

## FREEDOM AND LAW IN ST. THOMAS AQUINAS' PHILOSOPHY

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### **Abstract**

*This research delves into the intricate relationship between freedom and law as expounded in the philosophical framework of St. Thomas Aquinas. Grounded in Aquinas' synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology, the study elucidates his conception of freedom as aligned with rationality and the pursuit of the good. Aquinas' multi-layered understanding of law, encompassing the eternal, divine, natural, and human dimensions, forms the backdrop for analyzing the harmonious interplay between freedom and law. Contrary to viewing law as a constraint on freedom, Aquinas argues for their mutual enrichment, positing that adherence to just laws fosters individual flourishing and societal well-being. Drawing on key works such as the Summa Theologica and Summa Contra Gentiles, supplemented by scholarly interpretations by Gilson, Pieper, and Davies, this research contributes to a deeper comprehension of Aquinas' ethical and political thought, offering insights into the nature of moral agency and the pursuit of the common good.*

**Keywords:** Law, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica

### **Introduction**

In the rich tapestry of medieval philosophy, few figures loom as large as St. Thomas Aquinas. Central to Aquinas' philosophical inquiry is the profound relationship between freedom and law, which he explores with depth and nuance. This introduction sets the stage for our exploration of Aquinas' thought, outlining the significance of freedom and law within his philosophical framework. At the heart of Aquinas' philosophy lies a synthesis of Aristotelian ethics and Christian theology, a harmonization of reason and revelation. For Aquinas, the pursuit of truth is not a solitary endeavor but a communal journey guided by the light of reason and divine revelation. In this context, the concepts of freedom and law emerge as crucial elements in understanding human nature, moral agency, and social order. Aquinas' conception of freedom transcends mere autonomy, emphasizing the alignment of human will with rationality and the pursuit of the good. True freedom, according to Aquinas, is found in the pursuit of virtuous action, rooted in the natural inclination of rational beings towards their ultimate end—union with God. This understanding of freedom as harmonious with reason lays the foundation for Aquinas' exploration of the role of law in guiding human conduct. In Aquinas' philosophical schema, law serves as a rational directive for human action, reflecting the eternal law—divine reason governing the universe. He delineates four types of law: eternal, divine, natural, and human, each playing a distinct role in guiding human behavior towards its proper end. Contrary to viewing law as a constraint on freedom, Aquinas contends that adherence to just laws is conducive to individual flourishing and societal harmony.

This research seeks to delve into Aquinas' profound insights into the dynamic interplay between freedom and law, examining how his philosophical synthesis offers a compelling framework for

ethical inquiry and social cohesion. By exploring key texts such as the *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, supplemented by scholarly interpretations, we aim to elucidate Aquinas' conception of freedom and law and its implications for moral agency and the common good.

In the following sections, we will delve deeper into Aquinas' philosophy, exploring the nuances of freedom and law, and their implications for moral and social order. Through this exploration, we hope to glean valuable insights into the enduring relevance of Aquinas' thought for contemporary ethical and political discourse.

This research endeavors to explore how St. Thomas Aquinas reconciles the concepts of freedom and law within his philosophical framework, shedding light on their intricate relationship and implications for moral and social order. St. Thomas Aquinas, a towering figure in medieval philosophy, synthesized the philosophical heritage of Aristotle with Christian theology, offering profound insights into ethics, metaphysics, and political theory. Central to his thought are the notions of freedom and law, which he approached with depth and nuance.

### **Freedom in Aquinas' Philosophy**

Aquinas conceives of freedom not as mere autonomy but as the capacity to act in accordance with reason and will. He posits that true freedom is found in the pursuit of the good, grounded in the natural inclination of rational beings towards their ultimate end, which is God. In the philosophical framework of St. Thomas Aquinas, freedom is not merely conceived as the ability to choose among alternative courses of action but as the capacity to act in accordance with reason and will. Aquinas' understanding of freedom is deeply rooted in his teleological view of human nature, wherein freedom finds its fulfillment in the pursuit of the ultimate good—union with God.

**1. Teleological Understanding of Freedom:** For Aquinas, freedom is intricately linked to the telos, or ultimate end, of human existence, which is the beatific vision—perfect union with God. True freedom, therefore, consists in the ability of rational beings to choose actions that lead them closer to this ultimate end. In this sense, freedom is not an end in itself but a means to realizing one's inherent purpose and flourishing as a human being.

**2. Alignment with Reason:** Aquinas emphasizes the rationality of human freedom, asserting that true freedom is exercised when the will is directed by reason towards the good. Unlike a purely voluntarist conception of freedom, which divorces the will from reason, Aquinas maintains that freedom finds its fullest expression when the will is guided by right reason, enabling individuals to discern and pursue what is truly good and virtuous.

**3. Natural Inclination towards the Good:** Central to Aquinas' understanding of freedom is the concept of natural inclination—the innate tendency of rational beings to seek the good. Aquinas argues that human beings, by virtue of their rational nature, are naturally inclined towards the good, which is ultimately grounded in the divine. Thus, freedom is not an arbitrary exercise of the will but a harmonious alignment with the natural inclinations of human nature towards the good.

**4. Freedom and Moral Responsibility:** Aquinas acknowledges that freedom entails moral responsibility—the capacity to choose between good and evil and to be held accountable for one's actions. While individuals possess the freedom to choose, they are also bound by moral norms derived from divine and natural law. Thus, freedom is not a license to do as one pleases but a call to exercise moral agency in accordance with objective moral principles.

**5. Freedom and Grace:** Despite his emphasis on the rationality of freedom, Aquinas also recognizes the role of divine grace in perfecting human freedom. Grace, for Aquinas, elevates and perfects human nature, enabling individuals to freely choose the good and attain their ultimate end. In this way, freedom is not solely a product of human effort but is infused and sustained by divine grace.

In summary, Thomas Aquinas' philosophy offers a robust understanding of freedom as grounded in reason, aligned with the natural inclination towards the good, and oriented towards the ultimate end of human existence. Far from being a license for arbitrary action, freedom, for Aquinas, is inseparable from moral responsibility and finds its fulfillment in the pursuit of virtue and the attainment of union with God.

### **Law in Aquinas' Philosophy**

For Aquinas, law serves as a rational directive for human conduct, derived from the eternal law—divine reason governing the universe. He delineates four types of law: eternal, divine, natural, and human, each playing a distinct role in guiding human action towards its proper end. In St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophical framework, law serves as a rational directive for human conduct, reflecting the eternal order established by divine reason. Aquinas delineates four types of law—eternal, divine, natural, and human—each playing a distinct role in guiding human behavior towards its proper end. Understanding Aquinas' conception of law is essential for grasping the relationship between human freedom and moral order within his philosophical system.

**1. Eternal Law:** At the foundation of Aquinas' understanding of law lies the concept of eternal law, which is the divine reason governing the universe. Eternal law encompasses the divine plan and providence that governs all creation, guiding both natural processes and moral actions. As the highest expression of divine wisdom, eternal law serves as the ultimate standard of morality and order, providing the blueprint for all other forms of law.

**2. Divine Law:** Divine law consists of those precepts revealed by God to humanity through sacred scripture and divine revelation. For Aquinas, divine law supplements and reinforces natural law, providing additional guidance for human conduct in matters beyond the scope of natural reason. Divine law includes the moral teachings found in religious texts such as the Bible and the teachings of the Church, which serve as authoritative guides for moral behavior and spiritual development.

**3. Natural Law:** Natural law, according to Aquinas, is the participation of rational creatures in the eternal law through their rational nature. It is the inherent moral order inscribed in human nature, accessible to reason and discernible through reflection on the fundamental principles of human flourishing. Natural law consists of universal principles of morality, such as the preservation of life, pursuit of knowledge, and promotion of social harmony, which are binding on all rational beings by virtue of their rational nature.

**4. Human Law:** Human law encompasses the legal norms and regulations established by human authorities for the governance of civil society. Derived from natural law and guided by prudence, human law aims to promote justice, order, and the common good within a particular community or political entity. While human law is subject to change and variability depending on historical and cultural contexts, it must ultimately conform to the principles of natural and divine law to be considered valid and just.

Through his delineation of these four types of law, Aquinas seeks to articulate a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between divine, natural, and human authority, and the moral obligations incumbent upon individuals within society. Law, in Aquinas' philosophy, serves as a means of harmonizing human freedom with moral order, guiding individuals towards the attainment of their ultimate end—union with God—and the flourishing of the common good.

### **Relationship between Freedom and Law in Thomas Aquinas' Philosophy:**

Contrary to the notion of law as a constraint on freedom, Aquinas argues that true freedom is realized through adherence to divine and natural law. He contends that obedience to just laws foster individual flourishing and promotes the common good, aligning human will with the divine will.

In the philosophical system of St. Thomas Aquinas, the relationship between freedom and law is one of mutual enrichment rather than opposition. Aquinas seeks to reconcile the exercise of human freedom with the necessity of moral order and guidance provided by various forms of law—eternal, divine, natural, and human. Understanding this relationship is crucial for grasping Aquinas' conception of moral agency, virtue, and the pursuit of the common good.

**1. Harmony of Freedom and Law:** Contrary to viewing law as a constraint on freedom, Aquinas posits that true freedom is realized through adherence to just laws derived from divine and natural sources. He maintains that the laws established by divine reason—eternal law—provide the rational framework within which human freedom can flourish. Far from being arbitrary impositions, these laws reflect the inherent order and purpose of the universe, guiding human conduct towards its proper end.

**2. Guidance for Moral Action:** Law, according to Aquinas, serves as a rational directive for human conduct, providing guidance and norms that orient individuals towards the pursuit of the good. While freedom enables individuals to choose among various courses of action, law assists in discerning and selecting those actions that are in accordance with reason and conducive to human flourishing. Thus, law acts as a safeguard against the misuse of freedom and ensures that individual choices align with objective moral principles.

**3. Moral Responsibility and Accountability:** Aquinas emphasizes that freedom entails moral responsibility—the capacity to choose between good and evil and to be held accountable for one's actions. While individuals possess the freedom to choose, they are also bound by moral norms derived from divine and natural law. The existence of law, therefore, serves to reinforce the moral accountability of human agents, reminding them of their obligation to act in accordance with the dictates of reason and the divine will.

**4. Promotion of the Common Good:** Aquinas contends that obedience to just laws fosters individual flourishing and promotes the common good within society. By adhering to laws grounded in natural and divine principles, individuals contribute to the establishment of a harmonious social order characterized by justice, peace, and the well-being of all members. Thus, the relationship between freedom and law is not one of coercion but of mutual benefit, wherein the exercise of freedom is directed towards the common good.

In summary, Thomas Aquinas' philosophy elucidates a harmonious relationship between freedom and law, wherein freedom finds its fulfilment in adherence to just laws derived from divine reason and natural order. Rather than impeding freedom, law serves as a guide and safeguard, enabling individuals to exercise their moral agency in accordance with objective



moral principles and contributing to the establishment of a virtuous and flourishing society.

### **Implications for Moral Agency**

Aquinas' synthesis of freedom and law underscores the importance of moral agency in human actions. By exercising reason and will in conformity with objective moral norms, individuals become virtuous agents capable of realizing their full potential and contributing to a harmonious society.

### **Conclusion**

St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophy offers profound insights into the dynamic relationship between freedom and law, emphasizing their mutual enrichment rather than opposition. By embracing a teleological understanding of freedom and recognizing the role of law in guiding human conduct, Aquinas provides a compelling framework for ethical inquiry and social cohesion. In the philosophical oeuvre of St. Thomas Aquinas, the interplay between freedom and law emerges as a central theme, offering profound insights into the nature of moral agency, virtue, and social order. Through his synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology, Aquinas articulates a vision of freedom that is deeply rooted in reason, aligned with the pursuit of the good, and oriented towards the ultimate end of human existence—union with God. Contrary to viewing law as a constraint on freedom, Aquinas contends that true freedom is realized through adherence to just laws derived from divine and natural sources. Rather than impeding individual autonomy, these laws serve as rational directives for human conduct, guiding individuals towards virtuous action and the attainment of the common good. Far from being arbitrary impositions, law reflects the inherent order and purpose of the universe, providing the framework within which human freedom can flourish.

Furthermore, Aquinas emphasizes the moral responsibility and accountability that accompany freedom, highlighting the importance of obedience to objective moral norms derived from divine and natural law. By exercising their freedom in accordance with these norms, individuals contribute to the establishment of a harmonious social order characterized by justice, peace, and the flourishing of all members.

In conclusion, Thomas Aquinas' philosophy offers a compelling framework for understanding the dynamic relationship between freedom and law, wherein freedom finds its fulfilment in adherence to just laws grounded in reason and divine order. Through his nuanced exploration of this relationship, Aquinas provides invaluable insights into the nature of human flourishing, moral agency, and the pursuit of the common good, which continue to resonate in contemporary ethical and political discourse. As we reflect on Aquinas' enduring legacy, we are reminded of the profound wisdom contained within his philosophical synthesis, which continues to inspire and challenge us in our quest for a more just and virtuous society.

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