

Good Reasons for Acting: Towards Human Flourishing

Giulia Codognato

University of Trieste and University of Udine

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show that if and only if agents are motivated to act by good reasons for acting, they flourish, since, in so doing, they consciously act in accordance with their nature through virtuous actions. I offer an account of what good reasons for acting consist of reconsidering Aquinas' natural inclinations. Based on a critical analysis of Anjum and Mumford's work on dispositions in analytic metaphysics, I argue, *contra Hume's law*, that Aquinas' natural inclinations show that metaphysics is foundational for ethics. I claim that agents flourish as human beings if and only if they consciously act in accordance with natural inclinations. Natural inclinations naturally tend towards goods that depend on the metaphysical structure of human nature, by virtue of which agents have some powers that they should actualise in order to flourish. Intellect and will are the rational powers that distinguish human beings from other living beings. The will naturally desires what is good. If the will, through the input of the intellect, desires what is genuinely good for human beings according to their nature, it also directs the other powers to their own actualisation. Natural inclinations do not strictly necessitate agents to act in accordance with them, because, by virtue of their rational powers, agents should also recognise that they have a reason for acting in accordance with them. Thus, I will suggest that we can best appreciate the importance of natural inclinations from the first-person perspective.

Keywords: Dispositions, Human flourishing, Hume's law, Reasons for acting.

1. Introduction

According to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, flourishing for human beings means to actualise the potentialities that they have by virtue of their nature. But what makes human beings flourish? I will reply to this question reconsidering Aquinas' theory of natural law and natural inclinations (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 94) in the contemporary debate in analytic metaphysics.¹ I will argue that only good

¹ Although I acknowledge that Aquinas' account is indebted to Aristotle, I will refer here only to the Thomistic perspective, because I believe that Aquinas' natural inclinations

reasons for acting allow agents to flourish as human beings: good reasons for acting are those which motivate agents to consciously act in accordance with their nature through virtuous actions. In so doing, agents actualise their potentialities—that is, they flourish—as human beings.

Thomistic natural law theory is still present in the contemporary analytic debate on practical reason (e.g., Finnis 1980, 1983, 1998; Lisska 1996; McInerney 1992, 1997). However, it is often assumed that Aquinas' theory of natural law is challenged by *Hume's law* (e.g., Finnis 1980, 1983, 1998). According to *Hume's law*, it is not possible to derive prescriptive or normative conclusions—about 'ought'—from descriptive or non-normative premises—about 'is'—(Hume 2007a, book 3, part 1, sect. 1: 302). In the contemporary debate, *Hume's law* has implied the conviction that there is a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, what belongs to the realm of facts and metaphysics, and, on the other hand, what belongs to the realm of normativity, namely value.

In this paper, critically considering Anjum and Mumford's (2018) account, I will show that Aquinas' conception can exhibit the link between metaphysics and ethics that has been broken since *Hume's law*. I will argue that metaphysics is necessary for accounting for reasons for acting in ethics and that Aquinas' ethics is based on a metaphysical framework: 'ought' is to be understood as the actualisation of the potentialities that agents have because of their nature.² Indeed, by virtue of their nature, human beings have some powers—the powers of the soul—whereby they incline to realise some of the possible paths they can take, that is, they are open to perfect their nature through their agency. This means that among the many things that agents have the possibility to do, only a subset of them are actions that agents ought to do, by virtue of their powers. Moreover, in order to actualise their potentialities, agents should recognise in their concrete experience that they have certain powers, and they should be motivated to act in accordance with them.³

In this paper, firstly (section 2), I will examine *Hume's law* following Anjum and Mumford's (2018) reconstruction and critique of the two world's traditional modalities—pure contingency and necessity. Opposing to the two traditional world modalities, they propose to account for dispositions showing the existence of a third modality, the dispositional one. Anjum and Mumford argue that the dispositional modality makes it possible to recognise metaphysics as foundational for ethics. Secondly (section 3), after having analysed Anjum and Mumford's ethical account, I will criticise it. Indeed, even if I recognise that Anjum and Mumford have the merit of having further revitalised the consideration of potentiality in analytic metaphysics and ethics, I also believe that their view has some critical points. In particular, I disagree with their critique of Aquinas. Thus, considering

allow to account for good reasons for acting referring both to some normative criteria that are shared by all human beings by virtue of their nature, and to the first-person point of view in human agency.

² This account is based on Anscombe's critique of *Hume's law* and of the notion of 'ought' implied by it (Anscombe 1958a, 1958b). According to Anscombe (1958a), 'ought' denotes the characteristics that it is good for human beings to 'have' in order to flourish.

³ According to Anscombe (1957), to determine whether an act is a properly human act—for which an agent is responsible—it is necessary to identify the reasons for acting that motivate agents to act in a certain way. So, agents act on the basis of what they consider as a good to be desired as an end to be reached. In this way, Anscombe emphasises the relevance of the first-person point of view in human agency.

Aquinas' account, I intend to show that the dispositional modality is not satisfactory. So (section 4), I will examine Aquinas' account of natural law and natural inclinations (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 94), in order to show, finally (section 5), that, if and only if agents act in accordance with their natural inclinations, they develop a virtuous conduct and, in so doing, they flourish as human beings, that is, they actualise the powers they have by virtue of their nature. Natural inclinations do not express agents' psychological preferences but consist in agents' naturally tending to the perfection and the actualisation of their human nature as a good to be accomplished. Indeed, natural inclinations naturally tend towards goods that depend on the metaphysical structure of human nature, by virtue of which human beings have some powers, that is, *the powers of the soul*. Intellect and will are the rational powers that distinguish human beings from other living beings. The will, that is a rational appetite, has as its natural object what is good. If the will, through the input of the intellect, desires what is genuinely good for human beings according to their nature, then it also directs the other human powers to their own actualisation. Natural inclinations do not strictly necessitate agents to act in accordance with them, because, by virtue of their rational powers, agents should recognise what is the appropriate way to act in accordance with their nature, and they should also be motivated to act in this way, that is, they should recognise that acting in accordance with their natural inclinations is a reason for acting for them. Thus, I will suggest that we can best appreciate the importance of natural inclinations from the first-person perspective.

2. Potentiality: Between Pure Contingency and Necessity?

In contemporary analytic metaphysics, potentiality has been reconsidered within the debate on dispositions, powers, and capacities (Mumford 1998; Molnar 2003; Marmodoro 2010; Groff and Greco 2013). Anjum and Mumford (2018) have reconsidered potentiality through the notion of *disposition*.

According to Anjum and Mumford (2018: 145-46, 156-57), metaphysics and ethics have been regarded as two distinct fields since Hume: what has value is separated from what is in the world, that is, from facts and metaphysics. They argue that in Hume's view there is no place for value in accounting for the natural world, because *Hume's law* implies that accounting for what there is in the world is neutral in regard to what ought to be, namely to what is to be valued.

However, according to Anjum and Mumford, Hume's account is not metaphysically neutral. Indeed, it requires a metaphysical thesis, which entails endorsing a form of modal dualism that excludes value from the beginning (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 146). In this respect, the authors claim that according to the form of modal dualism common since Hume all things are related to two modalities: anything can be either purely contingent—matter of facts—or necessary—relation of ideas—(Hume 2007b, sect. IV, part I: 18). By 'modality' Anjum and Mumford refer to the modal values, that is, how things can be or how things should be (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 3). For Hume, modal values concern contingency and necessity: what is contingent concerns matters of facts, that refer to the natural world; what is necessary concerns relations of ideas, that refer to what is *a priori*, that is, the mathematical sciences (e.g., $2+2=4$).

Anjum and Mumford intend to challenge modal dualism (Anjum and Mumford 2018: Ch. 1). They argue that the two standard modalities do not account for what is more than purely contingent, but less than necessary, namely tendency, that

concerns what tends towards its outcome, but without necessitating it. According to the authors, there are lots of examples that manifest the existence of tendencies in metaphysics, logic, epistemology, and ethics. In this respect, they claim that, in order to account for tendency, we have to admit a third modality between pure contingency and necessity. This third modality is the dispositional one.

Anjum and Mumford claim not only that there is also the dispositional modality, but that the dispositional modality is the modality of all natural causal processes, that is, it is the ontological basis of everything that happens in nature (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 5, 9, 22, 149). Indeed, Anjum and Mumford claim that the dispositional modality involves causation, which refers to the exercise of causal powers (Anjum and Mumford, 2018: 147), that are the sources and the bearers of the dispositional modality (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 8-9). In this respect, it is worth noting that Anjum and Mumford use the terms ‘power’, ‘disposition’, ‘potentiality’, ‘potency’, ‘capacity’ as synonyms (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 8). Anjum and Mumford claim that the only properties that there are, are the dispositional or powerful ones: dispositional properties are properties that tend towards their manifestation, and the effect may or may not occur, without being either purely contingent or necessary (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 8-9).⁴

Therefore, Anjum and Mumford claim that their account of powers is contrary to Hume’s view, according to which there is no necessity in nature and to affirm the existence of powers in nature means to account for necessity in nature (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 148). Indeed, Hume argues that what happens in nature is contingent. Agents cannot assume that the future will be like the past, because in the natural world there is only pure contingency between one event and another: what agents think is a cause of an effect is just the result of regularity and habit (Hume 2007b, sect. V, part I: 32; sect. VII, part II: 54).

Moreover, Anjum and Mumford recognise that even if many defenders of powers claim that powers exist, they argue that powers are necessities that can be subject to impediments or interferences. Instead, according to Anjum and Mumford, necessity should be necessary in all cases. So, they claim that it is by virtue of the dispositional modality that dispositions are really dispositions, in that they concern what is more than contingent, but less than necessary (Anjum and Mumford 2018: viii).

In the light of this, Anjum and Mumford want to demonstrate that dispositions play a central role in ethics, that is dispositional in all respects (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 146). In this way, they want to show that ethics cannot be separated from metaphysics.

3. Looking for the Place of Value: No Ethics Without Metaphysics

In view of this, Anjum and Mumford intend to show that the dispositional modality encompasses the ethical agency of human beings (Anjum and Mumford 2018: Ch. 9). So, they attempt to demonstrate that the key concepts of ethics are to be considered in a dispositional way, namely as more than purely contingent and less than necessary. Therefore, they analyse in dispositional terms the notions that they identify as preconditions for ethics: (i) moral responsibility, (ii) agency, (iii) intentionality, (iv) autonomy, (v) normativity, (vi) value.

⁴ See Anscombe 1981: a cause produces its effect, but without necessitating it.

The authors firstly consider (i) moral responsibility (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 147-50). Moral responsibility is primarily and paradigmatically a causal notion, because being responsible for something means being its cause. However, for an agent to be held responsible for an action, on the one hand, she must be free to do it or not to do it, and therefore she cannot be necessitated to do it; on the other hand, there must be a stronger connection than pure contingency between action and effect, because, otherwise, anything could happen. So, the connection between the cause and the effect should exhibit the dispositional modality. For there to be moral responsibility, there must be an object of ethical evaluation that succeeds in causing an outcome, but without necessitating it. However, the object of ethical evaluation must have more than a purely contingent connection to that outcome, that is, it must have at least a disposition to produce it. Thus, moral responsibility displays the dispositional modality, because being responsible for something means being its cause.

In view of this, Anjum and Mumford refer to the notions of ‘agency’ and ‘normativity’, that are constitutively implied in moral responsibility. Indeed, for there to be moral responsibility, on the one hand, there must be an agent who exercises this responsibility, because she constitutes the cause of the outcome through her agency; on the other hand, there must be something that is recognised as a criterion for human action.

Anjum and Mumford argue that (ii) agency implies that an agent is responsible for what she has caused through her actions, since most of the time an agent is able to exercise her causal powers deliberately and freely in order to allow an effect to occur (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 150-51). According to the authors, the terms ‘deliberately’ and ‘freely’ lead to two notions that define what agency consists of: (iii) intentionality (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 151-53) and (iv) autonomy (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 153-54), which are two dispositional notions that concern the exercise of the causal powers of the agent as a powerful actor. Thus, according to Anjum and Mumford, intentionality is a power, or a capacity, of human beings, and it exhibits the dispositional modality. Indeed, an agent can aim to do only what is less than necessary, because agents cannot aim to do intentionally something that is already necessitated. Moreover, intentional agency involves more than pure contingency, because, when an agent acts with an intention, she intends a more or less specific outcome among all those that are possible. So, the intention is aimed at a series of actions that are a limited subset of all possible actions. Afterwards, Anjum and Mumford refer to autonomy. For them, autonomy is a dispositional notion, because an agent cannot be autonomous if her movements are necessitated nor if they are purely contingent: “to be free you must be both able to do something, an ability that complete contingency between desire and behaviour would disallow, but you must also be able not to do so, which necessity would disallow” (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 153). Anjum and Mumford claim that they are aware that they have not offered a complete account of human agency, but they also claim that this was not their purpose (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 154). In this respect, I will show later how Anjum and Mumford’s account of human agency could be extended.

According to Anjum and Mumford, for there to be moral responsibility, in conjunction with the notion of ‘agency’, is required also a second notion, namely (v) ‘normativity’ (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 154-56). Indeed, for there to be moral responsibility, there must be a normative criterion for human agency. The authors intend to account for this highlighting the dispositional modality of normativity.

Indeed, ‘ought-to-be’ requires something that is less than necessary: the fact that an agent should do X, does not necessitate X. However, ‘ought-to-be’ requires something that is more than purely contingent: the fact that an agent should do X, means that X is more than a mere possibility. This is so, because among the many things that an agent can do, only a subset of them are actions that the agent ought to do.

Anjum and Mumford argue that in order for normativity to have a foundation, there must be something that has (vi) value, that claims what ought-to-be, that is, there must be a criterion for normativity (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 156-158). The aim of the authors is to give value a place in the natural world trying to show that a dispositional theory of value is possible. So, they “offer a sketch for a theory that [...] might sound like a credible starting point” (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 157). To do this, Anjum and Mumford argue that value is neither entirely objective—value is not only a quality of an object and is not independent of agent’s mind—nor entirely subjective—value does not only lie in the mind of the agent. Indeed, referring to Martin’s (2008: Ch. 5) mutual manifestation framework, Anjum and Mumford argue that value consists in a mutual manifestation between the perceived object and the perceiving subject, where both are not passive—they are not waiting for a stimulus in order to be activated—but they are active in that they exercise their powers. In this way, both give rise to value. The world has the disposition to provoke a certain reaction and the perceiving subject has the disposition to have a certain reaction: “there has to be some feature of the world towards which perceivers are disposed to respond favourably or unfavourably, valuing that feature positively or negatively” (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 158). Thus, value provides a normative criterion that it is not independent of the agent. Indeed, in order to act, the agent should recognise as motivating something to be actualised by her. So, according to Anjum and Mumford, “the upshot is that while we do not challenge Hume’s claim that you cannot *derive* an ought from an is, the right metaphysical basis at least makes value possible. Dispositions, it thus seems, are vital to ethics” (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 147, emphasis in original).

However, I believe that in order to account for value, Anjum and Mumford’s view should be extended identifying a basis for the causal powers of the agents. Indeed, recognising that agents have some powers also requires to account on the basis of what they have these powers. Moreover, even recognising that among all the possible actions that agents have the possibility to do, only a subset of them are actions that agents ought to do, requires finding a basis for the powers of the agents in order to identify which is the subclass of actions that fits human beings. I claim that a basis for the causal powers of the agents can be found in a theory of the human being as a substance like that of Aquinas. This will also allow us to challenge *Hume’s law* more deeply. Indeed, in this respect, I will argue that human nature provides the normative criteria for ethical human agency.

In this regard, it is worth noting that, in considering some historical accounts that have used the notion of ‘potentiality’, Anjum and Mumford claim that

the idea that nature contains tendencies towards certain effects is not new. But the further thought that such tendencies are to be understood as containing an irreducible *sui generis* dispositional modality might be. Powers tend towards their manifestations, on this view, and causes tend towards their effects in a way that cannot be reduced to the other familiar modalities of necessity and mere possibility, nor to simple statistical facts of regularity (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 24).

Anjum and Mumford also discuss Aquinas. They argue that his account was fundamental in the development of the metaphysics of causal powers (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 25). Indeed, Aquinas developed a credible account of what the action of powers consists of considering the role of tendency (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 36). However, according to Anjum and Mumford, Aquinas' reference to tendencies is superficial, because he considers tendencies not in dispositional terms, but as causal necessities with occasional impediments (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 37).

In the light of this, I think that the dispositional modality itself should raise some concerns. According to Anjum and Mumford, conditional necessity is not admissible, because if something were necessary, then it should be necessary regardless of the circumstances. I will criticise their point of view reconsidering Aquinas' account of natural inclinations, that depends on his conception of human being as a substance. Indeed, according to Aquinas, because of their human nature, agents have some powers—the *powers of the soul*—by virtue of which they are naturally inclined to act in certain ways. I will claim that, in order to flourish, agents are necessitated to act according to their natural inclinations, by virtue of which they naturally tend towards goods that depend on the metaphysical structure of human nature. However, they are not strictly necessitated to do so, because, in order to flourish, they should also be motivated to act in that way exercising their rational powers. Thus, I will also clarify what Aquinas means by 'powers'. In this respect, it is worth noticing that if Anjum and Mumford seem to refer to causal powers mainly in terms of efficient causes, Aquinas refers to powers mainly from a teleological point of view, insofar as they are directed to an end that enables agents to flourish by virtue of their nature.

4. Rethinking Aquinas' Natural Inclinations

The *locus classicus* of Aquinas' theory of natural law and natural inclinations is I-II, q. 94 in the *Summa Theologiae*. In order to understand Aquinas' account of natural inclinations, we should first consider his conception of human nature (Aquinas 2017: I, q. 76),⁵ from which follows his account of ethical human agency (Konyndyk De Young et al. 2009). Indeed, according to Aquinas, the first precept of the natural law is “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided [because] every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good” (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 94, a. 2), since the first thing that is apprehended by practical reason is 'good', as the first thing that is apprehended by theoretical reason is 'being'. In this respect, it is useful to refer to Aquinas' account of good, according to which 'good' indicates the desirability of something in that it is perfect and actualised (Aquinas 2017: I, q. 5, a. 1). So, good indicates the end towards which everything tends to actualise its nature. According to Aquinas, human beings can flourish actualising their powers through their agency. In this respect, Aquinas claims that every properly human action is for the sake of some end that seems good to the agent (*ratio boni*): “the object of the will is the end and the good. Therefore, all human actions must be for an end” (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 1, a. 1).

According to Aquinas, all human beings have in common the same substantial form, the rational soul; however, human beings are composed not only of the rational soul, that is proper only to human beings, but also of the material body, that is what human beings have in common with animals and other substances (Aquinas

⁵ For Aquinas' account of human nature, see also Aquinas 1968: 34-44.

2017, I, q. 76). So, human beings as substances are composed of form, namely the rational soul, and of matter, namely the material body: human nature—the *essentia* (or *quidditas*) of each human being—is composed of form and matter. The *essentia* is universal because all human beings are composed of form and matter. However, each human being constitutes a substance in herself, that is, she is endowed with her own individuality. The individuality of human beings is not conferred by the rational soul as such, but by the rational soul as it is united to the material body, by virtue of which human beings are placed in concrete reality.

Aquinas argues that, by virtue of their nature, human beings have some capacities or powers—the *powers of the soul*—that are the vegetative, sensitive, appetitive, locomotive, and intellectual powers (Aquinas 2017: I, qq. 77-89). The vegetative, sensitive, appetitive, and locomotive capacities primarily concern the material body of human beings, because they concern what they have in common with all living beings—such as the capacity to grow, to feed and to reproduce—and what they have in common with animals—such as the capacity to perceive through the senses, to move towards or away from that which they perceive, to desire that which gives pleasure to the senses and to move away from that which is harmful. Appetitive capacities also include the will, which, together with the intellect, constitutes the rational capacities, that is, the capacities that agents possess properly as human beings by virtue of the rational soul.

Vegetative, sensitive, locomotive, appetitive, and intellectual capacities are inter-related in that they all intervene in the lives of human beings as members of a species. Indeed, these capacities should be considered not only insofar as they enable the life of human beings, but mainly insofar as they contribute to their flourishing in accordance with their nature. So, “human beings are a distinctive sort of living thing with specific causal powers, that is, distinctive self-perfective powers” (Hacker-Wright 2021: 50). The intellect and will play a central role in human flourishing, because, as rational capacities, they are able to direct the other capacities. Indeed, according to Aquinas, human beings should act in accordance with their rational soul:

The first thing by which the body lives is the soul. And as life appears through various operations in different degrees of living things, that whereby we primarily perform each of all these vital actions is the soul. For the soul is the primary principle of our nourishment, sensation, and local movement; and likewise of our understanding (Aquinas 2017: I, q. 76, a. 1).

Let us now consider in more detail the intellect and will that agents possess by virtue of the rational soul. For Aquinas, even if intellect is one faculty, it has two different functions that are complementary: the theoretical and the practical (Aquinas 2017: I, q. 79, a. 11). According to Aquinas, practical rationality concerns human actions and how it is proper to human beings to act in order to flourish, that is, in order to realise and perfect their nature consciously actualising all their powers; ‘consciously’ because, from a theoretical point of view, “understanding our distinctive powers brings us to a more complete picture of our nature and what perfects that nature” (Hacker-Wright 2021: 45). So, the intellect—both the speculative and the practical—consists in the capacity for cognition, that is, the capacity to understand the world—including ourselves—and, consequently, to understand how it is possible to act and what is the best way to act among the possible alternatives. What is judged to be good by the intellect is presented to the will as the object of desire or appetite: “the will is moved by the intellect, otherwise than by itself. By

the intellect it is moved on the part of the object: whereas it is moved by itself, as to the exercise of its act, in respect of the end” (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 9, a. 3).

According to Aquinas, human beings should not act in view of any end that they consider to be good, but they should act in view of their flourishing, that consists in the realisation of all their capacities under the guidance of the rational ones: “in human actions, good and evil are predicated in reference to the reason; because [...] ‘the good of man is to be in accordance with reason,’ and evil is ‘to be against reason’. For that is good for a thing which suits it in regard to its form; and evil, that which is against the order of its form” (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 18, a. 5). So, among all the actions that agents can do only a subset of them are actions that, in order to flourish, agents should do by virtue of all the powers they have because of their nature. This means that, in order to flourish, agents should act in accordance with all their capacities under the guidance of their rational ones:

Good in general, which has the nature of an end, is the object of the will. Consequently, in this respect, the will moves the other powers of the soul to their acts, for we make use of the other powers when we will. For the end and perfection of every other power, is included under the object of the will as some particular good: and always the art or power to which the universal end belongs, moves to their acts the arts or powers to which belong the particular ends included in the universal end (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 9, a.1).

In this perspective, the role of the first-person point of view in acting is not diminished, but quite the contrary. Indeed, by virtue of their rational powers, agents should recognise what are their powers and they should be motivated to act in accordance with them in order to flourish:

The principles of intellectual knowledge are naturally known. In like manner the principle of voluntary movements must be something naturally willed. Now this is good in general, to which the will tends naturally, as does each power to its object; and again it is the last end, which stands in the same relation to things appetible, as the first principles of demonstrations to things intelligible: and, speaking generally, it is all those things which belong to the willer according to his nature. For it is not only things pertaining to the will that the will desires, but also that which pertains to each power, and to the entire man. Wherefore man wills naturally not only the object of the will, but also other things that are appropriate to the other powers; such as the knowledge of truth, which befits the intellect; and to be and to live and other like things which concern the natural well-being; all of which are included in the object of the will, as so many particular goods (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 10, a.1).

In the light of the analysis of Aquinas’ account of human nature and human powers, it is now possible to consider his conception of natural law and natural inclinations (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 94, a. 2). According to Aquinas, natural inclinations are not something that agents may or may not have, but they are constitutively proper to human beings. Indeed, natural inclinations consist in agents’ naturally tending towards goods grounded in powers that agents have by virtue of their nature. In this respect, Aquinas claims that

every appetite is only of something good. The reason of this is that the appetite is nothing else than an inclination of a person desirous of a thing towards that thing. Now every inclination is to something like and suitable to the thing inclined. Since,

therefore, everything, inasmuch as it is being and substance, is a good, it must needs be that every inclination is to something good (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 8, a. 1).

Aquinas identifies three inclinations to good proper to human beings from which spring the precepts of natural law and that are derived from the more general precept: “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided” (Aquinas 2017: I-II, q. 94, a. 2):

- (1) The first is shared by all substances and consists in the natural inclination that all substances have for the conservation of their own being;
- (2) The second concerns the nature that human beings have in common with animals, that is, the natural inclination to sexual reproduction, education of the offspring, etc.;
- (3) The third is proper only to human beings and consists in the natural inclination to knowing the truth and to living in society.

In this respect, Aquinas claims that the order of the precepts of the natural law depends on the order of the natural inclinations. The first and second inclinations concern the powers that agents have by virtue of the material body, that is, the sensitive-appetitive capacities, and the third inclination concerns the powers that agents have by virtue of the rational soul, that is, the intellect and the will. Agents’ sensitive-appetitive and rational capacities are interrelated because human beings are composed of the union of the material body and the rational soul, and natural inclinations exhibit “the directedness of human nature towards a certain set of possible structures of appetitive and cognitive capacities” (De Anna 2020: 111). Thus, although only the third inclination is proper to human beings by virtue of their form, also the first and second inclinations are human. They concern the human good, because they can be pursued consciously, namely under the guidance of the rational capacities.

So, the first and the second inclinations concern the material body of human beings, because they concern agents’ sensitive-appetitive capacities, that

relate me as a concrete particular to other concrete particular as such; indeed, they relate me to some of them as good. [...] Our bodies respond to what we perceive through the senses; there is physical change in us that responds to the perception of something desired or some threat to something desired. [...] The appetites are a power to go for the good as it is manifest in the sensible world (Hacker-Wright 2021: 51).

Thus, sensitive-appetitive capacities have an “independent capacity to grasp and present particular sensed things as good; reason cannot, on its own, relate to particular sensed objects as good. That is, there would no be reason to go for anything sensed apart from an appetite for it. Reason can, however, take an independent stand on what the appetites present to it as good or bad” (Hacker-Wright 2021: 52). Therefore, sensitive-appetitive capacities can be ordered by rational capacities, that are proper only to human beings and that concern the third inclination.

The way in which human beings act according to their natural inclinations depends on the way in which their sensitive-appetitive and rational capacities are structured, that is, it depends on their first-person point of view. Natural inclinations do not strictly necessitate agents to actualise them, because they require agents to recognise the actualisation of them as motivating—a reason for acting—namely as something that has value and that can be perfected by agents through their agency. Thus, the fact that agents are motivated to act according to their

natural inclinations, by virtue of which they naturally tend towards what is good, depends on how their sensitive-appetitive and rational powers are structured and whether they are structured in a correct way.

5. Good Reasons for Acting

Indeed, not everything an agent considers a good to be pursued is a genuine good. An agent can be motivated to act by a genuine good or by an apparent good, since not all reasons that explain an action and that are considered as justificatory by an agent are good reasons for acting.⁶ An agent will be motivated to act by good reasons for acting only if she recognises the genuine good as a good to be pursued and if she tends to the fulfilment of that good, that is, if she acts following her natural inclinations that naturally tend towards what is good in accordance with human nature.

Therefore, not everything an agent considers good is a genuine good. In order to account for good reasons for acting, an agent cannot simply act according to what seems good to her. Indeed, good reasons for acting need both an objective side and a subjective side.⁷ A reason needs an objective side, because it implies a fact, namely that a certain object has a certain property at a certain time; it needs a subjective side, because it must be practical, that is, it must motivate the agent, who considers the fact in a certain way (De Anna 2020: 82). So, “a reason always implies both a content and an attitude towards that content” (De Anna 2020: 84). By ‘content’, is meant a description of states of affairs of the world. This means that a reason for acting is or is not consistent with states of affairs of the world (De Anna 2020: 84). Then, for an agent to consider a fact as a reason, she must have a belief about that fact, that is, she must see some value or goodness in that fact (De Anna 2020: 85). Furthermore, in order to be a reason, a fact must be linked to other facts in such a way that the resulting situation needs to be improved. Thus, in that situation there are unrealised but actualisable states of affairs, namely possibilities, that, if realised, allow the situation to be perfected. However, “these possibilities are not mere possibilities but *potentialities*, that is, possibilities the actualisation of which has a claim to be realised since it makes the situation better” (De Anna 2020: 85, emphasis in original). Finally, a fact will be a reason for an agent, if that agent is aware that she has the power to do something about the situation in which that fact is located (De Anna 2020: 88, 90).

In short, reasons for action imply that: (i) an agent sees reality as having some order in it, (ii) the order is seen by the agent as somehow incomplete, deficient and liable to be improved, and (iii) the agent sees herself as having the powers required to improve the partially existing order (De Anna 2020: 90).

Thus, good reasons for acting are relative to the genuine good, which is normative, because it concerns a potential situation that is actualisable by the agent

⁶ See MacIntyre 2016 for the distinction between apparent goods, “objects of desire”, and real goods, “genuine goods”.

⁷ This account stands in dialogue with the debate between Bernard Williams and John McDowell on internal and external reasons for acting. In short, according to internalism, a reason is such if agents are motivated to act by it (Williams 1981, 1995a, 1995b, 2001). Instead, according to externalism, there are reasons that agents must have, even if these reasons do not motivate agents to act (McDowell 1995).

in virtue of her powers and that should be recognised as actualisable by her. Therefore, there are correct and incorrect ways in which an agent can respond to facts. The agent's responsiveness depends on her first-person point of view, namely on her tendency to see the facts as having certain potentialities the actualisation of which would lead to an improvement of the situation in which the facts are involved. The agent's tendency implies both her sensitive-appetitive and rational capacities, that can be structured in a variety of correct or incorrect ways (De Anna 2020: 105). An agent should be able to understand whether her sensitive-appetitive and rational capacities are properly structured. To this end, the agent should be able to reflect on herself and on what is proper to the form of life to which she belongs (De Anna 2020: 106-108).

Therefore, 'good' holds together the objective and the subjective sides of reasons for acting: on the one hand, 'good' refers to all the facts and unrealised states of affairs that constitute some potentialities that can be actualised by an agent; on the other hand, good is practical, in that it implies that an agent sees some natural goodness that requires her intervention to be perfected (De Anna 2020: 94). So, value is "the result of interactions between a naturalistically conceived [...] world and the appetitive and cognitive structure of human subjects" (De Anna 2020: 80).

In the light of this, I think that it is possible to reconsider Aquinas' natural inclinations as agents' tendency to acquire and develop virtuous dispositions. Indeed, natural inclinations consist in the fact that, because of the powers that they have by virtue of human nature, agents tend towards their flourishing. In order to flourish, agents are necessitated to act in accordance with their natural inclinations. However, agents are not strictly necessitated to do so, because, by virtue of their rational capacities, they should also be motivated to consciously act in accordance with them. Indeed, in order to flourish, through the exercise of their rational capacities, human beings should recognise the actualisation of all their capacities as good, should desire it, and, finally, should act in accordance with that desire. In this way, they would be motivated to act by good reasons for acting. If agents are motivated to act by good reasons for acting and perform actions based on them, they develop a virtuous conduct, since they act in accordance with their nature: "the virtues are perfections of powers that characterize humans as agents, including both reason and desire: These are natural powers of human beings that characterize us in our pursuit of the good" (Hacker-Wright 2021: 44). So, it is only consciously actualising their capacities and desiring such actualisation that agents can flourish.⁸

6. Concluding Remarks

The aim of this paper has been to account for what enables human flourishing from a Thomistic perspective. The upshot has been to show that only good reasons for acting allow agents to flourish.

⁸ For example, normally, agents have a natural inclination to feed themselves. Imagine an agent who is fond of chocolate. If she eats chocolate every day from morning to night, then this will harm her. However, if the agent, by virtue of her rational capacities, understands that chocolate is not an appropriate food to eat all the time, because it is detrimental in large quantities, and becomes also motivated not to eat chocolate all the time, but only occasionally, then she will move towards her flourishing. Indeed, in this way, she has developed a good reason for acting that contributes to her flourishing.

The interesting account of Anjum and Mumford, while it has the merit of having further stimulated the reflection on potentiality, failed to disentangle itself from the Humean paradigm. In this respect, remind that Anjum and Mumford claim that “the upshot is that while we do not challenge Hume’s claim that you cannot *derive* an ought from an is, the right metaphysical basis at least makes value possible. Dispositions, it thus seems, are vital to ethics” (Anjum and Mumford 2018: 147, emphasis in original). Instead, in this paper, I wanted to show that Aquinas’ perspective challenges *Hume’s law* more deeply, as it enables us to recognise the metaphysical structure of human nature as foundational for ethics. Indeed, from a Thomistic point of view, good reasons for acting are only those that motivate agents to act according to their natural inclinations, which naturally tend towards some goods grounded in the powers that agents have by virtue of their nature. In order to flourish, it is necessary that agents act according to their natural inclinations. Indeed, if agents consciously act in accordance with their natural inclinations, they develop a virtuous conduct and, in so doing, they actualise the potentialities proper to their nature. However, they are not strictly necessitated to do so. Indeed, only when good reasons for acting are recognised as motivating by agents, they are able to flourish, since they actualise the powers proper to their nature by virtue of their rational powers.

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