

Aquinas on Intellect, Will, and Faith

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The acquisition of faith in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas is a process best understood in terms of the relationship between the human intellect and the will. Recent work in Aquinas's religious epistemology has led some scholars to categorize Aquinas as a sort of volitionalist, i.e., one who holds that our personal beliefs can be changed through acts of the will or that "willing" beliefs is possible. Others have argued against this interpretation by claiming that any volitional theory of belief leads to both logical and phenomenological problems and that such a method of acquiring beliefs is epistemically irresponsible. In this paper I will seek to answer the following questions: What role, according to Aquinas, does the will play in the acquisition of faith? and Is Aquinas correct in believing that agents can will to believe certain propositions? In answering these questions, I shall argue that there is indeed a place for the will in our assent to certain propositions or beliefs, and that the will plays a crucial role in acquiring Christian faith. Finally, I will defend Aquinas's volitionalism against objections.

I. The Relationship between the Intellect and the Will

In order to arrive at a satisfactory answer to the above questions, it will prove beneficial to provide a general explanation of the relationship

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between the intellect and the will in Aquinas's philosophy. For Aquinas, the intellect and the will are the two great powers of the mind.¹ The intellect, simply put, is the capacity for understanding and thought, or a power of apprehension and knowing. The intellect is "the rational agent's cognitive power."² On the other hand, the will is "an innate positive inclination towards the good. It is that aspect of a rational agent which disposes her to pursue what she considers good."³ Thus, the will can be understood as a natural appetite or inclination for goodness. The goodness that the will seeks is not any particular good thing, but rather goodness in general. The act of determining which particular good to seek is the job of the intellect, which produces evaluative judgments about certain things, events, or states of affairs, and then presents these to the will as good. After particular objects have been presented to the will as good, the will, in turn, seeks these objects because the will is a natural appetite for the good. So with regard to particulars that are judged to be good, "the will is the power to have wants which only the intellect can frame."⁴ In this sense, the intellect does not move the will as an efficient cause, but rather as a final cause, since whatever is perceived by the intellect as good moves the will as an end.⁵

Nevertheless, Aquinas also holds that the will can move the intellect by efficient causation.⁶ Each power of the soul is basically a disposition to be moved by a certain group of objects. For example, the power of sensory appetite is the inclination to seek pleasure and avoid pain; the power of hearing is an inclination to be affected or moved by sounds; and the intellect is an inclination towards knowledge or truth. Whenever a particular power of the soul is moved, the object that moves the power must neces-

¹ It should be noted that for Aquinas the intellect and the will are not entirely distinct entities. As Claudia Eisen-Murphy states, "The only real agent, Aquinas recognizes, is the whole agent." See Eisen-Murphy 575.

² Eisen-Murphy 576.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kenny 59.

⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (hereafter *STh*), I, q. 82, a. 4, c.

⁶ See Ibid.

sarily be a good that is proper to that power. In other words, to be a certain power's good, an object must belong to the set of things that naturally move that power. In explaining how the will can be said to move the intellect, Aquinas states, "[W]herever we have order among a number of active powers, that power which regards the universal end moves the powers which regard particular ends."⁷ Since the will is a disposition to be moved towards the universal good, whereas other powers are only moved towards particular goods, the will can, in some instances, move the other powers of the soul.

In most cases, there is no need for the will to move the other powers of the soul because the other powers are usually moved by their proper objects. When the power of sight is moved by light and color, the will plays no part in this movement because the power's proper object (light or color) is alone sufficient to move the power. Yet Aquinas believes that there are cases in which the object of the power is not sufficient to move the power: "The sufficient mover of a power is none but that object that in every respect presents the aspect of the mover of that power. If, on the other hand, it is lacking in any respect, it will not move of necessity."⁸ Aquinas provides an example of this in which the sight is confronted with an object of sight that is not completely colored; even though the object of sight is part of the class of things that move the power of sight, it is possible that an agent will only look at the part of the object that is not colored, and then the agent will not see the object.⁹ When such a situation occurs in which a power's proper good is not sufficient to move the power, "the will can intervene by inclining to the proper good of the power as a particular good."¹⁰ When an agent cannot hear a particular sound because of faintness or distance, a volition causes the agent to strain or concentrate, or when an agent cannot see something because of darkness, the will intervenes and a volition causes the agent to squint. It must

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *STh* I-II, q. 10, a. 2.

⁹ See Ibid.

¹⁰ Eisen-Murphy 577.

be noted, however, that while the will can command the intellect to the exercise of its act, it cannot lead the intellect to form specific judgments about specific objects. For instance, the will cannot cause the power of sight to see a color that is not actually present. The will can only command a power to perform certain kinds of acts in pursuit of the power's proper object (such as truth in the case of the intellect).¹¹

II. Aquinas's Volitionalism

Now that we have examined the relationship between the intellect and the will, we are in a position to see how these two powers interact in the formation of beliefs. That Aquinas thinks acts of coming to believe may be voluntary can be shown by his use of the verb 'to believe': "As Aquinas uses it, 'to believe' (*credere*) designates an intellectual act of assent to a proposition where (a) the assent is caused not by the evidentness of the object itself but by a volition, and (b) the assent is firm and unwavering."¹² According to this definition all beliefs are voluntary, a claim which can be clarified by contrasting a belief with an act of non-voluntary intellectual assent. Aquinas differentiates between voluntary and non-voluntary acts of intellectual assent in the following passage:

If, therefore, that which the reason apprehends is such that it naturally assents thereto, e.g. the first principles, it is not in our power to assent or dissent to the like: assent follows naturally, and consequently, properly speaking, is not subject to our command. But some things which are apprehended do not convince the intellect to such an extent as not to leave it free to assent or dissent, or at least suspend its assent or dissent, on account of some cause or other; and in such things assent or dissent is in our power, and is subject to our command.¹³

¹¹ See Eisen-Murphy 575-579.

¹² *Ibid.*, 579. See also *Quaestiones de veritate* (QDV) q. 14, a. 1, c.

¹³ *STh* I-II, q. 17, a. 6, c.

As Aquinas states, there are certain propositions to which the intellect “naturally assents” and to which the intellect is not free to dissent. The intellect has been created in such a way that propositions of a certain kind or structure automatically compel its assent. Aquinas provides two examples of propositions to which the intellect cannot refrain from assenting. The first example is given in the passage quoted above: propositions involving self-evident first principles.¹⁴ The second example occurs when the intellect uses first principles as premises in constructing a valid demonstrative argument in support of a proposition.¹⁵ In either case, an agent’s belief is not voluntary since assent is compelled by the evidentness of the first principles.

At this point it may be objected that there are a number of non-necessary propositions that still compel our assent. For example, the proposition ‘the sun is shining today’ is neither a self-evident first principle nor an analytic truth, yet I seem compelled to assent to it if the sun is indeed shining. Aquinas’s reply to this objection can be found in his notion of necessity. Aquinas holds that propositions referring to states of affairs or events in the past or present are necessarily true. Thus, both propositions involving first principles and those involving accurate representations of actual states of affairs or events are believed non-voluntarily.¹⁶

Despite our focus up to this point on involuntary belief, it is *voluntary* belief that is of the most importance in explaining Aquinas’s voluntarism. According to Aquinas scholar Claudia Eisen-Murphy, a belief *b* is voluntary “if and only if when the agent came to believe *b*, she could have done otherwise.”¹⁷ An agent could have done otherwise if she could have disbelieved *b* or if she could have suspended judgment about *b*. Even though an agent usually assents to a proposition on the basis of its apparent truth or on the basis of evidence, Aquinas nevertheless believes the agent’s

¹⁴ Examples of such first principles could be the three basic laws of logic: The Law of Identity, The Law of Non-Contradiction, and The Law of Excluded Middle.

¹⁵ See *STh* II-II, q. 1, a. 4, c.

¹⁶ See Eisen-Murphy 583.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 585.

freedom to withhold assent or to dissent from the proposition is preserved. In speaking of voluntary assent, he states:

Now, that the will moves the intellect to assent, may be due to two causes. First, through the will being directed to the good, and in this way, to believe is a praiseworthy action. Secondly, because the intellect is convinced that it ought to believe what is said, though that conviction is not based on objective evidence.¹⁸

Thus, voluntary assent can come about either (1) because the will is inclined towards some good to which belief is a means, or (2) because the intellect judges the truth of the proposition to be very likely, although the available evidence is not strong enough to compel assent. In either case, as Aquinas points out, the will is the force behind the intellectual assent. It is this claim—that the will plays a role in belief acquisition—that identifies Aquinas as an advocate of volitionalism.

The next step in our discussion of Aquinas's volitionalism is to determine exactly what *kind* of volitionalist Aquinas is. Volitionalism, in its most extreme form, holds that we can get ourselves to believe any proposition by merely “willing” to do so. However, as we have seen, the will only plays a part in *some* of our belief forming processes, and even then the will is not the only power involved. Indeed, Aquinas's thought can be understood as advocating a brand of volitionalism much weaker than the extreme form, and, as we shall discuss now, less direct.

Aquinas asserts that the will is inclined towards the general good and that the will can intervene or “fill the gap” when the object of the intellect is not sufficient to compel assent. One way in which this happens is that the will can lead the intellect to assent to a certain proposition “because it perceives assent to this proposition as a means of acquiring a true belief, and therefore as a good.”¹⁹ Irrespective of the will's inclination towards the good represented by the proposition, the agent still remains

¹⁸ STh II-II, q. 5, a. 2, c.

¹⁹ Eisen-Murphy 589.

free to assent or dissent from the proposition. Assent is therefore still a choice the agent makes, and thus it can be said in this case that the belief is voluntary. However, the question of exactly *how* the will intervenes remains. In order for the will to move the intellect to assent, and in order to preserve the truth basis of an agent's set of beliefs, the will must get the intellect to somehow judge that the proposition in question is more likely to be true than not. Consequently, the will gets the intellect to arrive at the likely truth of the proposition by working through other acts of the intellect, such as focusing on one kind of evidence over another, paying attention to certain kinds of facts and disregarding others, or giving more weight to some pieces of the evidence and less to others. In doing so, the will gets the intellect to judge that the proposition is most likely true and thus the will is able to command the intellect to assent. From this perspective, Aquinas can be seen as advancing a type of *indirect* volitionalism.

To further qualify Aquinas's volitionalism, we shall make use of the following schema devised by Louis Pojman in *The Logic of Subjectivity*:

	<u>Direct</u>	<u>Indirect</u>
<u>Descriptive</u>	1. I will to believe <i>p</i> , and, by doing so, acquire the belief that- <i>p</i> directly.	2. I will certain actions and life policies, and these cause the beliefs I eventually acquire.
<u>Prescriptive</u>	3. I ought to will to acquire a belief that- <i>p</i> by directly willing to do so.	4. I ought to set myself a specific course of action in order to acquire a specific belief, <i>p</i> , which the evidence alone does not cause. ²⁰

²⁰ Pojman 105.

Pojman notes that one could be a descriptivist without being a prescriptivist; that is, one might believe that it is possible to attain beliefs directly through willing to do so, but that we ought not attain them in that way. On the other hand, it is not possible to be a prescriptivist without being a descriptivist; that is, if one is to have some duty to acquire beliefs by willing to do so, then it must be possible for one to attain beliefs in such a way.²¹

Aquinas, I believe, can best be classified as an indirect descriptive volitionalist. Indirect because, as we saw earlier, the will plays an indirect role in belief formation, and descriptive rather than prescriptive because an agent does not consciously set out to acquire beliefs through the will; the intervention of the will is simply a natural functioning of the agent's power, which automatically follows its innate inclination towards the good.

III. Volitionalism and Faith

Not only does the will play an important role in the acquisition of ordinary beliefs, but Aquinas also believes that the will is essential to faith. The proper object of faith is God himself, but since human knowers, in this life, cannot comprehend God directly or immediately, the object of faith is not God but propositions about him.²² Assent to the propositions of faith (such as the proposition 'God exists') is a case in which the assent is not generated by the intellect's being sufficiently moved by its object. The assent of faith is produced by the will being moved sufficiently by the object of faith and therefore the intellect is brought to assent. Faith, however, is different from opinion. Opinion also results from the will moving the intellect to assent, but in the case of opinion, the agent recognizes that there is evidence both for and against the proposition and hence the agent must admit that the knowledge is not

²¹ See *ibid.*

²² See *STh* II-II, q. 1, a. 2

completely certain. Faith, unlike opinion, holds to its object with certainty, and in this sense is like knowledge.²³

The contribution of the will to the intellectual assent in faith occurs because of the will's natural inclination for goodness. The will is moved by considerations of the willer's happiness *and* by considerations of God, who is himself the true good. When an agent is presented with the propositions of faith, she sees that these propositions represent the combination of the two ends mentioned above, namely, the eternal life and happiness of the willer in union with God. Even though these propositions are not sufficient to command assent on the part of the intellect, the will recognizes the great good offered by assent to these propositions, and the will thus influences the intellect to assent.²⁴ As Eleonore Stump points out, that the will can have such an influence over the intellect is attested to by the fact that scientific experiments are often designed "to rule out just this kind of influence,"²⁵ where the desire to have the results turn out a certain way may affect the conclusions of the researchers.

IV. A Defense of Aquinas's Volitionalism

A number of objections have been raised against Aquinas's views on the role of the will in assent and the implications that this theory has on our understanding of faith. Since the scope of this paper does not allow for a complete treatment of these objections, I shall focus my discussion on a few of the most common objections to Aquinas's volitionalism. Another reason for narrowing the focus of my defense of Aquinas is that most of the contemporary criticism leveled against volitionalism tends to attack the notion of direct voluntary belief. Aquinas, however, as I have shown, advances an indirect brand of volitionalism that is able to escape the objections to direct voluntary volitionalism. Aquinas does not argue

²³ See *STh* II-II, q. 1, a. 4; q. 2, a. 1, 2.

²⁴ See Stump 187-88.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

that the will can command the intellect to assent to a proposition that is patently false, and Aquinas undoubtedly recognizes the fact that we often enough assent to propositions that we passionately wish were not true. Nevertheless, there are still objections that can be raised against Aquinas's weaker version.

Objection 1. Perhaps the most common and most obvious objection to Aquinas's notion of voluntary belief is that it seems to imply that faith is without epistemic justification. Stump states: "If a believer's intellectual assent to the propositions of faith results primarily from her will's being drawn to the good represented in those propositions, there seems to be no reason for supposing that the propositions of faith are *true* or that her belief in them is justified."²⁶ After all, we have a propensity to think of our beliefs as propositional attitudes that are caused by the reality that surrounds us. Beliefs, we suppose, are caused by evidence, and not our volitions. In other words, it is contrary to the nature of beliefs to acquire them by anything other than truth/evidence considerations.

Objection 2. If the object of faith is not sufficient to move the intellect, and if the acquisition of faith is based largely on the act of the will, how can Aquinas say that faith is held with certainty? Aquinas states that faith, as a form of belief, is not caused by the evidentness of the object itself, but nevertheless is "firm and unwavering."²⁷ Recognition of the fact that our faith is not based entirely upon truth considerations seems to give rise to doubts about how anyone's faith could be said to be *certain*.

Aquinas's answers to both of the above objections can be found in his account of "being" and "goodness." On Aquinas's view, the terms "being" and "goodness" are basically synonymous. More accurately, these terms refer to the same thing but with different senses (Stump exemplifies

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 191-92.

²⁷ See Eisen-Murphy 579, and *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* q. 14, a. 1, c.

this by stating that the expressions “being” and “goodness” are analogous to the expressions “morning star” and “evening star,” which refer to the same thing but under two different descriptions).²⁸ However, for the purposes of our discussion, we will simply equate these two terms.

Objection 1, that the propositions of faith are unjustified, and objection 2, that one cannot truly have a sense of certainty with regard to faith, can be answered by using an example of such a proposition of faith. Take for instance the proposition ‘God exists’. Now, for Aquinas, where there is being there is also goodness, and conversely, where there is goodness there is also being. In the case of God, who we think to be perfectly good, Aquinas holds that this perfect goodness must correspond to perfect being, and perfect being not only exists but exists necessarily.²⁹ In the case of ordinary beliefs, where the will may be inclined towards an imperfect or limited good, the assent may be unjustified. Yet with regard to the propositions of faith, the will seeks perfect and unlimited goodness since the object of faith is First Truth—God himself—and this perfect goodness assures the existence or being of the will’s object. Belief, then, in propositions such as ‘God exists’ is justified since the object of faith must necessarily exist.

Objection 3. Why should Aquinas believe that faith should be obtained through the will’s hunger for the good rather than the intellect’s being sufficiently moved by the propositions of faith? An omnipotent and omniscient God could have made the propositions of faith manifest in such a way that the intellect could be sufficiently compelled on account of the evidence. There seems to be something inappropriate about obtaining faith through the will’s attraction to the good when God could have made it possible to obtain it based on considerations that alone move the intellect. Aquinas’s account of faith, one might contend, is analogous to “using a sewing machine to join two pieces of cloth by gluing the two pieces of

²⁸ See Stump 192.

²⁹ See *Ibid.*, 197.

cloth together and using the machine as a weight to hold them in place as the glue dries.”³⁰ Why opt for a substitute method of acquiring faith when God could have easily provided a better, more compelling method involving the intellect alone?

This objection will likely seem absurd to most Christians, for the whole idea of faith is that it is not intellectual certainty, but a kind of risk in which the truth of our beliefs is something hoped for. Most Christians would claim that God’s fully manifesting himself to all people would contradict his desire to have people *freely* enter into relationships with him. Nonetheless, it could still be argued that God is perhaps guilty of not providing enough evidence as it is. Aquinas’s reply to this objection is found in his understanding of the purpose of faith.

Objection 3 might have more force if Aquinas agreed that the most important aspect of faith was its influence on the intellect, but Aquinas affirms that the most significant feature of faith is its influence on the will of the believer. The changes brought about in an agent by the acquisition of faith are, more than anything, changes in the will of the agent. When an agent begins to have faith through the will’s attraction to perfect goodness, God is then able to work on the will of that believer in order to produce a true change of heart and align her will in other aspects with the righteous desires of the heart that a true Christian should possess. The changes that take place after the assent of faith which are of the most importance in making the agent a true disciple are changes in the will of the agent to love goodness and hate sin. It is this change that constitutes the notion of justification by faith, in which inherent defects in the human will (in the form of desiring that which is evil or gives immediate pleasure) are corrected and the heart and will of the believer are brought into line with God’s will. Thus, Aquinas holds that the method of acquiring faith through the will, as opposed to a purely intellectual approach, is better because it involves the will in the search for faith and places the will

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

in a position to be further corrected and purified. While it should be noted that whatever affects the will must have first operated on the intellect, the purpose of the change that the intellect experiences through gaining faith has to do with the resulting change in the will.

V. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Aquinas presents a brand of volitionalism in which the will has an indirect and descriptive role in the acquisition of faith. To show this, I have explained Aquinas's account of the relationship between the intellect and the will, and how these come together when one assents to the propositions of faith. I have also defended Aquinas's view against the objections that (1) assent to the propositions of faith is unjustified, (2) the believer cannot be said to really hold to her faith with certainty, and (3) God should have instituted a more intellectually based approach to faith acquisition. While perhaps the most persuasive evidence that our religious beliefs must be arrived at voluntarily is the fact that God appears to hold people accountable for their beliefs, Aquinas still manages to offer a coherent account of how and why this is so.

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