

Human Action and the Foundations of the Natural Law

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TO ADDRESS the question why this book matters, one must observe that the theory of human action and of the nature of the object of the moral act have for too long—whether on the continent of Europe, or in England and North America—been separated from the foundational considerations of the natural law.¹ Long's *Teleological Grammar of the Moral Act* redresses this foundational error. The primacy of end and of form provides metaphysical profundity and rigor to the author's contemplation of the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas regarding the nature of the moral act. The title of the book alone adverts to this: *teleological grammar* suggests intelligibility, meaning, communicability, order, purpose, form, intention. Without the aid of all the king's horses or all the king's men, Professor Long has put Humpty Dumpty together again. Chapeau! as the French say.

Long understands that the natural law doctrine of Aquinas is deeply theocentric and metaphysical. The author articulates the manner in which man's passive participation in the eternal law through the teleological structuring of his nature provides reasons to do and not to do for his active rational life. When received preceptively by reason moreover, this structuring constitutes the natural law in the strict sense. Today this doctrine is scarcely appreciated, and natural law itself often is reduced to either deontological or purely logical structures. The implications of such reduction for the theory of moral action, as might be expected, have been unfortunate. The implications for the lives of Christian believers remain deadly; indeed, in some cases literally.

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The Teleological Grammar sets forth an account of the object of the moral act as “what the act is about relative to reason” (17). The most formal part of the object is the *ratio* of its choiceworthiness to the agent in relation to the end sought by the agent. But the object always also includes the act itself with its integral nature and *per se* effects. The object of the moral act is not simply what the agent finds attractive about the proposed action, because the action with its nature and *per se* effects is deliberately and voluntarily chosen by the agent. Indeed, without the nature and *per se* effects of action there is no action. As the Mock Turtle reminds Alice, “No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise.” Otherwise put, the purposeless traveler risks arriving in a real Wonderland.

Long usefully notes that Aquinas distinguishes between formally disunified acts with disjunct species, and formally unified acts all contained within one species. The former category presents the case of *per accidens* order between object and act, wherein the object neither tends by nature toward the end, nor does the end by nature require the object. In this case of *per accidens* order the species derived from the object is *not* contained within the species derived from the end. An example of such *per accidens* order: theft does not of its essence tend toward adultery, nor does adultery by its essence require theft. Hence, the one who steals for the sake of adultery, while more adulterer than thief, is guilty of *two* species of moral dereliction, and the action undertaken is *formally complex and disunified* because characterized by *two different species neither of which is contained within the other*.

A case of *per accidens* order remains altogether opposed to the case wherein there is natural *per se* order between object and end. In this instance, the most formal, containing, defining species is *derived from the end*, and any species derived from the object is *contained within this defining species from the end*. Such *per se* action is not formally complex, but rather is formally unified by the *per se* order toward the end.

For Long, this stress of Aquinas in article 7 of the *Summa theologiae* I–II, question 18, proves absolutely fundamental for understanding his account of moral action. For if and only if the object is *per se* ordained to the end will the most containing, universal, and defining species derive from the end. In the case of *per se* order, any species derived from the object or objects is contained within the more formal and defining species derived from the end. Further, human action is as such *per se*, since even *per accidens* acts wherein the object does not tend naturally toward the end, nor the end naturally require the object, are in reality two or more *per se* acts that are accidentally ordered one to another. Indeed, where there is no *per se* order in action, then choice would become impossible, as nothing of its nature would tend toward anything.

The most obvious case of *per se* order is a materially simple, freestanding act in which the object is essentially ordered to the end. For example, anesthesia might be given simply for pain relief, with no thought of its playing a part in a larger whole. But there are, Long tacitly suggests, more materially rich cases of *per se* order, where several acts or objects are required by the very nature of an intended end. In these cases, the species derived from the end is most containing and defining, while the species derived from the objects (which might have been but are not freestanding) are nonetheless retained within the species derived from the end as characterizing the larger whole.

Long argues that the integral nature of the act and its *per se* effects are *always* retained in the object of the act. This teaching regarding the integral nature and *per se* effects of action is important for more than its implications regarding materially rich *per se* action, precisely because there is today a tendency to suppose that the deliberate choice of actions of a certain nature may be neglected in favor of a purely intentionalist emphasis on merely what the agent proposes to himself as the purpose for his action. Some arguments in favor of allowing condom use in certain circumstances unfortunately exhibit this misplaced emphasis.

Why should the integral nature and *per se* effects of action be included in the moral object of the act? Because the object of the external act is what the act is about relative to reason. The relation to reason is an oblique reference to the end, for it is constituted by what makes the act choiceworthy to the agent. However, while what makes the act choiceworthy to the agent may indeed be the *most formal* aspect of the moral object, it is not the whole object—just as the soul is what is most formal in human nature, but it is not the whole of human nature. Rather, in addition to this aspect of what makes the act choiceworthy to the agent, the object also always includes the act itself and its integral nature and *per se* effects. Not alone what we seek, but the manner in which we deliberately choose to seek it, are morally significant for our action. With Aquinas, Long is saying that we are responsible, not alone for our proposals and intentions and preferences, *but for the nature of our deliberately chosen voluntary actions*.

Long's comprehensive treatment emphasizes the *natural integrity of action*, the *primacy of end*, and *form*. First, it stresses the *natural integrity of action*, because Long refuses to reduce the object of the moral act wholly to what makes the act desirable to the agent, or to a mere rational "proposal" or "idea" or "transcendentally constituted object." He refuses to treat the moral character of what we do as reducible wholly to why we may wish to do it. The words of *Veritatis Splendor*, paragraph 79, inspire and

shape Long's treatment of the moral act: "*One must therefore reject the thesis, characteristic of teleological and proportionalist theories, which holds that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil according to its species—its 'object'—the deliberate choice of certain kinds of behaviour or specific acts, apart from a consideration of the intention for which the choice is made or the totality of the foreseeable consequences of that act for all persons concerned*" (John Paul II, original emphasis). Long's analysis sustains the role both of natural teleology and the relation to reason in a manner that upholds, in my view, this crucial teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* better than any present-day alternative reading of St. Thomas's moral theory.

Second, as for the *primacy of the end* in the moral life, this emphasis is clear in the role that *per se* teleological order enjoys within the doctrine of Aquinas. Long understands that the natural teleology of acts is not merely their reductively physical ordering. For instance, it is in a technical physical sense accidental that wax under the heat of a flame should melt. Yet should a message be contained in the wax, and should someone who did not wish the message to be read deliberately put the wax too near the fire, this would in moral terms be an act of melting the wax for the sake of obliterating the message. Clearly the melting of the wax would tend, by its very nature, toward the obliterating of the message, irrespective of the technical physical designation as to the accidentality of wax melting in heat.

Third, Long's account vindicates the supereminent role of *form* in understanding of the moral act, because where the object is *per se* ordained to the end, there the *most formal, containing, and defining species* is derived from the end. Hence, if we wish most formally to know what the moral nature of an act is, we must understand whether the act is formally unified within the species derived from the end, or whether it is in reality characterized by multiple disjunct species that are not formally unified owing to *per accidens* order of object and end. Long does not let his readers forget that the role of natural moral teleological order remains crucial. With respect to merely physical species, Long understands that while these do not of themselves necessarily determine the moral species of an act, they nonetheless are among the causal elements determining the moral species.

Teleology saturates Aquinas's moral teaching as it dominates *Veritatis Splendor*. This teleology counters proportionalism or consequentialism (which renders the whole act a congeries of accidents, not even distinguishing end from mere consequence). Thomist teleology supplies an analysis of human actions placing them in relation to the normative hierarchy of ends. One's embrace of this teleology alone ensures that the human person achieves wisdom within the overarching context of Christian beatitude.

The Teleological Grammar of the Moral Act represents a sufficiently strategic work to give form to the recuperation of Catholic moral theology from the precarious uncertainties of proportionalism, logicism, and the transcendental evisceration of natural teleology. In achieving this objective, the author carries forth the hoped-for renewal of moral theology that was first expressed as a desideratum at the Second Vatican Council and later sketched out in the 1993 encyclical on moral theology. It is the great accomplishment of Steven Long's book that it offers an account in depth of the understanding of the nature of the human act that is set forth magisterially in the papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. For this reason, *Teleological Grammar* provides an especially useful companion volume for use with the handbooks on moral theology published at Catholic University of America Press in its series "Catholic Moral Thought."

Error is the most harmful evil that can befall the creature endowed with intelligence. Anyone who wants to know for sure what he is doing morally should read this book. If he finds it too difficult, then he should ask someone who can understand the book what it says. To put this otherwise, the book's teaching remains indispensable for anyone who wants to understand, as is said, "what the Church teaches" about the happy life.

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