

Introduction

Human beings are beings capable of agency. Some of our actions are mundane doings, such as setting an alarm clock or buying a train ticket. Others are deeds that have a significant impact on our lives, such as joining a political resistance movement. On a now common view, it is essential to an action that it be something done intentionally (at least under some description).¹ This means that we take an action to be something that we can explain and justify by appeal to reasons, that is, by appeal to considerations that speak in favor of it.² An agent can explain why she bought a train ticket, for instance, by saying that she wanted to get from A to B, and she can justify her joining a resistance movement by appealing to her conviction that one ought to fight a totalitarian regime.

Although we all know *that* we perform actions and *that* we provide reasons to explain them, it is not an easy matter to determine *what* actions

¹ The ‘under some description’ addition is due to G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 37–47 and Donald Davidson, “Agency,” in Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 50. The idea is that one and the same event may be intentional under one description but not under another. If by shaving I accidentally cause a shaving cut, for instance, my shaving and my causing a shaving cut are the same event, for Anscombe and Davidson. But this event is intentional only under the description of being a shaving, whereas it is not intentional under the description of being a causing of a shaving cut. To be an action, as Davidson and Anscombe see it, an event must be intentional under at least one description. In what follows, for the sake of simplicity, I speak of ‘intentional acts’ instead of ‘acts that are intentional under some description’ because the ‘under some description’ qualification is not relevant for my discussion of Aquinas’s action theory. A brief remark about my use of quotation marks and italics: I use single quotation marks to mention terms. I use double quotation marks for quotation and to introduce terms of authors other than myself. When introducing a special term of my own, I use italics. I also use italics for emphasis and to refer to concepts rather than words.

² The terms ‘intentional’ and ‘reason-based’ are usually treated coextensively in contemporary action theory. Sometimes they are even treated as synonyms. See, e.g., Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 76. Anscombe, *Intention*, 25 has pointed out that one could do *A* intentionally without having any reason to do *A*. Anscombe has in mind idle behavior here. But see Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” in *Essays on Action and Events*, 6 for a (to my mind, convincing) argument to the effect that even idle behavior is reason-based inasmuch as there is a want on the part of the agent to perform this behavior, which, as Davidson argues, qualifies as a reason.

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are and *how* they are explained. Consider a simple example, the action of raising one's arm. What makes this an action? Is it, as many philosophers from Aristotle onward have held, the presence of a mental act explaining the movement of the arm's going up? If this is the case, then what is the relevant mental act – a choice, an intention, or perhaps a belief–desire pair? And how does the mental act explain the movement of the arm's going up? Is the explanation causal or non-causal? Furthermore, what exactly is the action here? Is it the overt bodily movement of the arm's going up accounted for by the mental act or is it rather the mental act accounting for the movement? Or is it perhaps the whole process comprising the mental act plus the bodily movement as its components? If so, what is the nature of this composition? And suppose that we have satisfactory answers to these questions regarding bodily actions, such as raising one's arm, can we extend these to mental actions, such as trying to recall a piece of information?

In contemporary philosophy, it is generally taken to be the task of the philosophy of action or action theory, as it is also called, to answer these sorts of questions. These questions are metaphysical in nature.³ They concern the ontology and aetiology of action. That is, they ask *what kind of entity* an action is and *how it is explained*. These are distinct from ethical questions pertaining to action, such as, 'Is one morally obligated to fight a totalitarian regime?' or metaethical questions, such as, 'Does the goodness of an action derive from its intention or its outcome?' Ethical and metaethical questions concern action in relation to a normative standard, asking, respectively, whether a certain action, such as fighting a totalitarian regime, fits a given normative standard and what the nature of this normative standard is. Action theory, in contrast, is an inquiry into action irrespective of its relation to such a normative standard. It is, as we might say, an inquiry into action from a descriptive point of view.

This book investigates Thomas Aquinas's (1225?–74) action theory in this descriptive sense. Aquinas developed a sophisticated theory of this kind. Its subject matter is what Aquinas calls the "human act" (*actus humanus/actio humana/operatio humana*⁴), this being, roughly, how he

³ See, e.g., "Action theory has traditionally addressed itself in the first place to the question of what, metaphysically, an action is" (Elijah Millgram, "Pluralism about Action," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, ed. Timothy O'Connor and Constantine Sandis (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 90).

⁴ To the best of my knowledge, Aquinas treats the terms '*actus humanus*,' '*actio humana*,' and '*operatio humana*' equivalently. For '*actus humanus*,' see, e.g., ST I-II, q. 6, Pr., Leon. 6: 55. For '*actio humana*,' see, e.g., ST I-II, q. 1, a. 1, c., Leon. 6: 6. For '*operatio humana*,' see, e.g., In Eth. I, c. 1, Leon. 47, 1: 4, ll. 51–4. I prefer the translation 'human act' to 'human action.' The reason is that Aquinas takes an action to be only one part of the human act, the other being a passion, as we will see in Chapter 1. All translations from Latin to English in this book are mine.

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refers to what we would today call an “intentional action.” (I say ‘roughly’ because, as we will see in Chapter 1, for Aquinas, a human act is not just an intentional action, but rather an intentional action that is *free*.) Aquinas’s theory discusses the ontology of the human act, examines its aetiology, and investigates the peculiarities of bodily as well as mental acts that we perform at will.⁵

Unlike philosophers of action today, Aquinas does not refer to his account of the human act as “action theory,” and it is likely that he would have found this term problematic. The reason is that the term ‘action theory’ refers to its subject of study, that is, intentional doings, simply as ‘actions’ relying on the now widespread view that actions are intentional doings (under some description). Aquinas does not share this view of action, as we will see in Chapter 1. He thinks that the terms ‘action’ (*actio*) and ‘act’ (*actus*) extend well beyond the realm of intentional agency. On his view, the term ‘action’ denotes the exercise of an active as opposed to a passive power, and to refer to the exercise of the latter type of power he uses the term ‘passion’ (*passio*). And ‘act’ denotes, very generally, the exercise of any kind of power, whether active or passive. For Aquinas, power-exercises, whether active or passive, are found throughout nature, even among inanimate beings. Human acts are but one kind of act among many.

To facilitate the presentation of Aquinas’s theory, I follow his terminological conventions and henceforth speak of ‘human act’ where contemporary philosophers would speak of ‘action,’ and I will use ‘act’ and ‘action’ in Aquinas’s sense to refer, respectively, to a power-exercise in general and an active power-exercise more specifically. I will only use ‘action’ in the contemporary sense of ‘intentional doing’ when employing now standard terms such as ‘course of action,’ ‘action theory,’ and ‘action aetiology.’ Thus, when I speak of ‘Aquinas’s action theory,’ I thereby intend his theory of the human act, not his theory of active power-exercises.

If Aquinas does not call his descriptive study of the human act “action theory,” then how does he refer to it instead, assuming he has a term at all? He *does* in fact have a term. He says that the investigation of the human act pertains to “moral philosophy” (*philosophia moralis*). This notion has a much broader meaning in Aquinas than it does today, however. Aquinas writes that the subject matter of moral philosophy is, very generally, the “human

⁵ Here and in the remainder of the book, I use the term ‘mental’ in the broad, contemporary sense. According to this broad sense, roughly, all acts displaying intentionality, including sensory ones, such as seeing or hearing, are mental. I do not understand by ‘mental’ what only pertains to what Aquinas calls “*mens*,” that is, the non-sensory, intellectual soul (housing the intellect and will) (*De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 1, c., Leon. 22, 2, 1: 297, ll. 140–1).

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act ordered to the end.”⁶ For Aquinas, this study includes ethics, which, on his view, investigates whether a given human act is good by virtue of being conducive to human happiness, this being our ultimate end. Furthermore, it includes a series of metaethical reflections on the nature of normativity, in particular on whether claims about what ends we ought to pursue are grounded in facts about what kinds of beings we are. But it also contains a descriptive account of the human act, in particular of its ontology and aetiology, and this descriptive consideration, Aquinas thinks, is an indispensable prolegomenon to his ethics and metaethics. To see what human acts lead to happiness and why, he holds, we must first gain clarity on what the human act is and how it is explained.⁷

For this reason, Aquinas provides in a number of texts that belong to his moral philosophy detailed discussions of metaphysical issues related to the human act. His most detailed discussion of this sort can be found in the first fifth of his longest work on moral philosophy, the *Prima secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*, in particular in *quaestiones* 6–17 (1271).⁸ There, Aquinas investigates the powers of practical reason and will, their exercises, and the aetiology of the human act. Moreover, he offers an ontology of the human act. Only in a next step does he consider the features of “goodness and badness” (*bonitas et malitia*) (qq. 18–21), that is, the act’s normative dimension. Thus, Aquinas has a systematic action theory in the above-defined descriptive sense, but he considers it a part of his moral philosophy.

The present study is not the first to deal with Aquinas’s descriptive action theory. A number of scholars have investigated Aquinas’s sophisticated action aetiology as laid out in the *Prima secundae*, qq. 6–17.⁹

⁶ “[S]ubiectum moralis philosophiae est operatio humana ordinata in finem vel etiam homo prout est voluntarie agens propter finem” (In Eth. I, c. 1, Leon. 47, 1: 4, ll. 51–4). See also: “Moralis igitur consideratio . . . est humanorum actuus” (ST I-II, q. 6, Pr., Leon. 6: 55).

⁷ “Quia igitur ad beatitudinem per actus aliquos necesse est pervenire, oportet consequenter de humanis actibus considerare, ut sciamus quibus actibus perveniatur ad beatitudinem, vel impediatur beatitudinis via” (ST I-II, q. 6, Pr., Leon. 6: 55).

⁸ Aquinas says, e.g., in ST I, q. 84, Pr., Leon. 5: 313 that ST I-II in its entirety (which includes the descriptive action-theoretical *quaestiones* 6–17) is dedicated to what he calls “*materia moralis*.” For the dating of Aquinas’s works, I rely on Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal, rev. ed., vol. 1/2 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 211 and 332–61.

⁹ See, e.g., Vernon J. Bourke, *Ethics: A Textbook in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 57–66; R.-A. Gauthier, “Saint Maxime le confesseur et la psychologie de l’acte humaine,” *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 21 (1954): 51–100; Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 51–74; Martin Rhonheimer, *Praktische Vernunft und Vernünftigkeit der Praxis: Handlungstheorie bei Thomas von Aquin in ihrer Entstehung aus dem Problemkontext der aristotelischen Ethik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 173–317; Daniel Westberg, *Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action and Prudence in Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 119–82; David Gallagher, “The Will and Its Acts,” in *The*

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Furthermore, some commentators have also considered Aquinas's ontology of the human act.¹⁰ However, this book differs from previous work in three important ways.

First, there is a difference in focus. Aquinas's action aetiology, as developed in the *Prima secundae*, is rich, involving such diverse explanatory antecedents as "simple volition" (*simplex velle*), "intention" (*intentio*), "consent" (*consensus*), and "choice" (*electio*) (see Chapter 1). Studies dedicated to Aquinas's aetiology have offered detailed accounts of the various antecedents leading up to choice. In contrast, the phase leading from choice to the actual performance of the human act, which, in addition to choice, comprises the elements of "command" (*imperium*), "use" (*usus*), and the "commanded act" (*actus imperatus*), has received comparatively little attention. It is this latter phase that the present study will focus on.

This phase is of critical importance for Aquinas's action theory both from an ontological and an aetiological point of view. It is ontologically important on account of command, use, and the commanded act. For Aquinas specifies what the human act is by appeal to these three acts, arguing that a human act is a kind of composite of use and the commanded act, with use being informed by command (see Chapter 6).

The phase is aetiologically important on account of the act of choice. Among all of the aetiological antecedents that he countenances, Aquinas singles out choice as *the* key explanatory factor of the human act, as we will see in Chapter 1. It is because a human act proceeds from choice that it is

Ethics of Aquinas, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 69–89; Karl Mertens, "Handlungslehre und Grundlagen der Ethik," in *Thomas von Aquin: Die Summa theologiae: Werkinterpretationen*, ed. Andreas Speer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 168–97; Stephen Boulter, "Aquinas on Action and Action Explanation," in *New Essays on the Explanation of Action*, ed. Constantine Sandis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 257–75; María Teresa Enríquez, *De la Decisión a la Acción: Estudio sobre el Imperium en Tomas de Aquino* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2011), 19–142; María Silvia Vaccarezza, *Le ragioni del contingente: La saggezza pratica tra Aristotele e Tommaso d'Aquino* (Naples: Orthotes, 2012), 39–72; Thomas M. Osborne, *Human Action in Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 1–148. For a study of the historical sources of Aquinas's action aetiology, see Emil Dobler, *Zwei syrische Quellen der theologischen Summa des Thomas von Aquin: Nemesios von Emesa und Johannes von Damaskus, ihr Einfluss auf die anthropologischen Grundlagen der Moralthologie* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg, 2000).

¹⁰ See Stephen L. Brock, *Action and Conduct: Thomas Aquinas and the Theory of Action* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), esp. 49–196; Servais Pinckaers, "La structure de l'acte humain suivant Saint Thomas," *Revue Thomiste* 55 (1955): 393–412; Alan Donagan, "Thomas Aquinas on Human Action," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism. 1100–1600*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, Jan Pinborg, and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 642–54; McNerny, *Aquinas on Human Action*, 70–4.

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a characteristically *human* act, on his view. Thus, to understand what makes something a human act, we must examine how the composite of use and the commanded act relates not only to command but also to choice.

The focus on the neglected phase leading from choice to the human act is one respect that sets my study apart from others. But it is not the only one. My study also differs from others in terms of its interpretive approach. I examine Aquinas's ontology of the human act as well as his choice-based aetiology in light of a certain metaphysical commitment of his, namely, his *hylomorphism*. Generally speaking, hylomorphism is a view about material objects, according to which every material object has a material and a formal component, where the formal component makes the material object the kind of object it is by inhering in its matter. As we will see, Aquinas thinks that a human act is also structured like a hylomorphic whole. The formal and material components are, respectively, use, which is an act of the will or *volition*, as I shall call it,¹¹ and the commanded act. This view of Aquinas's, which I shall henceforth refer to as *Act Hylomorphism*, has for the most part gone unnoticed in the scholarly literature, and the available interpretations of the ontology of the human act in Aquinas are non-hylomorphic.¹² In this book, I aim to offer a detailed account of Aquinas's Act Hylomorphism and show why the alternative, non-hylomorphic interpretations are mistaken.

For Aquinas, not only the human act has a hylomorphic structure. On his view, the act of choice, which explains the human act, is likewise a kind of hylomorphic composite. It is a volition, materially speaking, and its formal component is, as I argue in Chapters 4–5, the volition's characteristic free intentional directedness to one pursuit rather than another, where this free directedness is inherited from a preceding judgment of reason that Aquinas refers to as “free judgment” (*liberum iudicium*). I call this doctrine of Aquinas's *Choice Hylomorphism*.

Aquinas's Choice Hylomorphism has received some attention in the literature.¹³ However, its details remain poorly understood because we lack

¹¹ I will use the term ‘volition’ to denote acts of the will in general. I will not use it in the more restricted, contemporary sense, according to which it only denotes an act of the will causing a piece of (bodily) behavior.

¹² To my knowledge, the only scholars to have drawn attention to Aquinas's Act Hylomorphism are Robert Koons and Matthew B. O'Brien, “Objects of Intention: A Hylomorphic Critique of the New Natural Law Theory,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2012), 674. But they do not offer a detailed account of this doctrine because their interest in this article lies in the theory of natural law.

¹³ See Westberg, *Right Practical Reason*, for a recent study that considers this account.

as yet a clear account of what kinds of mental acts free judgment and choice are, and we also lack a proper understanding of the way in which choice depends on judgment. In this study, I aim to fill this gap by considering free judgment and choice in light of Aquinas's general account of practical judgment and volition. I should note, however, that I do not take a stand in the dispute as to whether Aquinas's theory of choice is compatibilist or libertarian. In my view, answering this question would require another book, but I do not think that I have to settle this dispute here because my interpretation of choice is compatible with either reading.

There is also a third and final respect in which my book differs from previous work on Aquinas's philosophy of action. In addition to laying out Aquinas's action theory with a view to his Act and Choice Hylomorphism, this book also assesses the philosophical merit of Aquinas's Act Hylomorphism by bringing it into dialogue with some representative contemporary theories of action. The attempt to connect Aquinas's action theory with contemporary theorizing about human agency is not without precedent.¹⁴ However, this project has not yet been undertaken in light of a hylomorphic interpretation of the human act.

The book is in three parts. The first part (Chapter 1) introduces the general framework of Aquinas's action-theoretical project. As indicated, this theory revolves around the notion of the 'human act' (*actus humanus*), and in Chapter 1 I aim to explain this term. I argue that Aquinas understands by a 'human act' an intentional act that is free and that his theory of this act crucially relies on his Act and Choice Hylomorphism.

The second part (Chapters 2–5) examines Aquinas's Choice Hylomorphism. I first discuss free judgment (Chapters 2–3), which explains the characteristic form of the hylomorphically structured act of choice. In particular, I discuss what makes this judgment *free*, as this allows us to see on account of what the volitional act of choice is free. To explain what makes this judgment free, we need to first see what makes it *practical*, and this is the task of Chapter 2. I argue that a judgment is practical on account of the means–end relating nature of its propositional content. In Chapter 3, I then turn to an examination of free judgment more specifically, which is one kind of practical judgment, and I argue that its free character derives from the specific types of means–end relations that it is concerned with.

¹⁴ See especially Brock, *Action and Conduct*, who brings Aquinas into dialogue with the theories of Donald Davidson and Alan Donagan.

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Once the free character of judgment has been specified, the task of Chapters 4–5 is to consider choice itself and how it derives its characteristic freedom from the preceding judgment. In Chapter 4, I first examine Aquinas’s general theory of volition and the relation of dependence obtaining between volition and judgment. I argue that, on his view, judgments are both the formal and final causes of volitions and that this means that a volition derives its directedness to a certain means as ordered to an end from judgment. I also argue that the will possesses no freedom of its own and that volitional freedom is entirely derived from free judgment. In Chapter 5, I then spell out what the derivative directedness of volition is, and I argue that the core idea of Aquinas’s Choice Hylomorphism is that choice’s free or preferential character is an *intentional* directedness derived from the preceding free judgment.

Having so laid out Aquinas’s Choice Hylomorphism and its basis in free judgment, I turn in the third part of this book to Aquinas’s Act Hylomorphism (Chapters 6–9). In Chapter 6, I lay out the general framework of Aquinas’s Act Hylomorphism. I argue, against non-hylomorphic interpretations, that the act of use and the commanded act together compose the hylomorphically organized human act, for Aquinas, and I discuss this doctrine in some detail. I also discuss how choice explains this composite, thereby bringing Aquinas’s Act and Choice Hylomorphism together.

Chapters 7 and 8 then flesh out Aquinas’s Act Hylomorphism by considering the two general types of human acts that Aquinas countenances, namely, bodily ones, such as taking a walk (Chapter 7), and mental ones (Chapter 8), such as trying to recall a piece of information. I flesh out the hylomorphic structure of these two general types of human acts by considering the temporal and causal features of use and the commanded act in both cases. As we will see, bodily and mental human acts have certain key features in common, for Aquinas, but they also differ from one another in important respects.

Chapter 9, finally, compares Aquinas’s Act Hylomorphism to contemporary theories of the human act and concludes that Aquinas’s view has some attractive features and advantages over contemporary theories, though, unfortunately, it also has a considerable downside.