

QUESTION 7

The Circumstances of Human Acts

Next, we have to consider the circumstances of human acts. On this topic there are four questions: (1) What is a circumstance? (2) Should a theologian take into account the circumstances surrounding human acts? (3) How many sorts of circumstances are there? (4) Which are the most important among them?

Article 1

Is a circumstance an accident of a human act?

It seems that a circumstance (*circumstantia*) is not an accident of a human act:

Objection 1: In *Rhetorica* Tully says that a circumstance is “that by which an oration adds authority and strength to its argumentation.” But an oration gives strength to its argumentation mainly by appeal to what has to do with a thing’s substance—e.g., the definition, the genus, the species, etc.—on the basis of which Tully teaches orators how to argue. Therefore, a circumstance is not an accident of a human act.

Objection 2: It is proper to an accident to *exist in* something (*accidentis proprium est inesse*). But what surrounds (*circumstat*) a thing exists outside of it and not in it. Therefore, circumstances are not accidents of human acts.

Objection 3: An accident does not itself have accidents (*accidentis non est accidens*). But human acts are themselves certain sorts of accidents. Therefore, it is not the case that circumstances are accidents of acts.

But contrary to this: The particular conditions of a singular thing are called the accidents that individuate it (*accidentia individuantia ipsam*). But in *Ethics* 3 the Philosopher calls the circumstances *particulars*, i.e., particular conditions of singular acts. Therefore, circumstances are the individual accidents of human acts.

I respond: Since, according to the Philosopher, names are “signs of understandings” (*signa intellectuum*), in addition to the process of intellective cognition there has to be a corresponding process of naming as well. Now our intellective cognition proceeds from what is better known to what is less known. And so among us names are transferred from what is better known to signify things that are less known. And so it is, as *Metaphysics* 10 points out, that the name ‘distance’ is extended (*processit*) from things having to do with place to all sorts of contraries. Similarly, we use names pertaining to local motion to signify other movements, since bodies, which are circumscribed by their place, are the things best known to us. And so it is that the name ‘circumstance’ is extended from things existing in a place to human acts.

Now in matters of place, what is said to surround (*circumstare*) a thing is extrinsic to it and yet touches it or is close to it in place. And so what are called ‘circumstances’ are conditions that lie outside the substance of a human act and yet touch on the act in some sense.

Now anything that exists outside the substance of a thing and yet pertains to the thing itself is called an accident of that thing. Hence, the circumstances of human acts should be called their accidents.

Reply to objection 1: An oration does indeed give strength to its argumentation in the first place by appeal to the substance of an act, but it also gives strength to its argumentation secondarily by appeal to what surrounds the act. For instance, someone is rendered blameworthy (*accusabilis*) in the first instance by the fact that he committed homicide, but he is rendered blameworthy secondarily by the fact that he did it with evil intent (*dolo fecit*), or for the sake of money, or at a sacred time, or in a sacred place, or something else of this sort. And so Tully expressly claims that it is by appeal to the circumstances that an oration secondarily, as it were, adds strength to its argumentation.

Reply to objection 2: There are two ways in which something is said to be an accident of a thing:

(a) because it *exists in that thing*, in the sense in which *white* is said to be an accident of Socrates, or (b) because it *exists together with that thing in the same subject*, in the sense in which *white* is said to be accidental to *musical* insofar as they come together in a single subject and in some sense touch one another. It is in this second way that circumstances are called accidents of acts.

Reply to objection 3: As has been explained, an accident is said to be accidental to an accident because of their coming together in a subject. But there are two ways in which this can happen: (a) insofar as the two accidents are related to the single subject without any ordering, in the way that *white* and *musical* are related to Socrates, and (b) with some ordering, i.e., because the subject receives the one accident by the mediation of the other, in the way that a body receives its color by the mediation of its surface. In this latter sense one accident is even said to exist in the other; for example, we say that the color exists in the surface.

Now circumstances are related to acts in both of these ways. For some circumstances that are ordered to the act, e.g., place and the person's condition, have to do with the agent but are not mediated by the act, whereas other circumstances, e.g., the manner of acting, have to do with the agent and are mediated by the act itself.

Article 2

Should the theologian consider the circumstances of human acts?

It seems that the theologian (*theologus*) need not consider the circumstances of human acts:

Objection 1: A theologian considers human acts only insofar as they are of a certain sort, viz., good or bad. But it does not seem possible for the circumstances to make a human act to be of a certain sort, since a thing is qualified by what exists within it, and nothing is qualified, formally speaking, by what exists outside of itself. Therefore a theologian need not consider the circumstances of human acts.

Objection 2: The circumstances are accidents of acts. But "there are infinitely many things that are accidental to any given thing." This is why, as *Metaphysics* 6 says, "there is no art or science, except a sophistical one, with respect to a *per accidens* entity (*circa ens per accidens*)." Therefore, theologians do not have to consider the circumstances of human acts.

Objection 3: Consideration of the circumstances belongs to the rhetorician. But rhetoric is not a part of theology. Therefore, the consideration of circumstances is irrelevant to the theologian.

But contrary to this: As Damascene and Gregory of Nyssa point out, ignorance of the circumstances is a cause of involuntariness. But involuntariness excuses one from sin (*excusat a culpa*), the consideration of which pertains to the theologian. Therefore, the consideration of circumstances likewise pertains to the theologian.

I respond: There are three reasons why the circumstances pertain to the theologian's inquiry:

First, the theologian considers human acts insofar as through them a man is ordered toward beatitude. Now everything that is ordered to an end must be proportioned to that end. But acts are proportioned to an end in accord with a certain measure, which is brought about through the right circumstances. Hence, a consideration of circumstances pertains to the theologian.

Second, the theologian considers human acts insofar as they are good or evil, and better or worse, and, as will become clear below (q. 18, aa. 10-11), this diversification involves the circumstances.

Third, the theologian considers human acts insofar as they are meritorious or demeritorious, features which belong to human acts and for which it is required that the acts be voluntary. But as has been explained (q. 6, a. 8), a human act is judged to be voluntary or involuntary according to one's knowledge of the circumstances or ignorance of them.

And so a consideration of the circumstances pertains to the theologian.

Reply to objection 1: A good that is ordered to an end is called a *useful good* (*bonum utile*). This implies a certain relation, which is why the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 1, “It is with respect to something that a good is useful.” However, in those things that are predicated relatively (*quae ad aliquid dicuntur*) something is denominated not only from that which exists within it, but also from that which touches on it extrinsically, as is clear with *right* and *left*, *equal* and *unequal*, and other similar cases. And so since the goodness of acts exists insofar as they are useful for the end, nothing prevents them from being called *good* or *bad* because of a relation to certain things that affect touch on them from the outside.

Reply to objection 2: Accidents that behave altogether accidentally (*quae omnino per accidens se habent*) are left aside by every art because they are unstable and infinite in number (*propter eorum incertitudinem et infinitatem*). But such accidents do not have the nature of a circumstance (*non habent rationem circumstantiae*), since, as has been explained, circumstances lie outside of the act in such a way that they nonetheless touch on the act in some sense and are ordered toward it; and *per se* accidents do fall under an art.

Reply to objection 3: The consideration of circumstances pertains to the moralist and the statesman as well as to the rhetorician (*pertinet ad moralem et politicum et ad rhetorem*).

The circumstances pertain to the moralist insofar as the mean of virtue in human acts and human passions is either found or missed in relation to them.

They pertain to the statesman and the rhetorician insofar as acts are rendered praiseworthy or blameworthy, excusable or inexcusable (*laudabiles vel vituperabiles, excusabiles vel accusabiles*) by their circumstances. Yet the circumstances pertain to the statesman and the rhetorician in different ways. For the rhetorician makes a persuasive argument for what the statesman passes judgment on (*quod rhetor persuadet, politicus diiudicat*).

Now the circumstances pertain to the theologian, to whom all the other arts are subordinated, in *all* of the ways just mentioned. For the theologian, along with the moralist, conducts inquiry into virtuous acts and vicious acts. And along with the rhetorician and the statesman, he considers acts insofar as they merit punishment or reward.

Article 3

Are the circumstances correctly enumerated in *Ethics* 3?

It seems that the circumstances are incorrectly enumerated in *Ethics* 3:

Objection 1: What is called a circumstance of an act is related externally to the act. Time and place are circumstances of this sort. Therefore, *when?* and *where?* are the only two sorts of circumstances.

Objection 2: That something is done well or done badly is taken from the circumstances. But something’s being done well or done badly has to do with the mode [or manner] of an act (*pertinet ad modum actus*). Therefore, all the circumstances are included under a single circumstance, viz., *the manner of acting* (*modus agendi*).

Objection 3: Circumstances do not belong to the substance of an act. But it seems that the causes of the act itself have to do with the substance of the act. Therefore, no circumstance should be taken from the causes of the act itself. So, then, *who?* and *why?* and *what?* are not circumstances; for *who?* has to do with the efficient cause, *why?* with the final cause, and *what?* with the material cause.

But contrary to this is the relevant passage (*auctoritas*) from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 3.

I respond: In *Rhetorica* Tully enumerates seven sorts of circumstances that are contained in the following verse: “*Who? (quis), what? (quid), where? (ubi), by what means? (quibus auxiliis), why? (cur), in what manner? (quomodo), when? (quando).*” For in the case of an act, one has to take account

of *who* did it, *by what means or instruments* he did it, *what* he did, *where* he did it, *why* he did it, *in what manner (quomodo)* he did it, and *when* he did it. In *Ethics 3* Aristotle adds another, viz., *with respect to what? (circa quid)*, which Tully includes under *what?*

The explanation for this enumeration can be thought of as follows:

A circumstance is something that, while existing outside the substance of an act, touches on the act in some way. There are three ways in which this happens: (a) the circumstance touches on *the act itself*; (b) it touches on a *cause* of the act; or (c) it touches on an *effect* of the act.

Now it touches on *the act itself* either (a) as a measure, as with *time* and *place*, or (b) as a quality of the act, as with the *manner of acting*.

It touches on an *effect* as in the consideration of *what* someone has done.

It touches on a *cause* as follows: as regards the final cause, *why? (propter quid)*; as regards the material cause (or object), *with respect to what? (circa quid)*; as regards a principal agent cause, *who did it?*; and with respect to an instrumental agent cause, *by what means?*

Reply to objection 1: *Time* and *place* are ‘surround’ (*circumstat*) the act as measures, but the other circumstances are such that, while existing outside the substance of the act, they touch on the act itself in some other way.

Reply to objection 2: The particular mode or manner *done well* (or *done badly*) is posited not as a circumstance, but as something that follows upon all the circumstances. By contrast, *the manner [of acting]* that is posited as a special circumstance has to do with a quality of the act, e.g., that someone is walking *quickly* or *slowly*, or that someone struck another *forcefully* or *lightly*, and so on.

Reply to objection 3: It is a conjoined condition—and not the condition of a cause on which the act’s substance depends—that is a circumstance. For instance, in the case of the object, it is not a circumstance of theft that the item belongs to someone else, since this has to do with the substance of theft; rather, a circumstance would be that the object is of great value or of small value (*magnum vel parvum*).

The same holds for other circumstances that are taken from the other causes. For it is a conjoined end—and not the end that gives an act its species (*dat speciem actus*)—that is a circumstance. For instance, it is not a circumstance that a brave man acts bravely for the sake of the good of courage; instead, it is a circumstance that he acts bravely for the sake of freeing his city, or for the sake of the Christian people, or for something else of this sort.

The same holds for *what?*. For instance, it is not a circumstance of someone’s pouring water on another that he makes him wet; but it is a circumstance that, in pouring the water, he makes him cold or hot, or heals him or harms him.

Article 4

Is it the case, as *Ethics 3* asserts, that the principal circumstances are *why?* and the things in which the operation exists?

It seems that it is not the case, as *Ethics 3* asserts, that the principal circumstances are “*why?*” (*propter quid*) and the “things in which the operation exists”:

Objection 1: The things in which the operation exists seem to be place and time, which do not seem the most important among the circumstances, since they are especially extrinsic to the act. Therefore, the things in which the operation exists are not the most important circumstances.

Objection 2: The end is extrinsic to a thing. Therefore, it does not seem to be the most important circumstance.

Objection 3: The most important element in any given thing is its cause and its form. But the

cause of the act itself is the person who is the agent, whereas the form is the manner of acting (*modus actus*). Therefore, these are the two circumstances that seem to be the most important.

But contrary to this: Gregory of Nyssa says, “The most important circumstances are *that for the sake of which* the act is done and *what* it is that is done.”

I respond: As was explained above (q. 1, a. 1), acts are properly called human insofar as they are voluntary. But the will’s motive and object is the end. And so the most important of all the circumstances is that which touches on the act from the side of the end, viz., *that for the sake of which*, and, secondarily, that which touches on the substance of the act, i.e., *what* the agent did. The other circumstances are more or less important to the extent that they are more or less close to these.

Reply to objection 1: By “things in which the operation consists” the Philosopher means those things that are adjoined to the act itself and not time or place. Hence, Gregory of Nyssa, in explaining, as it were, what the Philosopher says, puts “what is done” in place of “things in which the operation exists.”

Reply to objection 2: Even if the end does not belong to the substance of the act, it is nonetheless the most important cause of the act insofar as it moves the agent to act. Hence, a moral act has its species especially from the end.

Reply to objection 3: The person is the agent cause of an act insofar as he is moved by the end, and it is mainly in this respect that he is ordered toward the act. By contrast, the other conditions of the person are not as principally ordered toward the act.

Also, the manner of acting is not the act’s substantial form, since it is, as it were, a certain quality of the act, whereas the substantial form in an act has to do with the object and with the terminus or end.