
AQUINAS ON THREATS AND TEMPTATIONS

BY

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Abstract: Aquinas maintains that when we succumb to temptation our actions are wholly voluntary. When we give up a good in the face of a threat our actions are partly involuntary, but they are more voluntary than involuntary. I argue that when we succumb to temptation our actions can also be partly involuntary. I also defend my intuition that in some mixed cases our action is more involuntary than voluntary, and I show how Aquinas's psychological theory can explain this. Finally, I explain why it matters that actions fully in accordance with our reasons-responsive choices might not be fully voluntary.

There are some difficult cases that an adequate theory of the voluntary should explain. When we do something under duress to avoid a greater evil is that action voluntary? When we give in to a strong desire for something against our better judgment is that action voluntary?

Aquinas addresses himself to questions of this sort when he asks in the *Summa Theologica* whether our actions are voluntary when we act out of fear or concupiscence. The contrast between fear and concupiscence corresponds roughly to that between threats and temptations. In cases of fear or threats one is presented with the prospect of evil; in cases of concupiscence or temptation one is presented with the prospect of good. Analysts have thought by and large that threats can be coercive and diminish our freedom. In contrast, since at least some temptations are a subclass of offers, and offers are thought not to diminish our freedom, it might be concluded that temptations do not diminish our freedom. However, while it is true that giving in to temptation sometimes just is accepting an offer, describing it as giving in suggests that one engages in the action against one's better judgment. That is, a temptation differs from an ordinary offer in that according to one's better judgment the prospective good is accompanied by evil that outweighs it. And it might seem that we can give in to

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a temptation against our better judgment only if our action is not fully free or voluntary.¹

Aquinas answers that when we act out of fear, that is, when we react to a threat, our actions are mixed – they are partly voluntary and partly involuntary, but they are still more voluntary than involuntary (ST IaIIae Q6 a6). He is sometimes translated as asserting not that these actions are more voluntary than involuntary, but instead that these actions are voluntary rather than involuntary.² This suggests that he is rejecting Aristotle's claim that such actions are mixed and is offering an alternative account. But Aquinas is not rejecting Aristotle's claim that the actions are mixed.³ Compelling evidence that he is endorsing Aristotle's claim comes from the fact that he begins his response by saying that "it ought to be said, just as the philosopher says, that. . . actions of this sort which are done through fear are mixtures of the voluntary and involuntary."⁴ Since Aquinas asserts that it ought to be said that these actions are mixtures of the voluntary and the involuntary, he could not consistently assert that they are voluntary rather than involuntary.⁵

In contrast to the case of fear, Aquinas says that when we act out of concupiscence, that is, when we give in to temptation, our actions are in no way involuntary (ST IaIIae Q6 a7). But this assertion is problematic because he also asserts that antecedent passions, that is, passions influencing choice, diminish voluntariness (ST IaIIae Q77 a6):

Accordingly if we take passion as preceding the sinful act, it must diminish the sin: because the act is a sin in so far as it is voluntary and exists in us. Now a thing is called in us through reason and will: and therefore the more reason and will do anything of their own accord, and not through the impulse of passion, the more it is voluntary and exists in us. In this respect passion diminishes sin, in so far as it diminishes its voluntariness.

These assertions can be reconciled only if Aquinas has two different notions or aspects of voluntariness in mind. When he asserts that actions done from concupiscence are in no way involuntary, his point is that the actions are wholly in accordance with our will. There is nothing in our will at the moment of action that opposes them. Our action reflects our will. But when he asserts that antecedent passion diminishes voluntariness, his point is that our choice is not wholly in accordance with reason. Our will is not fully reflective of reason. To be fully voluntary, it would seem that an action would have to be wholly voluntary in both respects. Our choices must be wholly in accordance with reason and our action must be wholly in accordance with our will.⁶

In this paper I want to consider some questions that arise from an examination of Aquinas's account of the sort of involuntariness that arises from a lack of concordance between our will and our actions. I want to argue first that a more careful application of Aquinas's own

psychological theory reveals that an action arising from concupiscence can fail to be fully in accordance with our will in the same way that an action arising from fear can be partly voluntary and partly involuntary. Second, it seems that involuntariness comes in degrees, so that some mixed cases reflect more involuntariness than others. I am even tempted to the view, contrary to Aquinas, that there might be mixed cases in which our action is more involuntary than voluntary. Thus I will attempt to see whether his psychological theory can account for degrees of involuntariness and for the possibility of mixed cases in which the action is more involuntary than voluntary. There is little discussion in contemporary literature on degrees of involuntariness, and I think there is much to be learned by reflecting on the possibilities implicit in Aquinas's theory.

Aquinas's analysis of the case of fear is based upon his appropriation of Aristotle's example of the sailor who throws cargo overboard in a storm to prevent the feared greater evil of sinking. Aquinas maintains that the action of throwing the cargo overboard is more voluntary than involuntary by arguing that while the action is involuntary in a certain respect, it is voluntary simply or without qualification (ST IaIIae Q6 a6).⁷

Aquinas explains the distinction between an action's being voluntary or involuntary without qualification and its being voluntary or involuntary in a certain respect by appeal to a distinction between being without qualification and being in a certain respect. To be without qualification is to be in actuality. An action is in actuality and thus is without qualification when it is done here and now and under these individual conditions. Something that is only thought of and is not in actuality does not exist without qualification but is or exists only in a certain respect. Thus an action that is only considered apart from the actual conditions and is not carried out is or exists only in a certain respect.

Aquinas's position is that in the actual circumstances of the storm, the action of throwing the cargo overboard is voluntary without qualification. Although he does not state the point exactly this way, under the circumstances we choose to throw the cargo overboard. As Aristotle puts it, under the circumstances, throwing the cargo overboard is worthy of choice.⁸ If we were to consider the action of throwing the cargo overboard supposing that there were no storm, that is, if we were to consider the action of throwing the cargo overboard apart from the actual circumstances, it would not be worthy of choice. But since the action of throwing the cargo overboard supposing there is no storm is merely contemplated but not actual, it is or exists only in a certain respect, so that is why throwing the cargo overboard is said to be involuntary only in a certain respect.

It seems reasonable to understand Aquinas's distinction between actions that exist without qualification and those that exist only in a respect to amount to a distinction between actions that are actual and those that are merely hypothetical. Accordingly, one might infer that he

thinks the choice to throw the cargo overboard is actual, but the choice not to throw the cargo overboard is merely hypothetical or conditional but not actual. This is potentially troubling, however, because one wonders how a merely hypothetical choice can result in an action's being less than fully voluntary. It might seem instead that for one of our actions to be partly involuntary we must have an actual volition that opposes it. In response to this concern I would argue that hypothetical choices tell us something about how our will is actually.⁹ The fact that the sailor would choose not to throw the cargo overboard if there were no storm shows that he does have some opposition to that action.

Things are actually more complicated than this.¹⁰ Suppose that a sailor is eager to throw the cargo overboard but to avoid suspicion wants to do it only in a storm. In such a case the hypothetical about his behavior in good weather, considered by itself, is misleading. To determine whether a sailor really does have some opposition to throwing the cargo overboard we would need to know his preferred choice situation as well as knowing his preferences in the different situations. An action is partly involuntary only if the agent would act differently in another choice situation which he prefers to the actual choice situation.

Aquinas considers the case of incontinence to argue that when we act from concupiscence, in contrast to acting from fear, the action is in no way involuntary. He maintains that the incontinent person does not at the moment of action retain the previous repudiation of the object. Rather he changes his will so that he wills the object which he previously repudiated. In other words, Aquinas thinks we cannot give in to temptation without judging at the time of action that the tempting object is choice-worthy (ST IaIIae Q6 a7 ad2).

Aquinas strongly suggests, however, that such a judgment in favor of the tempting object results from ignorance. Concupiscence leads us to fail to consider things we can and should consider (ST IaIIae Q6 a7 ad3). But this generates an apparent contradiction with his claim that actions done from concupiscence are in no way involuntary. In the very next article, in discussing the involuntariness associated with acts done from ignorance, he says that when we do something out of ignorance that we would not have done if knowledge were present, the action is involuntary in a respect, even if the ignorance itself is voluntary. So if as the result of passion, we fail to consider something that we can and should consider and as a result do something we would not have done had we considered the matter properly, our action is involuntary in a respect (ST IaIIae Q6 a8).

The only way to avoid attributing a contradiction to Aquinas is once again to appeal to different notions of voluntariness. When he asserts that actions done from concupiscence are in no way involuntary his point must be that such actions are fully in accordance with our will. When he commits himself to the view that passions can make an action involuntary

in a respect because they can lead us to do something we would not have done if the passion had not adversely affected our judgment, his point must be that such actions are not fully in accordance with reason.

What is noteworthy for our purposes is that in order to determine whether something is wholly voluntary in the sense of being wholly in accordance with reason, Aquinas apparently believes we have to take into account certain counterfactuals. We have to know how a person would act if knowledge were present. It would seem to be equally true that in order to determine whether an action is wholly voluntary in the sense of being wholly in accordance with our will, we also need to take into account certain counterfactuals. So as we just saw in the sailor case, we need to consider how he would act in another choice situation which he prefers to the actual choice situation.

Aquinas's attempt to draw such a sharp contrast between the cases of fear and concupiscence is undermined by his failure to consider cases in which acting out of fear involves incontinence. Indeed it is potentially misleading of Aquinas to characterize the case of throwing the cargo overboard in a storm as an instance of acting out of fear, if indeed he is following Aristotle, and I believe he is, in maintaining that at the moment of action throwing the cargo overboard is worthy of choice. As Aristotle and Aquinas describe the case, the sailor, even if feeling the degree of fear appropriate to the situation, might nevertheless be coolly calculating the most rational course of action. But we, on the contrary, typically think of acting out of fear as acting not only from the passion of fear, but also as acting contrary to or at least independently of what is worthy of choice at the time of action.¹¹ If we say someone threw the cargo overboard out of fear, what we usually mean is that the person panicked and threw the cargo overboard when it was not necessary to do so. In other words, the person's will was influenced by passion. But there is no indication in Aristotle and Aquinas that passion is influencing the sailor's reason or will.

So one might well conclude that a genuine case of acting out of fear, when it involves incontinence, is relevantly similar to incontinent action arising from concupiscence because both actions follow from a mistaken judgment, influenced by passion, that the action is worthy of choice. Therefore if Aquinas were correct in asserting that the incontinent action arising from concupiscence is in no way involuntary, by which he means that the action is wholly in accordance with the person's will, then it might seem to follow that an incontinent action arising from fear also is in no way involuntary in the same sense of being wholly in accordance with his will.

This inference is problematic. The action of the sailor who judges correctly that the cargo should be thrown overboard would seem to be at least as voluntary as that of the panicking sailor who judges incorrectly that it should be thrown overboard. But if we conclude that the action of

the incontinent sailor is in no way involuntary it might seem to follow that his action is more voluntary than the action of the sailor with sound judgment, an action that Aquinas asserts is involuntary in a certain respect.

We can avoid these counterintuitive results if we note that contrary to what Aquinas's discussion of incontinence might misleadingly suggest, it is not sufficient for an action to be wholly in accordance with an agent's will that, at the moment of action, the agent judges it to be choiceworthy. As his prior discussion of the continent sailor in the storm implies, if abstracting from the actual conditions, the agent would judge that the action is not choiceworthy, then it is not fully voluntary. Therefore the incontinent sailor, the one who under the influence of fear mistakenly judges that throwing the cargo overboard is the lesser of two evils, still is doing something that is involuntary in a certain respect, because abstracting from the actual conditions, he would presumably, like the continent sailor, choose not to throw the cargo overboard. That is, the incontinent sailor would presumably prefer to be in a situation in which there is no storm, and in those circumstances he would choose not to throw the cargo overboard. Moreover, unlike the continent sailor, the voluntariness of the incontinent sailor's choice is also diminished in the other sense that his will is not in accordance with reason. That is, if the passion of fear had not interfered with his judgment he would not have chosen to throw the cargo overboard. So in that sense his action is less free than the continent sailor whose choice is wholly in accordance with reason.

There would seem to be other sorts of possible cases in which someone who judges that pursuing a good is worthy of choice still wishes he were in other circumstances in which it were not worthy of choice. It is not unimaginable that in a given set of circumstances the choiceworthy thing for an individual is to give in to a desire for a particular good, even if, abstracting from the actual circumstances, that action would not be choiceworthy. For example, the pleasure of smoking a cigarette on a particular occasion might outweigh the negative contribution to one's long-term health that will be made by smoking that cigarette (even taking into account its contribution to one's continued disposition to smoke) and any other bad consequences, so that smoking is the choiceworthy action. Nevertheless, the individual might wish that he did not find smoking pleasurable. Given Aquinas's own analysis of involuntariness, we should conclude that the smoker's smoking is involuntary in a certain respect. The smoker seems to be in the same position as the sailor – both do what is choiceworthy in the actual circumstances, but both wish circumstances were different so that what is worthy of choice were not.¹²

This smoking example is troubling to some, but there are other examples. Suppose that given someone's lowbrow tastes he gets significant

pleasure from watching sitcoms on television and finds reading poetry unpleasant. He might nevertheless wish that he took more pleasure in reading poetry than in watching sitcoms. On Aquinas's theory, in the actual circumstances he makes the choiceworthy decision when he spends a pleasant half hour watching television instead of a joyless half hour reading poetry, but that choice is still involuntary in a respect, because he wishes that circumstances were different so that he took enough pleasure in reading poetry to make it choiceworthy.¹³

An extreme version of this sort of scenario is represented by Augustine. Augustine sometimes suggests that our being subject to any sensual pleasures (and not just to inordinate sensual pleasures) is a punishment from God and that it would be preferable to be in the situation of Adam before the fall who on Augustine's view was probably not subject to sensual pleasures.¹⁴ So Augustine thought it would be better if eating were like breathing which normally is not accompanied or driven by a desire for sensual pleasure.¹⁵ On Aquinas's theory, for someone who shares such an Augustinian belief, every pursuit of sensual pleasure would be involuntary in a respect. But in our present condition of being subject to sensual pleasures, Augustine believed that it can be choiceworthy to indulge in some of them (sex within marriage) in order to avoid the greater sin of indulging in others (sex outside of marriage).¹⁶

These examples reveal that Aquinas's discussion of concupiscence is potentially misleading in two respects. First, he seems to treat acting from concupiscence as acting incontinently; but the smoker, the television watcher and the Augustinian indulger in marital pleasures are, at least arguably, acting both continently and from concupiscence. That is, even if we suppose that such sensual indulgers' judgment is unclouded by the desire that they consent to, so that they are acting in accordance not just with their judgment at the moment but with their better judgment, we still might plausibly claim that they act from that desire.¹⁷ Aquinas, however, must be supposing that one can be said to act from concupiscence only if one is acting not in accordance with one's better judgment. In other words, Aquinas is supposing that giving in to temptation is always an instance of incontinence, but this need not be the case. Sometimes giving in to temptation is choiceworthy.

One might wonder how doing something that is choiceworthy can be accurately described as giving in to temptation.¹⁸ The action can still be described as giving in to temptation since the action becomes choiceworthy only because the agent has a desire that he believes he should not have or at least would prefer not to have. We typically think of giving in to temptation as going against what we think is choiceworthy in the actual situation. On such an analysis it could never be choiceworthy to give in to temptation. But I am advocating a different conception of giving in to temptation. On my proposed analysis, to give in to temptation is

to do something, presumably for the pleasure it provides, when one would prefer to be in other circumstances in which one did not find the action pleasurable so that it would not be choiceworthy.

One might object on Aquinas's behalf that he would find something fishy about my suggestion that some internal state of us, a passion, could make an action choiceworthy that would otherwise not be choiceworthy.¹⁹ There are two related objections here. The first is that in determining what is choiceworthy our passions should simply be discounted. The second is that we have control or should have control over what goes on in us in a way that we do not have control over things external to us, such as storms. So if smoking is not choiceworthy independently of my desire to smoke, then I should be able to rid myself of that desire.

I would respond first that desires do provide reasons for action, and it is simply a mistake to dismiss them out of hand. The mere fact that my wife or children desire something gives me a reason for action, even if that reason can be overridden (sometimes easily but other times not), and similarly my own desires give me a reason for action. Second, our control over our passions is limited. Sometimes we can rid ourselves of unwanted desires, and sometimes we cannot, but it is rare that we can rid ourselves of them at will on a moment's notice.

It is true that we are sometimes responsible for our coming to have an unwanted desire. It may be that I now have a desire to smoke only because my having decided to smoke in the past caused my present desire. So if we understood the notion of my action's being wholly voluntary to mean that it is wholly up to me or that I am wholly responsible for it, then it would follow that my decision to smoke now is wholly voluntary.²⁰ However, what Aquinas requires for an action to be wholly voluntary is that it be wholly in accordance with my will, that is, it requires that my will not be divided. And the fact that I wish I did not have the desire to smoke shows that my will is divided, and that therefore my decision to smoke is not wholly voluntary, but mixed. Thus the second way in which Aquinas's discussion is potentially misleading is that acting from concupiscence can be involuntary in a certain respect. Even when an action is wholly in accordance with our choice, we might still have some opposition to that action.

We are now in a position to see that this objection to Aquinas's discussion implies that many things we do are involuntary in a certain respect. We do many things which we regard as undesirable in themselves solely as means to other ends. We would prefer to be in other circumstances in which we could achieve those ends directly or by some more congenial means. So in addition to those things we do only to avoid a greater evil, courses of action that are undesirable in themselves that we undertake solely to achieve some other good should also be considered as involuntary in a respect. And this is perfectly reasonable. Working overtime at an

unpleasant job to save for an expensive vacation, though choiceworthy all things considered, is in a respect involuntary.

But we want to draw distinctions among cases which are involuntary in a respect. There is all the difference in the world between working overtime at a job one dislikes to earn extra money for an expensive vacation and giving money to someone holding a gun at one's head, even if both are involuntary in a respect and yet choiceworthy in the circumstances.²¹ Handing over the money seems much less voluntary than working overtime. Indeed, handing over the money is coerced, but working overtime seems not to be coerced. Similarly, watching sitcoms while wishing one took no pleasure in them seems more voluntary than throwing the cargo overboard in a storm. We would not describe the action of throwing the cargo overboard as coerced, but it does seem forced in a way that watching sitcoms does not. I even have some temptation to say, contrary to Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*, that in some circumstances handing over the money to the gunman and throwing the cargo overboard are more involuntary than voluntary.²²

Is there a plausible analysis from within or at least consistent with Aquinas's account of the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary that can account for differences in degrees of involuntariness? Can it explain what makes an action coerced or forced? Can it explain, if there are such cases, how some actions are more involuntary than voluntary? If in saying that an action is more involuntary than voluntary we mean that we are more against doing it than in favor of doing it, then it might well seem to follow that we do not do it. How can we do something that we are more against doing than in favor of doing (when incontinence is not a factor)? If, for example, throwing the cargo overboard and giving money to the gunman are more involuntary than voluntary, then we need a way to explain how it comes about that we actually throw the cargo overboard or hand over the money.²³

It would seem that the degree of involuntariness has something to do with the amount of evil one chooses to undergo. For example, if in order to avoid dying from some disease I need only to take a few pills with unpleasant, but temporary side-effects, that action seems much less involuntary than having my leg amputated to save my life. Similarly, the degree of involuntariness of throwing the cargo overboard seems to have some connection with the perceived value of the cargo. The more valuable the cargo, the more involuntary the action of throwing it overboard. These examples suggest that an action could be more involuntary than voluntary only if it involves suffering a great loss.

So we can go some distance in explaining our differing intuitions about differing degrees of involuntariness in various cases by taking into account the amount of evil one chooses to undergo. But appeal to the amount of evil one chooses to undergo does not explain how an action

could be more involuntary than voluntary. How can we do something if we are more against doing it than in favor of doing it? Even if our actions in some of these scenarios are less voluntary than in others, it still might seem that in all of them the action has to be more voluntary than involuntary, otherwise we would not do it.

There is another more subtle account of degrees of involuntariness that does provide a possible explanation of how in some mixed cases an action might be more involuntary than voluntary, though it yields different outcomes with respect to some of the cases considered so far. In discussing the sailor in the storm example, different volitions have come into play. First is the sailor's choice to throw the cargo overboard. Second is his hypothetical choice not to throw the cargo overboard in the absence of a storm. Third is his wish not to be in the storm. The degree of voluntariness might be analyzed in terms of which of these volitions predominates. Aquinas rightly maintains that an actual choice is predominant over a hypothetical choice, which is why he maintains that throwing the cargo overboard is more voluntary than involuntary. However, one's hypothetical choice not to throw the cargo overboard in the absence of a storm might (or might not) generate a strong desire not to be in the storm. This is not a mere hypothetical desire, but an actual desire concerning what is here and now and under these individual conditions. One might maintain that if the sailor's predominant volition is that he not be in the circumstances in which throwing the cargo overboard is choiceworthy, then his action is more involuntary than voluntary. But if his predominant volition is that he throw the cargo overboard, however much he views that action as bad in itself, it is more voluntary than involuntary. On this account the action of a sailor whose predominant volition is that he not be in the storm would be less voluntary than the action of a sailor whose predominant volition is that he do what it takes to keep the ship from sinking, even if they attach the same value to the cargo.

The sailor's volition not to be in the storm may not be an effective volition. A sailor can typically carry out his volition to throw the cargo overboard in a way he cannot carry out a volition to be out of the storm. Sometimes he can try to sail out of the storm, and in some circumstances that might be more choiceworthy than throwing the cargo overboard. But suppose he cannot. He still might have a volition that the storm cease, and that volition is here and now and under these individual conditions. Indeed a religious person might very well pray in the hope that his will that the storm cease be carried out by another power. But even a non-religious person who can think of no steps to take towards ending the storm might wish with all his heart that it end.²⁴ Since the two volitions in question – the volition to be in other circumstances and the volition to do what we consider choiceworthy in these circumstances – both exist without qualification, it cannot be maintained that the volition to do

what we consider choiceworthy must be predominant because it is without qualification. Rather predominance has to do with the degree to which we want something, which, presumably, in most cases, is measured phenomenologically. The pragmatic sailor's wish that the storm end might not be very strong – it is eclipsed by his efforts to get the cargo overboard. But another somewhat less pragmatic sailor's wish that the storm end might well surpass his wish to get the cargo into the sea. In the former case throwing the cargo overboard would be more voluntary than involuntary, in the latter case it might plausibly be characterized as more involuntary than voluntary.

The attractiveness of this sort of analysis is that it explains how the actions of people who are preoccupied with the desire that they be in other circumstances are less voluntary than those of the pragmatic sort of person concerned with handling circumstances as they come. So someone who is preoccupied with feeling trapped in an undesirable job might indeed be justified in his belief that everything he does on the job is more involuntary than voluntary, even if he believes that everything he does on the job is choiceworthy in the circumstances. But someone else in the same job who also dislikes it, but is less concerned with his desire to be in other circumstances than with performing his duties as well as he can, would be acting more voluntarily than involuntarily in performing those duties.

Let me elaborate.²⁵ Regarding some other situation as better than our present situation does not necessarily entail that we form the volition to be in that situation rather than our present situation, but we might form such a volition. Still the mere fact that we form such a volition is sufficient only to make our actions in our present situation involuntary in a respect.²⁶ It is not sufficient to make them more involuntary than voluntary. In order for our actions in our present situation to be more involuntary than voluntary, the present situation must be so undesirable that we form such a strong volition against being in those circumstances that it becomes our predominant volition. If this volition, which is without qualification and exists not merely in a respect, coupled with the hypothetical or conditional choice not to perform the action in the circumstances we wish would obtain, is sufficiently strong to become our predominant volition, then that could explain why the action is more involuntary than voluntary in the actual circumstances, even though it is choiceworthy in the actual circumstances. So even though we do have a volition to perform the action choiceworthy in the actual circumstances and this volition generates the action, if our predominant volition is not to be in those circumstances, then we are more opposed to performing the action than we are in favor of performing it.

It will typically be the case that we wish to be in other circumstances precisely because there is some great evil we wish we could avoid. But this need not be the case. Even if an agent decided to undergo a very great

evil, the action could still be more voluntary than involuntary if the agent's predominant volition is not the volition to be in other circumstances but rather the volition to do the choiceworthy thing in those circumstances. On the other hand, it seems possible that someone might so much dread choosing between two desirable options (such as competing job offers or marriage proposals) that his predominant volition is not to be in those circumstances, with the result that the ultimate choice is more involuntary than voluntary.

This wish to be in other circumstances in spite of facing desirable options could have different sources. It might be that the person simply hates making decisions or making that sort of decision.²⁷ So even though the person chooses one of the two options, since that volition is outweighed by a stronger actual volition not to be in his present circumstances and a hypothetical volition not to make any choice at all, we could plausibly infer that his actual choice is more involuntary than voluntary. Alternatively, it might be that the person does not dread making choices, but was so much hoping for a third option which did not materialize that his predominant volition is to be in the circumstances in which that option did materialize. Thus his actual choice for something that he regards as desirable might still be more involuntary than voluntary since it is outweighed by the combination of the actual volition to be in other circumstances and the hypothetical choice of something else in those other circumstances.

This analysis might sound odd, that choosing something we regard as desirable could be more involuntary than voluntary, but I believe on the contrary that it provides the correct account of an important fact of life regarding our attitudes towards our choices. I believe, for instance, that there is a certain percentage of people who feel that their act of marrying someone whom they regard as desirable is more involuntary than voluntary precisely because there is someone else (actual or hypothetical) whom they would have preferred to marry. My view is that in some such cases, depending on the strength of the volitions in question, these feelings are accurate – the marriage is more involuntary than voluntary. Similar things could be said about job offers.

It should be clear at this point how this analysis answers the earlier question of how we could do something which we are more against doing than in favor of doing. We do it because it is what we judge to be choiceworthy in the actual circumstances, yet we are more against doing it than in favor of doing it because our predominant volition is to be in other circumstances in which we would choose not to do it.

One sort of worry about this analysis is that it might seem to imply that everything we do is involuntary in a respect. We can almost always imagine some other circumstances that we think would be better than our present circumstances. I would try to block this result by arguing that judging that other circumstances would be better does not amount to

forming a volition to be in those circumstances. But admittedly this is a difficult line to draw. Judging that something would be better seems very close to preferring it, and preferring seems very close to wanting or wishing. However, I believe that judging that something would be better does not amount to preferring it. So I might judge that there are other dwellings that would be better to live in than my own, but I still prefer to live where I live now.

Another related objection is that this analysis seems to imply that some actions are partly involuntary that seem wholly voluntary. If, for example, my wife is injured and calls out for help, and I have to interrupt my work to help her, the analysis would seem to imply that my helping her is not wholly voluntary, since I would prefer to be in other circumstances in which she were not injured and I could continue with my work.²⁸ In reply I would note first that my stopping my work does seem partly involuntary, it is very much like the sailor in the storm. But is my helping my wife in any respect involuntary? I think it is. For my helping her to be wholly voluntary, that is, for my will to be wholly behind helping her, I would have to prefer being in circumstances in which she is injured to circumstances in which she is not injured. Such a preference might occur if, for example, I wanted circumstances to arise in which I could be a hero to her. But that would be a perverse preference.

This example brings out nicely that Aquinas's notion of being wholly voluntary is different from our own. We typically think of an action as being wholly voluntary provided it is in accordance with our choice, where our choice is somehow responsive to reasons. Or, under the influence of Harry Frankfurt, we might add the further condition that an action is wholly voluntary provided that we also endorse or identify with our choice, so that our choice can be said to be wholehearted. What Frankfurt means by being wholehearted is that one is fully resolved to do the thing, that one knows what one wants and has the will one wants to have, even if one is aware of conflict within oneself. This sort of wholeheartedness is contrasted with not having made up one's mind.²⁹ So on his understanding of wholeheartedness both the pragmatic and unpragmatic sailor might throw the cargo overboard wholeheartedly. But the point behind Aquinas's use of the sailor example is that there is another notion of the wholly voluntary that requires more. To be wholly voluntary requires being wholly in accordance with our will, but an action can be wholly in accordance with our choice without being wholly in accordance with our will. Being wholly in accordance with our will in Aquinas's sense also requires that the circumstances in which we find ourselves are those we prefer to be in. So we might introduce another notion of being wholehearted and say that an action is wholehearted provided it is wholly voluntary in Aquinas's sense. In this sense, neither the pragmatic nor the unpragmatic sailor's action is wholehearted.³⁰

There is still a third notion of wholeheartedness worth mentioning. Aquinas distinguishes will or rational appetite from sensitive appetite. We could say that an action is wholehearted in this third sense provided that our sensitive appetite as well as our rational appetite is wholly behind it.

Why should we care about whether an action is wholly voluntary in Aquinas's sense?³¹ Aren't we, and shouldn't we, be concerned only with whether an action is voluntary in the sense of being in accordance with our reasons-responsive choice? If we were concerned only with judgments of moral responsibility for our actions, then there would be no reason to pay attention to Aquinas's notion of the wholly voluntary. I agree that moral responsibility is connected with voluntariness only in the sense of our actions being in accordance with our reasons-responsive choices. But in evaluating people, in praising and blaming them, we are not concerned only with their moral responsibility for their actions. We are also concerned with their commitment to those actions, with their wholeheartedness in performing them.

Thus in arguing that in some cases choices of things that we regard as evil in themselves and choices of things as good in themselves might be more involuntary than voluntary, I do not mean to be implying that we are less than fully responsible for those actions. So in the case of throwing the cargo overboard in the storm I would agree that our action is praiseworthy because it is the best thing to do in the circumstances, even when, if there are such cases, it is more involuntary than voluntary.³²

Instead, the moral significance of arguing that some of these actions are more involuntary than voluntary has to do with what it reveals about our commitment to those actions. In some cases it seems that we are less blameworthy the more involuntary the action is, but in other cases it seems that we are more blameworthy the more involuntary the action is. So the person whose marriage is more involuntary than voluntary because he would have preferred to marry someone else seems blameworthy for that lack of wholeheartedness, but someone who, faced with threats, caves in and does something he should not have done (betray a friend or torture someone) seems less blameworthy the greater the reluctance.

There are limitations to this analysis. When both throw the cargo overboard, the pragmatic and the unpragmatic sailor seem equally praiseworthy for that action, even if the pragmatic sailor's action is more voluntary than the unpragmatic sailor's action. It seems unfair to say that in all cases the pragmatic sailor's action, even though more voluntary than the unpragmatic sailor's action, is less reluctant and hence less praiseworthy. Rather, if anything, the unpragmatic sailor would seem to be blameworthy for engaging in wishful thinking. But in other circumstances we might consider it to be a fault not to engage in wishful thinking. So when confronted with the serious illness of a loved one, we would be blameworthy

if the wish that circumstances were different did not become phenomenologically significant.³³

Second, and more importantly, the analysis does not help us understand how some actions that are involuntary in a respect are forced or coerced and others are not. Handing over money to the gunman is coerced and throwing cargo overboard in a storm is forced, whether or not our predominant volition is to be in other circumstances. The first suggested analysis of degrees of involuntariness in terms of degree of perceived loss also fails to explain what turns an action that is involuntary in a respect into a coerced or forced action. My handing over the money to the gunman is coerced so long as it is something I would not do were it not for the gunman's threat, even if I do not attach much value to the money. It may be true, however, that my action becomes more coerced the more I value the money. At the same time, the degree of coercion and associated involuntariness also seem to be influenced by the nature of the threat. My handing money over to a gunman who threatens my life is perhaps more coerced and less voluntary than my handing money over to a thug who merely threatens to rough me up.

I think there is an important lesson here, namely, that it is not sufficient for an action to be coerced or forced that it be partly involuntary in that we have a volition that opposes doing it; nor is it necessary for an action to be coerced or forced that we are more opposed to doing it than in favor of doing it. It does seem that in order for an act to be coerced or forced we must have some volition that opposes doing it, but the further conditions that make some partly involuntary acts coerced or forced have to do not with the internal structure of our will but rather with the circumstances in which our volitions occur.

This paper began by exploring Aquinas's contrast between fear and concupiscence. I argued that a careful application of Aquinas's own psychological theory reveals that when we act out of concupiscence our actions can also be partly involuntary. I then defended my intuition, which Aquinas seems not to share, that in some mixed cases our action is more involuntary than voluntary, and I have tried to show that Aquinas's psychological theory can explain how this is possible. Finally, I have tried to explain why we should care that actions that are fully in accordance with our reasons-responsive choices might fail to be fully voluntary.³⁴

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NOTES

¹ I will be using the terms 'free' and 'voluntary' interchangeably. I will also be using the terms 'freely', 'voluntarily', and 'willingly' interchangeably. Some philosophers distinguish

the notions of being free and being voluntary, and I used to think Aquinas did so as well, so I distinguished them in earlier drafts of this paper. I now realize that was a mistake, for reasons to be explained in note 30.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Blackfriars edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970); Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne: 1912–36; repr. New York: Benziger 1947–48; repr. New York: Christian Classics, 1981).

³ Here I am indebted to Jeffrey Hause and especially to Calvin Normore.

⁴ André Guindon (1972) in “L’influence de la crainte sur la qualité de l’action selon Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue Thomiste* 71, pp. 41–42 defends the rival interpretation, but he does not attempt to explain how his interpretation is consistent with Aquinas’s endorsement of Aristotle’s view that such actions are mixed.

⁵ The fact that Aquinas introduces the disputed remark with the phrase “But if one considers [this issue] correctly” indicates only that he is offering a further clarificatory point that is not intended to be in opposition to Aristotle’s claim that the actions are mixed.

⁶ This suggests that Aquinas would say that if an offer were to appeal to our passions and cloud our judgment with the result that our will is not fully reflective of reason, then it would diminish the voluntariness of our action.

⁷ The Latin *simpliciter* is variously translated as “simply”, “absolutely”, and “without qualification”. Guindon, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–40, argues convincingly that Aquinas should not be understood to be asserting that the sailor’s action is voluntary absolutely. However, see note 9 below.

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. III, Ch. 1, 1110a11–13.

⁹ This same issue comes up in regard to Aquinas’s account of the distinction between God’s antecedent will and God’s consequent will. God’s consequent will or absolute will just is what God wills without qualification. God’s antecedent or qualified will is what God wills in a qualified way because it is in regard to things as they are in themselves and not as they are in particular circumstances. Aquinas argues that what God wills consequently takes place, but that what God wills antecedently, for example, that all human beings be saved, may not take place (ST Ia Q19 a6 ad1). Nicholas Wolterstorff, in “Could God Not Sorrow If We Do,” a paper delivered at UC-Riverside’s 10th Annual Philosophy Conference, February 6, 2000, argues that God’s antecedent will is only a counterfactual state of affairs and reflects only what God would will, so that anything out of accord with God’s antecedent will is really not out of accord with God’s will, but only with God’s willingness (*velleitas*). Wolterstorff concludes from this that on Aquinas’s view there can be no sorrow in God because nothing is out of accord with God’s will. I would reply that even in the case of God, Aquinas thinks hypothetical choices reveal something about God’s actual will. Wolterstorff himself notes that Aquinas asserts that all evil of sin is out of harmony with the divine will (ST Ia Q19 a2 ad4), but interprets this to mean that it is only out of harmony with God’s antecedent will and hence not out of harmony with God’s actual will. But it seems to me more plausible to read Aquinas as implying that willingness (*velleitas*) pertains to one’s actual will, so that it is a mistake to restrict God’s actual will to his absolute will. The reason Aquinas thinks God is incapable of sorrow, I would argue, is not that he thinks nothing can be out of harmony with God’s will, but rather that there can be no evil present in God.

¹⁰ As Dan Speak, Gary Watson and Andy Reath pointed out in discussion of this paper.

¹¹ I am indebted to Gideon Yaffe here.

¹² I have tried to imagine a case in which the pleasure alone is sufficient to make smoking choiceworthy. Gary Watson raised the objection that smoking would then always be

choiceworthy on each occasion so that stopping smoking would never be choiceworthy, but Matt Talbert replied that smoking is more pleasurable on some occasions than others. One can imagine other sorts of cases in which smoking becomes choiceworthy because of the anxiety that would result if one did not smoke, and because one finds oneself in particular circumstances in which being anxious might be disastrous (say, before an exam or, as Glen Pettigrove suggested, before meeting one's future in-laws).

¹³ An example of this sort was suggested by Gary Watson.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Against Julian*, Book 4, Chapter 14, §69, 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §68.

¹⁶ Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, Chapter 6.

¹⁷ One might object that the Augustinian marital indulger is really acting solely from fear of a greater evil and not at all from concupiscence. I would not argue that that is never the case, but it seems implausible that it is always the case. What I say here might seem to conflict with what I said earlier about the sailor. I said that the sailor throwing the cargo overboard might be feeling fear but not acting from fear. My view is that the cases are asymmetrical in the following respect. The sailor's passion of fear over the prospect of sinking need not be the motive for throwing the cargo overboard, but in the case of the sensual indulger the passion does seem to provide a motive for the action.

¹⁸ Hugh Mavlowe raised this concern.

¹⁹ Bonnie Kent raised this concern in conversation.

²⁰ I read Sarah Broadie as implying that these are, roughly, the notions of what it is to be voluntary that are operative in Aristotle. See her (1991) *Ethics with Aristotle*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 138ff.

²¹ Even this is controversial. In "Coercion and Moral Responsibility," Harry Frankfurt argues that an act is coerced only if it is compelled in the sense of being inescapable. The agent is incapable of resisting the threat. See his (1988) *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 36–42.

²² There is an interesting passage from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* which might suggest that Aquinas can allow for a mixed action to be more involuntary than voluntary:

For since he is free who is a cause of himself, we do freely what we do of ourselves, and this is to act from the will. But what we do against the will we do not do freely but like a slave. This is either absolute violence, as when the whole source is outside, for example when someone is impelled by force to move, or it is violence mixed with voluntariness, as when someone wants to do or undergo something that is less opposed to the will in order to avoid what is more opposed to the will. (SCG IV 22)

Aquinas could be read as implying that in the mixed case, if the violence is greater than the voluntariness, the action is more involuntary than voluntary. But matters are complicated. An absolutely violent motion is one against our nature to which we contribute no force, and in such a case, when an external force literally moves our body, we are not really acting at all. In the mixed case when we act to avoid a greater evil, Aquinas cannot strictly allow that the agent's behavior is at all violent, because the entire motive force is from the agent.

²³ Harry Frankfurt, *op. cit.*, p. 43, argues that when an action is done under duress (because of a threat of some sort) but is not compelled, the agent does something that he does not really want to do. My question is how is it possible for us to do something we do not really want to do.

²⁴ For those who might worry that we cannot have a volition for something unless we think that thing is possible to obtain, it is important to note that Aquinas draws a distinction between willing an end and intending an end. Willing an end is independent of consideration of means to that end, whereas intending an end involves willing the means to that end (ST IaIIae Q12 a1 ad4).

²⁵ This is in response to acute questions by Jeffrey Hause.

²⁶ One might object that this makes it too easy for an action to be partly involuntary. In determining whether an action is partly involuntarily we should ask only whether the agent forms a volition to be in *normal* circumstances rather than the actual circumstances, and not consider whether there are any circumstances other than the actual circumstances that the agent forms a volition to be in. Aside from the difficulty of distinguishing normal from abnormal circumstances, this restriction seems arbitrary if we are out to capture the extent to which an agent's action is in accordance with his will.

²⁷ After coming up with this sort of analysis on Aquinas's behalf, I noticed that Harry Frankfurt in "Three Concepts of Free Action," *op. cit.*, p. 47, makes a similar appeal to our discontent with the necessity of having to make a certain choice to explain how we can act not "altogether willingly," but he does not take up the issue of degrees of involuntariness.

²⁸ This objection was raised by Gary Watson.

²⁹ Harry Frankfurt (1999) "The Faintest Passion," in *Necessity, Volition and Love*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 100–102.

³⁰ There is another important respect in which Aquinas's views differ from Frankfurt's. Frankfurt thinks that being wholehearted in his sense is sufficient for freedom, even if the agent could not have done otherwise. Aquinas, however, believes that for a choice to be free the agent must be able to do the opposite of what he does. The choice cannot be necessary (ST Ia Q82 a2, Q83 a1, *De Veritate* Q24 a2). I am sympathetic with this further condition, so I am inclined to disagree with Frankfurt that wholeheartedness, in my sense or in his sense, is a sufficient condition for freedom. Aquinas's position is complicated because he does think that we will the ultimate end of happiness by natural necessity, that is, by the necessity of our own nature (ST Ia Q82 a1). He accordingly denies that our willing the end is a choice, but he nevertheless appeals to the authority of Augustine in asserting (ST Ia Q82 a1 ad1, *De Veritate* Q24 a1 ad20, *De Potentia* Q10 a5 ad5) that our willing happiness is free even though necessary according to our nature. [My earlier mistake was to suppose that in denying that this willing is a choice or act of free judgment – *liberum arbitrium* – and in granting that we are not master of our desire for the ultimate end (ST Ia Q82 a1 ad3), he was implying that it was only voluntary and not free.] Does this commit him to denying that freedom requires the ability to do otherwise? Not necessarily. He draws a further distinction between the necessity of the object and the necessity of the act, and argues that even if willing happiness is necessary with respect to the object, it is not necessary with respect to the act. That is, he seems to think that if we will anything, we have to will happiness, but we do not necessarily have to will anything (ST IaIIae Q10 a2).

³¹ This question was raised by Glen Pettigrove.

³² See Susan Sauvé Meyer (1993) *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, Cambridge: Blackwell, pp. 116–118.

³³ Dan Speak made this point.

³⁴ Earlier versions of this paper were discussed at workshops at UCLA, December 12, 1998, and at UCR, December 12, 2001. I would like to thank Janet Broughton, John Carriero, Hannah Ginsborg, Calvin Normore, and Daniel Warren for their comments at the UCLA session and my colleagues John Fischer, Andrews Reath, and Gary Watson for their participation at the UCR session. I would like to give special thanks to Bonnie Kent for her many helpful suggestions.