

Aquinas and the Sins of Ignorance

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Contemporary Readings of Aquinas on the Moral Object

The contemporary moral theologian Duarte Sousa-Lara maintains that there are three schools of interpretation regarding Thomas Aquinas's account of the moral object. First, there is what he calls the "classical" interpretation, which understands the moral object to be a thing measured by reason.¹ Second, there is a proportionalist interpretation, which contends that the moral object includes the agent's intended remote end.² As exemplified by Louis Janssens, the proportionalist interpretation correlates Aquinas's moral doctrine with that of Peter Abelard.³ Third, there is a "contemporary" interpretation that Sousa-Lara himself affirms. This interpretation construes the moral object as a "proposal" that the agent presents to himself and that can be morally evaluated in precision from his intended remote end.⁴

John Finnis, Germain Grisez, and Joseph Boyle also emphasize the agent's "proposal" in their interpretation of Aquinas's teaching on the moral object.⁵ In association with this understanding of the moral

¹ Duarte Sousa-Lara, "Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act: A Reading in Light of the Texts and Commentators," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (2008): 243–276 and 272.

² *Ibid.*, 273.

³ *Ibid.* For Janssens's interpretations of Aquinas, see his "Ontic Evil and Moral Evil," in *Readings in Moral Theology*, vol. 1, *Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1979), 40, and his "Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Question of Proportionality," in *Louvain Studies* 9, no. 1 (1982): 26–46, especially 27–28.

⁴ Sousa-Lara, "Aquinas on the Object," 273.

⁵ John Finnis, Germain Grisez, and Joseph Boyle, "'Direct' and 'Indirect': A Reply to Critics of Our Action Theory," *The Thomist* 65 (2001): 1–44, at 3.

object, the authors claim that Aquinas rejects both Abelard's emphasis upon the agent's intended remote end and Peter Lombard's emphasis upon the moral character of the exterior act itself, specified independently of the agent's will.⁶ Finnis claims elsewhere that Aquinas finds Lombard's account to be "excessive" in this respect.⁷ In order to support this account of the moral object, which they claim is also the doctrine of the Roman Magisterium,⁸ Finnis, Grisez, and Boyle appeal to John Paul II's statement in *Veritatis splendor* §78 that "in order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person."⁹ The Pontiff's statement here is interpreted in such a way that his emphasis upon the perspective of the acting person is taken to indicate that the moral object specifying that person's act can be nothing other than the proposed end that that person intends to realize. In this way, Finnis argues in a previous study that a moral act is whatever the agent intends that act to be.¹⁰ Finnis claims that his emphasis upon the agent's subjective proposal is not aimed to advance a methodology for rationalizing the performance of immoral acts.¹¹ Grisez, however, does argue in an early essay that his methodological emphasis upon the agent's proposal allows for a revision of the principle of double effect that thereafter enables it "to justify acts hitherto regarded as evil."¹²

A similar interpretation of Aquinas is advanced by Martin Rhonheimer,¹³

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ John Finnis, "Object and Intention in Moral Judgments according to Aquinas," *The Thomist* 55 (1991): 1–27, at 18.

⁸ Finnis, Grisez, and Boyle, "Direct' and 'Indirect,'" 29.

⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* (1993), §78: "Proinde, ut actus obiectum deprehendi possit, quod ei moralem proprietatem tribuat, se collocare necesse est in prospectu personae agentis"; for the English, see John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth* (Boston, MA: Pauline, 1993); for the Latin, see *Acta Apostolicae Sedis (AAS)* 85 (1993): 1133–1228, at 1196.

¹⁰ See Finnis, "Object and Intention," 14.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, 18.

¹² Germain Grisez, "Toward a Consistent Natural Law Ethics of Killing," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 15 (1970): 64–96, at 91.

¹³ See Martin Rhonheimer, *Natur als Grundlage der Moral: Die personale Struktur des Naturgesetzes bei Thomas von Aquin* (Innsbruck, Austria: Tyrolia Verlag, 1987); Rhonheimer, "Intrinsically Evil Acts and the Moral Viewpoint: Clarifying a Central Teaching of *Veritatis splendor*," in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, eds. J. A. DiNoia and Romanus Cessario (Chicago: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999), 161–193; and Rhonheimer, "The Perspective of the Acting Person and the Nature of Practical Reason: The 'Object of the Human Act' in Thomistic Anthropology of Action," *Nova et Vetera (English)* 2, no. 2 (2004):

an author whose work Finnis cites.¹⁴ Rhonheimer (while disagreeing with Finnis, Grisez, and Boyle in some details¹⁵) also urges that the moral object be construed as a proposal of the acting person.¹⁶ His interpretation is endorsed or echoed by Sousa-Lara,¹⁷ Rodríguez Luño,¹⁸ and William Murphy.¹⁹ Rhonheimer's emphasis upon the agent's subjective proposal is a key component of his overall interpretation of Aquinas, which he describes as concerned with developing Aquinas's moral doctrine,²⁰ as seeking what Rhonheimer calls an "advanced Thomism" that can dialogue with "modern moral thinking."²¹

A number of concerns have been raised with understanding the moral object as the agent's proposal. Jean Porter, for example, questions how Grisez's emphasis upon the agent's subjective proposal (apart from causal considerations) can retain objective moral criteria for evaluating moral acts.²² Kevin Flannery rejects the methodology of Finnis, Grisez, and Boyle as involving an "artificial redescription" that veils the true

461–516. The last article also appears in Rhonheimer, *The Perspective of the Acting Person: Essays in the Renewal of Thomistic Moral Philosophy*, ed. William F. Murphy (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 195–249. Rhonheimer defends his essay, "The Perspective of the Acting Person" in response to Dewan's criticisms in his (Rhonheimer) "The Moral Object of Human Acts and the Role of Reason according to Aquinas: A Restatement and Defense of My View," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 18, no. 2 (2011): 454–506.

¹⁴ See Finnis, "Object and Intention," 17n43.

¹⁵ See Rhonheimer, "The Perspective of the Acting Person," 473n43.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 466, 469n30, 470, 473, and 484.

¹⁷ See Sousa-Lara, "Aquinas on the Object," 276.

¹⁸ Sousa-Lara (*ibid.*, 268) quotes A. Rodríguez Luño's study of the moral object, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi. Elementi di Teologia Morale Fondamentale* (Rome: Edizioni Università della Santa Croce, 2003).

¹⁹ See William Murphy, "Veritatis Splendor and Thomistic Naturalism," *Studia Moralia* 45, no. 2 (2007): 185–216; Murphy, "A Reading of Aquinas in Support of Veritatis Splendor on the Moral Object," *Logos* 11, no. 1 (2008): 100–126; Murphy, "Aquinas on the Object and Evaluation of the Human Act: Rhonheimer's Approach and Some Recent Interlocutors," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (2008): 205–242; Murphy, "Developments in Thomistic Action Theory: Progress toward a Greater Consensus," *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2008): 505–527; and Murphy, "Further Response to Long, To the Editor," *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (2010): 16–18.

²⁰ See Rhonheimer, "The Perspective of the Acting Person," 463.

²¹ See Rhonheimer, "The Moral Object of Human Acts," 506.

²² See Jean Porter, "'Direct' and 'Indirect' in Grisez's Moral Theory," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 611–632, especially 620–623.

moral object.²³ Steven Long describes such contemporary readings of Aquinas as involving a kind of methodological “angelism”²⁴ that (he states elsewhere) leads to “unfortunate implications.”²⁵ Stephen Brock²⁶ and Lawrence Dewan²⁷ have also responded to this problematic.

The Current Focus: Moral Objects and Sins of Ignorance

When responding to Flannery’s concern that their approach to the moral object is artificial, Finnis, Grisez, and Boyle reiterate that it is the agent’s subjective proposal that should be given primacy in moral evaluation. They write:

What counts for moral analysis is not what may or may not be included in various descriptions that might be given by observers, or even by acting persons reflecting on what they have done, but what is or is not included within a proposal developed in deliberation for possible adoption by choice.²⁸

In response, it must be recognized that, while it is true that primacy should be given to the moral object when evaluating a human act, the moral object must not be identified ontologically with an agent’s subjective proposal. This is especially so if such a proposal is construed as an artificial design of productive reason. In order to establish these points, the current study approaches Aquinas’s account of the moral object with a particular focus upon his doctrine of sins of ignorance. In connection with this focus, consideration must also be given to Aquinas’s account of the imputation of sin.

Aquinas and the Roman Magisterium both affirm that there can be sins of ignorance. While primary attention here is given to Aquinas’s

²³ Kevin Flannery, “What Is Included in a Means to an End?” *Gregorianum* 74, no. 3 (1993): 499–513, at 512. See also Flannery, “The Multifarious Moral Object of Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 95–118.

²⁴ Steven A. Long, “A Brief Disquisition Regarding the Nature of the Object of the Moral Act According to St. Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 45–71, at 49.

²⁵ Steven A. Long, “Engaging Thomist Interlocutors,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 9, no. 2 (2011): 267–295, at 268.

²⁶ See Stephen L. Brock, “*Veritatis Splendor* §78, St. Thomas, and (Not Merely) Physical Objects of Moral Acts,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 6, no. 1 (2008): 1–62; and Brock, *Action and Conduct: Thomas Aquinas and the Theory of Action* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

²⁷ Lawrence Dewan, “St. Thomas, Rhonheimer, and the Object of the Human Act,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 6, no. 1 (2008): 63–112.

²⁸ Finnis, Grisez, Boyle, “‘Direct’ and ‘Indirect,’” 29.

nas, one should also take note of John Paul II's references to sins of ignorance in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*²⁹ and to the imputation of sin in *Veritatis splendor*.³⁰ This doctrine is evident as well in the contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1793, which states:

If . . . ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience.³¹

These passages lead to a concise point: since there can be sins of ignorance, appeal cannot be made to the Magisterium to support the view that the moral object specifying an agent's act is to be identified ontologically with the agent's subjective proposal. This likewise holds when interpreting Aquinas: his texts that affirm that the *per se* specification of a moral act derives from what the agent intends must be read within the overall context of his doctrine of sins of ignorance. While there can be a specification of an exterior moral act by the (potentially corrupt) subjective reason of a particular agent, the ultimate formal measure of any exterior moral act is found in light of God and right reason.

In order to establish these claims, the present study briefly considers the historical context of Aquinas's moral theology.³² It then gives focused attention to three particular details in Aquinas's texts. First, Aquinas distinguishes between the moral object in itself and the moral object as known. Second, since an agent may suffer from moral ignorance, one must consider the issue of imputation (that is, to what

²⁹ See John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984), §17 (1984); for the Latin, see *AAS* 77 (1985): 185–275, at 218. He cites Lv 4:2; 5:1; and Nm 15:22–29.

³⁰ See *Veritatis Splendor*, §70: “Sine dubio condiciones esse possunt admodum implicatae et obscurae, quod ad rem psychologiam attinet, quae ad imputabilitatem subiectivam peccantis habent momentum.”

³¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), §1793: “Si . . . ignorantia est invincibilis, vel iudicium erroneum sine subiecti moralis responsabilitate, malum a persona commissum non potest ei imputari. Ipsum nihilominus manet malum, privatio, deordinatio. Est ergo necessarium operam dare ut conscientia moralis a suis erroribus corrigatur.” The Latin is from *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997).

³² For similar studies, see Tobias Hoffman, “Moral Action as Human Action: End and Object in Aquinas in Comparison with Abelard, Lombard, Albert, and Duns Scotus,” *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 73–94, and Flannery, “The Multifarious Moral Object of Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 95–118.

extent a morally ignorant agent is responsible for his or her exterior moral act). Third, the topic of imputation leads to examining Aquinas's distinction between formal and material sin on the part of the agent, where material sin involves a disordered exterior moral act as measured in light of God and right reason. After seeking to establish these points on a textual basis, a final observation is given here regarding a proper Thomistic interpretation of John Paul II's statement in *Veritatis splendor* §78.

Aquinas's Texts

The Historical Context of Aquinas's Moral Theology

In his mature work, *Ethica* (c. 1139),³³ Abelard teaches that, when God evaluates the moral character of a person, God is concerned with the agent's intention, not his or her action. He writes, "God doesn't think about the things that are done but rather in what mind they are done. The merit or praiseworthiness of the doer doesn't consist in the deed but in the intention."³⁴ Abelard maintains that the word "sin" thus has two meanings: either as applied to the deed or as applied to the agent's intention, where the latter is given emphasis. In this respect, he considers whether Christ's executioners sinned. "Those who persecuted Christ or his followers," Abelard writes, "and believed they *should* be persecuted, we say sinned through action. Nevertheless, they would have sinned more seriously through fault if they had spared them contrary to conscience."³⁵ While an unintentional "sin through action" or a sin of ignorance involves a misdeed, it does not, for Abelard, involve guilt. As another example, Abelard mentions adultery through ignorance (an example to which the discussion will return when considering Aquinas's texts below).³⁶

Abelard was interpreted by his contemporaries to deny that there are genuine sins of ignorance. Bernard of Clairvaux likely had already encountered Abelard's ethical teachings when Hugh of St. Victor, upon becoming the head of the abbey school at St. Victor, wrote to Bernard regarding an unnamed theologian whose work was popular at that

³³ For the Latin and English, see D. E. Luscombe, trans., *Peter Abelard's Ethics* (New York: Clarendon, 1971). See also Peter Abelard, *Ethics*, in *Ethical Writings*, trans. Paul Vincent Spade (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995).

³⁴ Abelard, *Ethics* 1.3, no. 57 (*Abelard's Ethics*, 28).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.14, no. 131; (*Abelard's Ethics*, 66).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.3, no. 49 (*Abelard's Ethics*, 24).

time.³⁷ This theologian was probably Abelard or one of his students.³⁸ Hugh evidently sent three theological propositions of this unnamed theologian to Bernard for evaluation, the third of which denies that there can be sins of ignorance. In response to this third proposition, Bernard states, “the proposition is manifestly untrue.”³⁹ He explains:

If . . . it is impossible to sin through ignorance, what case have we against the slayers of the apostles, who were not only unaware that it was wrong to kill these men, but believed that in so doing they were obeying God? Groundless, too, was the Savior’s prayer for his crucifiers, who, as he himself bore witness, had no idea what they were doing, and so were committing no sin. . . . Is it not plain from these examples how deeply those who fail to realize that ignorance can be a cause of sin are plunged into its own darkness?⁴⁰

Events later culminated at the local council of Sens (c. 1141),⁴¹ which condemned the ethical judgment that “they have not sinned who being ignorant have crucified Christ, and that whatever is done through ignorance must not be considered as sin.”⁴²

It is not surprising that, a decade later, Lombard emphasizes a different approach to moral assessment than that of Abelard. Lombard treats

³⁷ For dating, see Emero Stiegman, “Three Theologians in Debate: Saint Bernard’s Tract on Baptism,” in Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Baptism and the Office of Bishops*, trans. Pauline Matarasso (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2004), 93.

³⁸ Ibid., 90.

³⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Baptism*, in Matarasso, 170. For the Latin, see Bernardus Claraevallensis, *Ad Hugonem de Sancto Victore epistola seu tractatus de baptismo*, Cap. 4, no. 16, in J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* (Paris, 1844–1864; hereafter *PL*), 182:1029–1046, at 1041c.

⁴⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Baptism*, 171–172; *Ad Hugonem*, Cap. IV, no. 17 (*PL* 182:1042b–1042c).

⁴¹ For dating, see Constant J. Mews, “The Council of Sens (1141): Abelard, Bernard, and the Fear of Social Upheaval,” *Speculum* 77, no. 2 (2002): 342–382.

⁴² Council of Sens, “The Errors of Peter Abelard,” Error 10, in Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (hereafter, Denzinger), no. 377, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, from *Enchiridion symbolorum*, 30th ed. (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2004). Luscombe treats this proposition as the ninth *capitulum* condemned at Sens in *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard’s Thought in the Early Scholastic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 130–131. The error appears as the eleventh *capitulum* in *Capitula haeresum Petri Abaelardi in Life and Works of Saint Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux*, vol. 2, trans. Samuel J. Eales (London: Burns and Oates, 1889–1896), 563.

the generic moral goodness or moral evil of an act in distinction forty of book II of the *Libri sententiarum*. He states, “it is asked whether all the works of man are good or evil from affective disposition and end.”⁴³ In response to this question, he considers three options regarding whether acts can be morally good or evil in themselves apart from cause and end. The first option, which seems to be the doctrine of Abelard, is that acts in themselves are neither morally good nor morally evil but rather morally indifferent.⁴⁴ A second option is that acts are morally good or morally evil in themselves to such an extent that an act which is morally good remains good even when it has an evil cause or an evil end.⁴⁵ Lombard rejects both of these alternatives. Rather, he approves of a third option, one he construes to be the teaching of Augustine in *Contra mendacium*.⁴⁶ In this text, Augustine contends that certain acts can be morally good or evil in themselves and also that a morally good act can be vitiated by an evil cause or evil end.⁴⁷ To relate this doctrine, Lombard quotes chapter 7 of Augustine’s *Contra mendacium* at great length.⁴⁸ He then closes by summarizing Augustine’s account, stating:

A will or action is not always judged to be evil from its end, as is the case with those things which are sins in themselves. For when one has done these things for some good cause, they appear to have a good end; and the will is not evil as a result of the end, nor is the action made evil as a result of the will, but the will is made depraved as a result of the action.⁴⁹

The Moral Object in Itself and as Known

Lombard mediated the twelfth-century moral problematic initiated by Abelard to Aquinas, who encountered the *Libri sententiarum* in association with its Parisian reception, heavily influenced by Aristotle. In order to examine Aquinas’s response to this problematic, consideration here will be given to Aquinas’s mature works, especially the *Summa*

⁴³ Peter Lombard, *Sentences* II, d.40, ch. 1, no. 4. This English translation is found in *The Sentences, Book 2: On Creation*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), 199.

⁴⁴ Ibid. II, d.40, ch. 1, no. 5 (Silano, 199).

⁴⁵ Ibid. II, d.40, ch. 1, no. 6 (Silano, 199).

⁴⁶ See Marcia Colish, *Peter Lombard*, Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 41/2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 483.

⁴⁷ Lombard, *Sentences*, II, d.40, Ch. 1, no. 7 (Silano, 200).

⁴⁸ Ibid. II, d.40, ch. 1, nos. 7–9 (Silano, 200–201).

⁴⁹ Ibid. II, d.40, ch. 1, nos. 10–11 (Silano, 201).

theologiae,⁵⁰ the disputed questions *De malo*,⁵¹ and the *Expositio in libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum*.⁵²

In his doctrine, Aquinas observes that a moral act may be oriented toward multiple ends—for example, a proximate end and a remote end. The interior act of the agent's will is indeed specified in accordance with the moral object chosen as a proximate end.⁵³ But the moral object is also the matter of a human act that establishes the exterior act in its generic moral character, as described by Lombard, quoted above.⁵⁴ The object *qua* matter is the *materia circa quam*, the “matter about which” the act is concerned, and not “matter from which” something is made, *materia ex qua*.⁵⁵ Generic moral goodness or moral evil is found in an exterior human act bearing upon due or undue matter, respectively.⁵⁶ Due or undue matter is distinct from the due or undue circumstances surrounding an agent's individual act, and also distinct from the exterior act's due or undue ordering to a further remote end.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ For the Latin see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*), 5 vols. (Ottawa: Institutum Studiorum Medievalium Ottaviensis, 1941). For the English see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948).

⁵¹ For the Latin, see S. Thomae Aquinatis, *De malo*, ed. P. Bazzi, P. M. Pession, in *Quaestiones disputatae*, vol. 2 (Rome: Marietti, 1953). For the English, see Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. Richard Regan (New York: Oxford University, 2003).

⁵² For the Latin, see Thomas Aquinas, *In decem libros ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum expositio*, ed. Raymundi M. Spiazzi (Rome: Marietti, 1964). For the English, see Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. J. Litzinger (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox, 1993).

⁵³ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 4, ad 9: “Duplex est finis: proximus et remotus. Finis proximus actus idem est quod obiectum, et ab hoc recipit speciem. Ex fine autem remoto non habet speciem; sed ordo ad talem finem est circumstantia actus.” See also *De malo* q. 2, a. 6, ad 9, and q. 2, a. 7, ad 8.

⁵⁴ *De malo*, q. 10, a. 2: “genus sive species actus moralis attenditur secundum materiam vel obiectum; unde etiam actus moralis dicitur bonus vel malus secundum suum genus.”

⁵⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 18, a. 2, ad 2: “obiectum non est materia ex qua, sed materia circa quam: et habet quodammodo rationem formae, in quantum dat speciem.” See also *ST* I-II, q. 73, a. 3, ad 1: “obiectum, etsi sit materia circa quam terminatur actus, habet tamen rationem finis secundum quod intentio agentis fertur in ipsum.”

⁵⁶ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 4, ad 5: “dicitur communiter, quod actus quidam sunt boni vel mali ex genere; et quod actus bonus ex genere, est actus cadens supra debitam materiam, sicut pascere esurientem; actus autem malus ex genere est qui cadit supra indebitam materiam, sicut subtrahere aliena; materia enim actus, dicitur obiectum ipsius.”

⁵⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 20, a. 2: “in exteriori actu potest considerari duplex bonitas vel

The agent's exterior moral act and the interior act of the agent's will both relate to the same object, which terminates the exterior and interior movements. Yet, the object terminates the exterior moral act as the *materia circa quam*, whereas it terminates the interior act of the will as a chosen proximate end.⁵⁸ The former can be the proper object of a power that is moved by the will when seeking a further remote end.⁵⁹ And while in some cases it may be that the exterior moral act itself is its own term,⁶⁰ in general the exterior moral act is specified by the *materia circa quam* (*ab obiecto circa quod est*).⁶¹ As such, and in contrast with Finnis' reading, Aquinas in fact affirms Lombard's teaching that certain kinds of exterior moral acts can be specified independently of an agent's will.⁶² An exterior moral act so specified may then serve as a proximate end that is proposed to the will for choice.⁶³

As distinct from its character as *materia circa quam*, the moral object takes on its character as a proximate end in accordance with a formal *ratio*, understood here as an intellectual measure.⁶⁴ The formal *ratio* in

malitia: una secundum debitam materiam et circumstantias; alia secundum ordinem ad finem."

⁵⁸ ST I-II, q. 72, a. 3, ad 2: "obiecta, secundum quod comparantur ad actus exteriores, habent rationem materiae circa quam; sed secundum quod comparantur ad actum interiorem voluntatis, habent rationem finium, et ex hoc habent quod dent speciem actui. Quamvis etiam secundum quod sunt materia circa quam, habeant rationem terminorum, a quibus motus specificantur, ut dicitur V *Physic.* et in X *Ethic.*"

⁵⁹ ST II-II, q. 110, a. 1: "actus moralis ex duobus speciem sortitur: scilicet ex obiecto et ex fine. Nam finis est obiectum voluntatis, quae est primum movens in moralibus actibus. Potentia autem a voluntate mota habet suum obiectum, quod est proximum obiectum voluntarii actus, et se habet in actu voluntatis ad finem sicut materiale ad formale."

⁶⁰ ST I-II, q. 13, a. 4: "Finis autem vel est actio, vel res aliqua . . . necesse est ut id quod est ad finem, vel sit actio; vel res aliqua, interveniente aliqua actione, per quam facit id quod est ad finem, vel utitur eo." See also *De malo*, q. 1, a. 2, ad 9: "in quibusdam etiam ipsa operatio vel usus est finis, ut dicitur in I *Ethic.* [comment. 1]."

⁶¹ ST I-II, q. 18, a. 6: "id autem circa quod est actio exterior, est obiectum eius. . . . actus exterior accipit speciem ab obiecto circa quod est."

⁶² ST I-II, q. 20, a. 1: "Bonitas autem vel malitia quam habet actus exterior secundum se propter debitam materiam et debitas circumstantias, non derivatur a voluntate, sed magis a ratione."

⁶³ ST I-II, q. 20, a. 1, ad 1: "actus exterior est obiectum voluntatis, inquantum proponitur voluntati a ratione ut quoddam bonum apprehensum et ordinatum per rationem, et sic est prius quam bonum actus voluntatis."

⁶⁴ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 11: "species habituum diversificantur secundum diversitatem obiecti quae attenditur penes rationem formalem ipsius. Ratio autem formalis omnium quae sunt ad finem attenditur ex parte finis."

accordance with which the agent grasps the moral object is of key importance regarding the moral specification of his or her interior act of the will. In *De malo*, Aquinas states, “in moral matters, the object constitutes the species by reason of the formal *ratio* of the object, not by its material element.”⁶⁵ Aquinas echoes this teaching with examples in his third quodlibetal question dated around the same time.⁶⁶ In the quodlibet, Aquinas states, “Although an act receives its species from the object, it nevertheless does not receive the species according to the object’s matter, but according to the *ratio* of the object.”⁶⁷ When an agent grasps an object in accordance with a formal *ratio*, the object is then proposed to the will as an end, specifying the interior act of the agent’s will and constituting that agent’s intention.⁶⁸ In this way, Aquinas states that one and the same human act can be considered materially with respect to its *materia circa quam* (the object in relation to the exterior moral act) and formally with respect to its end (the same object in relation to the interior act of the will).⁶⁹

In order to explain the relationship between an object and a formal *ratio*, Aquinas frequently employs the analogy of color and light.⁷⁰ A moral act, he states, tends to both the object and to the formal *ratio* of the object simultaneously, just as sight tends to both color and light simultaneously.⁷¹ The formal *ratio* of an object is attained by an exercise of reason. An agent’s reason may exemplify rectitude or, alternatively, be

⁶⁵ *De malo*, q. 9, a. 2, ad 10: “in moralibus obiectum constituit speciem, non secundum id quod est materiale in ipso, sed secundum formalem rationem obiecti.”

⁶⁶ As found in Quodlibet III q.12, a.2, which Jean-Pierre Torrell dates at 1270 (following Mandonnet and Gauthier) in *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 211. For the Latin of the Quodlibet, see *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, ed. Raymundi Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1956), 65–66.

⁶⁷ This English translation (slightly modified) is from Sousa-Lara, in “The *Ordo Rationis* and the Moral Species,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 17, no. 1 (2010): 80–125, at 82. The Latin reads: “cum actus recipiat speciem ab obiecto, non recipit speciem ab eo secundum materiam obiecti, sed secundum rationem obiecti” (Maretti ed., 65–66).

⁶⁸ *ST I-II*, q. 73, a. 3, ad 1: “obiectum, etsi sit materia circa quam terminatur actus, habet tamen rationem finis secundum quod intentio agentis fertur in ipsum.”

⁶⁹ *ST I-II*, q. 18, a. 6: “actus humani species formaliter consideratur secundum finem, materialiter autem secundum obiectum exterioris actus.”

⁷⁰ See, for example, *ST II-II*, q. 25, a. 1.

⁷¹ *ST I-II*, q. 12, a. 4: “Idem autem actus cadit super obiectum, et super rationem obiecti, sicut eadem visio est coloris et luminis.”

corrupt.⁷² Right reason as cultivated by the moral virtue of prudence will guide the agent to conform his or her will to the Divine Will.⁷³ As the foundation of right reason, it is God, the eternal moral law, who is the primary measure of the rectitude of the interior act of the will.⁷⁴

At the same time, Aquinas argues that an agent's will is obliged to follow the judgments of corrupt reason. In article 5 of question 19 of the *prima secundae* in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas considers the question of whether the will is evil when it differs from the guidance of corrupt reason.⁷⁵ In the course of answering this question affirmatively, Aquinas makes an important distinction between the moral object in itself and the moral object as known by reason. The passage is worth quoting at length. He writes:

In matters of indifference, the will that is at variance with erring reason or conscience, is evil in some way on account of the object, on which the goodness or malice of the will depends; not indeed on account of the object according as it is in its own nature; but according as it is accidentally apprehended by reason as something evil to do or to avoid. . . . And this is the case not only in indifferent matters, but also in those that are good or evil in themselves. . . . To believe in Christ is good in itself, and necessary for salvation: but the will does not tend thereto, except inasmuch as it is proposed by the reason. Consequently if it be proposed by the reason as something evil, the will tends to it as to something evil: not as if it were evil in itself, but because it is evil accidentally, through the apprehension of the reason.⁷⁶

⁷² ST II-II, q. 155, a. 1, ad 2: "solus vere continens dicitur qui tenet se in eo quod est secundum rationem rectam; non autem in eo quod est secundum rationem perversam."

⁷³ ST II-II, q. 154, a. 2, ad 2: "Ratio autem hominis recta est secundum quod regulatur voluntate divina, quae est prima et summa regula. Et ideo quod homo facit ex voluntate Dei, eius praecepto obediens, non est contra rationem rectam."

⁷⁴ ST I-II, q. 19, a. 4: "Quod autem ratio humana sit regula voluntatis humanae, ex qua eius bonitas mensuretur, habet ex lege aeterna, quae est ratio divina."

⁷⁵ ST I-II, q. 19, a. 5: "Utrum voluntas discordans a ratione errante sit mala."

⁷⁶ ST I-II, q. 19, a. 5: "In indifferentibus enim voluntas discordans a ratione vel conscientia errante est mala aliquo modo propter obiectum, a quo bonitas vel malitia voluntatis dependet; non autem propter obiectum secundum sui naturam; sed secundum quod per accidens a ratione apprehenditur ut malum ad faciendum vel ad vitandum.... Hoc autem contingit non solum in indifferentibus, sed etiam in per se bonis vel malis.... Credere in Christum est per se bonum et necessarium ad salutem, sed voluntas non fertur in hoc, nisi

Because Aquinas here differentiates the moral object in its own nature from the moral object as apprehended by the intellect and as proposed to the will as an end, the moral object cannot be identified ontologically with a proposal of subjective reason. Although an agent's reason mediates the moral object to his will, his reason does not originate that object as such. Aquinas makes a similar point in *De malo*, where he observes that there can be an evil object mistakenly loved as good, while a good object can be mistakenly avoided as evil.⁷⁷

These passages manifest that, for Aquinas, the moral object is not merely a design of productive reason. Rather, human reason can make a mistake when it measures the *materia circa quam*. Aquinas's distinction between the moral object in itself and the moral object as known is an instantiation of his broader cognitional judgment that "the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower."⁷⁸ A reading of Aquinas that identifies the moral object in itself with the moral object as known risks misrepresenting his account by ontologically reducing the *materia circa quam* to a subjective proposal that reason presents to the will as an end.⁷⁹ This confuses the moral object in itself with the moral object as known and opens the door to replacing sound prudential judgment with a design of productive reason. Hence, Flannery's concern with an "artificial" method of specification is well founded.

Imputation

According to Aquinas, a rational agent who performs an exterior act involving a moral privation performs an "undue operation."⁸⁰ The question at hand is whether a deformed exterior moral act is ascribable to the agent. Is he or she morally responsible for the performed

secundum quod a ratione proponitur. Unde si a ratione proponatur ut malum, voluntas feretur in hoc ut malum; non quia illud sit malum secundum se, sed quia est malum per accidens ex apprehensione rationis."

⁷⁷ *De malo*, q. 10, a. 1, ad 8: "sicut in amore boni non potest esse peccatum, nisi in quantum id quod amatur, etso apprehendatur in ratione boni, non tamen est vere bonum, sed malum: ita etiam tristitia quae est in bono, quod apprehenditur ut malum, quod non est vere malum sed apparens."

⁷⁸ *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 2: "cognita sunt in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis."

⁷⁹ See Rhonheimer, "The Perspective of the Acting Person," 469n30.

⁸⁰ See, for example, *ST I*, q. 48, a. 5: "Malum autem quod consistit in subtractione debitae operationis in rebus voluntariis, habet rationem culpae. Hoc enim imputatur alicui in culpam, cum deficit a perfecta actione, cuius dominus est secundum voluntatem."

action? The question touches on the Pauline distinction between sin and the imputation of sin.⁸¹ In general, a deformed exterior moral action is imputable to an agent to the extent that that agent performed that action voluntarily (some important qualifications to this claim are considered below).⁸² The criterion of the will's mastery over the act is thus of key importance when assessing imputation. In *De malo*, Aquinas maintains that it is because of a defect in the will that a privation in an agent's deformed exterior moral act can be imputed to that agent.⁸³

Unlike Abelard, yet again echoing Lombard, Aquinas indicates that there can be proper sin or evil in an exterior moral act even though that act is involuntary. The exterior moral act remains deformed whether or not it is imputed to the agent.⁸⁴ Aquinas also cites Augustine in this respect.⁸⁵ In one passage, Aquinas explains that an exterior act may be morally specified according to its *materia circa quam* apart from the agent's intention because its effect resolves into that exterior act as a voluntary cause. He writes:

A thing may be voluntary either "in itself," as when the will tends towards it directly; or "in its cause," when the will tends towards that cause and not towards the effect; as is the case with one who willfully gets drunk, for in that case that which he does through being drunk is imputed to him as if it were voluntary.⁸⁶

Further, Aquinas maintains that if the object of an act is an effect, then that effect is the term of the act and therefore specifies that act.⁸⁷

⁸¹ See Rom 5:13: "peccatum autem non imputatur cum lex non est." The Latin is that of *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. Robert Weber and Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007).

⁸² *ST* II-II, q. 21, a. 2: "Tunc enim actus imputatur agenti, quando est potestate ipsius, ita quod habeat dominium sui actus. Hoc autem est in omnibus actibus voluntariis, quia per voluntatem homo dominium sui actus habet."

⁸³ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2: "Sed rationem culpae non habet peccatum nisi ex eo quod est voluntarium; nulli enim imputatur ad culpam aliquis inordinatus actus nisi ex eo quod est in eius potestate."

⁸⁴ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2: "Sed tamen hoc ipsum quod actus exterior deformis imputatur homini ad culpam, est a voluntate."

⁸⁵ See *ST* I-II, q. 71, a. 6, ad 2.

⁸⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 77, a. 7: "aliquid potest esse voluntarium vel secundum se, sicut quando voluntas directe in ipsum fertur; vel secundum suam causam, quando voluntas fertur in causam et non in effectum, ut patet in eo qui voluntarie inebriatur; ex hoc enim quasi voluntarium ei imputatur quod per ebrietatem committit."

⁸⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 18 a. 2, ad 3: In certain cases, "ex hoc autem quod obiectum est

When there is an unintended effect, the interior act of the will may be understood as a *per accidens* cause and not as a *per se* cause.⁸⁸ The deformity of the exterior moral act in such a case remains apart from subjective intentionality.⁸⁹ In this respect, certain kinds of exterior moral acts may be measured as undue in precision from an agent's subjective intention: such acts are generically considered in light of God and right reason.⁹⁰ This generic consideration comprises the task of moral theology and moral philosophy, respectively.⁹¹

With respect to the imputation of a deformed exterior moral act to the agent, Aquinas considers in the *Summa theologiae* how an action that would ordinarily involve the imputation of mortal sin can, in certain cases, involve the lesser imputation of venial sin. This happens in the absence of deliberate reason.⁹² In this passage, Aquinas indicates that the privation "present" in the act (its deformity) imputes to the agent in various degrees in proportion to the voluntariness of the agent's performance of that act. As an example of a condition that might result in the absence of deliberate reason (and thus limiting imputation), Aquinas mentions demonic possession.⁹³

aliquo modo effectus potentiae activae, sequitur quod sit terminus actionis eius, et per consequens quod det ei formam et speciem; motus enim habet speciem a terminis. – Et quamvis etiam bonitas actionis non causetur ex bonitate effectus, tamen ex hoc dicitur actio bona, quod bonum effectum inducere potest. Et ita ipsa proportio actionis ad effectum est ratio bonitatis ipsius."

⁸⁸ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 1: "Sed voluntas est causa alicuius quandoque quidem per se, quandoque autem per accidens; per se quidem, sicut quando per intentionem agit ad talem effectum... per accidens autem, sicut quando praeter intentionem."

⁸⁹ *ST I*, q. 48, a. 5: "Malum autem quod consistit in subtractione debitae operationis in rebus voluntariis, habet rationem culpae. Hoc enim imputatur alicui in culpam, cum deficit a perfecta actione, cuius dominus est secundum voluntatem."

⁹⁰ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2: "Deformitas autem actus est per hoc quod discordat a debita regula rationis vel legis Dei. Quae quidem deformitas invenitur non solum in actu interiori, sed etiam exteriori."

⁹¹ *ST I-II*, q. 71, a. 6, ad 5: "a theologis consideratur peccatum praecipue secundum quod est offensa contra Deum; a philosopho autem morali, secundum quod contrariatur rationi. Et ideo Augustinus convenientibus definit peccatum ex hoc quod est contra legem aeternam."

⁹² *ST I-II*, q. 88, a. 6: "Potest tamen id quod est ex genere mortale, esse veniale propter imperfectionem actus, quia non perfecte pertingit ad rationem actus moralis, cum non sit deliberatus sed subitus.... Et hoc fit per subtractionem quandam, scilicet deliberatae rationis. Et quia a ratione deliberata habet speciem moralis actus, inde est quod per talem subtractionem solvitur species."

⁹³ *ST I-II*, q. 80, a. 3: "homo motivo ad peccandum non resistit nisi per rationem; cuius usum totaliter impedire potest movendo imaginationem et appetitum

Formal Sin and Material Sin

Just as with the matter of how the imputation of sin can be lessened from mortal to venial, so too does Aquinas consider how the imputation of sin can be nullified altogether.⁹⁴ When a deformed exterior moral act cannot be imputed to the agent, Aquinas describes its moral species as “dissolved.”⁹⁵ His reference to the dissolution of the moral species may be taken to apply to the specification of the interior act of the will. When the species is dissolved, there is no imputation, and thus no formal sin or culpability. At the same time, since sin is broader in scope than culpability, one can still refer to “material sins.” Imputation involves an agent’s sin *qua* culpability; just as evil is broader in scope than sin, so is sin broader in scope than culpability.⁹⁶ In this passage, Aquinas arguably is not merely discussing natural malfunctions, which he also states are without culpability.⁹⁷ Rather, since the exterior act may be evaluated as a voluntary cause in precision from the agent’s intention (as discussed above), the exterior act itself can be specified in accordance with its own moral character. It is in this way that Aquinas refers to a “material sin.”

Aquinas explicitly discusses the material specification of the exterior moral act in *De malo*. He writes:

Every circumstance constituting a species of sin necessarily makes the sin more serious. . . . And if such a circumstance is completely unknown in accordance with an ignorance which does not involve culpability, it will not constitute a species of sin formally speaking, but only materially.⁹⁸

sensitivum, sicut in arreptitiis patet. Sed tunc, ratione sic ligata, quicquid homo agat, non imputatur ei ad peccatum.”

⁹⁴ ST I-II, q. 88, a. 6, ad 2: “si sit talis ignorantia quae peccatum omnino excuset, sicut est furiosi vel amentis, tunc ex tali ignorantia fornicationem committens nec venialiter nec mortaliter peccat.”

⁹⁵ ST I-II, q. 88, a. 6.

⁹⁶ ST II-II, q. 21, a. 2: “sicut malum est in plus quam peccatum, ita peccatum est in plus quam culpa. Ex hoc enim dicitur actus culpabilis vel laudabilis, quod imputatur agenti; nihil enim est aliud laudari vel culpari quam imputari alicui malitiam vel bonitatem sui actus.”

⁹⁷ ST I-II, q. 21, a. 2, ad 1: “actus naturales non sunt in potestate naturalis agentis, cum natura sit determinata ad unum. Et ideo, licet in actibus naturalibus sit peccatum, non tamen est ibi culpa.”

⁹⁸ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 6, ad 11: “omnis circumstantia constituens aliquam speciem peccati, necesse est quod aggravet.... Si autem talis circumstantia sit penitus ignorata tali ignorantia quae non habeat culpam, speciem peccati non constituet formaliter loquendo, sed materialiter tantum.”

Material specification should be identified with the specification of the exterior moral act, whereas formal specification should be identified with the specification of the interior act of the will. To illustrate his point regarding material sin in *De malo*, Aquinas employs Abelard's example of committing adultery in ignorance. He states:

If a man has sexual intercourse with a married woman whom he does not know to be married, he indeed commits what is adultery, yet not as an adulterer, since the form of a moral act proceeds from reason and the will. But what is unknown is not voluntary. And so if a man were to have sexual intercourse with the wife of another whom he thinks to be his own wife, he would be without sin, as when Jacob was brought to lie with Leah instead of Rachel.⁹⁹

His biblical reference is to Genesis 29:21–25.¹⁰⁰

Aquinas makes this same distinction elsewhere when he describes formal sin as affective sin and material sin as effective sin.¹⁰¹ As examples of effective sin, Aquinas mentions material parricide and material pride. So too does Aquinas elsewhere discuss material falsehood¹⁰² and material injustice.¹⁰³ When describing an act of material injustice, Aquinas explains that the formal specification of the act arises in accordance with what is *per se*, what the agent intends, whereas the matter concerns what is *per accidens* and is beside the agent's intention.¹⁰⁴ Aquinas repeats

⁹⁹ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 6, ad 11: "si aliquis accedit ad coniugatam quam non credit coniugatam, committit quidem id quod est adulterium, non quasi adulter, quia forma talis actu est ex ratione et voluntate. Quod autem ignoratur, non est voluntarium. Unde si accederet ad coniugatam alterius, quam putaret esse suam uxorem, esset absque peccato, sicut cum Lia subinducta est Iacob, loco Rachelis."

¹⁰⁰ Use of this narrative requires inferring that Jacob believes he has celebrated a marriage rite with Rachel (perhaps at Gn 29:22) and that he has no knowledge of Leah's presence when he believes he is consummating his marriage with Rachel (Gn 29:23–25).

¹⁰¹ *ST* II-II, q. 162, a. 2, ad 2: "quandoque aliquis committit aliquod peccatum secundum effectum, sed non secundum affectum, sicut ille qui ignoranter occidit patrem, committit parricidium secundum effectum, sed non secundum affectum, quia hoc non intendebat."

¹⁰² See *ST* II-II, q. 110, a. 1.

¹⁰³ *ST* II-II, q. 59, a. 2. See also Finnis, "Object and Intention in Aquinas," 14.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Aquinas's discussion of an intentional lie in *ST* II-II, q. 110, a. 1, ad 1.

this same teaching in the next article on injustice¹⁰⁵ and in his famous passage on self-defense.¹⁰⁶ In these passages, he is speaking in terms of assessing the imputation of formal sin.

In *De malo*, Aquinas states that a deformed exterior moral act may even be imputed to an agent regardless of that agent's intention if that agent knows that foreseeable bad effects will follow from what the agent intends. He writes:

Sometimes an accidental product of an effect is in very few cases and rarely associated with the effect, and then the cause, in intending the *per se* effect, need not in any way intend the *per accidens* effect. And sometimes such an accident always or in most cases accompanies the effect chiefly intended, and then the accident is not dissociated from the intention of the cause. Therefore, if an evil is in very few cases associated with the good that the will intends, the will can be excused from sin. . . . But if evil is always or in most cases associated with the good *per se* intended, the will is not excused from sin, although the will does not *per se* intend the evil.¹⁰⁷

An allegedly unintended *per accidens* effect (if foreseen) may, in the end, be formally imputed to the agent.

There is another situation in which a deformed exterior moral act may be imputed to an agent regardless of that agent's intention. Recall, as stated above, that Aquinas teaches that "ignorance excuses

¹⁰⁵ ST II-II, q. 59, a. 3: "quod iniustum, per se et formaliter loquendo, nullus potest facere nisi volens, nec pati nisi nolens. Per accidens autem et quasi materialiter loquendo, potest aliquis id quod est de se iniustum vel facere nolens, sicut cum quis praeter intentionem operatur, vel pati volens, sicut cum aliquis plus alteri dat sua voluntate quam debeat." See also ad 3.

¹⁰⁶ ST II-II, q. 64, a. 7: "nihil prohibet unius actus esse duos effectus, quorum alter solum sit in intentione, alius vero sit praeter intentionem. Morales autem actus recipiunt speciem secundum id quod intenditur, non autem ab eo quod est praeter intentionem, cum sit per accidens, ut ex supradictis patet."

¹⁰⁷ *De malo*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 15: "aliquando accidens alicuius effectus coniungitur ei ut in paucioribus et raro; et tunc agens dum intendit effectum per se non oportet quod aliquo modo intendat effectum per accidens. Aliquando vero huiusmodi accidens concomitatur effectum principaliter intentum semper, vel ut in pluribus; et tunc accidens non separatur ab intentione agentis. Si ergo bono quod voluntas intendit, adiungitur aliquod malum ut in paucioribus, potest excusari a peccato. . . . Sed si semper vel ut in pluribus adiungatur malum bono quod per se intendit, non excusatur a peccato, licet illud malum non per se intendat."

from sin, in so far as something is not known to be a sin.”¹⁰⁸ He writes similarly in *De malo*.¹⁰⁹ He reiterates this point again in his *Commentum in Evangelium Joannis*,¹¹⁰ in a gloss on the passage where Christ relates culpability to the acquisition of knowledge.¹¹¹

While, in general, a deformed exterior moral action is imputable to an agent to the extent that that agent performed that action voluntarily, there are some important qualifications to keep in mind when interpreting Aquinas. First, one has to take into consideration Aquinas’s distinction between invincible and vincible ignorance,¹¹² as well as his distinction between obligatory and non-obligatory knowledge.¹¹³ Such obligatory knowledge might enable an agent to recognize an integral condition of an exterior moral act or judge that the *materia circa quam* upon which an exterior act bears involves undue matter.¹¹⁴

Aquinas addresses the issue of obligatory moral knowledge explicitly in article 6 of question 19 of the *prima secundae* in the *Summa*, where he asks whether the will is good when it agrees with the guidance of corrupt reason.¹¹⁵ It is this article, according to Joseph Ratzinger, that clearly separates the doctrine of Aquinas from the teaching of Abelard.¹¹⁶ Here Aquinas observes that, “ignorance sometimes causes

¹⁰⁸ ST I-II, q. 76, a. 3: “Intantum enim ignorantia excusat a peccato, inquantum ignoratur aliquid esse peccatum.”

¹⁰⁹ See *De malo*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 9.

¹¹⁰ Aquinas, *Super Ioan.* 15, lect. 5, no. 2044, in *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 13–21*, trans. Fabian Larcher and James A. Weisheipl (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 121. For the Latin, see *Commentum in Evangelium Joannis*, in *Commentum in Matthaeum et Joannem Evangelistas* (Cadillac, France: Editions Saint-Remi, n.d.), 572a.

¹¹¹ Jn 15:22.

¹¹² ST I-II, q. 76, a. 2: “propter negligentiam ignorantia eorum quae aliquis scire tenetur, est peccatum. Non autem imputatur homini ad negligentiam, si nesciat ea quae scire non potest. Unde horum ignorantia invincibilis dicitur, quia studio superari non potest. . . . ignorantia autem vincibilis est peccatum, si sit eorum quae aliquis scire tenetur.”

¹¹³ ST I-II, q. 76, a. 2: “Ignorantia vero importat scientiae privationem, dum scilicet alicui deest scientia eorum quae aptus natus est scire. Horum autem quaedam aliquis scire tenetur, illa scilicet sine quorum scientia non potest debitum actum recte exercere.”

¹¹⁴ ST I-II, q. 76, a. 1, ad 3: “ignorantia est causa peccati; sicut cum aliquis scit hunc quem occidit esse hominem, sed nescit eum esse patrem; vel cum aliquis scit aliquem actum esse delectabilem, nescit tamen eum esse peccatum.”

¹¹⁵ ST I-II, q. 19, a. 6: “Utrum voluntas concordans rationi erranti sit bona.”

¹¹⁶ See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), 96–97, esp. n. 19.

an act to be involuntary, and sometimes not.”¹¹⁷ In order to explain how ignorance in some cases does not cause an act to be involuntary, Aquinas distinguishes between different kinds of “willed ignorance.”¹¹⁸ When there is willed ignorance with respect to obligatory moral knowledge (either as directly intended or as indirectly willed by way of negligence), the unintentional performance of a deformed exterior moral act is imputable to the agent.¹¹⁹ This occurs, for example, when one wills to be ignorant of the revealed moral law.¹²⁰ Such a deformed exterior moral act is imputable to an ignorant agent as long as his or her ignorance is not invincible.¹²¹ On the other hand, an agent is excused who sins as a result of a lack of knowledge that he or she had no obligation to acquire.¹²²

Note also that Aquinas, in this article, refers to what he calls “ignorance of a circumstance”¹²³ (he again gives the example of committing adultery in ignorance¹²⁴). Aquinas is using the word “circumstance”

¹¹⁷ *ST I-II*, q. 19, a. 6: “ignorantia quandoque causat involuntarium, quandoque autem non.”

¹¹⁸ *ST I-II*, q. 19, a. 6: “ignorantia quae est aliquo modo volita, sive directe sive indirecte, non causat involuntarium. Et dico ignorantiam directe voluntarium, in quam actus voluntatis fertur; indirecte autem propter negligentiam, ex eo quod aliquis non vult illud scire quod scire tenetur.”

¹¹⁹ *ST I-II*, q. 19, a. 6: “Si igitur ratio vel conscientia erret errore voluntario vel directe vel propter negligentiam, quia est error circa id quod quis scire tenetur; tunc talis error rationis vel conscientiae non excusat quin voluntas concordans rationi vel conscientiae sic erranti sit mala.”

¹²⁰ *ST I-II*, q. 19, a. 6: “Putat si ratio errans dicat quod homo teneatur ad uxorem alterius accedere, voluntas concordans huic rationi erranti est mala, eo quod error iste provenit ex ignorantia legis Dei, quam scire tenetur.”

¹²¹ *ST I-II*, q. 76, a. 2: “Unde propter negligentiam ignorantia eorum quae aliquis scire tenetur, est peccatum. Non autem imputatur homini ad negligentiam, si nesciat ea quae scire non potest. Unde horum ignorantia invincibilis dicitur, quia studio superari non potest. Et propter hoc talis ignorantia, cum non sit voluntaria, eo quod non est in potestate nostra eam repellere, non est peccatum. Ex quo patet quod nulla ignorantia invincibilis est peccatum; ignorantia autem vincibilis est peccatum, si sit eorum quae aliquis scire tenetur, non autem si sit eorum quae quis scire non tenetur.”

¹²² *ST I-II*, q. 76, a. 3: “Si vero sit talis ignorantia quae omnino sit involuntaria, sive quia est invincibilis, sive quia est eius quod quis scire non tenetur; talis ignorantia omnino excusat a peccato.”

¹²³ *ST I-II*, q. 19, a. 6: “Si autem sit error qui causat involuntarium, proveniens ex ignorantia alicuius circumstantiae absque omni negligentia; tunc talis error rationis vel conscientiae excusat, ut voluntas concordans rationi erranti non sit mala.”

¹²⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 19, a. 6: “Si autem ratio erret in hoc quod credat aliquam mulierem

here as a synonym for an “integral condition” of an exterior moral act.¹²⁵ It is helpful to refer to non-specifying circumstances as “genuine circumstances” and to refer to specifying circumstances as “integral conditions” of an exterior moral act.¹²⁶ As a further example of ignorance of an integral condition, Aquinas elsewhere considers someone who mistakes how much alcohol he or she can ingest without incurring drunkenness.¹²⁷ In yet another passage, Aquinas describes a parricide mistaken as a regular homicide¹²⁸ (this example is similar to one of Aristotle’s¹²⁹). It is important to ask in moral assessment whether or not an agent willed himself to be ignorant of an integral condition of his exterior act, as well as whether or not the agent was obligated to obtain that knowledge.

A final related point concerns Aquinas’s doctrine of affected ignorance. When Aquinas considers the question of the sin of Christ’s executioners, he divides the various parties into three categories. The Sanhedrin, he maintains, had an “affected ignorance,” and as such it “could not excuse them.”¹³⁰ (Aquinas elsewhere explains in the *Summa* that affected ignorance is present when one wills to be ignorant in

submissam esse suam uxorem, et ea petente debitum, velit eam cognoscere, excusatur voluntas eius, ut non sit mala; quia error iste ex ignorantia circumstantiae provenit, quae excusat et involuntarium causat.”

¹²⁵ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 6, ad 1: “illud quod consideratur ut circumstantia et extrinsecum respectu actus aliquo modo considerati, potest etiam considerari ut intrinsecum respectu actus alio modo considerati, et dare speciem ipsi.”

¹²⁶ Such follows Aquinas’s mode of speaking in certain texts—for example, *ST* I-II, q. 7, a. 3, ad 3: “illa conditio causae ex qua substantia actus dependet, non dicitur circumstantia, sed aliqua conditio adiuncta.”

¹²⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 88 a. 5, ad 1: “De ebrietate vero dicendum est quod secundum suam rationem habet quod sit peccatum mortale. . . . Sed quod sit peccatum veniale, contingit propter ignorantiam quandam vel infirmitatem, puta cum homo nescit virtutem vini aut propriam debilitatem, unde non putat se inebriari; tunc enim non imputatur ei ebrietas ad peccatum, sed solum superabundantia potus. Sed quando frequenter inebriatur, non potest per hanc ignorantiam excusari. . . . Unde redit peccatum ad suam naturam.”

¹²⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 76, a. 1: “homo prohibetur ab actu parricidii per hoc quid scit patrem non esse occidendum, et per hoc quod scit hunc esse patrem. Utriusque ergo ignorantia potest causare parricidii actum, scilicet et universalis principii, quod est quaedam regula rationis, et singularis circumstantiae.”

¹²⁹ See Aquinas, *Sent. Eth.* III, lec. 3, no. 418.

¹³⁰ *ST* III, q. 47, a. 6: “principes Iudaeorum cognoverunt Christum; et si aliqua ignorantia fuit in eis, fuit ignorantia affectata, quae eos non poterat excusare. Et ideo peccatum eorum fuit gravissimum.”

order to have an excuse for one's actions;¹³¹ he quotes Job 21:14 to illustrate this point¹³²).

In contrast to the affected ignorance of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish mob who pleaded for Christ's crucifixion before Pilate must be considered separately. With respect to the act evaluated "as a genus of sin," Aquinas affirms that the mob "sinned most grievously," but "in one respect their crime was lessened by reason of their ignorance."¹³³ When considering Christ's prayer asking God the Father to pardon Christ's executioners due to their ignorance,¹³⁴ Aquinas contends that one should understand Christ's prayer as pertaining to the mob and not to the Sanhedrin.¹³⁵ At the same time, Aquinas indicates that their act was less excusable than that of the Gentiles who crucified Christ, for the common Jewish people did have knowledge of the revealed moral law.¹³⁶ In each category, one must observe that Aquinas does affirm the presence of sin. His differentiation of the parties into categories involves to what extent the sin is imputable. Such is entirely so in the case of the Sanhedrin, less so in the case of the Jewish mob, and significantly less with respect to the Gentiles lacking moral knowledge. Aquinas's judgment follows the criterion that the subjective imputation of sin is proportionate to the degree of an informed conscience. He does not teach, however, that persons suffering from moral ignorance are not able to commit a deformed exterior act.

Afterword: Interpreting *Veritatis splendor* §78

If a Thomistic interpretation of *Veritatis splendor* §78 takes into consideration the foregoing discussion, the Pontiff's teaching cannot be said

¹³¹ ST I-II, q. 6, a. 8: "se habet ignorantia ad voluntatem, inquantum ipsa ignorantia est voluntaria. Et hoc contingit dupliciter. . . . Uno modo, quia actus voluntatus fertur in ignorantiam; sicut cum aliquis ignorare vult vel ut non retrahatur a peccando, secundum illud Iob. XXI¹⁴: 'Scientiam viarum tuarum nolumus.' Et haec dicitur ignorantia affectata."

¹³² See Thomas Aquinas, *The Literal Exposition on Job: A Scriptural Commentary concerning Providence*, ch. 21, trans. Anthony Damico (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 284.

¹³³ ST III, q. 47, a. 6: "Minores autem Iudaei gravissime peccaverunt quantum ad genus peccati; in aliquo tamen diminuebatur eorum peccatum propter eorum ignorantiam."

¹³⁴ Lk 23:34.

¹³⁵ ST III, q. 47, a. 6, ad 1: "excusatio illa Domini non refertur ad principes Iudaeorum, sed ad minores de populo."

¹³⁶ ST III, q. 47, a. 6: "Multo autem magis fuit excusabile peccatum gentilium per quorum manus crucifixus est, qui legis scientiam non habebant."

to condone a moral methodology where an agent may design a moral object which artificially brackets an integral condition of an exterior moral act. Such a practice will involve a kind of methodologically affected ignorance. This ignorance will be directly voluntary, and therefore culpable. Flannery is thus entirely correct to raise a concern with any approach to moral specification that entails an artificial structuring of the formal *ratio* in accordance with which the moral object is grasped.

In closing, when John Paul II states, “in order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person,”¹³⁷ the object under consideration in this passage should be understood in two ways. First, the object under consideration should be understood materially with respect to the agent’s exterior moral act that relates to the object as *materia circa quam*. In this respect, an exterior act as specified in light of God and right reason may involve a material sin regardless of the agent’s intention. Second, the object under consideration should be understood formally with respect to the interior act of the agent’s will. In this respect, the agent may or may not be formally culpable for performing a deformed exterior moral act (depending upon whether ignorance is involved and what kind). In either respect, the passage should not be read as ontologically identifying the moral object with a subjectively designed proposal. N V

¹³⁷ *Veritatis splendor*, §78.