Aquinas’ ethical writings tell the story of the goal of human life, and how the goal is won or lost. In the course of the story, we hear about virtue and vice, law and grace, sin and happiness. Underlying the discussion of all these subjects is Aquinas’ account of human action and moral responsibility. And the key element of Aquinas’ account of moral responsibility is his account of voluntariness.

Only if an agent A is morally responsible are certain attitudes toward A appropriate. For example, only a morally responsible agent is the appropriate object of resentment, forgiveness, or friendship:¹ Moreover, only if A is a morally responsible agent may one appropriately direct toward A such actions as praising, blaming, punishing, rewarding, and showing mercy.²

But what renders an agent an appropriate object of these attitudes and actions? Answering this question is the main task of a theory of moral responsibility. In addition, we can expect a theory of responsibility to explain which states of character and events a responsible agent is responsible for. Furthermore, it should explain how much praise or blame, reward or punishment a responsible agent A is a candidate for.

We can find Aquinas’ answer to these key questions in his account of voluntariness. He argues that only those agents capable of voluntary

² We do sometimes treat beings who are not morally responsible (pets, for instance) in positive ways and call that treatment “praise” or “reward”; and when we treat them in a negative way, we do sometimes call that treatment “punishment.” We may even “show mercy” to our pets. However, in doing so, we are not engaging in the same practices we engage in when we praise, blame, punish, reward, or show mercy to morally responsible agents. For example, when we praise a cat, we are trying to condition the cat’s behavior. Alternatively, we might be expressing our own pleasure in behavior we want the cat to engage in. In contrast, we praise, blame, punish or reward morally responsible agents because we think it is appropriate to do so apart from the usefulness such treatment has for conditioning them. These agents are worthy of, or deserving of, this treatment.
actions are responsible agents; that only those states, acts, and other events that an agent A voluntarily effects are those A is responsible for; and that the amount of praise or blame, reward or punishment appropriate to A for a state, act, or other event that A effects depends in part on how voluntary that state, act, or other event is. To articulate the conditions of voluntariness, therefore, is to articulate the conditions of moral responsibility.

Because human beings are possessed of both reason and will, they are capable of making, adopting, and executing their own plans and, therefore, of acting voluntarily. Those events and states one plans on—those one wills directly and per se—are among those one brings about voluntarily. However, Aquinas argues that one can bring about voluntarily even some events and states one does not plan on:

...something can be voluntary either in itself, as when the will is borne directly to it, or in its cause, when the will is borne to the cause and not to the effect as is evident in the case of someone who gets drunk voluntarily; for on this basis what he does through drunkenness is imputed to him as voluntary. Second, we must note that something is called voluntary directly or indirectly: directly, that to which the will is borne; but indirectly, that which the will could have prevented but did not.

Some events and states are voluntary because their cause is voluntary; others are voluntary because one could have, but did not, prevent them. These conditions for voluntariness, of course, cannot be sufficient conditions. One does not bring about voluntarily whatever is caused by what one plans on; nor does one bring about voluntarily everything one can, but does not, prevent. Aquinas does sometimes articulate further conditions to restrict the range of states and events an agent brings about voluntarily. However, these discussions are often vague and terse, and it is unclear that they resolve the problems at issue.

In this paper, I will focus on just one of these problematic issues: the

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3 At *Summa theologiae*, Ia IIae q. 6 a. 2, Aquinas distinguishes between "the voluntary in its complete nature" and "the voluntary in its incomplete nature." Following Aristotle, Aquinas admits that non-human animals, which he takes not to be morally responsible, are capable of "incompletely" voluntary acts; but only those agents who are capable of performing "completely voluntary" acts are morally responsible agents. For simplicity's sake, I use "voluntary" throughout this paper to mean *completely voluntary*.

4 "...aliquid potest esse voluntarium vel secundum se, sicut quando voluntas directe in ipsum fertur; vel secundum suam causam, quando voluntas fertur in causam et non in effectum, ut patet in eo qui voluntarie inebriatur; ex hoc enim quasi voluntarium ei imputatur quod per ebrietatem committit. Secundo considerandum est quod aliquid dicitur voluntarium directe vel indirecte: directe quidem id in quod voluntas fertur; indirecte autem illud quod voluntas potuit prohibere, sed non prohibit" (*ST*, Ia IIae q. 77 a. 7c).