

A Defense of Intellectualism: Will, Intellect, and Control in Late Thirteenth-Century Philosophy

Dissertation Abstract

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The question of whether volition is caused by the activity of our cognitive powers was the subject of tremendous controversy for medieval philosophers. By answering in the affirmative, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas of Sutton and Godfrey of Fontaines, the so-called *intellectualists*, face what I call the *Problem of Control*. If my wanting some object is caused by my grasping it as good through some cognitive act, then it seems that I am not able to will otherwise than I do. For to will otherwise than I do, it would be necessary that I apprehend some *other* object as good, which is not possible, since my acts of cognition are not “up to me.” If, however, I am not able to will otherwise than I do, then I do not seem to have control over my actions. But if I do not have control over my actions, then I do not act freely, since having control over one’s actions is necessary for acting freely.

My dissertation is a defense of intellectualism, in which I address the *Problem of Control*. In general, scholars of medieval moral psychology have neglected intellectualism and praised the philosophical innovations of so-called *voluntarists* such as John Duns Scotus. But I show that intellectualism is worth careful attention, for although they were very much criticized by their contemporaries, the intellectualists have a more plausible understanding of the relationship between volition and the activity of our cognitive powers, and of human free will.

The first step of my dissertation is to present a preliminary answer to *the Problem of Control* that draws on the intellectualism of Thomas Aquinas. I call attention to Aquinas’s concept of “perfect cognition of the end,” which is an apprehension of the notion of one’s end, the means to that end, and the relationship between the two. I argue, first, that a human being has control over her action when she acts with perfect cognition of the end of that action, and second, that it is possible to have perfect cognition of the end, and thus, control over one’s actions, even when volition is caused by the activity of our cognitive powers.

The second step of my dissertation is to show that, although Aquinas does have a story about how a human being has control over her actions, he does not adequately explain a key feature of his intellectualism, namely, how the *will*, the faculty of human volition, seems to “move” itself to the exercise of its act. I consider, first, how Thomas of Sutton develops Aquinas’s intellectualism by arguing that the will “moves” itself in two ways, namely, *consecutively* and *accidentally*, and second, how Godfrey of Fontaines rejects Aquinas’s intellectualism, and adopts a more “radical” one, by denying that *any* self-motion of the will is possible.

In the third and final step of my dissertation, I come back to the *Problem of Control* and consider whether the control that a human being has over her action when she acts with perfect cognition of the end of that action is the sort of control that is necessary for her doing that action freely. I argue in the affirmative by defending the intellectualist claim that acting with perfect cognition of the end and having control over one’s actions just is acting freely. So, having shown that a human being has control over her action and thereby acts freely by acting with perfect cognition of the end of that action, I conclude in favour of the plausibility of the intellectualist understanding of the relationship between volition and the activity of our cognitive powers, and of human free will.