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Happiness as the constitutive principle of action in Thomas Aquinas

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Constitutivism locates the ground of practical normativity in features constitutive of rational agency and rests on the concept of a constitutive norm – a norm that is internal to a thing such that it both defines and measures it. In this essay, I argue that Aquinas understands happiness as the constitutive principle of human action, since happiness is the end that both defines and measures it. Turning to the thought of Aquinas opens up new possibilities for constitutivism by showing how the constitutive principle of action can be the ground of a practical realism in ethics.

Keywords: Aquinas; Aristotle; constitutivism; happiness; practical reason; action; ethics

Constitutivism is an ambitious meta-ethical thesis about the nature, scope, and authority of reason, particularly in its practical mode. Its fundamental claim is that the explanation of reasons or normativity more generally can be explicated in terms of norms or features constitutive of rational agency (Bagnoli 2017). The program rests on the concept of a constitutive norm – viz., one that is internal to the thing such that it constitutes the nature of the thing, and in so doing, provides an internal measure of the thing’s excellence. As I understand it, a constitutive norm both defines and measures the thing to which it applies, such that, without (at least implicit) reference to it, no particular is intelligible as an instance of its kind, nor is any evaluation of its activities or actions possible.

When applied to the explanation of action, a constitutive principle or end similarly serves to define and measure it. Whatever the constitutive principle or end turns out to be, what is essential to its *constitutive* character is that there is no separation between the end and the action: to act just is to be directed toward the end, and thus under its standard. On this view, any action is good or bad *qua* action insofar as it serves or realizes the constitutive end of acting generally. For the action constitutivist, ethics has its ultimate ground in an account of this constitutive principle.

The idea that there is an end internal to and constitutive of human life and action is familiar to students of history; indeed it’s the cornerstone of the Aristotelian ethical tradition. An Aristotelian holds that the end internal to human life and action is human happiness or living well (*eudaimonia* or *eupraxis*). Thomas Aquinas is an especially sophisticated but neglected exponent of this tradition. In his practical philosophy, happiness (*felicitas*/

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(*beatitudo*) functions as a constitutive principle of human action: an action is properly human insofar as it is ordered towards this end, and it is successful insofar as it attains it.

The purpose of this essay is twofold: first, to explain how happiness functions as a constitutive principle in Aquinas's action theory; and second, to show how this account of action can serve as the foundation of a realist form of ethics.

II

Aquinas places human agency within a much broader metaphysics of agency and action. Accordingly, Aquinas typically begins any discussion of human action with an articulation of a general nexus of agent, end, and good. For Aquinas, to be, strictly speaking, is to have an essence, and to have an essence is to have an act of being or a "proper operation." Agents possess an *internal* principle of movement and rest that defines them as the specific kind of agents they are. For instance, the element fire is an agent because it moves up towards the periphery, which is its natural place of rest. This is at once a description of the characteristic activity of fire and a partial definition of what fire is. To say that fire has a natural end is to say that it tends to move towards it unless something interferes, and that it will rest when it reaches this point of completion. For Aquinas, the applicability of the concept of interference to an activity implies that there is tendency (*inclinatio*) in the thing itself that explains it – a being ordered towards a specified point of completion. Aquinas therefore speaks of a natural inclination in agents. He often calls this *natural appetite*.

Of course, Aquinas didn't really understand the essence of fire, so it may seem easy to dismiss his account; but such dismissals are too quick. For we can and do still speak of what things are in terms of their characteristic operations. For example, an acid is the kind of thing that donates its protons. Donating protons is the characteristic activity that allows us to identify a substance as an acid; furthermore, this activity also explains how acids characteristically interact with things, like litmus paper.¹ We often rely on the specification of a characteristic operation in order to isolate the contribution of a substance to its interactions with things distinct from itself; in so doing, we utilize the notion of agency in Aquinas's broad sense.

Agents tend to move towards a characteristic end. Movement as such implies a subject being on its way towards some point in which the motion or process terminates. To be in motion is to be on the way or in progress; its canonical formulation is the progressive tense: A is Φ-ing. The statement that A is Φ-ing implies that it there is a determinate conception of A having Φ-ed; at the same time, it leaves room for the possibility that A never reaches the state of having Φ-ed. Movement itself presupposes a limit or a term of its completion, a specification of when the movement ceases to be. This is the concept of an end: a point of rest that both defines and measures the movement into a kind.

Now, being in progress or in motion implies an imperfect or incomplete condition; for a natural motion this means that to be in progress implies that an agent is not yet perfectly or fully itself, which is the condition of having attained its natural end. The very idea of *natural* movement is being directed to an end that, once reached, is a state of completion or fulfillment – a condition in which it is true to say that there is nothing lacking in it. This is the sense of the Aristotelian formula: goodness is of the end.

Acids are agents in Aquinas's capacious sense, but do we want to say that acids have a good? We do not have to settle this question here. For whether or not we accept the weak notion of good in such cases, the explanatory nexus Aquinas finds between agent, end, and good is certainly manifest in a more limiting case: living organisms, or self-movers. Focus on agents whose source of their own actions is in themselves also helps to put Aquinas into conversation with

contemporary ethicists and action theorists who put *life* at the center of their account (Anscombe 1958; Foot 2001; MacIntyre 1999; Thompson 2008).

III

To arrive at the concept of self-motion, we cannot simply add something to the idea of motion or natural motion already articulated, as if it were a species of a common genus. Motion is an analogous term.² Something is alive, according to Aquinas, if it “determines itself” to its own act (ST I, Q 18.1). I cannot explain Aquinas’s account of self-motion in anything like the detail it deserves here. What matters for our limited purposes is this: form plays a unifying role in the account but in a fundamentally different way. In self-motion, form is not merely an internal principle of movement and rest; it is itself the active cause and source of its own coming to be.

Aquinas argues that in order to make sense of life activities and processes, we must have some concept of a unified subject that directs its capacities to a single, unifying end: the realization of its form. For a self-mover, all of its movements are ordered as parts or phases of its other movements, and all are for the sake of a realizing its own form of life. For living things, the movement of any part, at any moment, is ultimately explained by reference to the movement of the whole living thing towards a single, unitary end: nature or form.³

Aquinas explains vital movements in terms of capacities or powers (*potentiae*) for ends that define and measure its exercise or activity. Each capacity of a living thing is its own internal principle of movement and rest, but all of a living thing’s capacities are ordered towards the realization of the whole thing: its nature or form. For example, the capacity for sight has its own characteristic activity – seeing – defined by its formal object – the visible – but sight comes to be in a bald eagle for the sake of its form, and is therefore different from sight in another living thing. The perfection of a capacity in a living thing is its complete actualization; a power is *fully actualized* when it realizes the end towards which it is ordered: form. The standard of perfection is therefore form relative; what is good sight in us is bad sight in a bald eagle.

In order to specify an instance of self-motion into a recognizable kind – for instance, this bald eagle is catching prey to feed its young – we need to make recourse to the agent’s form or the mature stage of its life, its characteristic end (Foot 2001; Thompson 2008). In general, of a self-mover, we can ask, “Why is A Φ-ing?” and the answer will typically involve an appeal to another vital activity that it serves: “Because A is X-ing.” And the answer to the question “Why is A X-ing?” could be a further vital activity, “Because it is Ψ-ing.” At some point, however, the chain of questions will appeal to the life form itself. For example:

Why is that tree sending sap down its phloems?
 Because the tree is storing it in its roots.
 Why is the tree storing sugar in its roots?
 Because the tree is entering a dormant stage for the winter and will need the stored energy in the spring.
 Why will it need stored energy in the spring?
 Because it’s a maple tree, and in the spring the maple develops new growth and seeds so that it can reproduce in the Fall.

In the case of a self-mover, what explains why it is engaged in one vital movement is that this is a part or phase of its being engaged in another vital movement. Ultimately what explains these movements is the thing’s form – the fact that they are movements and changes in a *maple tree*.

A living thing is comprised of many vital capacities. A capacity is an inclination to some end that constitutes the perfected condition of the operation of the power. For any living creature, we could create a list of such capacities and the vital processes in which they play a constitutive role. These vital processes yield progressive statements that form a teleological system that shows how they are unified in order to realize the growth, self-maintenance and reproduction of the living thing. Such an interrelated series demonstrates how the subject can be engaged in a process that explains its own realization, a process that can be the cause of its own coming to be.⁴ One sees, in living things, characteristic patterns of development, which must be explained by some underlying principle in the thing itself.⁵

Aquinas calls this system of powers each tending towards their own ends for the sake of the whole the plant's nature or form, and he speaks of there being a natural inclination in the plant that explains why it moves and changes according to the characteristic patterns we observe. This natural appetite is not a regulating power or impulse we ascribe to the plant – it is not some kind of inner manager or homunculus that oversees the whole operation. Appetite is best thought of as a principle of explanation: it accounts for the changes we see in the living thing itself. What is noteworthy for our purposes is that in this account, form functions as a constitutive principle. For in self-motion, the movement of any capacity counts as a vital movement insofar as it is directed to the realization of the life form.

Michael Thompson (2008) illustrates this point with the example of mitosis. He notes that if we evaluate this process at a material level, abstracting away from the life in which it comes to be and serves, we cannot identify what kind of vital process is occurring. For in an amoeba, mitosis is a phase in the larger process of reproduction, whereas in a human being, mitosis is a part of growth or self-maintenance. Thompson notes that the end for the sake of which the movements come to be both defines the movement itself into a kind (growth or reproduction), while also providing a measure whether it is going well or badly. Form functions then as a constitutive principle of vital operation.

Living things possess a constitutive measure of the success or failure of its activities and processes. For instance, an oak tree might progress in such a way that it fails to develop a strong root system; the processes that led to this condition are bad or defective for the oak, which needs strong roots to flourish. Our ability to make judgments of natural goodness and defect depends upon our having in mind an exemplar of the kind, a notion of form. For a living thing, to live well is to completely or fully exemplify one's form. Because living things determine themselves to act according to an internal principle that both defines and measure its activity, Aquinas can agree with Korsgaard that a living thing “is constantly making itself into itself” according to this constitutive principle, and thus life activity might be understood as a form of *self-constitution* (Korsgaard 2009a, 41–42).⁶

IV

For Aquinas, to be alive is to be an agent that determines itself to its own act; life activity is a form of self-constitution. Aquinas sees that there is a hierarchy of living things, or general modes of self-constitution: nutritive life, animal life, and rational life. He writes:

A thing is said to live in so far as it operates of itself and not as moved by another, the more perfectly this power is found in anything, the more perfect is the life of that thing. (ST I.18.3)

Plant life is the lowest form of self-constitution, since plants “move themselves according to their inherent nature, but only with regard to executing the movements of growth and decay” (ST I.18.3). A plant has no awareness of its movements, of itself, or of anything

distinct from itself. Although it is an agent, what it does and how it does this is completely determined by its form.

Animals have a “more perfect mode of inclination” and “self-motion to a higher degree.” The hallmark of animality is the possession of perceptual powers, which can be divided into two distinct kinds: cognitive and appetitive. To know and to desire are two fundamentally different orientations an animal can take as a conscious subject in relation to objects in the world. Through its senses, an animal perceives objects distinct from itself and can discriminate whether something appears good or bad for it. Aquinas follows Aristotle in holding that desire is either a tendency towards an object perceived as good, or a tendency away from an object perceived as bad. So desire depends upon cognition, since it is a tendency towards an object that is cognized as in some sense good.

For instance, a sheep perceives a wolf as dangerous and tends to flee, and this is no accident. It is because an animal is inclined to seek what is suitable, pleasant, or useful to itself, and flee or resist what is harmful, difficult, or unpleasant, that Aquinas attributes capacities for sense desires to it. This “sensitive appetite” directs the animal to the realization of its form through the exercise of its vital powers in accordance with what it perceives about its environment through its senses. An animal, unlike a plant, consciously constitutes itself into the kind of thing it is.

However, a sheep cannot question whether it ought to flee the wolf, nor can it decide to be brave and stand its ground. The reason is that it cannot think of the particular harm it perceives, here and now, in light of a *general* conception of what is good for it on the whole (the good sheep life). Aquinas writes:

Although animals receive through sense the form that is the principle of their movement, nevertheless they cannot of themselves propose to themselves the end of their operation or movement; for this has been implanted in them by nature; and by natural instinct they are moved to any action through the form apprehended by sense. (ST I.18.3)

An animal cannot propose to itself the ends of its own acts. Though there is such a thing as a good sheep life (specified by its form), the sheep itself neither knows it generally nor is essentially guided by such knowledge in what it does. The sheep has no capacity for this general knowledge; it lacks rational capacities. In absence of such general knowledge a sheep relies on its instincts.

We humans, like plants, also grow, reproduce, and maintain our forms; and like animals, we have perceptual powers and a sensory appetite (this is the seat of our passions, like fear, anger, and sorrow). But what defines human life and action are our capacities of intellect and will; it is through the exercise of these capacities that we determine ourselves to realize our form in a still more perfect way. A human person has a *self-consciously, self-determined* life. Through intellect and will we pursue or avoid things under an intellectual, universal apprehension of their good. Thus, Aquinas states that the will, as a rational appetite, is inclined towards its objects under the formality of the “universal good,” rather than the particular, perceived good of the sensitive appetite (ST I 82.1).

As animals we still experience sense desires. For example, someone who happens upon a fresh cake sitting outside a colleague’s office might experience an immediate desire to eat it, given that the cake is perceived in various ways as delectable. However, this person also has the capacity to judge that he has reasons not to eat it. In such a scenario, there is both sensory desire and the rational desire we associate with deliberation or choice. A person in such a situation must decide what to do, since nothing determines him to act in some

specific way in this moment. One must assess the situation, make a judgment about what to do (or avoid), and choose accordingly.

To judge and choose is to act in the manner characteristic of the human person. One cannot make such a judgment about what one ought to do in a specific situation without assessing it in light of some general conception of how to live well, what Aquinas calls “the universal good” or “happiness.” Without reference to this wider context of the ultimate or definitive end or point of human life, there is no ultimate rational ground for a practical judgment’s truth or a choice’s goodness. For a practical judgment is true if it gets things correct about which object to pursue or avoid in any specific situation, here and now, and a choice is only good insofar as it tends to an action that, when successfully executed, can truly be described as an instance of living well or living a good human life. A person must bring the generality of her life on the whole to bear on the particularity of any situation she is confronted with; if her life on the whole is well-ordered, then she is well-positioned to make a true judgment and a good choice. But regardless of whether she acts well or poorly – whether she exercises her reason and will properly – it is the human ability to grasp the particular in light of the general and act accordingly that is the hallmark of human action properly so called. It is because it is up to us how we act in this deeper sense that we are responsible for what we do and fail to do, that our actions are susceptible to attributions of a praise and blame that go well beyond the assessment of the exercise of a skill.

For Aquinas, properly human acts are those over which we exercise our *dominium*, or actions that fall under the command of reason and the control of the will, for “man is the master of his actions through his reason and will” (ST I-II, 6.1). Aquinas follows Aristotle in taking intellect and will to be the essentially rational powers of the human person, and our perceptual powers (including the elementary powers of locomotion) as intrinsically such as to be exercised through the command of reason and control of the will. The idea is roughly this. In judging and choosing some end to pursue through some specific means, one pursues it as part of one’s conception of “the universal good.” This formal object of the will – universal good – is the constitutive principle of human action. In acting voluntarily, we are ordered to this end. In acting well, we exemplify or help realize it.

For Aquinas, every properly human act (an act whose source lies in the joint activity of intellect and will) is *moral* – it can either be truthfully described as living well or it cannot.⁷ To live and act in the way characteristic of the human person is to pursue happiness; we cannot cease to pursue this end without ceasing to live in the properly human way. To return to the language of self-motion we have been discussing, through intellect and will a human person pursues the single, unifying end that makes its acts properly human: happiness or living well.

V

I have been trying to place Aquinas’s conception of will within the broader context of his account of self-motion or self-constitution. At this point, a common objection presents itself. How can a rational animal be necessitated to an end provided by its nature – happiness – that both defines and measures its activity and remain rational and free? Isn’t the condition of being naturally determined to an end the very opposite of what it is to determine oneself to act through the use of reason?

Kant expresses this worry at the beginning of the *Groundwork* (1977). He imagines a peculiar “favored creature” whose end is supplied by nature, and argues that:

[i]n a being that has reason and a will, if the proper end of nature were its preservation, its welfare, in a word, its happiness, then nature would have hit upon a very bad arrangement

in selecting the reason of the creature to carry out this purpose. For all the actions that the creature has to perform for this purpose, and the whole rule of its conduct, would be marked out for it far more accurately by instinct, and that end would have thereby been attained much more surely than it ever can be by reason; and if reason should have been given, over and above, to this favored creature, it must have served it only to contemplate the fortunate constitution of its nature, to admire this, to delight in it, and to be grateful for it to the beneficent cause, but not to submit its faculty of desire to that weak and deceptive guidance and meddle with nature's purpose. (*Groundwork*, 1977, 9)

Kant's worry is this: if nature provides us with an ultimate standard of success or failure, then there's little point in our possessing a capacity for practical reason at all, since reason would not have its own use or purposes. Kant goes on to accuse those who think nature can constrain reason of *misology* – hatred of reason.

We will return to this objection in the final section. For now, we should notice that Aquinas and Kant agree that reason and will are self-conscious powers through which we determine ourselves to act, and so in some obvious sense free. Aquinas strongly disagrees, however, that a dualism between reason and nature is what is necessary to account for the self-determining or self – constituting character of practical reason. For Aquinas, it is not that reason must be independent of the constraints of nature, but that reason cannot operate independently of such constraints. For Aquinas, reason operates according to constitutive principles, such principles belong to an account of human nature, and human nature is part of nature more broadly construed. Reason, for Aquinas, is not outside of or external to nature. Rather, rational principles define the life of a certain natural, living substance: a human person.

VI

Aquinas argues that human acts are voluntary acts, or those that come under the command of reason and control of the will. What is essential to the voluntary character of an action (or a passion or an omission) is that a principle of knowledge is internal to it: “the act of the will is nothing less than an inclination proceeding from an interior principle of knowledge” (ST I-II 6.4). This makes sense given how Aquinas thinks of a power of desire generally: a tendency towards an object that is cognized in some respect as good to pursue. For a rational appetite, or will, the inclination proceeds from an act of practical intellect, a judgment that the end is to be pursued, here and now, in these circumstances. A rational judgment is the ground of choice, which determines the will towards a specific object of pursuit through some specific means.

I cannot even begin to give a full account of Aquinas's theory of action here. Our present focus is why a principle of knowledge must be internal to it, and the character of this knowledge. In his question on the nature of voluntary acts, Aquinas writes:

It is essential to the voluntary act that its principle be within the agent, together with some knowledge of the end. Now knowledge of the end is twofold; perfect and imperfect. Perfect knowledge of the end consists in not only apprehending the thing which is the end, but also in knowing it under the aspect of the end and the means to that end. And such knowledge belongs to none but the rational nature. (ST I-II 6.2)

What does it mean to know one's end *qua* end, and the means in relation to it? The knowledge that agents have when acting voluntarily, of their end in acting, and the means in relation to the end, is connected to the capacity for deliberation, since “the fact that man is master of his actions is due to his being able to deliberate about them” (ST I-II 6.).

The knowledge that is internal to human acts is the sort of knowledge that is at least potentially connected to deliberation.⁸

Aquinas follows Aristotle in thinking we only deliberate about the means to our ends. This has been characterized as a kind of instrumentalism (Vogler 2009), but this classification is misleading insofar as instrumentalism is often associated with a so-called instrumental principle of reasoning, a principle Aquinas does not recognize. Practical deliberation is restricted to means because such an activity presupposes a tendency towards an end that is not yet fully realized; in absence of this, there is nothing to deliberate about, and no function for deliberation to serve. Practical reason generally is distinguished from theoretical reason by its end. Practical reason aims to realize living well (the universal good) through action; theoretical reason aims at knowing the truth. Indeed, truth and living well function as constitutive principles that structure deliberation, judgment, and choice.

Aquinas thinks that truth is not simply about the way things are but the way things are in relation to the intellect. So, to believe or judge some proposition, *p*, just is to take *p* as true. This means that if one deliberates about whether to believe or judge that *p*, one deliberates about whether *p* is true, or, whether it is the case that *p*. The activity of theoretical deliberation, judgment, and belief is unintelligible without reference to the truth; truth is the principle that both defines and measures intellectual activity. For this reason, Aquinas says that truth is that towards which the intellect tends by its nature.

A similar point holds about practical deliberation. Just as the question about what to believe is transparent to the question about what is true, so also the question about what to do is transparent to the question about what it is good to pursue. When we deliberate about what to do, we are thinking about how to realize what we (rationally) desire.⁹ So, just as the intellect naturally orients us to the truth, the will naturally orients us to the good. The notion of truth and good as constitutive principles of intellect and will should not be understood psychologically, but metaphysically. We should understand them as both defining and measuring the nature of the activity of intellect and will, such that one cannot be engaged in these activities without being ordered to these ends. One can be ordered to an end without consciously thinking about that end, or even being “guided” by it in any important sense.

To further appreciate the restriction of practical deliberation to means, we should consider that in human life, actions are typically connected in such a way that what typically explains one action is another action. For instance, suppose we find someone sitting at her desk, and note that she is typing the letter “a”; We may ask her a series of “Why?” questions about what she does that elicit the following responses:

- Because I am typing the word “action.”
- Because I am typing a sentence about action.
- Because I am making an argument about action explanation.
- Because I am writing an essay about action and practical reason.

Michael Thompson has called this form of explanation “naïve rationalization;” what focus on it makes clear is that human actions typically have a part-whole or means-end form that exhibits a familiar teleological nexus: A in order to B, B in order to C, C in order to D. So what looks like an end at one part of the order, looks like a means in another.

Just as in the explanation of the movements of any living thing, here too we see the not yet realized future (a completed essay on action) informs the present action (moving of fingers on a keyboard) and makes it intelligible. However, in this case there is no natural tendency that explains the connection between the elements of the teleological nexus.

The only non-accidental connection between typing the letter “a” and completing an essay on action is a principle of practical knowledge: self-knowledge of the end one has decided on rational grounds to pursue and the means chosen to realize it. Only such a principle of self-knowledge can unite the disparate elements of a human action and make it into one action in progress. Knowledge of one’s reasons and knowledge of what one is doing are inseparable, since “ends are the reasons why one wills means” (*QDM* 2.2).

Such knowledge is characterized by Aquinas as *perfect* by contrast to the knowledge of an end possessed by a mere animal in acting. An animal sees what it is after and the means necessary to attain it too. What an animal lacks is deliberative choice. In order to decide or act for reasons, an agent has to operate under some general knowledge of its own good – of what it is to live well, or be happy. For Aquinas, the explanation of someone typing the letter “a” ultimately depends for its *full* intelligibility upon a look to this much wider context – the context of the agent’s knowledge of her life generally and the ends towards which it is presently progressing. Whether this life in progress is good or bad depends upon whether it is well-ordered, whether one pursues the right objects, for the right ends, and in the right circumstances, and from the right dispositions. How can we judge whether such conditions hold? For Aquinas, there must be an ultimate end or reason by reference to which all other ends are in some sense a means; without such an ultimate end, it would be impossible to rationally criticize any decision. Such criticism implicitly carries with it the idea that there is some ultimate measure, an architectonic end. This end is happiness or living well. There is no higher end for practical deliberation to seek, and all deliberation is good or bad insofar as it helps to realize it.

This conception of how to live – the universal good or happiness – is the formal object of the will and therefore the starting point of practical deliberation; whatever we wish for or choose is ultimately done with at least implicit reference to it. Without this intentionality of a specifically rational form of desire, the distinction between sense and rational desire becomes untenable.

That we are ordered in our actions, through the exercise of will, to happiness is necessary. We do not deliberate about this end, because deliberation presupposes an end, something wanted and not yet attained. Without this starting point, practical thought and reasoning isn’t so much as possible. We can think of happiness functioning as a constitutive principle of the explanation of action: it both defines an act of will and measures it. An act is properly human if it tends to the universal good or happiness. An act is a good human act if it succeeds in hitting this target – if it is an instance of living well or happiness.

The parallels between this and self-motion more broadly understood are apparent. The general schema of self-motion outlined earlier states that one vital movement is explained by its being a part or phase of another vital movement, and that what ultimately explains the whole nexus is the thing’s form – the fact that the movements are movements of a specific kind of living thing. The same general schema fits the explanation of human action. What makes human action a unique form of self-constitution is that the constitutive end that defines and measures it – living well, or happiness – must be self-consciously known by the agent in acting. As rational animals we determine ourselves to act in particular ways in light of our general conception of how to live (our general conception of the good life, or human happiness). We have the capacity to see the general in the particular, and this is the ground of our practical judgments and choices.¹⁰

To forestall a potential objection, this general conception of how to live well is not a blueprint one strives to realize over time. To the contrary, this general conception is constantly under revision, in ways large and small, in light of one’s changing circumstances and one’s history of mistakes. Aquinas certainly allows that for many, this general

conception is unreflective, vague, full of holes and contradictions, and in important respects false. To make sense of this, Aquinas draws a distinction between formal and material conceptions of happiness. Formally, happiness is the object of will, the “universal good.” Everyone has to operate under some material conception of happiness, but in order to have a correct conception, a truthful vision of the good human life, one has to develop the virtues – stable dispositions of thought, action, and feeling that enable us to act according to our nature, which is to say, so as to attain human happiness. There is no conception of goodness of will apart from virtue, for Aquinas. Without virtue, we cannot judge or choose well.

VII

At the same time that intellect and will are vital operations, ways by which we move ourselves to our ends, they are also rational powers. Among other things, this means they are self-conscious or self-determined powers. I determine myself to judge that p , based on reasons that I accept for believing that p is true. I determine myself to Φ , based on reasons that I accept for thinking that Φ will help me to live well. I accept reasons, in either case, based on principles. But any principles that determine right reasoning will be grounded in what Aquinas calls “first principles,” which are given by nature, and are con-naturally known to us. Such principles are “the starting points” of reasoning, meaning that they lay out the conditions of rational intelligibility as such. A *very brief* explanation of such principles will help us to see how reason, freedom, and nature are, for Aquinas, essentially interrelated.

In theoretical reason, the first principle is the principle of non-contradiction (PNC): it is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong to the same thing, at the same time, and in the same respect (*Metaph.* IV, 6, 1001b13-14). This principle (PNC) is a basic condition for the intelligibility of theoretical reasoning and judgment. Whatever can be thought or judged must be in accordance with this principle.

The first principle of practical reason (FPPR) is that good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided. Just as one cannot judge something as being and not being at the same time, place, and respect, so one cannot choose and not choose something while considering it in the same respect and at the same time. Practical reasons exclude their practical contradictionaries just as theoretical reasons exclude theirs. And just as the principle of non-contradiction has to do with being, or what is, the FPPR has to do with the nature of what can be striven for, possessed, or realized so as to fulfill a human being: the universal good or happiness.¹¹

The first principle of practical reason gives a determinate sense to the concept of practical intelligibility (to the special sense of the question “Why?” and what can count as an intelligible response to it that will be recognized and accepted by others). Something is good if it is such as to be pursued by a subject through the use of reason; something is a practical reason if it speaks in favor of realizing some end that is apprehended as good. A first principle also gives us a sense of the intelligibility of the concept of practical reasoning and practical inference. Practical reasoning serves to pursue and preserve the good through the use of one’s own powers, and to avoid what is harmful to it.

The first principle of practical reason is formal, but it needs to be filled out in a way that is not formal. The power of practical reason in operation always directs a rational animal towards the goods of its own form of life, and so any application of the principle would depend on the ends that constitute the specific life form in question. Aquinas argues that practical reason is naturally apt to know these ends, and the will is naturally apt to seek

them. Furthermore, it is apt to know them in a practical way, to desire to realize them through the use of its own powers. These further determinations of practical reason are what Aquinas calls the precepts of the natural law, and each precept corresponds to a basic human good. Although the first principle of practical reason is to pursue the universal good or happiness, good is tied to specific being or form. And so the practical good will be a species relative concept – it stands in for what constitutes *human* happiness.¹²

On Aquinas's view, it is not a cosmic accident that every human community has developed practices and institutions that attempt to preserve (some version of) the goods of health, family life, political community, knowledge, friendship, and so on. The grasp of these ends as worthy of pursuit does not require special instruction or theory; our grasp of them is internal to the experience of being a human. Aquinas calls this sort of knowledge of human form *connatural*, noting that we are inclined to it by nature, just in virtue of living a characteristically human sort of life. This general practical self-knowledge of human form structures practical deliberation by supplying it with common ends that are naturally and practically intelligible to us. We determine what to do based on our pursuit of these ends, according some general conception of how we ought to live. To do this well, we need to acquire the virtues, most especially the virtue of practical wisdom, which perfects our ability to judge what we ought to do in the ever-changing circumstances of life.

VIII

Constitutivism locates the source of practical normativity in features constitutive of rational agency, and rests on the concept of a constitutive norm – a norm that is internal to a thing such that it constitutes the nature of the thing, and in so doing, provides an internal measure of the thing's excellence or defect.

In this essay, I have argued that in Aquinas happiness functions as the constitutive norm or principle of human action. To show this, first I located Aquinas's conception of action within his broader account of self-motion, where form functions as a constitutive principle of vital movement and activity. A living thing constitutes itself in accordance with its form. A human person, unlike other living things, has a self-consciously, self-constituted form of life. Properly human acts are those over which we exercise a kind of rational control through the exercise of practical judgment and choice. In judging and choosing, a human person strives to realize “the universal good” or one’s general conception of the good or happy life. In acting in the characteristically human way, we are necessarily ordered towards our general practical knowledge of this end. For Aquinas, every human act is *moral*, it either exemplifies a happy life or it doesn’t. To put the same point in the language of contemporary constitutivism, to act voluntarily is to pursue happiness through the activity of practical intellect and will – we cannot cease to be ordered towards this end without thereby ceasing to act in the way characteristic of man. In this way, happiness functions as a constitutive principle of action in the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

I want to close by considering the case for contemporary engagement with and further development of Aquinas's view. First, well-known criticisms of constitutivism, such as the schmagency objection (Enoch 2006), exploit a weakness in many contemporary theories that is absent from Aquinas's view. For Aquinas, happiness as a constitutive principle is a metaphysical commitment about rational capacities and the structure of practical deliberation, rather than a claim about anyone's individual psychology. No one has to endorse or express a personal commitment to happiness in order for Aquinas's theory to be true.

Second, contemporary work too often pits theories of practical reason against theories of moral realism (Korsgaard 2009a). One benefit of turning to Aquinas is that it helps to

expose this presentation as a false dichotomy. On the view I have been sketching here, the point and purpose of human life is happiness. I have noted that for Aquinas, a happy life is one realized in accordance with the constitutive principles of our shared nature – of the real ends that constitute living well for a human person. Human nature is the ultimate ground of truth claims in practical philosophy, and the ultimate ground of whether a choice is good or bad. Insofar as what happiness consists in is determined in accordance with natural first principles of human nature, it is grounded in an objective reality – the reality of the kind of thing we are. However, Aquinas does not adopt the model of applied theoretical knowledge attributed to the moral realist; we do not know ourselves as objects and then apply this knowledge to our actions. Rather, *practical self-knowledge* of our nature determines the structure of good practical deliberation and correct choice. We might call this view a kind of *practical realism*, and oppose it to the dogmatic realism and constructivism that are too often presented as our only theoretical options. Attention to Aquinas shows us that there is a third way in need of further articulation and defense.

Finally, the reason to turn to Aquinas is that it shows us how we might overcome the problematic dualism between reason and nature. As we have already discussed, Kant worried that if practical reason served a natural end, reason could not have its own purpose, end, or use. Attention to Aquinas helps to raise the opposite worry; that without a constitutive end that defines and measures its operation as a vital power of a living thing, practical deliberation can have no internal measure and ultimate standard. For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, deliberation must have starting points or first principles. For Aquinas, this consists in rational knowledge of and desire for the common ends and goods of human life generally. Far from not giving reason enough to do, these first principles define the activity and operation of practical deliberation itself: to realize these ends in a well-ordered way – i.e. to realize a good, happy, human life. Aquinas gives us the resources to ground ethics in action theory in a way that fits with the Neo-Aristotelian conception of virtue ethics, a theory that places the concept of life at the center of ethics. Such a theory promises to help us reconcile practical normativity with natural normativity, and thereby helps to place the human person in nature, rather than as something living rather strangely outside of it.

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Notes

1. I take this example from Makin (1989).
2. Analogous terms share no common definition, but do manifest proportionality and these similarities between senses of the term make their common name no accident. In order to understand an analogous term we must not seek a common definition but consider its homonymous manifestations and appreciate the similarities and differences between them. For a more detailed analysis, see Frey and Frey (2017).
3. God is alive for Aquinas (in fact, God is most fully alive, for Aquinas), but doesn't have parts and doesn't move in the sense outlined here. So in whatever sense God determines himself to His own act, this must respect the fact that God is never merely potentially in act, but always and necessarily so self-determined. I will pass over this complication here, since this paper does not

address Aquinas's views about God, or his views about the analogy of being that allow us to speak intelligently about God.

4. For a recent account of self-motion that also draws on Aquinas, see Boyle and Lavin (2008). For a recent account of natural normativity, see Foot (2001).
5. I will not attempt here to engage in a metaphysical analysis of this, as the metaphysics in question are difficult and subject to scholarly disputes. The point is that we must identify some principle here, and to see how it functions as a constitutive principle or norm.
6. Aquinas would not agree with all that Korsgaard (2009b) says about constitutive principles. For instance, he sees no need for a "guiding requirement."
7. For a contemporary defense of this position, see Anscombe (2005).
8. Of course, the deliberation can be merely potential or habitual and dispositional. Deliberation does not always pick out an actual mental process that takes place prior to acting. We can grasp the deliberative structure of an action without having to refer to something "in the mind."
9. We also choose actions because we think that they avoid some evil, but avoiding evil is just another way to maintain or preserve one's good.
10. It is this ability to see the general in the particular that makes the knowledge "perfect." Aquinas obviously does not think the knowledge that agents have of their actions is perfected until they acquire practical wisdom.
11. My understanding of the first principles of practical reason is deeply indebted to Flannery (2001).
12. For further discussion of this point, see Frey (2018a, 2018b).

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