotelian-Neoplatonist tradition, which Aquinas elsewhere identifies with angels and God. But the concept of reflexivity that he elaborates here applies more broadly to any intellectual entity, including the human soul, as is confirmed by *Sent* II.19.1.1 and *SCG* 2.48. Note that Aquinas is clearly following a version of the *Liber* that states that an intelligence is *not* extended by cognizing corporeal things. According to Taylor (1989), 91–92, this version is not representative of the bulk of the manuscript tradition, which reads instead: “Quod est quia quando vult scientiam rei corporalis, extenditur cum ea, et ipsa stat fixa secundum suam dispositionem.”

The reasoning behind the Reflexivity Premise now begins to come clear. The spatial and temporal extension of parts interferes with what, for Aquinas, defines reflexivity: i.e., that in a single act, the origin and terminus of the act perfectly coincide. Certainly a corporeal entity is already metaphysically unified in the sense that it is itself. And one part of a body can, loosely speaking, be unified with a *different* part by contact, as when I touch my shoulder. But nobody can entirely turn back upon itself, the whole turning back upon the whole. The extension of its parts gets in the way.

For instance, picture a piece of paper "turning back upon itself." If it is folded, the top half makes physical contact with the bottom half. But no matter how many times I fold it, the *whole* piece of paper will never be united to the *whole* piece of paper all at once, due to the nature of spatiotemporal extension. Two parts cannot occupy the same spatio-temporal position; the parts exclude each other. A corporeal being is therefore incapable of reflexive activity, because it can never wholly reappropriate itself. In the end, even the "union" of one part physically touching another falls short of the kind of unification that Aquinas has in mind for a reflexive "turning to oneself." I can *juxtapose* parts of the paper, but I cannot make them *share the same spatio-temporal position*.

In commenting on the *Liber's* prop. 6(7), then, Aquinas explicitly explains the causal relationship whereby reflexivity is had *in virtue of incorporeality*. And thus we now see the reasoning behind the Reflexivity Premise: Assuming that the nature of spatio-temporal extension is the only block to reflexivity, some entity is reflexive if and only if it is incorporeal, having no extended parts that get in the way of whole-by-whole cognitive unification. For Aquinas, the intellect is wholly available to itself, entirely present to itself, fully able to appropriate itself cognitively in such a way that the whole encompasses the whole, like a self-seeing eye.<sup>13</sup> As Aquinas explains roughly a decade earlier in *SCG* II.49: "The action of no body reflects back upon the agent: for it is shown in physics that no body is moved by itself except in part, namely, insofar as one of its parts is the mover and the other is moved. But the intellect is reflected upon itself by acting: for it understands itself, not only part-by-part, but as a whole (*secundum totum*). So it is not a body." One could frame the same reasoning another way: In the "self-unification" of the parts of the folded piece of paper, the parts remain really distinct, whereas in a reflexive action such as the intellect's self-understanding, the intellect-as-cognizer and intellect-as-cognized are only distinguished by a relation of reason.<sup>14</sup> And thus an act of self-understanding achieves genuine cognitive self-unification.

The above texts also help sharpen our understanding of Aquinas's concept of reflexivity. Full reflexion requires not only the union of origin and terminus, but

<sup>13</sup>Although it cannot actualize this capacity without species abstracted from sensation, as I will show in the next section.

<sup>14</sup>See *Sent* I.26.2.3, ad 4. On real relations vs. relations of reason, see *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* 7.11.

more specifically their union *in an intentional act, such that the whole is appropriated by the whole, from the inside of the numerically same act*. Under this construal, in order for the intellectual act to be fully reflexive, it would not be enough for one "part" of the intellect to be thinking about another "part," or for a second-order act to encompass a numerically distinct first-order act. Rather, the whole intellect must appropriate the whole intellect, and the whole intellectual act must appropriate the whole of itself.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, reflexivity in this sense excludes acts such as scratching my head (one part turns back on a different part); bouncing a ball back to myself against a wall (the ball goes forth and returns in two distinct acts); examining my own eyeball in a mirror (the medium of the mirror allows the eye to be presented to itself as though it were an external object), or even a plant's act of growing itself (the act is not intentional). This refined concept of reflexivity shows, in hindsight, why, in the texts from *Sent*, Aquinas thinks reliance on a corporeal organ *necessarily* excludes the originating power and its act from the power's scope. The organ's spatio-temporal extension entails that there is always some part of the physiological structure serving as the "vantage point" for the operation, and which is therefore necessarily excluded from that power's scope of vision: There is no change that the optical system could undergo, that would allow the whole of itself to encompass itself visually *as a whole, from the inside*.<sup>16</sup> And since every act of seeing must take place in and through the optical system, sight cannot be fully reflexive; for the same reason, no corporeal or corporeally-mediated act can be fully reflexive.

Let us now turn to how, according to Aquinas, this sort of reflexivity shapes the psychological phenomena associated with selfhood or subjectivity.

## The Effect of Reflexivity on Human Agency/Subjectivity

### *The Intrinsic Self-Awareness of Intellectual Thought*

For Aquinas, one interesting way in which reflexivity—understood as the whole encompassing the whole—shapes the character of our experience has to do with self-awareness: namely, in the very exercise of an intellectual act of thinking, the act itself, and myself as its principle, are manifested to me. In other words, the reflexivity of intellectual acts means not only that the intellect *can* turn its attention to itself *after* thinking about other things, but also that *it is already manifest to itself in the*

<sup>15</sup>*Sent* IV.49.1.1, ad qc. 2: "For it is inconceivable for a power to reflect upon its own act, except by the same act upon which it reflects, i.e., the act priorly terminated by a proper object distinct from that power's act itself; otherwise it would go to infinity. For if the intellect understands itself to understand, it must understand itself to understand *something*."

<sup>16</sup>Interestingly, in his *Sentencia libri De sensu et sensato* 3, arguing that after-images are the result of the eye seeing itself, Aquinas stresses that this quasi-reflexion is only possible when the eye moves so quickly that it is able to see itself as an object existing in a distinct place, as it might see itself in a mirror.

very performance of its act of thinking about other things. “[I]n perceiving its acts, [the mind] understands itself whenever it understands something.”<sup>17</sup>

Now it is important to clarify at the outset that for Aquinas, a reflexive act of the “whole grasping the whole” need not be perfect self-comprehension. Instead, he distinguishes two main levels of self-knowing.<sup>18</sup> At the first level, the intellectual soul grasps the whole of itself indistinctly, in its individual existence as the principle of this act of thinking, without understanding what differentiates it from other kinds of things. Aquinas associates this “self-awareness” with a first-person awareness of myself as the individual agent-in-act. Self-awareness may be explicit, as when I turn my attention inward to think about myself, or remain implicit in acts attending to other things. At the second level (which we will not discuss here), the intellectual soul grasps the whole of itself distinctly, having achieved knowledge of its own definition through reasoning.<sup>19</sup> For Aquinas, cognitive indistinctness at the first level and lack of comprehensiveness at the second level do not threaten reflexivity; they merely reduce it. “Whole by whole” self-appropriation thus does not require that the intellect appropriate itself *wholly*, in the sense of comprehending every aspect of its being through and through.<sup>20</sup>

For Aquinas, the human intellect is “like prime matter in the order of intelligibles,” a sheer potency having no native intelligible form of its own. Consequently, in order to cognize itself, it must be actualized in, say, cognizing “what a wolf is”—at which point it is formed by the species (intramental likeness) of ‘wolf’ as its own form. This species of ‘wolf’, inhering in the intellect, “lights up” the intellect to itself just as much as it “lights up” wolves to the intellect.<sup>21</sup>

Thus for Aquinas, I cognize myself *only* in cognizing other things, and in *all* my acts of cognizing other things.<sup>22</sup> Every act of cognizing anything at all, in essence, is an instance of the whole encompassing the whole. This account has two important implications for the way in which humans, as intellectual beings, experience the world as subjects. First, subjectivity for Aquinas is relational. I experience myself in relation to the extramental universe, cognizing myself, not as a bare self, but always as the agent of some outer-directed act: cognizing something other, sensing something other, loving something other.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, in explicitly thinking about wolves, I cannot help but perceive them in reference to myself as the cognizing

<sup>17</sup> *ST* Ia.93.7, ad 4.

<sup>18</sup> See *Sent* III.23.1.2, ad 3 (which uses the language of reflexion); *DV* 10.8; *SCG* 3.46; *ST* Ia.87.1.

<sup>19</sup> Aquinas equates this type of self-knowledge with a “complete return to one’s essence” or *reditio completa*; see *SLDC* 15.

<sup>20</sup> *ST* Ia.93.7, ad 2: “But the mind, although it cognizes its whole self in some way (*se totam quodammodo cognoscat*) also is ignorant of itself in some way, namely insofar as it is distinct from other things; and thus it also seeks itself, as Augustine says”; and Ia.111.1, ad 3.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance *ST* Ia.87.1, ad 3.

<sup>22</sup> I have elsewhere unpacked this theory in depth; see Cory (2014), Chaps. 3–4 and 6.

<sup>23</sup> See *DV* 10.8: “With respect to actual cognition, by which someone actually considers that he has a soul, I say this: that the soul is known by its acts... [For] no one perceives that he understands except from the fact that he understands something”; *Sent* I.3.4.5; *DV* 8.6; *DV* 18.1, ad 10; *ST* Ia.111.1, ad 3.

subject, as manifest to me: “Whoever understands or is illuminated cognizes that he understands or is illuminated, because he cognizes the thing to be manifest to himself (*quia cognoscit rem sibi esse manifestam*).”<sup>24</sup>

Second, this relationality is so integral to the way that humans experience the world that it remains embedded in our memories of what we have already learned. According to Aquinas, intellectual memory consists in the intellect’s ability to store and recall, say, wolf-nature as *having been previously cognized by me*, “insofar as the intellect understands itself to have understood previously.”<sup>25</sup> “For always when the soul remembers, it judges itself to have heard or sensed or understood something before.”<sup>26</sup> The possibility of intellectual memory, then, depends on the intellect’s reflexivity. Implicit self-awareness is such an integral part of the act of cognition that the remembering of the object is inseparable from the remembering of myself in the act of thinking about that object. Consequently, not only my present experience, but also my past experiences, are transparent to the same me. In this way, implicit self-awareness, a necessary part of every cognition and every memory, anchors all my intentional acts in a single persisting viewpoint.<sup>27</sup> These insights can, I believe, be used to sketch an account of how we experience ourselves as a single subject existing over time.<sup>28</sup>

For Aquinas, then, it is the reflexivity of intellect’s incorporeal act that gives our thoughts their special degree of subjectivity, allowing the human subject to experience the world in a distinctively self-possessed way. Because of its full reflexivity, thinking does not happen in a “blind” way, but in a self-aware way, according to which each thought also encompasses me, the thinking agent, from the inside in the very performance of thought. The same subject-perspective, the same relation to “I,” is an integral part of every conscious thought, and remains an integral part of my memories, unifying my experience across time.

### *Reflexivity and the Freedom of Practical Judgment*

For Aquinas, reflexivity is the necessary condition for another experience that is central to subjectivity: the experience of free decision.<sup>29</sup> He holds that intellect and will are both, in different ways, principles of free decision. The intellect *formally* causes the will’s choice, specifying the object of choice with its free practical

<sup>24</sup> *ST* Ia.111.1, ad 3.

<sup>25</sup> *ST* Ia.79.6, ad 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Sentencia libri De memoria et reminiscencia* 1.

<sup>27</sup> Putallaz (1991), 93, notes that self-awareness is what gathers together and unifies awareness of one’s object, which is otherwise scattered and dispersed into many acts (though he does not offer an explanation of how this is possible); see also Dhavamony (1965), 77.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Cory (2012).

<sup>29</sup> “Free decision” is the standard translation for *liberum arbitrium*, a medieval phrase that is not quite congruent with “free will,” as it does not specify whether freedom originates in the intellect,

judgment that “This end *E* is to be achieved by means of doing action *A*.” The will, in turn, *efficiently* causes its choice by willing to achieve *E* by means of doing *A*.<sup>30</sup> Scholars debate whether, in this causal analysis, the will’s freedom of exercise is derivative upon, or independent from, the intellect’s freedom of judgment,<sup>31</sup> and whether this causal analysis undergoes any changes toward the end of Aquinas’s life.<sup>32</sup>

It is not my intention to comment on these debates here, but rather to draw attention to a different, underappreciated feature of Aquinas’s account: namely, his effort to root human freedom in the reflexivity of the acts of intellect and will (i.e., reflexivity as defined above, as the whole act encompassing the whole act). For reasons of space, I will focus on the freedom of the intellect’s reflexive practical judgment, to which Aquinas gives a special role in accounting for human freedom.<sup>33</sup> Note that ‘freedom’ can be construed in terms of sourcehood, i.e., initiating my own actions, and/or in terms of alternative possibilities, i.e., having control over alternative courses of action such that although I *do* actualize one, I *could* have actualized the other.<sup>34</sup> In Aquinas’s theory, the intellect displays both sourcehood and alternative possibilities in its practical judgment, with reflexivity as the necessary condition for both.<sup>35</sup>

in the will, or in both. Aquinas’s main treatments of human freedom occur in *Sent* II.24; *DV* 22 and 24; *SCG* 2.47–48 and 3.85–90; *ST* Ia.82–83 and Ia-IIae.6–16; and *DM* 6.

<sup>30</sup>See *DM* 6: “If we consider the movement of the powers of the soul from the perspective of the object specifying the act, then the first principle of motion is from the intellect ... but from the perspective of the exercise of act, then the principle of motion is from the will.”

<sup>31</sup>Hause (1997) includes a useful review of the intellectualist, voluntarist, and semi-voluntarist readings up to that date. He offers one of the most able defenses of the intellectualist account, although in my view his analysis does not take sufficiently into consideration Aquinas’s attributions of sourcehood to the will. Since our focus here is intellectual reflexivity, and intellect is generally agreed to be at least a principle of the freedom of choice in Aquinas, this debate need not concern us here.

<sup>32</sup>Lottin (1935), 55–56 and 162–163, for instance, argued for development. Gallagher (1988), 302–305, and Westberg (1994) have argued that there is a shift only in Aquinas’s approach and terminology. I note only that in researching this project I have not found any discrepancy on the role of reflexivity in free decision across the disputed texts.

<sup>33</sup>E.g., “The root of liberty is the will as its subject, but reason as its cause. For the will is able to direct itself freely to different things because reason can have different conceptions of the good” (*ST* Ia-IIae.17.1, ad 2; see also *DV* 24.2 and *SCG* 2.47–48), although such formulations also must be balanced against references to the will as “origin of freedom” (*Sent* II.24.1.3, ad 5; *DV* 24.6) and the cause of judgment’s freedom (*DM* 6). On the reflexivity of the immaterial will in relation to its self-motion, see *DV* 22.12.

<sup>34</sup>See McKenna (2009).

<sup>35</sup>Sourcehood in the sense of “dominion over one’s act” is mentioned in *DV* 24.1; *SCG* 2.48; *ST* Ia.83.1, ad 3; see also the definition of voluntary action, reserved to humans, in *ST* Ia-IIae.6.1–2. Alternative possibilities appear in the exercise of the rational powers (the will can move itself to act or not do so [*ST* Ia-IIae.8.3] and the intellect can move itself to judge or not [*DV* 24.2; *SCG* 2.47]), and in their specification (the possibility for formulating *this vs. that* practical judgment [*DV* 24.2, ad 3; *ST* Ia-IIae.6.2, ad 2] and choosing *this over that* [*ST* Ia-IIae.15.3, ad 3]).

In order to understand why, for Aquinas, intellectual reflexivity is necessary for the freedom of practical judgment, it is helpful to examine why he thinks practical judgment is free in the first place. A review of his key texts on the topic show him identifying three main reasons for the freedom of practical judgments:

1. Practical matters are contingent, i.e., what is to be done varies from situation to situation. Therefore practical judgments, which are conclusions of deliberation about practical matters, do not compel assent; in contrast, one necessarily assents to the conclusion of a demonstrative argument rightly understood (e.g., *ST* Ia.82.1 and Ia-IIae.17.6; *DM* 16.5).
2. Because the intellect is open to the indeterminate concept of the good, it can make different practical judgments about the same thing, by considering it as good under one aspect and not good under another aspect (e.g., *SCG* 2.48; *ST* Ia-IIae.19.10; and *DM* 16.5, the latter focusing on the multiplicity of means that can be understood as promoting any given end).
3. Because the intellect judges its own judgment, it moves itself to judge (*SCG* 2.48). In other texts, we find two explanations of this claim:
  - (a) The intellect judges its judgment insofar as understands the rationale for its judgment, i.e., it understands what makes a given action *A* suitable to be ordered as means to a given end *E* (e.g., *DV* 24.2; *ST* Ia-IIae.6.2).
  - (b) The intellect is able to judge its own decision insofar as it understands what it is to be a means and an end and what it is to order a means to an end (e.g., *DV* 24.1; the knowledge of means and ends is cited without a clear connection to reflexivity in *Sent* II.25.1.1<sup>36</sup> and *ST* Ia-IIae.6.2).<sup>37</sup>

Notice that (1) and (2) specify necessary conditions for control over alternative possibilities in practical judgment: namely, a practical situation is by its nature susceptible of eliciting, and the intellect is by its nature capable of making, a variety of judgments about what is to be done.<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that for Aquinas, animals are in principle open to different actions (a sheep is capable of turning to the right or to the left); but what distinguishes *free* agents is their ability to *control* which future is actualized by moving themselves to act. To put it another way, for Aquinas, intellectual sourcehood—moving oneself to judge *A* to be a suitable means for achieving *E*—is a necessary condition for genuine alternative possible judgments. The role of (3) is to specify the necessary condition for sourcehood: namely, intellectual reflexivity.

In other words, Aquinas holds that intellectual reflexivity is the necessary condition for sourcehood of practical judgments, which is the necessary condition for

<sup>36</sup>Although *Sent* II.25.1.1 does speak of “prescribing an end to oneself” (*finem sibi praestituere*).

<sup>37</sup>In another argument, which appears in the late *DM* 6, he makes the will responsible for the freedom of judgment. Although I think this text can be rendered consistent with the ones above, this issue is beyond the scope of the present inquiry; see the debates mentioned in notes 31 and 32 above.

<sup>38</sup>The assumption here is apparently that for us to have alternative possibilities, the objects of choice must themselves be susceptible to alternative possibilities.

genuine alternative possible judgments. The connection among reflexivity, sourcehood, and alternative possibilities for judgment, however, is not immediately clear. Let us turn to *DV* 24.2, which provides the most detailed exposition:

Judgment is in the power of the one judging insofar as he can judge his own judgment—for we can judge anything that is in our power. But to judge one's own judgment belongs only to reason, which reflects upon its act and cognizes the dispositions of the things about which it judges, and by which it judges: whence the root of entire freedom is established in reason. Thus one is related to free decision according as one is related to reason.

Aquinas contrasts this free intellectual judgment with the practical judgments that non-rational animals make by means of the "estimative power" that governs their actions. Estimative judgments are determined by the animal's nature:

Brute animals have some likeness of reason ... insofar as they have a ordered judgment [i.e., ordered to action] about things. But this judgment is in them from a natural evaluation (*aestimatione*), not by some mental comparison (*collatione*), because they are ignorant of the reason (*ratio*) of their judgment. Because of this [ignorance], a judgment of this sort does not extend to all things, like the judgment of reason, but only to certain determinate things.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, *reflexivity is necessary for my recognizing the means-end relationship whereby A is ordered to E; this recognition is necessary for my comparing A to alternative actions that fit the same rationale; this comparison is in turn necessary for me to have control over my judgment, such that I can move myself to this practical judgment in preference to that one.*

Let's unpack this curious explanation step by step, using the example of a sheep and a shepherd, both of whom are fleeing from a wolf in accordance with their practical judgments, "This creature is to be avoided by fleeing." Now because of the intrinsic reflexivity of intellectual acts, a human being does not pronounce judgments blindly, but implicitly "sees" himself judging from the inside of the act of judging. The shepherd, then, *sees what he is doing* when he judges, "This creature is to be avoided by fleeing." The self-awareness implicit in judging means that in the act of judging, the shepherd has insight into three aspects of his practical judgment that are opaque to the sheep, and which enable him to make a free choice to flee (assuming that he has enough time to deliberate and does not simply instinctively flee like the sheep).

First, he grasps himself as the agent performing the judgment—a key condition for moral behavior.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *DV* 24.2; and compare *SCG* 2.48, which argues that "only those judge freely that move themselves in judging. But no power that judges moves itself to judging unless it reflects upon its act: for if it impels itself toward judging (*se ad iudicandum agit*), it must cognize its judgment—which belongs only to the intellect." In *ST* Ia-IIae.17.6, he again proposes that reason "can order its own act because it reflects upon itself," now adding that although reason always has its act in its own power, it can only move itself to judge *this or that conclusion* if the latter is contingent and does not compel assent.

<sup>40</sup> See *Sententia libri Ethicorum* III.3 [Leon. 47/1.127:165–167]: "[M]anifestum est, quod non potest ignorare quis sit operans, quia sic ignoraret se ipsum, quod est impossibile."

Second, he grasps the judgment's rationale (or reason, *ratio*), or that which makes sense of the means-end relationship that it proposes (*per* 3a above). In the case of the shepherd, the "reason" of his judgment is the aspect under which he understands fleeing, such that it makes sense to him to order fleeing to wolf-avoidance: namely, he understands fleeing as increasing his distance from the wolf, on the assumption that wolves must be within a certain range of their prey in order to attack. (Of course the rationale might be wrong on many levels: for instance, if the wolf can run faster, or attack from a greater distance, than he had thought.) It is important to note that this rationale is *the agent's own rationale in judging*, which is why the agent must be reflexive in order to grasp it.

Third, the shepherd grasps the judgment itself as an act of ordering a means to an end (*per* 3b). Since Aquinas insists that it takes considerable experience and reasoning to be able to define the intellectual act,<sup>41</sup> he presumably does not mean that the shepherd has some kind of definitive knowledge of what an act of judgment is. But at the least, when he judges, the shepherd is aware of himself as actively ordering the action of fleeing to the goal of wolf-avoidance. This insight is significant, because it means that he recognizes (even if only vaguely) not only what means and ends are, but also that *means can be actively ordered to ends by reason*.<sup>42</sup> Here one might object that this insight into the nature of the means-end relationship established in judgment can be explained merely by reference to the intellect's ability to understand concepts such as 'means' and 'ends.' Does reflexivity really contribute anything here? I would argue that it does. Even if the concepts of 'means' and 'ends' can be acquired by observing objects in the world, means-ends relationships can only be seen *as something that can be established by reason* if this activity of reason is grasped reflexively, "from the inside."

It is important to note that the difference between the shepherd's and the sheep's judgments is not that the shepherd grasps fleeing as ordered toward wolf-avoidance, while the sheep merely reacts to a stimulus. For Aquinas, both shepherd and sheep flee intentionally, as the result of a judgment that "this creature is to be avoided by fleeing." Otherwise, the sheep would not be fleeing the wolf in an intentional way, but merely running mechanically.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, because the sheep does not "judge its own judgment," it lacks the shepherd's insights into what it is doing when it judges. The sheep cannot grasp its judgment as *its own*, nor as *a judgment*—i.e., more specifically, as the ordering of this means to that end according to a certain rationale. Consequently, the sheep neither understands *that* it is judging, nor *why* it is judging flight to be a suitable means for wolf-avoidance, nor *what it is to judge*.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., *Sent* III.23.1.2, ad 3, and for discussion, Cory (2014), Chap. 7.

<sup>42</sup> See *DV* 24.1, where Aquinas explains that a rational being can "judge concerning his own decision insofar as he cognizes the nature of an end and the nature of that which is for the sake of the end, and the disposition and order of one to another—and therefore he is a cause of himself not only in moving, but in judging." See the same argument in *Sent* II.25.1.1 and *ST* Ia-IIae.6.2.

<sup>43</sup> I am grateful to Maria Carl for this observation. See *Sententia libri De anima* II.13, where Aquinas explicitly holds that an animal grasps an object "solum secundum quod est terminus aut principium alicuius actionis uel passionis, sicut ouis cognoscit hunc agnum non in quantum est hic agnus, set in quantum est ab ea lactabilis" [Leon. 45/1.122:213–216].



Intellectual reflexivity thus provides a certain kind of insight into the judgment in the moment of judging, which is the foundation for the freedom of judgment. We experience our judgments as reason's establishing of a means-end relationship: i.e., that we experience our judgments as something whose content can be controlled. This is not to say that the experience of control just *is* freedom, but rather merely that we can consciously control only what lies within our sphere of cognition. If our extramentally-focused judgments were opaque to us, they could not be susceptible to our conscious control.

Using *DV* 24.2, we can take the analysis one step further: For Aquinas, these insights, acquired implicitly on account of the reflexivity of judgment, are what make deliberation possible, because they enable the intellect to compare different means to the same end. Because the shepherd is aware of the "rationale" that informs his judgment and of the content of judgment as susceptible to reason's control, he can recognize that other options for wolf-avoidance included the same broad means-rationale of "lessening the risk of attack." For instance, he could recognize that the same end could be achieved by climbing a tree or ducking into a shed, even if, against instinct, that means initially running *toward* the wolf. To put it another way, because he has discovered how means are ordered toward ends in reflecting on his own judgments, he judges with the awareness that *different means can be ordered to the same end under the same rationale*. And because he experiences his judgments as not necessitated but rather caused contingently by his own reason, he is able to compare these means, remaining open to alternative possible judgments.

For Aquinas, the ability to compare different means is crucial to the freedom of practical judgment. He insists that the judgment informing the choice of *A*, properly speaking, must affirm *A* as choiceworthy *in comparison to other options* (E.g., in judging that he ought to flee, the shepherd is judging fleeing as *preferable to other alternatives* such as chasing away or attempting to kill the wolf).<sup>44</sup> And because of the nature of practical matters, this comparison does not necessitate any particular judgment by way of conclusion, *per* (1) above. Thus, for Aquinas, if the intellect does in fact pronounce a judgment, *it must have moved itself to do so* (=sourcehood), indicating that the determining factor for the pronouncing of *this vs. that* judgment is located in the intellect and not in the object (=control over alternate possible judgments). Thus when the shepherd judges that "The wolf is to be avoided by fleeing," the judgment has not been impressed blindly by nature; rather he has *constructed* that judgment freely, on his own initiative, in a self-aware way, as one of a virtually limitless number of possible practical judgments at his disposal.<sup>45</sup>

The relationship of reflexivity to freedom of practical judgment, according to Aquinas, then, can be summarized as follows: Reflexivity is necessary for apprehending one's judgment as the ordering of a means to an end under a certain rationale; which apprehension is necessary for recognizing the existence of possible means that can be ordered to this end under the same rationale; which recognition is

<sup>44</sup>On *collatio* see *ST* Ia.83.1; Ia.83.3, ad 3; Ia-IIae.13.1, ad 1; *Sent.* II.25.1.1, ad 7; on preference, *ST* Ia-IIae.15.3, ad 3; *Sent* II.24.1.2.

<sup>45</sup>*DV* 24.2. For discussion, see Klubertanz (1952), 187–188.

necessary for comparing different means against each other; which comparison is necessary for freely ordering one means *rather than another* to an end—or in other words, for moving oneself freely to this rather than that practical judgment. And that is why in *DV* 24.2, he states that ignorance of the rationale (*ratio*) of one's judgment restricts the scope of animal judgment and blocks "comparison," preventing non-reflexive cognitive powers from exercising free judgment. To put it another way, because my intellectual practical judgments are intelligible to me (on account of their reflexivity), I recognize this particular judgment as one among many others that I could have constructed. Without this awareness, I would not have the freedom to construct and deliberate among innumerable different practical judgments.

I contend, then, that "judging one's judgment" does not refer to a "meta-judgment" or "second-order judgment," as MacDonald has suggested.<sup>46</sup> Rather, it refers simply to exercising judgment with a from-the-inside awareness of one's rationale for judging—which, Aquinas thinks for the reasons outlined above, implies moving oneself without necessity to that judgment. Aquinas's reasoning captures nicely the experience of freedom as emerging in some way from our awareness of oneself as having options (though it does not seem that he intends to *equate* freedom with this sort of awareness). But he may not satisfy our curiosity about *why* the intellect ultimately judges some action *A* preferable to other possible means of securing some end *E*. Through comparison, the intellect *gives itself a reason* for preferring *A*, although *per* (1) above, there is nothing in *A* or *E* that necessitates the preference. But why does it move itself in response to this vs. that reason? Perhaps Aquinas thinks we can go no farther in parsing the principles of practical judgment; and in any case, this question about motivation and freedom falls outside our present scope of inquiry.

## An Anthropology of Reflexivity

From what we have seen, then, Aquinas constructs his account of human action in full view of the complex psychological phenomena that we would today associate with subjectivity. He sees humans as exercising understanding in a uniquely self-possessed way that gives intellectual acts their distinctive qualitative "feel." When I solve a math problem, I am manifested to myself as "I, doing math." Immersed in reality, I stand out from it to myself, without either being absorbed by it or cut off from it. To put it another way, I do not simply act; *I act from a perspective, and am aware of myself as doing so*. This self-possession is traceable to the reflexivity of the intellectual act, which is "lit up" to itself in its performance, the whole encompassing the whole from the inside.

In determining what is to be done, this intellectual self-possession is the necessary condition for the freedom of our practical judgments. In the very act of judging, I am aware of ordering a means to an end under a specific rationale according to

<sup>46</sup>MacDonald (1998), 326–328.

which this means is preferable to alternative means. This awareness is something I can only get by experiencing my judgments from the inside, and for Aquinas, one cannot decide freely without it. Because of it, my judgments are not automated reactions to situations in the world, nor are they the pronouncements of natural instinct. Rather, I “construct” them, freely ordering this means to that end in preference to other available possibilities.

This “self-possessed” character of experience is at the center of what we mean today when we speak of a “subject” or “self.” And Aquinas’s effort to interpret these experiences in terms of reflexivity suggests a new perspective on his defense of the incorporeality of thinking and willing. This position is often taken to have—and certainly does have—a theological motivation in the Christian doctrine of personal immortality. But our analysis of the metaphysics of reflexivity shows that Aquinas also has a philosophical motivation: namely, the experience of living a life suffused with subjectivity, the self-possessed life. The complete reflexivity demanded by the experience of thinking and willing, in his view, is impossible without metaphysical incorporeality. In the end, from his analysis of conscious cognition and agency to his metaphysics of the soul, Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology has a keen regard for human subjectivity.

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