

The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas. By JOSEPH PILSNER. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 273. £55.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-19-928605-1.

In Aquinas's ethics, the moral character of an action depends above all on what kind of action it is. "Specific *kinds* of human actions must be pursued to achieve certain specific ends in the moral life" (29). This fundamental characteristic of Aquinas's teaching distinguishes his ethics from any consequentialist or utilitarian ethics and from an ethics of intention: if the action is evil in kind, it does not become good if it has good consequences or if it is done with a good intention.

Aquinas's account of the specification of human, that is, moral actions is one of the most ingenious and difficult aspects of his moral writings. The *locus classicus*, questions 18-21 of the *Prima Secundae*, frequently leaves the reader puzzled. The difficulty of interpretation is due to Aquinas's nonuniform terminology, his elliptical writing style, and his parsimonious use of examples. The best way to achieve clarity is to read this key text in the context of the entire corpus of Aquinas's writings, above all the *Secunda Secundae*, where he discusses his moral principles in connection with concrete situations or specific virtues and vices. Just this sort of study is what Pilsner has provided: his discussions are never kept within the narrow bounds of a specific text, but take all of Aquinas's works into account. Pilsner intends to show that Aquinas's account of specification, despite contrary appearances, is fundamentally coherent (6).

Before summarizing parts of this fine book, I will briefly mention a few points of minor criticism. Regretfully, Pilsner does not pay sufficient attention to previous medieval debates, in light of which Aquinas's personal achievement would appear more clearly. A further complaint regards a certain lack of attention to using the latest critical text. The Latin texts Pilsner uses are taken from Roberto Busa's CD-ROM, which provides the best texts that were available during the course of the creation of this database, yet are not always the best texts today. Also, when citing Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea* in Latin translation, Pilsner does not recur to the critical editions by René Gauthier, but simply cites it from a nineteenth-century edition and refers to it as "old Latin translation" (179, 225). This label obscures the fact that Aquinas used not only the complete translation by Robert Grosseteste, but also the earlier, partial translations called *Ethica vetus* and *Ethica nova*. These minor issues do not diminish the value of Pilsner's book.

The study is divided into ten chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. In addition to the introduction, chapters 2 and 3 have introductory value, providing a summary of Aquinas's ethics (ch. 2) and discussing specification generally in natural things and natural motions (ch. 3). Six chapters examine the five specifying factors of human actions: end, object, matter, circumstance, motive (chs. 4-9). In what follows I will concentrate on chapters 4-6 and 9, where Pilsner discusses the most important specifying factors: end, object, and matter.

What Aquinas refers to as end (*finis*) is either "what one wants" or "why one wants something." Only when a thing is willed for its own sake do these two coincide. Otherwise, proximate and remote end are distinct. If I want money to buy a house, then "what I want" are both the house and money, and the remote end, the house, is "why I want" the proximate end, money. Pilsner explores the relationship between proximate and remote end in chapter 9.

In chapter 4, Pilsner examines the role of the end apart from the distinction of proximate and remote end. The end is what constitutes a human action: if one does not pursue an end, one does not act at all (51). An analogy illustrates the fundamental specifying role of the end for human action: what the substantial form is with regard to a corporeal substance, giving it its being and determining its species, is what the end is to a human action (48-51; cf. 30-37). The specifying role of ends can also be seen when human actions are considered as a special kind of motion. Motions receive their species from their term; therefore acts of will, which are a kind of motion, receive their species from their term, which is their end (52; cf. 39-44). (As Pilsner points out, Thomas is using the word "motion" here in the broad sense of change or action.) The most important argument for the specifying role of the end focuses on the fact that ends are freely and consciously pursued by the will and are in this way the principle of human acts (55-60). It is because of this preeminent role of the end in human action that Aquinas innovatively holds that the primary division of human actions is into good and evil: good and evil ends divide human actions primarily into good and evil actions (61-66). An end is evil, and hence a human action is evil, if it lacks due order to an appropriate end (68). How appropriate ends are distinguished from inappropriate ones is part of the discussion of chapter 5.

In chapter 9, Pilsner presents and solves a puzzle of interpretation: when something is done as a proximate end in order to achieve a remote end, which one specifies the action? Seemingly contradictory statements can be found in Aquinas. On occasion, he holds that the proximate end specifies, while at other times he argues that the remote end specifies. Yet as Pilsner shows, the answer to this problem depends on whether Aquinas considers human actions according to their kind or as individual actions. In the first perspective, the remote end is incidental to the species of action; in the second, the remote end is the crucial factor. When one commits adultery in order to steal, then the further end of stealing does not alter the nature of adultery when considered as a kind of action. Conversely, when considered from the perspective of the acting person, the focus is on the remote end as the object of his will, and his action is to be described as theft (by means of adultery). Said in another way, the external act is specified by the proximate end, whereas the internal act, that is, the act of the will, is specified by the remote end (234-38).

Chapter 5, which accounts for almost a third of the entire book, investigates the role of the object in specifying human actions. Pilsner distinguishes three meanings that the term "object" takes on in Aquinas's writings: (1) that to which an action relates; (2) a formal aspect which is crucial in determining an action's species, such as taking *one's own* or *another's* thing; (3) the proximate end, that

is, when something is done for the sake of something else, as when someone steals in order to commit adultery (72). The first meaning of object, that to which an action relates, is the most difficult to interpret. When someone sets out to buy bread, which one of these three is the object of his action: the bread (the thing related to an external action), buying bread (the external action), or the effect accomplished by buying bread (the action's effect)? According to Pilsner, depending on the context and the viewpoint, Aquinas can be found to interpret "object" in any of these three ways (77-91).

The key question is what accounts for an object's function in specification? This is not a physical aspect, but rather a "formal aspect" of the object at hand. The way the formal aspect (or formal *ratio*) of an object accounts for the specification of human actions is analogous to the formal aspect of an object that specifies the powers of the soul. For example, what specifies an action as either legitimate intercourse or adultery is a formal *ratio* of the object, that is, whether the woman is one's own wife or another's. "In a way analogous to what happens when 'coloured' or 'sensually attractive' identifies a distinct object for a human power, 'one's own' or 'not one's own' is a *ratio* which gives formal completion to this object of human action" (105). Since it is the formal *ratio* and not the material thing that specifies human actions, a single thing considered materially can be the object of two different species of actions or habits when considered formally; vice versa, two different things, materially speaking, can be considered as the same species of human action. An example of the first is when money is either the object of liberality or justice, depending on whether the money is given out of generosity or on account of obligation. An example of the second is pride, which can take as its foundation many different things (knowledge, possessions, etc.) (106-7). How is the formal aspect of an object identified, so that an action can be specified and hence morally evaluated? It is a comparison of the object to right reason that allows for this to happen. It is the standard of right reason that determines that the essential condition of adultery is the formal aspect that the woman is another's wife, rather than her height, etc. (118-21). The standard of right reason, that is, the rule for human actions, is discovered either by reason itself (natural law) or by revelation (divine law) (126-33).

The third meaning of object found in Aquinas is the proximate end. This meaning of "object" is usually found in contexts where he discusses means-end relationships. For example "fighting well" (= object or proximate end) is related to "victory" (= remote end) (133-34). This use of "object" is to be distinguished from the object as what is constituted by a formal *ratio*. For example, the virtue of religion is about offering things to God. "What is offered" is the object in the sense of proximate end, whereas the fact that it is offered to God constitutes the formal *ratio* (137-40).

A term that Thomas at times uses interchangeably with the term "object," to which however in many contexts he gives a specific meaning, is "matter." Matter as a specifying element in human action is either "matter about which" (*materia circa quam*) or "due / undue matter." According to Pilsner, "matter about which" is what the action or habit is particularly engaged with or specially related to

during its operation, especially what is the direct recipient of the motion or activity" (148). For example, the "matter about which" for a carpenter is certain types of wood; for a clergyman, sacred things; for fortitude, dangers of death, etc. (149). "Matter about which" specifies when it is taken in the sense of the "end" (166). The other sense of "matter" that Thomas uses at times as an equivalent of "object" is "due / undue matter" (151). For example, the due matter of buying or selling is one's own thing, whereas undue matter is, for example, a spiritual thing; the due matter of intercourse is one's own wife as opposed to another's wife, etc. (152).

Although Pilsner discusses key issues of Thomistic casuistry, he avoids engaging himself in applied ethics. Important topics for such an enterprise, such as the notion of unintended side-effects and the doctrine of the double effect, are not discussed in his study. He also steers clear from recent debates regarding the moral object. Yet by offering a detailed and insightful study of the specification of human actions, Pilsner provides not only a very useful resource for the advancement of current debates, but also a book that is well suited to nonspecialists who are interested in Thomas's ethics.

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