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Aquinas on Virtue

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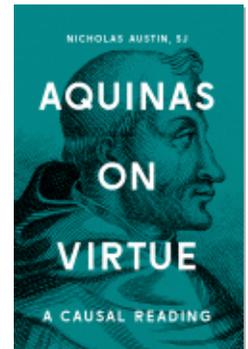
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PART II

Causal Ethics

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CHAPTER 5

Exemplar and Object

Suggested reading: *Summa Theologiae* I 77.3, 93.4; I.II pr, 1.3, 54.2; *On the Virtues* 2.4

A close examination of the four articles in which Aquinas attempts to define virtue (I.II 54.1-4) has revealed that he understands virtue in terms of its causes. Before we look in depth at how Aquinas employs the schema of the formal, material, final, and efficient causes to elaborate a comprehensive virtue theory, a pressing question that is as much systematic as exegetical needs to be considered: Given its dependence on a metaphysical understanding of causation that few today would accept, is it plausible to maintain that Aquinas's causal virtue theory retains its normative significance?

Standing between Aquinas and us is modern philosophy and science and the corresponding wholesale rejection of the scholastic way of understanding causal explanation. As Kenneth Clatterbaugh explains, a number of transformations in thinking about causation occurred in the modern period, from René Descartes onward.¹ First there was a significant simplification, as the moderns reduced talk about the four causes to the explanation of natural phenomena in terms of efficient causation alone. Then came a tendency toward secularization, from the desire to explain and understand the natural world without resorting to divine intention or agency. Eventually there was a move to a greater focus on epistemological questions, such as those concerning how we can know the metaphysical nature of causation and how we can even be sure of the existence of genuine causal interactions. The latter epistemological focus manifests itself in the skepticism of David Hume (1711–1776), who argues that causal inferences are determined by the experience of the constant conjunction of two phenomena only, such as smoke and fire, and not by reason.

Contemporary theories of causation, while influenced by advances especially in physical science, are largely inheritors of the simplification, secularization, and metaphysical skepticism of modern natural philosophy. Some

theories, such as the understanding of causes as INUS conditions (insufficient but necessary parts of a condition that is itself unnecessary but sufficient for the effect), take Hume as a starting point.² Others explain causation in terms of counterfactual claims, such as the theory put forward by David Lewis.³ Yet other theories, motivated by problems in such accounts, attempt to define a cause as that which raises the probability of its effect.⁴ There is, then, no commonly accepted theory of causation. The diversity of theories “can lead one to suspect that no univocal analysis of the concept of causation is possible.”⁵

There are a number of reasons for resisting as too hasty the conclusion that Aquinas’s causal approach to virtue is unworthy of serious consideration today. The first is a simple but telling point: modern theories of causation are almost exclusively concerned with efficient causation. What this means is that when moderns refer to the “cause” of something, they are not necessarily talking about the same thing as when Aquinas says the same. For example, Aquinas spends much time on the formal cause of virtue. Yet a formal “cause” for him is simply that which accounts for something being what it is. No one accuses a virtue theorist of employing an obsolete mode of causal explanation if she attempts to say what virtue is, or what justice or some other virtue is.

There is, moreover, a strong motivation for the ethicist to consider seriously the kind of multidimensional account of causation offered by Aquinas, since the “naturalist” alternative seems inimical to an ethical worldview. According to Richard Dawkins, “The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.”⁶ We shall examine the role, in Aquinas’s ethics, of four central causal ideas—exemplar, object, end, and agent—and I shall argue that to discard this wide palette of causal concepts has demoralizing results. Something akin to Aquinas’s understanding of causal explanation is needed by normative ethical theory.

THE EXEMPLAR CAUSE

One of the Platonic strands of Aquinas’s thought is his recognition that the “exemplar” or “idea” is a cause. In accord with Aristotle, Aquinas rejects Platonic ideas as separate from the beings in which they are realized. But he sees God as the subsistent exemplar cause by which other things, through participation, have their being and goodness. “In this respect, the opinion of Plato can be held.”⁷

What is an exemplar cause? Aquinas’s fullest characterization of this species of cause is found in his disputed questions *On Truth* (Q3), where he explains that an exemplar cause or idea is a particular kind of form but not in the same way that the soul is the form of a human being or the figure of a statue is the

form of bronze. For an idea is not that *by which* something is formed but that *according to* which something is formed.⁸ The idea is an exemplary form after whose likeness something is made. Nor is it enough for exemplar causality that one thing resembles another by chance; the likeness must arise from the intention of the agent, as when an artist produces a portrait. Aquinas says, “This therefore seems to be the rationale of *idea*, that it is a form that something imitates from the intention of the agent, who predetermines the end for himself.”⁹

Does the exemplar cause fall outside of Aristotle’s four-causal schema? Aquinas notes that in some way an exemplar cause is a final cause since the image is intended to be like the exemplar.¹⁰ Similarly, the exemplar also relates to efficient causality since the idea preexists in the mind of the agent who brings the image into being. However, the idea is a particular kind of form in whose likeness something is formed. As Gregory Doolan puts it, the exemplar “is a formal cause, even though it is an extrinsic form.”¹¹

How can the idea be a form if it is external to what is formed? Aquinas says that the formal cause is related in two ways to what is formed: “In one way as the *intrinsic* form of the thing, and this is called ‘species’; in the other way as [the form] *extrinsic* to the thing, after whose likeness, nevertheless, the thing is said to be made; and in this way, the exemplar of a thing is called a form.”¹² The exemplar cause, though external to its effect, nevertheless exhibits a kind of formal causality; it is not a fifth species of cause. Poinsett says: “The causality of the idea can be reduced to efficient and final, but specially and properly to formal [causality], insofar as it is an extrinsic form forming, but not *in*-forming.”¹³ The exemplar cause is an *extrinsic formal cause*.

Exemplars, Images, and Ethics

What role does the exemplar play in Aquinas’s theological ethics? Exemplar causation is evident from the outset of his ethical masterpiece, the *Treatise on Morals*. As he begins this central section of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas may well have had in mind Aristotle’s famous remark, “A small mistake in the beginning is a big one in the end.”¹⁴ The starting point is all-important, as it is present virtually in all that follows. Aquinas begins, then, as follows:

Because, as Damascene says [De Fide Orth. ii, 12], the human being is said to be made after God’s image, insofar as “image” implies “an intelligent being having free judgment and power in himself”; having spoken of the exemplar, namely, of God, and of what proceeds from the divine power according to his will, it remains to consider God’s image, that is, the human being insofar as he himself is the principle of his works, having free judgment and power over his own works. (I.II pr)¹⁵

This dense and intensely holographic text, which sets the stage for Aquinas's most complete statement on moral science, conceives the human person as the image of the exemplar, God.

Why begin ethics with exemplar causality? It is possible to identify at least three advantages. The divine exemplar cause is the efficient, the final, and especially the (extrinsic) formal cause of the human person. So exemplar causality sketches a “theocentric” ethics in which the human person, as the image of God, is made by God, for God, and like God. For, “Everything is treated in sacred doctrine under the rationale of God: either because they are God himself, or because they have an order to God as to the principle and end” (I 1.7c).¹⁶

A second reason for choosing exemplar causation is that it expresses a remarkably dynamic theological ethics, which Aquinas describes as being “about the *motion* of the rational creature into God” (I 2 pr) (emphasis added).¹⁷ The human person is characterized as made after the image of God (*ad imaginem Dei*) in two senses: an image made *after* the exemplar, on which she is modeled, but also *to be after* the exemplar, as moving toward a more perfect imaging.¹⁸ This is the basis for a developmental ethics: “The human being is not only said to be the image, but also towards the image, by which the motion of someone tending towards completion is designated” (I 35.2 ad 3).¹⁹ Exemplar causation therefore conveys a dynamic process: morality is the created image's movement toward becoming the perfected image in glory (93.4c). Ramírez puts it well: the subject matter of Aquinas's moral theology is not the merely *entitative* but the *dynamic* image of God.²⁰

Beginning ethics with the divine exemplar cause also places an accent on human agency. Aquinas sees a connection between being an image of God and being an agent—that is, having mastery over oneself and one's acts (*dominium sui*). Ignatius Theodore Eschmann observes that Aquinas could have begun with the human merely as a creature needing divine direction, indicating an ethics of dependency for a child who by definition never grows up. Instead, Aquinas begins with the idea of a human as made in the image of the creator and governor of the universe, and therefore as an agent in her own right: an ethics of a child who “*by definition is growing up.*”²¹

For Aquinas, the exemplar, or that according to which something is formed, is a “cause” in that it is an explanatory principle that helps to account for what something is. There is nothing problematic in the idea itself, and if modern theories of causation fail to acknowledge exemplar causation it is only because they employ a narrower, more reductionistic conception of “cause.” Aquinas's employment of the ideas of exemplar and image provide an important motif for a theological ethics that is theocentric, dynamic, and focused on human agency. There is no need to abandon it merely because naturalistic theories of causation fail to consider it.

THE OBJECTIVE CAUSE

We turn now to another species of formal causation—namely, objective causation. This is the causation specific to the object, in Aquinas’s technical understanding of “object.” The idea of objective causation is closely related to that of *intentionality*, which is derived from the Latin *intendere*, to tend toward. Intentionality is the intrinsic characteristic of being directed toward some object, and since the time the concept was reintroduced by Franz Brentano (1838–1917), from his (evidently incomplete) knowledge of medieval discussions, it is widely seen as an essential mark of the mental.²² This is not the understanding of Aquinas, who happily ascribes an object even to bodily processes such as growth (I.II 77.3c). Contemporary understandings of intentionality should not be assumed to correspond to Aquinas’s understanding of objective causation.²³ Our focus will be on Aquinas as explicated by John Poinsett, whose account has been found to have significant philosophical value today.²⁴

Object as Specifier

“Object” (*obiectum*) is evidently a scholastic term of art.²⁵ To what does it refer? The word was scarcely employed before the year 1240 but was in common use by Aquinas’s day.²⁶ Etymologically, as Joseph Pilsner explains, the Latin word *obiectum* comes from the verb *obiicere*: to throw or place in front of another.²⁷ An object is therefore something that is distinct from but comes into relation with powers, habits, and acts. For example, one desires various *goods*, thinks about various *things*, or is angry at a *certain person* about *some injustice committed*. Here goods, things, persons, and injustices are all objects since they are what some act of desire, thought, or passion is directed toward.

The crucial role of an object, according to Aquinas, is to specify a power, habit, or act, where “act” includes interior as well as exterior acts.²⁸ How does one define a power of the soul, such as the power of intellect, will, or sight? In the first place, a power is defined in terms of its *acts*, such as a thinking, willing, or seeing: “In the logic of definition, acts and operations are prior to powers.”²⁹ As Aquinas puts it in his commentary on Aristotle’s *De Anima* (the *locus classicus* of the whole discussion), “Acts and operations are prior to powers in their defining rationale. For a power, according to the very thing that it is, implies a certain directedness to act: for it is a certain principle of acting or undergoing. So it is necessary that acts are placed in the definition of powers.”³⁰ For example, to define what the intellect is, one must first define what understanding (*intelligere*) is since a power or potential is defined in terms of

what it is a potential *for*. “Each thing takes its species from act, and not from potential” (I.II 1.3c).³¹

If powers are defined by their acts, acts or operations are in turn defined in terms of their objects: “It will be necessary to determine objects before acts, for the same reason that acts are also determined prior to powers.”³² Briefly, Aquinas’s argument is that the acts in question are operations of either passive or active powers; in each case it is the object that defines the act (I 77.3c).³³ In the case of a passive power, the object is the principle and “moving” cause of the act; in the case of an active power, the object is its end point or goal. For example, seeing, which is the act of the *passive* power of sight, is defined by its object (namely, color); to see is by definition to perceive some color, which is the proper object of sight. Similarly, growth, which is an act of the *active* power of vegetation, is defined by its object (namely, maturity), since growth is by definition a process toward maturity, or its proper object.

Aquinas applies the principle of specification by object to habits as well as powers: “And so the rationale and species of a power is taken from its object; and the same applies to a habit, which is nothing other than the disposition of a perfected power to its object” (*On the Virtues* 2.4c).³⁴ As he puts it elsewhere, “Habits imply order to another. However, all things described in terms of their order to another, are distinguished according to the distinction of those things towards which they are described” (I.II 54.2.c).³⁵ Thus, “species of virtues are distinguished according to objects” in particular (I.II 54.2.c).³⁶ The way of defining (*via definiendi*), then, is this: first objects, then acts, then powers or habits.

Formal and Material Objects

The principle of specification by object needs to be interpreted with care since there are different aspects under which the object may be considered. Aquinas distinguishes formal and material objects. Take, as an example, the power of sight. The objects of sight include a human being, a stone, and a donkey. However, it is no use defining sight as the apprehensive power that has Peter the human, a stone, and Donald the donkey as its objects, since the same could apply to the power of hearing so long as Peter speaks, the stone falls into the well, and Donald brays. Aquinas therefore makes his first refinement to the principle by distinguishing the *material* from the *formal* objects of a power or habit:

In the object we find a formal and a material element. The formal element in the object is *that according to which the object is referred to a power or habit*; the

material element, on the other hand, is *that in which this is founded*. For example, if we speak of the power of sight, its formal object is color, or something of this kind, for something is visible insofar as it is colored; but the material element in the object is the body which the color happens to qualify. From this it is clear that a power or habit is referred *per se* to the formal rationale of the object; but to that which is material in the object, *per accidens*. And only what is *per se*, not what is *per accidens* varies the thing; therefore, material diversity of the object does not diversify a power or habit, but only a formal diversity. For there is one power of sight, by which we see both stones and human beings and the sky, because this is a material diversity of objects, and not a diversity according to the formal rationale of the visible. (*On the Virtues* 2.4c)³⁷

It is not enough to define sight in terms of its *material* objects (namely, Peter, a stone, and Donald); rather, sight is defined in terms of its *formal object* (that is, whatever in the object makes it an object of sight (namely, color)).

Aquinas's preferred term for the formal object is the technical expression "formal rationale of its object" (*formalis ratio obiecti*); it refers to *what makes something an object of some power, habit, or act*. That is, the formal rationale of the object of X is the *ratio* or nature something needs to possess to be an object of X. In the case of sight, this is simply color since color is what makes some bodily thing, such as Peter, a stone, or a donkey, visible. "For the unity of a power and a habit is to be considered according to the object, not indeed materially, but according to the formal rationale of the object; for example, a human being, a donkey, and a stone agree in one formal rationale of colored, which is the object of sight" (I 1.3c).³⁸ In general, then, a power of the soul or a habit is determined in its species according to the formal rationale of the object toward which it is directed.

The English "rationale" is used here as a placeholder for Aquinas's *ratio*, an important term with a wide semantic field. Alternative translations include "formula," "aspect," "nature," "determinant," and "concept." None is an exact equivalent. As Armand Maurer explains, "The *ratio* of a thing is its definition, or, in other words, the concept that expresses what a thing is. By extension, the term also signifies the intelligible nature of a thing corresponding to its definition."³⁹ I use "rationale" to translate Aquinas's *ratio*, the formula of a thing's nature, or the intelligible nature itself.

Why is it that the *formal* rationale of the object defines a power, state, or act? A material object, considered as a thing in its own right, may have many different properties and accidents, each with its own rationale: the body that the eye sees may be round, heavy, hard, and blue. The formal rationale of the object makes the object an object since the form is what makes something

what it is. For example, the formal rationale of the object of sight is not shape, weight, or hardness. It is color, because that is the rationale under which the object becomes an object of sight. It is not any particular color, such as white or blue, that specifies powers (since then we would need different faculties to perceive white and blue objects); it is only the specific rationale of color (I 59.4c). Thus, the principle of specification by object is this: *Human powers, habits, and acts are specified not by their material objects but by the formal rationale of their objects.*⁴⁰

To complexify still further, Aquinas is prepared to identify different degrees of materiality or formality in the object. The case is once again most easily illustrated by the power of sight. The formal object of sight is that by which something becomes visible. But while a body becomes visible by being colored, it is also true that a colored body becomes visible only when it is manifested to the power of sight through light (I 105.5c).⁴¹ Since it is possible to see light without seeing any colored object, light is the *most* formal object of sight (*De Malo* 2.2 ad 5). Although sight is oriented toward perceiving colored bodies, light seems even more definitive of the object of sight than color.⁴²

In the case of sight, then, we have different layers, as it were, of materiality and formality in the object:

- (1) The *purely material objects* of the power of sight are bodies since they are visible only insofar as they take on the form of color.
- (2) The *somewhat material, somewhat formal* object of sight is color. This is more formal than any body since bodies become objects of sight by being colored. Yet color is a material object of sight when considered in relation to light, in virtue of which a colored body becomes visible.
- (3) The *purely formal object* of sight is light. This is the purely formal object of sight since it is ultimately by light that anything becomes visible.

Later Thomists introduce some helpful technical terminology to express the important distinction between (2) and (3). The somewhat material yet somewhat formal object is referred to as the object that is attained (*obiectum quod*), like color in the case of sight. The purely formal object is referred to as the object by which something is attained (*objectum quo*) by a power, habit, or act, like light in the case of sight.⁴³

So there is at least a threefold object of any power, habit, or act: the purely material object, the formal rationale of the object that is attained, and the formal rationale of the object by which it is attained. This threefold object provides a powerful method of specifying and distinguishing virtues.

OBJECTIVE CAUSATION

Since the object is clearly a principle of specification, it is natural to ask: Is the object a cause? And if so, of what kind? Poincot best clarifies the causality of the object by explicitly addressing the key issue: In what genus of cause does the object specify powers, habits, and acts?⁴⁴ Poincot's approach is more penetrating than contemporary accounts, which tend to confuse final and objective causation.

Poincot characterizes the object as follows: "Object in general [. . .] consists in this, that it is something extrinsic, from which the intrinsic rationale and species of some power or act [or habit] is derived, and upon which it depends; and this is reduced to the genus of formal extrinsic cause, not causing existence, but specification."⁴⁵ The object, then, is indeed a cause; more particularly it is a species of *extrinsic formal cause*, like the exemplar cause. Why is this so?

Habits, along with acts and powers, belong to a somewhat unique category of being.⁴⁶ The scholastics divide beings into those that are "absolute" or non-relative, in that they have their essence in themselves, and those that are "relative" (*ad aliud*). What falls into the categories of "substance" or "quantity," for example, are absolute beings: while they may depend for their *existence* on another being such as God, their *essence* is, as it were, self-contained. Relations, on the other hand, are purely other-directed: for example, "to be taller than" is by its very nature for one being to be taller than *some other being* without which the relation would not be defined or even exist. Poincot claims that acts, habits, and powers fall into neither category straightforwardly but rather exist in a kind of in-between or mixed realm, having something absolute in themselves and yet being somewhat relative at the same time. They are indeed ordered to something (*ad aliud*), but they are ordered to this *from their very nature*. As he puts it, "Essentially and intrinsically, that is, from the property of their natures, [powers, habits, and acts] are ordained to another [that is, the object], and therefore are said to be specified by it."⁴⁷ It follows that the object must be a formal cause. For the causality proper to a form is precisely that which makes it what it is: the form determines the species (*forma dat speciem*).⁴⁸ The object specifies acts, powers, and habits, and so must be a form. As Aquinas puts it, the object "has in some way the rationale of a form, insofar as it determines the species" (I.II 18.2 ad 2).⁴⁹ Again, "the object moves [a power] by determining it in the manner of a formal principle" (I.II 9.1c; cf. II.II 4.3c).⁵⁰

Poincot points out that the object is not the *intrinsic* form of a power, habit, or act but rather something external to which the power, habit, or act is nevertheless intrinsically referred. The intrinsic form is a tendency or directedness to

the object; the object, on the other hand, is that to which the power, habit, or act is ordered.⁵¹ The object, then, must be an *extrinsic formal cause* since, while it is extrinsic as that to which a power, habit, or act relates, it nevertheless helps to make a power, habit, or act what it is (cf. I 77.3 ad 1).⁵²

Some Objections

A significant objection can be made to this way of conceiving the causality proper to the object. Sometimes the object is an efficient cause, as when a real color causes the act of seeing. At other times the object is a final cause, as in the case of virtues or even acts of the will, which are oriented toward some good act or end as their object. Finally, the object can also be the effect, as when a power, habit, or act gives rise to operation or result. Why identify the object exclusively with the formal cause but not with the final or efficient cause, or even with the effect?

Let us deal with these possibilities in turn. Poinsoot discounts the possibility that the object as such can be an efficient cause. Efficient causation concerns the order of existence rather than the order of specification:

What depends on another in existence, as such, is not specified by it. For specification and definition abstract from existence, because the existence of no created thing is essential or pertains to definition. It is clear, however, that every dependency *from the efficient cause* is only a dependency as regards existence, because the efficient cause as such only regards the thing under existence or to posit it outside its causes. . . . Whence respect to the efficient cause . . . insofar as it is such, does not specify, because it does not regard the definition of the thing according to itself, but only the thing under existence.⁵³

The efficient cause, precisely as such, does not determine the nature or species of something but rather bestows existence on it. Yet the role of the object is to specify. The object's characteristic causation is therefore not efficient but formal.

Poinsoot concedes that sometimes the object is also sometimes the efficient cause of some act, as when a color is perceived correctly. However, he constructs a thought experiment to show that the causality of the object is not efficient causality. Suppose that God brings about a vision in a person. For example, he makes Paul see Ananias lay his hands on him, even though this event has not yet happened. The perceptions would be efficiently caused by God, not by the object, and yet the object would still specify what is being seen. Paul is seeing Ananias, not God. The causality proper to the object as object, therefore, is not efficient causality.

Admittedly, Aquinas does refer to the object as “moving” a power (I.II 9.1c). However, Poinsoot points out that “moving” in this context is applied not merely to efficient causes but to the other genera of causes by a kind of metaphor:

A great equivocation is committed in that term “motive” when it is applied only to the efficient cause, since it may also be applied to the other causes. For example, the end is said [metaphorically] to “move” [the agent to act], and the object proposed to the will “moves” it, and the exemplar “moves” to its imitation. In this way, therefore, we distinguish “motive” in the manner of *exercise* and in the manner of *specification*, and the first is what characterizes the efficient cause, the second the formal object.⁵⁴

The object “moves” by specifying a power, act, or habit, not by moving it in the manner of an efficient cause (cf. I.II 9.1c). Once again, the characteristic causation of the object is formal, not efficient.

What about the idea that the object causes by final causation? Aquinas claims that human acts receive their species from their end, their final cause (I.II 1.3). Is this not a counterexample to Poinsoot’s claim that the object specifies by means of formal causation? No, quite the opposite. The reason that human acts that is—acts from deliberate will—are specified by the final cause, is, as Aquinas says, “The object of the will is the good and the end” (ibid.).⁵⁵ Poinsoot points out, then, that the final cause can specify but only insofar as it “clothes itself,” so to speak, in the nature of an object. Thus, in regard to an act of the will, “the end has both offices: both that of *finalizing*, or ‘moving’ (metaphorically speaking) to the execution and existence of a work, and of *specifying* or *formalizing* the act of a will, insofar as it presents to it the rationale of good and desirable, which is the formal and specifying object of the will.”⁵⁶ Thus, although the final cause does indeed specify the act of the will, it is by objective not final causation that it does so; to specify is not to “finalize” but to “formalize.”

Poinsoot’s analytic acumen helps to clear up some confusions about object. Joseph Pilsner is the author of the most thorough treatment of object in contemporary literature. On the basis of various texts where Aquinas seems to identify the object with the immediate goal of an action, Pilsner claims that “object” sometimes means “the proximate end of an act.”⁵⁷ This leaves Pilsner puzzled as to why Aquinas appears to use “object” in two senses: sometimes connoting that to which a power, habit, or act relates, and sometimes connoting the end of a power, habit, or act.

If Poinsoot is right, there is no equivocation in Aquinas’s terminology. “Object” and “end” can sometimes coincide in reference, but never in sense.

Even when the object happens to be an end because of the appetitive nature of the power, habit, or act to which it belongs, “object” only ever *means* a particular kind of formal cause namely—that to which a power, habit, or act is intrinsically and essentially related as something to be done, desired, known, effected, or in some other way attained. Even when the object happens to be an end, the object *as object* only ever lies in the order of formal and never final causation.

There is one final possibility to consider, that the object *as effect* specifies a power, act, or habit. This moves us toward consequentialist accounts of moral action: an action is right or wrong insofar as it produces good or bad effects. Poinsett points out that this does not work: “The effect, as effect, does not specify an act or power, but presupposes them as specified. For an effect, insofar as it is an effect, receives being and nature or species from its cause, it does not give them to it.”⁵⁸ Since to count as the efficient cause of some effect something must already exist and therefore already have a specific nature, the efficient cause cannot receive its nature from its effect: this would be to put the cart before the horse. In regard to specification, as well as existence, the effect is the beneficiary rather than the benefactor. Effects may be the sign and manifestation of a power, habit, or act, but they can never be what essentially defines them.⁵⁹ Because consequentialism fails to distinguish objective from efficient causation, it mistakenly locates morality in the efficient effect of an action rather than the action’s object. The unfortunate result is a morality that eclipses the way every action is already specified by its object—that is, before it brings about any effect. Consequentialism, then, tends to fail to consider the all-important intentionality in which morality is formally located.

For Poinsett the object may sometimes be an efficient cause, a final cause, or an effect, but it is only the object *as object*, not the object under any of these other causal descriptions, that specifies. This is the crucial importance of understanding the specificity of the causation proper to the object. The object as object does not bring about existence, or attract desire, or come into existence; it only specifies. Thus specification by object must be a distinct kind of causality, one that is not reducible to final or efficient causality or being an effect. Poinsett calls it *objective* causality.

Let us review the central point. Why must objective causality be a kind of formal causality? The answer is simple: formal causality is the causality that makes something what it is. The object is that which the power, habit, or act intrinsically regards by its very nature as making it what it is. Hence the causality exercised by the object as such is a formal causality. Because the object is that to which a power, habit, or act is essentially referred, rather than an intrinsic form constituting its essence, it is a kind of *extrinsic* formal causality.

OBJECTIVE CAUSATION AND ETHICS

How important is objective causation in ethics? Its relevance lies in addressing what we can call “the problem of specification.” When Elizabeth Anscombe wrote the essay widely credited as the origin of the renewal of virtue, she made the following observation: “It would be a great improvement if, instead of ‘morally wrong,’ one always named a genus such as ‘untruthful,’ ‘unchaste,’ ‘unjust.’”⁶⁰ Specificity matters in ethics, and modern moral philosophy had for her remained too abstract, making do with an impoverished moral vocabulary of actions that are only “right” or “wrong.” A recovery of the richer language of the virtues and vices was needed.

Aquinas is a primary reference point for the retrieval of a differentiated yet integrated vocabulary of virtue. He recognizes that abstract ethics is not, by itself, enough. The extensive first part of his ethical treatise (I.II 6–114), which describes a “universal consideration” of human acts and their principles, is merely a preparation for the even vaster second part (II.II 1–189), which examines them specifically. This is a necessary movement: “For general moral discourse is less useful, since actions exist in the particular” (II.II pr).⁶¹ Aquinas calls this procedure of moving from the general to the specific the way of “determination” (I.II 95.2): “Every operative science is perfected in particular consideration” (II.II pr).⁶²

Just as Albert Einstein proposed both a general and a special theory of relativity, so virtue theory has its general and special varieties.⁶³ Aquinas’s general theory of virtue (I.II 55–70) says what virtue in general is; the special theory (II.II 1–170) offers accounts of the specific virtues.

How, though, do we get from a general account of what virtue is to an account of the specific virtues and their interrelationships? It is part of the task of general virtue theory to address this question. Aquinas devotes six questions (I.II 57–62), a large part of the *Treatise on Virtue in General*, to the task: “We have now to consider the *distinction* of virtues: first, as regards the intellectual virtues; second, as regards the moral virtues; third, as regard the theological virtues” (57 pr).⁶⁴ His aim is not merely to begin the process of determination but to uncover the methodological principles that govern the specification and distinction of the virtues. In addition, he is careful to order the virtues into an overall structure and so discusses the “connectivity” (*connexio*) or mutual interdependence of the virtues (65) and how they are to be placed on scales of relative importance (66). He attempts, then, to outline the principles of a structured differentiation of virtue, respecting both their oneness and their multiplicity.

It is in this context that the importance of objective causation becomes clear. As discussed earlier, the causality proper to form is to specify (*forma dat speciem*).

Since by definition virtues are the kind of things that are tendencies toward some morally good object (that is, an object that conforms to reason), it is by their objects that virtues are specified and distinguished from one another. Each virtue has a material object (the “matter-about-which” the virtue is), a formal object that is attained by the virtue (the “target”), and a formal object by which the target is attained (the “mode”). These objective causes are both interrelated and relate to the efficient, final, and material causes. The idea of objective causation, therefore, provides a means to the generation of the rich moral vocabulary that Anscombe and others have recognized as so necessary for ethics today.

NOTES

1. Kenneth Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate in Modern Philosophy, 1637–1739* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1–15.
2. John L. Mackie, “Causes and Conditions,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (October 1965): 245–64.
3. David Lewis, “Causation,” *Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 17 (1973): 556–67. Lewis has revised his theory a number of times since his original statement.
4. Jon Williamson, “Probabilistic Theories,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Causation*, ed. Helen Beebe, Christopher Hitchcock, and Peter Menzies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 185–212.
5. Helen Beebe, Christopher Hitchcock, and Peter Menzies, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Causation* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.
6. Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic, 1995), 132–33.
7. *De Veritate*, q. 21 a.4c: “Et quantum ad hoc opinio Platonis sustineri potest.”
8. *De Veritate*, q. 3 a. 1c.
9. *De Veritate*, q. 3 a. 1c: “Haec ergo videtur esse ratio ideae, quod idea sit forma quam aliquid imitatur ex intentione agentis, qui praedeterminat sibi finem.”
10. *De Veritate*, q. 1. a. 1c.
11. Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 42. As Doolan explains, the exemplar is not only a formal cause, since it exercises final and efficient causality; “an exemplar idea, in its capacity as an exemplar, is reduced to the order of formal causality since the characteristic that is proper to it as an exemplar is its imitability” (43).
12. *Comm. Metaph.*, lib. 5 l. 2 n.2: “Alio modo sicut extrinseca a re, ad cuius tamen similitudinem res fieri dicitur; et secundum hoc, exemplar rei dicitur forma.” Compare *De Veritate*, q. 3 a. 3c.
13. *Cursus Philosophicus*, part 1, *De Ente Mobili in Communi*, Q.11, Art.3 (Reiser 2:245b): “Nihominus dicendum est causalitatem ideae reduci posse ad efficientem et finalem, sed specialiter et proprie ad formalem, quatenus est forma extrinseca formans, sed non informans.”

14. Aquinas begins his *De Ente et Essentia*: “Quia parvus error in principio magnus est in fine, secundum philosophum in I caeli et mundi.”

15. I.II pr: “Quia, sicut Damascenus dicit, homo factus ad imaginem Dei dicitur, secundum quod per imaginem significatur *intellectuale et arbitrio liberum et per se potestativum*; postquam praedictum est de exemplari, scilicet de Deo, et de his quae processerunt ex divina potestate secundum eius voluntatem; restat ut consideremus de eius imagine, idest de homine, secundum quod et ipse est suorum operum principium, quasi liberum arbitrium habens et suorum operum potestatem.”

16. I 1.7c: “Omnia autem pertractantur in sacra doctrina sub ratione Dei, vel quia sunt ipse Deus; vel quia habent ordinem ad Deum, ut ad principium et finem.”

17. I 2 pr: “de motu rationalis creaturae in Deum.”

18. What I say here draws on my essay “Spirituality and Virtue in Christian Formation: A Conversation between Thomistic and Ignatian Traditions,” *New Blackfriars* 97, no. 1068 (March 2016): 202–17.

19. I 35.2 ad 3: “homo non solum dicitur imago, sed ad imaginem, per quod motus quidam tendentis in perfectionem designatur.”

20. Jacobus M. Ramírez, *De Hominis Beatitudine: In I–II Summae Theologiae Divi Thomae Commentaria (QQ. I–V)* (Madrid: Vives, 1972), 1:88–89.

21. Ignatius Theodore Eschmann, *Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Edward A. Synan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), 163–64.

22. Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 92–95, 181, 205.

23. Robbie Moser, “Thomas Aquinas, Esse Intentionale, and the Cognitive as Such,” *Review of Metaphysics* 64, no. 4 (June 2011): 763–88; and Stephen L. Brock, “Intentional Being, Natural Being, and the First-Person Perspective in Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 77 (2013): 103–33.

24. John Deely, *Purely Objective Reality* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

25. Although his focus is on action rather than on virtue, the best contemporary treatment of object as specifying is that by Joseph Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), chap. 5. My approach is influenced by Poinsett: *Cursus Philosophicus, Ars Logica (Prima Pars), Summul. Lib. I. Cap. II* (Reiser 1:9); *Ars Logica (Secunda Pars)*, Q.21; *De Signo Secundum Se*, Art. IV (Reiser 1:670–79); Q.27, *De Unitate et Distinctione Scientiarum*, Art.1 (Resider 1:818–20); *De Ente Mobili Animato*, Q.2, Art.3, *Utrum potentiae specificentur et distinguantur per actus et obiecta* (Reiser 3:74–83); and *Cursus Theologicus*, in I–II, Disp.1, *De fine ultimo et morali*, Art.3, nn.5–7 (Solesmes 5:39). See also Salamancans, *Cursus Theologus*, Tract. 8, *De Ultimo Fine*, Disp.1, Dub.3, §1, nn.27–32 (Solesmes 5:18–21); Tract. 14, *De Fide*, Disp.1, nn.1–4 (11:5–6); Ramírez, *De Beatitudine*, 1972, pt. I, 60ff.; and *De Fide Divina: In II–II Summae Theologiae Divi Thomae Expositio (QQ. I–VII)* (Madrid: Vives, 1972), 24–27.

26. Lawrence Dewan, “‘Obiectum’: Notes on the Invention of a Word,” in *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue: Essays in Thomistic Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 403–43.

27. Pilsner, *Specification*, 73.

28. *Comm. De Anima*, lib. 2 l. 6 nn.6–9; I.II 77.3; Quaestiones de anima, Articulus 13.

29. *Comm. De Anima*, lib. 2 l. 6 n.6: quia secundum rationem definitivam, actus et operationes sunt priores potentiis.

30. *Comm. De Anima*, lib. 2 l. 6 n.6: “secundum rationem definitivam, actus et operationes sunt priores potentiis. Potentia enim, secundum hoc ipsum quod est, importat habitudinem quamdam ad actum: est enim principium quoddam agendi vel patiendi: unde oportet, quod actus ponantur in definitionibus potentialium.”

31. I.II 1.3c: “unumquodque sortitur speciem secundum actum, et non secundum potentiam.”

32. *Comm. De Anima*, lib. 2 l. 6 n.8: “prius oportebit determinare de obiectis quam de actibus, propter eandem causam, propter quam et de actibus prius determinatur quam de potentiis.”

33. On the distinction between active and passive powers, and indeed on the concept of powers itself, see Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 143–51.

34. *On the Virtues* 2.4c: “Et sic ratio et species potentiae ex obiecto accipitur; et similiter est de habitu, qui nihil est aliud quam dispositio potentiae perfectae ad suum obiectum.”

35. I.II 54.2.c: “Habitus autem importat ordinem ad aliquid. Omnia autem quae dicuntur secundum ordinem ad aliquid, distinguuntur secundum distinctionem eorum ad quae dicuntur.”

36. I.II 54.2.c: “species virtutum distinguuntur secundum obiecta.”

37. *On the Virtues* 2.4c: “Sed in obiecto consideratur aliquid ut formale et aliquid ut materiale. Formale autem in obiecto est id secundum quod obiectum refertur ad potentiam vel habitum; materiale autem id in quo hoc fundatur: ut si loquamur de obiecto potentiae visivae, obiectum eius formale est color, vel aliquid huiusmodi, in quantum enim aliquid coloratum est, in tantum visibile est; sed materiale in obiecto est corpus cui accidit color. Ex quo patet quod potentia vel habitus refertur ad formalem rationem obiecti per se; ad id autem quod est materiale in obiecto, per accidens. Et ea quae sunt per accidens non variant rem, sed solum ea quae sunt per se: ideo materialis diversitas obiecti non diversificat potentiam vel habitum, sed solum formalis. Una est enim potentia visiva, qua videmus et lapides et homines et caelum, quia ista diversitas obiectorum est materialis, et non secundum formalem rationem visibilis.”

38. I 1.3c: “Est enim unitas potentiae et habitus consideranda secundum obiectum, non quidem materialiter, sed secundum rationem formalem obiecti, puta homo, asinus et lapis conveniunt in una formali ratione colorati, quod est obiectum visus.”

39. Armand A. Maurer, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986), 36.

40. For a detailed list of texts throughout Aquinas’s works where the formal rationale of the object is said to specify and distinguish powers, habits, and acts, see Pilsner, *Specification*, 91.

41. *Ibid.*, 97–102.

42. On Aquinas’s understanding of the role of light in perception, see *ibid.*, 98n.252.

43. Ramírez, *De Hominis Beatitudine*, 1:60–61.

44. *Cursus Philosophicus, De Ente Mobili Animato*, Q.2, Art.3 (Reiser 3:74).
45. *Cursus Philosophicus, Ars Logica (Secunda Pars)*, Q.21, Art.4 (Solesmes 1:670).
46. Ibid. Also, *Cursus Theologicus*, in I.II, *De fine morali et ultimo*, Disp.1, Art.3, nn.5–7 (Solesmes 5:39).
47. *Cursus Philosophicus, De Ente Mobili Animato*, Q.2, Art.3 (Reiser 3:74).
48. E.g. I.II 18.2c, ad 2, 3c.
49. I.II 18.2 ad 2: “habet quodammodo rationem formae, in quantum dat speciem.”
50. I.II 9.1c: “obiectum movet, determinando actum, ad modum principii formalis.”
51. *Cursus Theologicus*, in I.II, *De fine morali et ultimo*, Disp.1, Art.3, n.5 (Solesmes 5:39).
52. *Cursus Philosophicus, De Ente Mobili Animato*, Q.2, Art.3 (Reiser 3:74).
53. *Cursus Philosophicus, De Ente Mobili Animato*, Q.2, Art.3 (Reiser 3:75).
54. *Cursus Philosophicus, Ars Logica (Secunda Pars)*, Q.21, Art.4 (Reiser 1:670).
55. I.II 1.3: “Obiectum autem voluntatis est bonum et finis.”
56. *Cursus Theologicus*, in I.II, *De fine morali et ultimo*, Disp.1, Art.3, n.32 (Solesmes 5:45).
57. Pilsner, *Specification*, 133–40.
58. *Cursus Theologicus*, in I.II, *De fine morali et ultimo*, Disp.1, Art.3, n.19 (Solesmes 5:42).
59. *Cursus Philosophicus, De Ente Mobili Animato*, Q.2, Art.3 (Reiser 3:74).
60. G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 8–9.
61. II.II pr: “Post communem considerationem *On the Virtues* et vitiis et aliis ad materiam moralem pertinentibus, necesse est considerare singula in speciali, sermones enim morales universales sunt minus utiles, eo quod actiones in particularibus sunt.”
62. II.II pr: “Sed quia operationes et actus circa singularia sunt, ideo omnis operativa scientia in particulari consideratione perficitur.”
63. Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
64. 57 pr: “Deinde considerandum est de distinctione virtutum. Et primo, quantum ad virtutes intellectuales; secundo, quantum ad morales; tertio, quantum ad theologicas.”