

The Importance of the Idea of Inclination in Summa Theologica

On first reading Question 90 of the Summa Theologica, it struck me as odd that Aquinas opens with the statement, “We have now to consider the extrinsic principles of acts,” then immediately in the next sentence identifies the devil as an “external” principle “inclining to evil.” “Inclination” seems to describe a predisposition to act in a certain way, which in turns suggests an *intrinsic* or “inward” principle. As I read through this section on Law in the Summa again, I am impressed that nearly every Question involves some discussion of inclination. This is in sharp contrast to the Nichomachean Ethics or Politics, in which Aristotle rarely speaks of inclination. Aristotle acknowledges the concept of inclination when he speaks of certain groups of men as “inclining toward” certain constitutions in the Politics, and of certain inclinations associated with the various virtues in Book IV of the Ethics, but in general he prefers to speak in terms of “aims”. “Every art and every inquiry, and likewise every action and choice, seems to aim at some good.” So begins the Ethics, and a word search on “aim” finds it on almost every page. An “aim” envisions an objective outside and at a distance, and requires a goal or an end to have any meaning. An “inclination”, on the other hand, is more subjective, and seems to describe a property of the subject that exists apart from any specific external object. Why does Aquinas favor this more inward concept, how does he develop it, and how does it support his overall concept of Law?

One of his first principles of law is that it has to do with reason. [Q90A1] Therefore we might expect that any inclinations that arise from law would do so through reason. However, in the Reply to Objection 1 of Q90A1, he clarifies that there are two ways by which a law “may be in something.” In the first, the law is in the reason alone, and this would apply to “that which measures and rules”, that is, the lawgiver. In the second sense, the law is “in that which is measured or ruled” not essentially, but insofar as there arises an “inclination” in the thing ruled as a result of the action of the law. This turns out to be a critical distinction, and helps explain why Aquinas may have favored language of inclination over language of aim in developing his concepts, as we shall see.

In his introduction to eternal law, Aquinas notes that, “The whole community of the universe is governed by Divine Reason.” [Q91A1] Though all law necessarily pertains to reason, the necessary connection to reason here occurs not in the universe itself, much of which is non-rational (“irrational” in Summa), but in the reason in God’s mind. The eternal law, in its essence, is in the mind of God, the lawgiver. In this introduction to eternal law Aquinas does not yet develop the idea of inclination, but he will in Question 93.

In Q91A6, on the “law of sin”, Aquinas begins to amplify the relationship between inclination and law. The law in its essence resides in the lawgiver, as we have seen in Q91 and 90, above. However, “every inclination...which may be found in things subject to the law, is a law by participation.” The lawgiver can incline the subject in two ways: by directly inclining the subject to something, or indirectly by deprivation and demotion to a lower level. The various inclinations of the animals, the “natural” inclinations, are laws in this way, in that they are participations in the eternal law, and their inclinations were placed in them by the lawgiver. In this section Aquinas makes an analogy from the animals to man, in which man’s “natural condition” is “that he should act in accordance with reason.” The effect of an eternal law is an inclination in the creature, and that inclination can be thought of as that law in the creature.

In Q93A5, on eternal law, the idea of inward “imprinting” is brought forth. The question is whether irrational natural contingents can be thought of as subject to eternal law, since they are irrational and hence the law cannot be promulgated to them rationally. In addressing this objection, Aquinas utilizes a parallel to man’s imposition of law upon other men, in which he states that the human lawgiver, through his commands, “imprints on their minds a rule” which is an “inward principle of action.” Insofar as God likewise imprints principles of proper action into his irrational creation, so that they act according to nature, he has “promulgated” the eternal law to these subjects through their inclination to act in certain ways. Apparently, the subject need not understand the rule or law, provided it is manifested as an inclination, and that such inclination is a result of a rule in the rational mind of the lawgiver.

Here, I believe, is a chief reason Aquinas frames his argument in terms of inclination rather than aims. This construction allows him to conceive of the entire universe as operating according

to rational law in the mind of a creator God, which is a much broader conceit than Aristotle's view of law. Indeed, Aristotle tends to speak only of "laws" in the Politics and the Ethics, not of law as an overarching concept. In the Physics he speaks of each natural thing's proper "end", but not of "laws of nature". The concept of imprinted inclinations allows Aquinas to explain how irrational elements of creation can "follow" a rational law without having any reason of their own. An "aim" seems to require some type of mind, some ability to choose one goal among several. An inclination seems more inherent in the thing, and less anthropomorphic than an "aim" or an "end". The participation of each subject, through its inclinations, in the rational plan of the divine lawgiver also provides an explanation and an expectation that the interplay of all the various creatures, through their inclinations, will cohere into a rational whole.

In Q93A6 Aquinas make the startling assertion that, since we are rational creatures, we have a natural inclination to act "in harmony with the eternal law," which is virtue. He acknowledges that the wicked are incompletely inclined to the good, but still have some of that inclination present. By being so inclined to obey the eternal law, all men have some inclination to the "common good". The fundamental importance of this inclination of man comes out in the section on natural law, in which man's "natural" inclinations are clues to the nature of good as it pertains to man. Since good is "that which all things seek after," and since man's natural inclinations are given him by God's eternal law as a rational being, his natural inclinations indicate the shape of natural law. Hence, his inclination to self-preservation means the preservation of human life is a natural law. His inclinations to procreate and care for the young indicate a natural law favoring these things. His nature as a rational being leads to his inclination to know truth, about God and himself. This is summed up in Q94A3: "To the natural law belongs everything to which a man is inclined."

If the natural law is simply the natural inclinations of man, what do we do with the fact that different men seem to have different inclinations? This is the third objection of Q94A4. He answers that "to the natural law belongs those things to which a man is inclined naturally", but notes that "among these it is proper to man to be inclined to act according to reason." He seems to be saying that, while there are certainly many inclinations in man, the one that is his alone is

that of acting according to reason. In his Reply to Objection 3, he seems to be saying that inclinations other than the inclination to act according to reason are inclinations that derive from “other powers” that must subordinate themselves to the primary human inclination to act according to reason.

Why does Aquinas retain this language of inclination when discussing man, when man clearly has the capability to “aim”, as Aristotle would have it? To some extent, it may be simply a matter of consistency; God’s eternal law results in inclinations in all his creatures, of which man is one, so there is no need to introduce a new term to describe his motivations. Perhaps it is also, as in the case of the irrational creatures, a means of connecting everything to God, including the values of man. For Aristotle, that at which all things aim is simply defined as good without reference to any thing higher than man’s goals. For Aquinas, that to which all men are inclined is good not simply because all men are inclined to it, but because their inclinations reflect the eternal law of God. Their very inclination to the good is simply a participation in the eternal law, and does not depend on their own reason. At the level of their participation in the eternal law, the natural law is “in” them in the same way as the inclinations of the irrational creation. Its essence as law exists at the level of the lawgiver, in God’s reason, not man’s. Hence man’s reason does not define what is good for man, but God’s does.

Aquinas’ description of law in terms of inward inclinations therefore allows him to extend the concept of law to all of creation, through the participatory inclinations of the rational and irrational creatures in the eternal law, and allows him to locate the value concept of “the good” above man’s reason simply, in the eternal law, which is the Divine Reason.