



Aquinas' Solution of Aristotle's Incontinent Man and Augustine's Two Wills

Martina Stepinova OP

Aquinas' treatise on conscience was the culmination of a lengthy debate that had been going on for centuries. This debate is today known and carried on under the name "weakness of the will" or *akrasia*. In my article, I am aiming to demonstrate that this discussion, which started with the Aristotle's problem of incontinent (*akratic*) man, has been going on through Augustine's problem of "two wills". I would like to demonstrate that Aquinas links this discussion to his conception of the conscience and synderesis. Despite the fact, that R. Saarinen¹ in his book about "weakness of the will" proves there is no connection between Aristotle's incontinent (*akratic*) man and Augustine's problem of "two wills", my aim is to explain that it is Aquinas himself who connects Aristotle's incontinent man with Augustine's "two wills" and that incontinent person is someone who acts against his conscience.

St. Thomas Aquinas' conception of conscience is well known. According to Aquinas, conscience is an "application of knowledge to an action"². To illustrate how Aquinas arrived at his conception of conscience in accordance with the Socratic-Aristotelian tradition, and with the problems of two wills given by Augustine, it seems necessary to supply a brief summary of these traditions. This historical excursion helps to clear some confusion about the incontinent person which could be caused by the influence of the modern conception of the will. Socrates – Aristotle's approach explains that the incontinent person acts against his knowledge concerning what is best for him. But this evaluation is not given by speculation about what one should do. It is not Kant's opposition of good will and desire of pleasure. Philosophers are investigating a puzzling situation: how is it possible that somebody who evaluates that he would rather do A than B voluntarily does B instead? Hence, although one rather desires to do A, he does B. Socrates – Aristotle's approach elaborates the problem from the side of intellect. It is because Greek philosophy

¹ Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of the will in medieval thought : from Augustine to Buridan* (Leiden – New York: E. J. Brill, 1994).

² Thomas Aquinas, *QD De veritate* q. 17, a. 1.

began with an investigation of the universe and its rules; only late (in the fifth century B.C.) did Greek philosophers turn to social and moral problems; nevertheless they applied rules of the universe to the rational conduct of human beings.³ Hence, Greek philosophy overlooked the problem of the will as rationally appetitive. In contrast Augustine was interested in the question of the will and he did know Aristotle's work. Augustine as well as other Christian philosophers supposed that in corrupted human nature there is still some rightness which is necessary for searching the ultimate goal and on which are based all the other criteria of human being's action. Later Christian philosophers discussed whether the rightness is in the intellect or in the will.

Thus, the historical excursion aims to show the background of Aquinas' approach and his presuppositions about the collaboration of reason and will in every human's action which helps him to answer the question about the incontinent person with help of the concept of conscience.

Socrates – Aristotle's Approach

According to Socrates no one acts against what he/she believes to be best for him/her. If a person's action is immoral it is only due to ignorance because he/she follows what he/she wrongly considers to be the best for him/her.⁴ The human being judges his/her action from the perspective of the action's end because this end is the purpose of actions. Although the human being is able to achieve many ends in his/her life, the main end of his/her entire life could be only one. This end has to be considered the most appropriate for the human being as a human being, which means, to his/her soul. Everyone seeks happiness through his/her actions. Therefore happiness is the ultimate and the best end of all his/her actions. Thus, the misunderstanding of this end has as a consequence wrong or bad actions. The knowledge of this end is wisdom and the soul is strong due to its wisdom and knowledge.⁵ Therefore, to correct immoral actions means to improve the knowledge about that which really makes human beings happy.

Aristotle agreed with Socrates that the main end of a human being is the only one and that is happiness. The other ends are desired only for the sake of this one.⁶ Additionally, he noted that this end is contemplation of God and that this end is indeed reachable by

³ Albrecht Dihle, *The theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*, (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1982), pp. 36–37.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 2 (1145 b 21–30).

⁵ Plato, *Euthydemus*, 281b.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 7 (1097 a 29–b 21).

human beings.⁷ Nevertheless, Aristotle objected to the premise that a human being is able to act against his/her best knowledge when following his/her wrong passions. Aristotle called the human being who acts against his best knowledge incontinent (*akratic*) and he treated this problem in the 7th book of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle accepted Socrates' affirmation that nothing is more powerful than knowledge⁸; that no one follows what he/she determines to be bad for him/her. Nevertheless, knowledge is general in form, while the action is concerned with a particular end. General knowledge has to be applied to a concrete action with the help of a particular evaluation. This particular evaluation has to connect general knowledge with the concrete conclusion. For example, a diabetic knows that sweetness harms his/her health (this general knowledge is based on his/her painful experience). If a diabetic evaluates this cake as sweet, he/she immediately concludes that this cake harms his/her health (and the result of the eating would be painful). Therefore, he/she refuses to eat it. But the judgment of the incontinent diabetic is under pressure due to the appetite. That is why he/she connects his/her particular evaluation of the sweet cake with the other general knowledge. Even though he/she has the right knowledge, he/she connects it with the general knowledge that sweetness as a taste is good, so he/she concludes that the cake is good. The act follows the conclusion. However, after consuming the cake, he/she knows that he/she acted wrongly. Both general and particular judgment were right but the choice of the general knowledge was wrong because he/she should have connected the evaluation of the cake as sweet with the general knowledge that sweetness is unhealthy for him/her being a diabetic. According to Aristotle the incontinent human being holds the general knowledge but in a habitual way, hence this knowledge is not present actually in the process of his evaluation of the cake. The incontinent human being is like a drunken man who has the knowledge but is unable to use it. They both have the knowledge habitually, but not actually. The incontinent person also has habitual knowledge but the intensity of his/her passions prevents him/her from applying it. Nevertheless, the incontinent person is able to change his attitude because he/she has not lost sight of his/her main end, so he/she has not lost his criterion of the right action. For better understanding, Aristotle compared the incontinent with the intemperate person who judges a similar situation in the same way. However, the intemperate person holds only the general knowledge, and he/she is wrongly convinced that it is right for him/her to follow bodily pleasure. Unlike the incontinent person, the intemperate

⁷ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* IX, 3 (1249 b 6–23).

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 2 (1145 b 28).

person has lost sight of his/her ultimate end and therefore he/she is convinced that his/her judging is right. So, it is impossible to persuade him to change his judgment⁹. Therefore, if the weakness of the incontinent person consists in intemperance, then there would not be a difference in the actions of the intemperate and the incontinent person; actions of both will be intemperate. The difference would be only in the knowledge. The incontinent person knows about his/her own weakness. Thus, it is only necessary for him/her to exercise the opposite virtues to be able to use habitual knowledge effectively.

Augustine's Problem of "Two Wills"

Christian thinkers approved of the view of ancient philosophers that everyone desires what he/she knows to be good for him/her.¹⁰ They inquired as to how one could understand that one's act is wrong. How could one be deemed to be immoral if his/her judgment is contaminated by wrong passions? If one has lost the end how then is he/she able to know it?

Moreover Christian thinkers noticed, as Aristotle did, a special split in the conduct of a human being which is expressed in Rom 7:15: "I do not act as I mean to, but I do things that I hate." So they were, of necessity, preoccupied with the question of how it is possible that the same will wants and does not want the same thing at the same time.

Augustine's solution was influenced by his conception of the will. According to Augustine, the supreme end of the human being and that which makes him/her happy is the contemplation of unchangeable eternal truths which are the proper objects of the soul. On the other hand, as far as his/her corporal life is concerned, he/she depends on the sensual world. The soul is obligated, according to eternal truths, to govern the body. Human beings should use things of the sensual world wisely, that is, only in the measure in which they are necessary for the conservation of his/her life. Augustine distinguished a higher and lower reason to explain the ability of the soul to contemplate unchangeable eternal truths and to direct particular acts. The task of the higher reason is the contemplation of eternal truths, and the task of the lower reason is the understanding of and orientation within the sensual world. The task of the lower reason is to direct actions according to the eternal truths which are contemplated by the higher reason. Both reasons are aspects of the same reason; their distinction is only on account of their object.

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 8 (1151 a 7–10).

¹⁰ *QD De veritate* q. 24, a. 8.

Although the reason determines the actions, the will actually decides which one will be chosen. Only free will that has the potential to choose; hence, human will must be free. And will inclines the soul toward a desired object. Thus, the will plays the main role in Augustine's explanation of the right action. As the reason has turned away from eternal truths, the will lost the criterion for the right decision. Moreover, the will is under the governance of sensual reality insofar as the will is attracted by it. An evaluation of sensual reality is based on daily practice which is likely affected by custom and by convenience. Although eternal truths, which illuminate a human soul, keep commanding the soul to clarify itself by turning away from temporary goods to eternal truths, human being is under the governance of sensual passions as a result of original sin, the repetition of sin and the presence of the desirable. The soul is bound to temporary goods and is unable to "hear" a command of the eternal truths. If the soul is turned away from the eternal truths how could it be that the soul can know about eternal truths' command to return to them? How might the soul release itself from captivity to temporary things? There is an immense gap between an evaluation of reality under pressure of the passions or under influence of customs and an evaluation in the light of the eternal truths. Augustine demonstrated it through the example of the children who would prefer the death of a person to the death of a beloved bird¹¹. Augustine's solution is connected with will and this solution explains how it is possible that "I do not act as I mean to, but I do things that I hate." In spite of the fact that the soul has lost its view of eternal truths and its evaluation is affected by customs and passions, the human being still wants to act in the right way. According to Augustine the right will itself is one of the objects (goods) of will. Moreover, the right will, as an object, ranks among the highest objects of the will. He explains that the will wants itself in its rightness more than the other goods because the other goods can be used rightly only by the right will. This rightness is more valuable for the will than the other goods.¹² And which will is right? That will is right which desires a right and honorable life and which desires to achieve the highest wisdom. And it is enough if the will desires only to be right.¹³ Thus, there has to be conserved a sense of rightness inside the human being which is connected with desire, which is an act of the will. After original sin, the will is captivated by the attraction of lower goods and tends toward them; but none of these sensual goods is able to satisfy the will. As long as the will is not content with its willing or does not approve of itself, the will, in a certain way, reflects an insufficiency in its desire for lower

¹¹ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* III, 5, 17 (PL 32, 1279).

¹² Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* I, 13, 28 (PL 32, 1236).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1, 12, 25, (PL 32, 1234).

goods. This means that the will has to possess a right orientation towards the object of its proper desire and this orientation helps the will to evaluate the wrong tendencies. Augustine explains that, despite the losing of the original rightness, there remains an image of the beatitude and a view of wisdom in the human's soul. Therefore, human being is able to see his/her *summum bonum* in the light of this view (this explains why the human being longs for beatitude and wisdom although he/she lacks the wisdom which gives him/her an understanding of the value of the wisdom)¹⁴. According to Augustine, there is only one wisdom in which the human being sees his/her *summum bonum*.¹⁵

The inner conflict of the will, which was described by the tradition as the conflict of "two wills", is produced by the will's auto-reflection when the will is not content with its willing of lower goods. Then the will refutes its willing because it is not what the will really wants.¹⁶ Augustine affirms the human being never lost his power to want his/her *summum bonum*, nevertheless, the human being had lost the force and the ability to do it.¹⁷ Augustine describes this conflict of the wills in his book *Confessions* (8) as a fight of two wills. He underwent this experience during his searching for God.¹⁸ The problem of "two wills" was treated by other authors during the subsequent centuries, often in connection with Rom 7:15. Peter Lombard in his *Sentences* summarizes this tradition. We will see that St. Albert Great, St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas and other philosophers of the 13th century developed this topic from the point of view of their conception of conscience and *synderesis*.

Scholastic Tradition in 12–13th Century

A different approach to the "problem of two wills" and to the rightness of soul in Western philosophy and theology in the 11th century was caused by the discovery of Aristotle's philosophy as well as Arabian commentaries on Aristotle. The role of the reason in the explanation of human being's action gradually increased. In the 12–13th century, the discussion about the problem of "two wills" turned upon whether the rightness, after the original sin, was conserved in the right will or in the right reason. The solution was connected with

¹⁴ Ibid., 2, 9, 26, (PL 32, 1255).

¹⁵ Ibid., 2, 9, 25, (PL 32, 1254).

¹⁶ Eleonore Stump, 'Augustine on Free Will', *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. E. Stump and N. Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 126.

¹⁷ Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum libri duo* 1,1,11 (PL 40,107).

¹⁸ Eric O. Springsted, *The Act of Faith, Christian Faith and the Moral Self*, (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002), pp. 105.

the conception of *synderesis*¹⁹ and conscience.²⁰ For example, Peter of Poitiers²¹ proclaims that *synderesis* is an act of reason, which approves of or rejects inclinations of the will. He designates *synderesis* as a Greek expression for conscience. Consequently, William of Auvergne considers the possibility of the destruction of *synderesis* in the case of mortal sins and heresies.²² Philip the Chancellor and Alexander of Hales made an effort to demonstrate that *synderesis* is an innate habit of the principles, meaning that reason is naturally supplied by the principles which enables reason to judge rightly in human affairs. St. Bonaventure made a distinction between *synderesis* and conscience as two lasting aspects of rightness: conscience as the rightness of judging and *synderesis* is the rightness of will.²³ And finally, St. Albert the Great presented *synderesis* as innate *habits*²⁴ and the conscience as that which makes the decision whether to act or not.²⁵

These latter two authors treated the conception of “*synderesis*” and “conscience” in their Commentaries on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, strictly speaking in the *Distinctio* 24 and 39 of the 2nd book. However, Peter Lombard raises here the question of “two wills”, but he does not write about conscience at all and he only mentions the question of *synderesis* (without using the term “*synderesis*”). He gathers, in his *Sentences*, the views of previous authorities. Thus, Peter Lombard had collated here all views about the problem of the genesis of sin (e.g., if the human being is created by God who created all

¹⁹ The concept “*synderesis*” (it would be better to say *syneidésis* because *synderesis* had arisen from the wrong transcription) was used for the first time by Jerome (347–419) in his commentary on Ezekiel (*Commentaria in Ezechielem prophetam* 1,1, c. 1, PL 25,22b). Jerome explained Ezekiel’s vision of four animals (human, lion, ox, and eagle) in the manner of Plato as the four powers of the soul: reason, irascibility, concupiscence and conscience, although the conception “conscience” did not play a part in Plato’s description of the soul. According to Jerome conscience is a spark of reason called by Greek *synderesis*. *Synderesis* is, according to Jerome, the ability of the soul which was not touched by original sin; the soul is able to judge, what is right or wrong, because of conscience; and so the soul is able to direct the person’s actions.

²⁰ James C. Doig, *Aquinas’s Philosophical Commentary on the Ethics: A Historical Perspective*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2001), pp. 166–169.

²¹ Peter of Poitiers taught in Paris in 1167–1205.

²² James C. Doig, *Aquinas’s Philosophical Commentary on the Ethics: A Historical Perspective*, pp. 162.

²³ Bonaventura, ‘*Breviloquium* 2, c. 11’, *S. Bonaventurae opera omnia*, sv. 5, *Opuscula varia theologica*, ed. PP. Collegii a S. Bonaventura, Quaracchi (Firenze: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1891), pp. 201–291.

²⁴ Albert the Great, ‘*Quaestio de ratione superiori et synderesi*, a. 3’, *Alberti Magni opera omnia*, sv. 25/2, *Quaestiones*, ed. A. Friez, (W. Kübl a H. Anzulewitz, Münster: Aschendorff, 1993).

²⁵ Albert the Great, ‘*Quaestio de conscientia* II, a. 1’, *Alberti Magni opera omnia*, sv. 25/2, *Quaestiones*: “*Primus ergo actus rationis, qui est accipere particulare sub universali, non est conscientia, sed secundus, qui est decernere aliquid faciendum in particulari propter decretum synderesis in universali.*”

things to be right, including the human being, he/she has to be given the capacity of right will; consequently it must be asked: how is it possible for him to commit sin?)²⁶ and the problem of the will which is supposed to desire good but often wants that which is bad. Lombard's solution of the problem is based on Augustine's tradition of "two wills".²⁷ Aquinas, linked with this tradition, treats conscience and *synderesis*, as did his contemporaries, in his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. He kept the same structure as his contemporaries (for ex. Albert Great and Bonaventure). At the beginning, he treats *synderesis*, then Augustine's higher and lower reason, and finally, there is an explanation of conscience. We have to notice that Aquinas keeps this structure in all his questions about conscience.²⁸ So, Aquinas' conception of "conscience" must be considered with the background of the above mentioned discussions.

Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas agrees with the previous tradition that the human being, despite the destruction caused by original sin, still has to have the possibility of reaching his/her end. However, he underlines, under the influence of Aristotle and in spite of the importance of the will in the Augustinian tradition, the central role of reason. This does not mean that Thomas diminished the role of the will. Both the will and the reason are the highest powers of the soul and both govern every human's action. Will is still the primary mover of all the other human powers and abilities, including reason. And will itself is moved by its own end, which is goodness.

a) The concept of the will

Aquinas links his explanation of the intellect's and the will's collaboration to Aristotelian and Augustinian tradition. Aquinas followed previous tradition's reference to the point of view that every human action tends to an end which is a good for this act. The actions are caused by inclinations of the appetitive faculties. The inclinations are organized by the natural order. Therefore, human beings are naturally inclined to the goods, which human being shares with all beings and which serve to conserve their lives. Then, human being is inclined to these goods, which he/she shares with animals and which are conducive to the making of a family, for example living with a partner

²⁶ Peter Lombard, *Liber Sententiarum* II, d. 24, PL 192, 701–706.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, d. 39, PL 192, 745–747.

²⁸ *QD De veritate*, q. 15 - q. 17; *STh* I, q. 79, a. 9, a. 12–13.

or rearing children. A human being naturally evaluates higher the good which he/she shares with animals than those which he/she shares with all beings. Further, a human being evaluates as lower the goods, which he/she shares with animals than the goods, which properly belong to him/her as a human being, namely justice, cognition of the truth, etc.²⁹ It is natural to subordinate the lower good to the higher. Hence, all the ends of particular actions could be coordinated in a way that all human acts could lead to the supreme end. This end is the object of the will as the rational appetitive faculty. There might be only one supreme end. Because happiness is always desirable for itself and never for another end, happiness is a perfect and ultimate end of human being.³⁰ Other particular goods, the will desires on account of happiness, and they are useful as means for the sake of the happiness. Thus, the will is free from the particular goods apprehended in this or that thing because things are both good and useful only in relation to the ultimate and supreme end.

b) The concept of the reason

The will is a motor for all the soul's powers but the will also has to be moved; the will is moved by what is apprehended as a good, and this apprehension is the task of reason. The intellect forms a *species* of a thing under influence of the thing. The intellect presents the goodness of the knowing thing to the will. Nevertheless, the will does not want the *species* of the thing as it is in the intellect: the will wants the thing in its own act of being. If we are freezing, we are not satisfied by knowing what fire is we want the warmth of fire itself. The will desires not a presentation of the thing but the thing itself. How is the will able to surpass the thing's presentation and how does it want the thing in its being? It is because there is connaturality between all our appetites and their ends, as it was mentioned above. The will is perfected by the being (*esse*) of things inasmuch as things are its goal, in contrast to reason, which is perfected by the *species* of things.³¹ Moreover, reason, which evaluates all things, is able to coordinate the means and the instrumental goods as far as these goods lead to the end.

The cooperation between reason and will is described by St. Thomas in terms of intention. Will desires its own end as well as the other things for the sake of this end. Will desires the other things in the intention toward this end, and reason evaluates these things as

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I-II, q. 94, a 2.

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lb. 1, lc. 9.

³¹ *QD De veritate*, q. 21, a. 1.

good or useful for the sake of this end. The intention is, therefore, the object of will, but it is reason which determines and chooses the things which serve for achieving this end.³² Thus, although reason causes any movement of the will, it is not in the Kantian sense. Reason does not move the will through a command; it moves the will through a representation of the good. Since everything may be a means on the way to the supreme end, everything may participate in the goodness of the supreme end. On the way to the supreme end, it is impossible to consider any things as totally negative. Aquinas often uses the example of health. If a human being desires health, then he/she would take advantage of bodily exercise, a healthy diet and a healthy regimen with the intention towards health. Inasmuch as a human being takes pleasure in health and in being healthy, he/she takes pleasure in bodily exercise, a healthy diet, and a healthy regimen and he/she evaluates them immediately as good for him/her, because he/she experiences healthiness through these means. Of course, if the human being is ill then a cure could be painful at first. It is only because of illness that the healthy diet or regimen (etc.) seems to be negative. Human being desires other things for the sake of the last end in a way similar to his/her desire for a bodily exercise, a healthy diet and a healthy regimen, for the sake of the health itself. Inasmuch as the will wills its own end, happiness, the will also desires the others things, and the will experiences in this things happiness. Therefore, a virtuous man takes pleasure in all actions which point to his end, while a man who is short of virtue experiences more difficulty or more pain in taking these actions. Virtuous man evaluates everything rightly for the sake of a certain co-naturalness (*connaturalitas*) with his needs and the evaluation of these goods is given on the basis of the natural inclinations of the appetitive faculties. So, everything is good and enjoyable for a virtuous human being, inasmuch as it leads to the ultimate end.

According to Aquinas, the will always follows only what reason judges to be good. Thus, a misunderstanding of the end could be given only by reason. A clue to the misunderstanding lies in the connection of the reason and the sensual faculties: An object of reason is a general concept. Nevertheless, the action is about a concrete thing and thus, the evaluation of reason must be about a concrete thing. Therefore, the reason's evaluation has to be connected with a thing through the sense, *Vis cogitativa* (the same sense in animals is called *vis aestimativa*). With its help, animals are able to evaluate things as useful, pleasant, dangerous, unpleasant, etc., whereas human beings evaluate things as useful, pleasant, good, etc., with help of reason). The *vis cogitativa* works with phantasms in which the human being

³² *QD De veritate*, q. 22, a. 12.

conserves all the precedent experience. For that reason, bad habits or customs might strongly influence the reason's evaluation of things.³³

Since it is reason which evaluates things as good, useful or bad, and this judgment of reason is followed by the movement of will, Aquinas could not accept Augustine's point of view that the will would follow what is judged to be bad. The will never follows what reason understands as bad. So, the problem of two wills must be explicated from the point of view of reason. Reason errs either in knowledge of the end or in the evaluation of the means.

Does practical reason err in the knowledge of the end?

Reason, which evaluates things and actions from the point of view of the ultimate end, is called practical. Although Aquinas sometimes compared its operations to those of speculative reason, there are some differences between them. The object of speculative reason is truth, while the object of practical reason is the rightness of the action. Speculative reason firstly apprehends the being (*ens*), and it shapes the other concepts within the framework of being. Speculative reason is perfected by science and addresses itself to the necessary affirmations. Practical reason firstly apprehends goodness and it evaluates things and actions in the framework of goodness. Practical reason is perfected by prudence in regard to contingent things. According to St. Thomas, as a follower of Aristotle, every reality in its nature is created in such way as to be able to fulfill its own purpose³⁴. As speculative reason is supplied with the habit of the first principles (e.g., – the whole is bigger than its parts) which makes the reason able to judge rightly and so attend to the truth, so the practical reason has to be supplied with the habit of first principles which makes the reason able to judge rightly in regard its operations. This means that practical reason must be supplied by the most common criterion which is the foundation of all other evaluations of things. This natural habit is just the *synderesis*, and its principle can be expressed by that word (Aquinas offered more expressions: “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided”)³⁵. Nevertheless, this principle is not any command (as is for example Kant's categorical imperative). This principle grounds the spontaneous judgment of the practical reason to follow the good as soon as practical reason has apprehended the good. The will is always free to follow a judgment based on this principle. Once a hungry man sees an apple he knows that he would like to eat it, but it does not mean that he takes it.

³³ *STh* I-II, q. 72, a. 7, ad 2; *STh* I-II, q. 31 a. 7.

³⁴ *QD De veritate*, q. 15, a. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, q. 16, a. 2.

To summarize, *synderesis* is an innate habit of practical reason. *Synderesis* supplies practical reason with the first principles of judging. *Synderesis* might be developed by exercise into virtue: prudence. Prudence is based on *synderesis* in a similar way as sciences are based on the first principles of speculative reason. Prudence leads the others virtues because practical reason through prudence judges all actions and things to be good or bad according to the natural order, as was mentioned above. In this way *synderesis* is developed in the natural law which determines the rightness of the person's operation.

Does practical reason err in the evaluation of the means?

If the human being had erred in the knowledge of the ultimate end, the human being would have lost his/her criterion of acting (as Aristotle had taught), and evermore the human being would not have known about his/her wrongness and he/she would have done what he/she would wrongly consider to be the best for him/her. Due to *synderesis* (as Aquinas teaches) human being cannot completely lose his/her last end. So, human being always follows in some way what makes him/her happy. Thus, the split could be only on the part of the reason which evaluates the means. In this case, reason compares the individual object of the various human needs and tendencies and this evaluation could be influenced by the passions of the lower tendencies because of *vis cogitativa*. The human being is corrupted in the appetitive faculty and his/her right evaluation is drawn away to the contrary by reason of the passion. If the human being gives priority to the lower things over the higher, it is because he/she must apprehend it as higher and because his/her evaluation is perverted.³⁶ It could be caused by reason of passion, or by a wrong understanding, or by reason of custom.³⁷ Aquinas follows Aristotle in that there is only one way to restore the ability to judge rightly: to exercise the corresponding virtue until the human being can operate with ease and with pleasure, in other words, naturally.

Conscience and incontinent person

To be able to correct one's own conduct and to exercise right virtues, one needs first of all to get a criterion which helps him/her to reveal his/her wrong judgment. These means are, according to Aquinas, *synderesis* and conscience. This is the reason why Aquinas put his

³⁶ *STh* I-II, q. 31, a. 7.

³⁷ *STh*. I-II, q. 94, a. 4.

treatise on conscience and on *synderesis* in the place where Lombard described the means which the human being possesses for right action (*Distinctio* 24) without mentioning *synderesis* and conscience. The conscience is a help for "seeing" the sin. Aquinas defines conscience as "application of knowledge to an action".³⁸ This application is made by the practical reason, and could be in some way compared with a syllogism of speculative reason. In the case of speculative reason, the conclusion of a syllogism follows from the well-known general affirmation, which is contracted by the well-known and less general affirmation (e.g., every human being is mortal; Socrates is human; hence, Socrates is mortal). The most general judgments of speculative reason, which are the bases for all further syllogisms, are grounded on the first principles of speculative reason. Similarly, in the case of practical reason, the final evaluation results from the general judgments grounded on the general principles of *synderesis*, and from the judgment of a particular situation (eating sweets is harmful to me as diabetic; this cake is sweet, and I am diabetic; thus, this cake is harmful to me). As the rightness of syllogism is guaranteed by the habit of first principles in speculative matters, so it is with *synderesis* in practical matters. Although Aquinas proclaimed the process of evaluation of the practical reason to be similar to the syllogism, there is a difference. Judgment of speculative reason is logically deduced from two known judgments. In the case of practical reason, it is better to say that the practical reason judges the concrete case in the light of the *synderesis* or the natural law or a general knowledge of the end.³⁹ To sum up, in the case of practical matters, practical reason judges things aright on account of connaturality with them.⁴⁰ The judgments given only on the level of speculation do not enter directly into the evaluation until it becomes connatural through meditation⁴¹ and exercise of virtues. When a human being considers how he/she *should* act in his/her particular circumstances (in the moral sense), a human being generalizes his/her particular case. Because a human being considers how to act in his/her cases generally, it means that a human being is speculating and it is a task of the speculative

³⁸ *QD De veritate*, q. 17, a. 1: "Nomen enim conscientiae significat applicationem scientiae ad aliquid, unde conscire dicitur quasi simul scire."

³⁹ Ignacius T. Eschmann, *The Ethics of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, (Toronto-Ontario-Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), pp. 186–188; Pauline Westerman, *The Disintegration of Natural Law Theory*, (Leiden-New York-Köln: E. J. Brill 1998), pp. 29.

⁴⁰ *STh.* I-II, q. 58, a. 5; Rafael T. Caldera, *Le jugement par inclination chez Saint T. Aquinas*, (Paris: Librairie Philosophique, 1980), pp. 65.

⁴¹ *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lb. 7, lc. 3: "ad hoc enim requiritur quod illa quae homo audit fiant ei quasi connaturalia, propter perfectam impressionem ipsorum intellectui, ad quod homo indiget tempore in quo intellectus per multiplices meditationes firmetur in eo quod accipit."

reason.⁴² And it might follow that he/she does not accept it for her/his particular case. For example, smokers are not continent but intemperate in most cases. The smoker knows the threat of the consequences but he/she does not accept to be it his/her case. It does not help to argue with him/her (he/she knows it) but it helps to repeat how the smoking is dangerous. In this way, the smoker is able to accept the general knowledge to his/her case and to decide that he/she does not want to smoke. The smoker who unsuccessfully fights with smoking could be called incontinent.

To sum up, a human being judges the thing to be good or bad in regard to his/her intention to fulfill his/her tendencies and needs. These evaluations are based on the grounds of the tendency of will towards human being's last end, which is always understood under specific circumstances of the concrete historical, social and personal conditions.⁴³ This means that a human being evaluates the things in regard to how he/she understands himself/herself, the world, a particular situation, etc. This understanding might be wrong and never would be perfect in any case, but *synderesis* guarantees that the ultimate end could never be totally lost. The human being is able to understand his most profound desire and find out his own end, and from this point of view, he/she is able to evaluate the goodness and usefulness of individual realities as the means to the end, in the context of his/her specific circumstances.

The reason why Aquinas uses the likeness of evaluation's process of the practical reason to the speculative syllogism is that it enables him to explain the possibility of two different conclusions of practical reason operating at the same time. He treats this case in his question *De conscientia* in *QD De Veritate*.⁴⁴ He explains the possibilities of two different "syllogisms" of practical reason. Both "syllogisms" involve the application of *synderesis* to the same evaluation of the concrete situation. Aquinas' example of evaluation of a concrete situation is "this married woman is desirable"⁴⁵. Nevertheless, while the one "syllogism" is made by reason itself, the other one might be subject to the influence of momentary passions, either concupiscence or anger. This syllogism, made by reason without interference of passion, is called conscience. This one, which is influenced by passions,

⁴² This is also why the kind of ethic judgment differs from the kind of judgment that would be derived solely from a particular or concrete situation. The judgments of ethic belong to the speculative science while the judgment as to matters of conduct is *connaturalis*.

⁴³ *QD De veritate*, q. 17, a. 2, ad 2: "Vel dicendum quod cum dico conscientiam non implico scientiam solummodo stricte acceptam prout est tantum verorum, sed scientiam largo modo acceptam pro quacumque notitia, secundum quod omne quod novimus, communi usu loquendi scire dicimur."

⁴⁴ *QD De Veritate*, q. 17, a. 1, ad 4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; Thomas Aquinas, *QD De malo*, q. 3 a. 9, ad 7.

is called the *liberum arbitrium* (free judgment). Aquinas explains that this “syllogism” is made in collaboration between the reason and the will and the will is connected with passions. The judgment of conscience is shaped only by reason, but the act of the *liberum arbitrium* is under the influence of the desirable things, which is present in the moment of the decision. So if the influence of the desirable thing is not under the control of virtue's power, it can affect the human's cognitive powers. And this is exactly the case of Aristotle's incontinent person, who during an attack of passion “forgets” his original intention, although he/she knows it before and after this attack. Thus, incontinent man generally knows that sleeping with married women is fornication, which leaves him unhappy with consequences. And he knows that this desirable woman is married, hence sleeping with this woman is fornication and leaves him unhappy with consequences. Nevertheless, under momentary passion, he connects the evaluation of the concrete situation “this married woman is desirable” with the general judgment “everything desirable should be enjoyed” and thus, he enjoys. Nevertheless, Aquinas' point of view is stronger in that his incontinent person has two syllogisms⁴⁶. This means that the incontinent person does not forget the general knowledge and the incontinent person knows what he/she should do in this situation, what he/she really desires. However, this application of knowledge is almost “forgotten” in the moment of decision. The goodness of the present thing is more vivid, because of the precedent experiences, than the remote end, which is present in the intention.

In summary, there can be only two cases concerning the judgments of conscience and *liberum arbitrium*. Either the judgment of *liberum arbitrium* is the same as the judgment of conscience, or there is a discrepancy between both judgments. In the first case, it is not useful to speak about conscience, because there is only the judgment of reason which a person follows without hesitation. However, when there is a discrepancy inside in the reason it is useful to discern both judgments of reason, and then, we call the one conscience and the other the *liberum arbitrium*.

To sum up, Aquinas affirms that the reason as conscience is the human being's highest criterion for conduct, although the conscience could be wrong in respect to wrong knowing. Aquinas maintained his position in contrast to his teacher St. Albert the Great who had proclaimed that it is impossible to act against the authority of Commandments and of superiors.⁴⁷ According to Aquinas, the ultimate end of the human being is present as the most profound desire and only his/her reason can discover the way to its fulfillment.

⁴⁶ *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lb. 7, lc. 3.

⁴⁷ *QD De veritate*, q. 17, a. 4.

Conclusion

Aquinas' conception of conscience was the culmination of all preceding traditions. St. Thomas Aquinas links back to the Socratic-Aristotelian line, but he also makes a connection with the Augustinian tradition.

As we have seen, Aquinas' conception of conscience and *synderesis* links to the Augustinian problem of the two wills through his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (*Distinctio 24* and *39* of the 2nd book). Hence, conscience helps him to solve this problem: how is it possible that one wants to do what one does not want to do? Aquinas rejects the possibility of the two wills and solves Augustine's problem with differentiation of the reason's actions. Thus, he correlates Augustine's problem of "the two wills" with Aristotle's problem of the incontinent man. Additionally, Augustine's eternal truths, which illuminate higher reason, are the same as Aquinas' natural law given by *synderesis*. Aquinas accepts that if the human being acts deliberately then he/she acts in accordance with higher reason because the task of higher reason is the ultimate end.⁴⁸ This means that a human being acts in accord with his/her conscience. Aquinas also connects Augustine's higher reason with Aristotle's knowledge of the last end in his treatise about the conscience.⁴⁹

Aquinas also has a link to preceding Christian tradition which holds that, in spite of human corruption caused by original sin, there is a remainder of original rightness. According to Aquinas, rightness is in reason as an innate habit – it is the habit of the first principles of speculative reason and of *synderesis*, the habit of practical reason.

Nevertheless, Aquinas more than his predecessors faithfully follows Socrates-Aristotle's line. Aquinas, as Socrates did, put emphasis on the fact that the human being does what he/she knows as best for him/her. Therefore, it is impossible that the human being would want what he/she does not want. In the case of Aristotle's incontinent man, whom he mentioned,⁵⁰ the original intention is "forgotten" for some time under vivid affection of the thing apprehended. However, because the reason is not completely under the influence of this affection, after ceasing of influence of passion, the reason is able to give the right judgment, and this act of reason is known as conscience. R. Saarinen in his book⁵¹ pointed out that Aquinas in *STh* I-II,

⁴⁸ *QD De veritate*, q. 15, a. 3: "Et inde est quod consensus in actum attribuitur rationi superiori, quae finem ultimum inspicit."

⁴⁹ *QD De veritate*, q. 15, a. 3.

⁵⁰ *QD De veritate*, q. 17, a. 4: "Et haec solutio potest accipi ex verbis Philosophi in VII Ethicorum ubi quasi eandem quaestionem quaerit, utrum scilicet dicendus sit incontinens qui abscedit a ratione recta solum vel qui abscedit etiam a falsa;".

⁵¹ Risto Saarinen, *Weakness of the will in medieval thought : from Augustine to Buridan*, pp. 119.

q. 77, a. 2 and *QD De malo* q. 3, a. 9 summarized his commentary on Aristotle's incontinent man. If we compare these articles with the answer in question *De conscientia*⁵² we can see that Aquinas in his answer only named (*conscientia, liberum arbitrium*) two different judgments considered in Saarinen's mentioned book. Moreover, in *QD De malo* q.3, a.9 ad7, Aquinas used the same example as in the paper *De conscientia*⁵³, when incontinent man knows that this fornication is prohibited but he acts on it under the influence of passion⁵⁴. Thomas Aquinas affirmed that in regard to an action, there could be only one intention which is followed.⁵⁵ Therefore, once the passions prevail, they influence the evaluation and the incontinent person is unable to hear the "voice of conscience". Once the passions get stronger, the incontinent person loses his/her freedom not to act. The intention of the remote end may be very weak when confronted with the temptation of pleasure which has already been experienced in the past. In spite of the fact that a diabetic desires to be healthy, the taste of sweet is so vivid in his/her memory that he/she "forgets" his/her original intention. It does not mean that the incontinent person loses absolutely his/her freedom not to act. The incontinent person has not lost the criterion – the supreme end. Thus one is able to make weaker the intention of forbidden pleasure (by exercising the opposite virtue or avoiding the "dangerous" situation) or to make stronger the desire for the goal by its meditation. Aquinas differs from Aristotle's conception of incontinent man in the point that nobody can be completely lost. In spite of the fact that after more repetitions of actions, experiences become customs or habits and the apprehension of the realities would be influenced by these customs and habits and thus conscience would be wrong, the *synderesis* is never extinguished, and therefore nobody could be hopelessly adrift.

Hence, Aquinas' whole concept of conscience as a solution of the problem of the incontinent person is based on a presupposition of the rightness of the reason.

It is necessary to notice that a certain confusion, which is around the incontinent person, might be caused by different conceptions of the will and of the collaboration of the will with reason. There is Kant's Copernican Revolution which demands the good will as the highest good – higher than happiness.⁵⁶ Kant analyzes which will

⁵² *QD De veritate*, q. 17, a. 1, ad 4.

⁵³ *QD De veritate*, q. 17, a. 1, ad 4.

⁵⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *QD De malo*, q. 3 a. 9, ad 7.

⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *QD De malo*, q. 3 a. 9.

⁵⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* I, 369: "While such a will may not indeed be the sole and complete good, it must, nevertheless, be the highest good and condition of all the rest, even of the desire for happiness." (transl. by James W. Ellington).

could be called “good” and demonstrates that will which is determined only by a duty without influence of sensual inclination might be called “good”. Such duty might be given only by reason as a pure form – as a Categorical Imperative. Therefore, moral action is determined by the Categorical Imperative, while immoral action follows pleasure. Kant opened a gap between pleasure and duty. Thus, there are explanations of incontinent action as gaps between motivation (what one wants) and evaluation (what one judge to be good)⁵⁷ or between reason and desire⁵⁸. Aquinas supposition of the reason's rightness is also based on an analysis of the will. But he defines the will as a rational appetite. As an appetite, the will inclines to its goal – it is the supreme end of human beings. And because no desire can be vain and the will follows a good manifested by reason, reason has to be supplied by the innate habit (*synderesis*) which makes reason capable to do it. However, Kant demands that the will and reason be autonomous, without any supposition of goal which would determine them from outside. However, for example E. Levinas is also able to demonstrate that there is a desire in human being which could not be satisfied by anything from his/her world and which indicates that autonomy has to be surpassed by the Other.⁵⁹ A bigger problem might be with the presupposition about reason's innate habit as a necessary means for reaching of the supreme end. Followers of Hume's conception of the will (E. Dewey, E. Mach, Michael Smith, S. Blackburn etc.) would refuse the view that reason has ability to guide the will. Hume negates any influence of reason on will.⁶⁰ On the contrary, he affirms that reason is a slave of passions.

It is impossible to prove reason's rightness, because it is the point of departure. If there is a doubt about the first principles of speculative reason, it is impossible to discuss this doubt because every discussion is based on the first principles. If there is a doubt about the *synderesis* of practical reason, it is vain to carry on any discussion about moral conduct because human being would have lost any criterion for right actions.

We conclude that the conscience signifies the power of human reason whereby one can follow one's own way independently, whatever the circumstance (either personal or historical). And so conscience is the highest criterion of a person's action. Nevertheless, conscience can be wrong (very probably) and so the human

⁵⁷ Serbic Tenenbaum, “The Judgment of a Weak Will”, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LIX, No. 4, December 1999.

⁵⁸ Kirk Robinson, “Reason, Desire, and Weakness of Will”, in: *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 28, No. 4, October 1991.

⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*, I, 1.

⁶⁰ David Hume, *Treatise*, II, III, 1.

being is obliged to keep on examining his/her intention (especially in circumstances where he/she disapproves of the command of his superior).

Martina Stepinova OP, PhD
Department of Philosophy
CMTF University of Olomouc
Universitni 22
Olomouc
CZ 771 11
E-mail: mrtnst@volny.cz