

## AN ARGUMENT OF AQUINAS ON GOD’S WILL MUTABILITY

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**Abstract.** I analyze an argument by Aquinas on God’s will mutability (*Summa Theologica*), which presupposes the collective predication on the term ‘man’. This explains why God repents of having made the collection of men, but not some men. The argument is valid, but its second premise and its conclusion are false.

**Keywords:** God’s will mutability • validity • solidity

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In this article I propose to analyze a deductive argument by Saint Thomas Aquinas on God’s will mutability. This argument appears in *The Summa Theologica* (First Part, Q. 19, Art. 7: Obj. 1), and it is interesting, from the point of view of its logical formalization, because it presupposes the collective predication, against the distributive one, on the term ‘man’ in its first premise. This to avoid the need of adding an enthymematic premise providing existential import on the term ‘man’. Moreover, the collective predication allows us to explain why God may repents of having made men, as a collection of beings, without having to repent of having made some individual men. But, despite its validity, the argument is not solid as its second premise is false; which is shown by Aquinas himself, and brings about the falsity of its conclusion. Surely the final purpose of Aquinas with respect to all this exercise of argumentation is precisely to show the falsity of its conclusion —that God has a changeable will—, i. e., that God’s will is not mutable.

This is the text of the aforementioned Objection 1, Article 7 (“Whether the will of God is Changeable?”) Question 19 (“The will of God”):

It seems that the Will of God is changeable. For the Lord says (Gn. 6:7): “It repenteth Me that I have made man”. But whoever repents of what he has done, has a changeable will. Therefore God has a changeable will (1947, p.147).

And this is the analysis I propose:

It seems that ① (the Will of God is changeable). For the Lord says (Gn. 6:7): “② < It repenteth Me that I have made man””. But ③ < whoever repents of



what he has done, has a changeable will  $\}$ . Therefore ① ( God has a changeable will).

Clearly, conclusion ① appears two times: first as a hypothesis and then as a thesis, after giving reasons for it in premises ② and ③. Premise ② reports a God's saying in *Genesis* 6:7 (which precedes and is strongly linked to the universal deluge), and premise ③ seems to have the force of a universal psychological law.

Previous to its symbolization, premise ② may be paraphrased as a universal declarative sentence: 'For any human being, God repents of having made him'; and the indefinite pronoun 'whoever' in ③ surely refers to any sentient being (not necessarily human; e. g., God or an angel) with self-consciousness, intelligence, and will, which explains the next paraphrase of premise ③: 'Given any two things whatever, if one of them is a sentient being who repents of having done the other one, then the first one has a changeable will'. These resources allow us to propose two things, i) the dictionary:  $H(y) = y$  is a human being;  $S(x) = x$  is a sentient being with self-consciousness, intelligence, and will;  $W(x) = x$  has a changeable will;  $R(x, y) = x$  repents of having done  $y$ ; and  $g = \text{God}$ ; and ii) the following symbolization, where 1 corresponds to ②, 2 to ③, and the conclusion ' $W(g)$ ' to ①:

1.  $(y)(H(y) \supset R(g, y))$
2.  $(x)(y)[(S(x) \cdot R(x, y)) \supset W(x)] \quad / \therefore W(g)$ .

But, despite the intuitive validity of Aquinas' argument, we cannot deduce the conclusion above from 1 and 2 if we do not accept two not controversial extra premises: that God is a sentient being with self-consciousness, intelligence, and will, ' $S(g)$ ', and that there are human beings, ' $(\exists y)H(y)$ ' (no problem with these assumptions in the biblical context). The last premise, because universal formulae do not have existential import in deductive first order logic (different from Aristotelian logic), so that the inclusion of the propositional function ' $H(y)$ ' in 1, even assuming its truth, does not guarantee the existence of human beings (1 would be vacuously true if there was no human being). So, the next formalization of Saint Thomas' argument and the deduction of its conclusion look like this (I use Copi's 1973 rules of inference; cf. §4.5, pp.89–99):

1.  $(y)(H(y) \supset R(g, y))$
2.  $(x)(y)[(S(x) \cdot R(x, y)) \supset W(x)]$
3.  $S(g)$
4.  $(\exists y)H(y)$   $/ \therefore W(g)$
5.  $H(y)$
6.  $H(y) \supset R(g, y)$  1, UI
7.  $(y)[(S(g) \cdot R(g, y)) \supset W(g)]$  2, UI

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|-----|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| 8.  | $(S(g) \cdot R(g, y)) \supset W(g)$ | 7, UI       |
| 9.  | $R(g, y)$                           | 6, 5, MP    |
| 10. | $S(g) \cdot R(g, y)$                | 3, 9, Conj  |
| 11. | $W(g)$                              | 8, 10, MP   |
| 12. | $W(g)$                              | 4, 5-11, EI |

Nonetheless, despite of recovering the intuitive validity of Aquinas' argument, this formalization is unacceptable, in particular because its first premise does not seem to recover the sense in which God repents of having made men. Surely the Lord repents of having made men not in the sense of repenting of having made *all and every man*,<sup>1</sup> but in the sense of repenting of having created the *aggregate* or *collection* of human beings, not each individual man. This because God's repentance of having made the aggregate of human beings does not imply that He *must* repents of having made each man; e. g., surely God does not repent of having made Abel, but of course Cain; not Noah and his family, but truly Lamech and his family;<sup>2</sup> not king David, but certainly king Saul; not John the Baptist, but surely king Herod; not Saint Peter, but truly Judas; and so on.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the contrary opinion would be subject to the fallacy of division: for the reason that the Lord repents of having created the collection of men, he *does not need* repenting of having made each and every man.

In short, the formalization of premise ② 'It repenteth Me that I have made man' surely presupposes the *collective predication* —on the aggregate of human beings—, against the *distributive* one —on each individual man—, with respect to the term 'man'. Furthermore, this allows us to avoid the need of adding an enthymematic extra premise providing existential import on the term 'man' in the formalization. So, the new formalization and deduction look like this (we need to add an individual constant to the dictionary:  $h$  = the aggregate or collection of human beings):

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|----|---|-------------------|
| 1. | $R(g, h)$                                   |                   |
| 2. | $(x)(y)[(S(x) \cdot R(x, y)) \supset W(x)]$ |                   |
| 3. | $S(g)$                                      | $\therefore W(g)$ |
| 4. | $(y)[(S(g) \cdot R(g, y)) \supset W(g)]$    | 2, UI             |
| 5. | $(S(g) \cdot R(g, h)) \supset W(g)$         | 4, UI             |
| 6. | $S(g) \cdot R(g, h)$                        | 3, 1, Conj        |
| 7. | $W(g)$                                      | 5, 6, MP          |

With respect to the previous formalization and deduction this one is simpler, as we may appreciate, since it only presupposes one —not two— enthymematic and not controversial premise, ' $S(g)$ '; and it is more direct, as only takes seven steps, not twelve, to arrive at its conclusion.

However, and this is the most important thing, the last formalization of the argument is valid but not *solid*, because its premise 2, which pretends to have the force of a universal psychological law, lacks the ingredient of necessity. This is shown by

Aquinas himself when he says: “It is possible to will a thing to be done now, and its contrary afterwards; and yet for the will to remain permanently the same [...]” (1947, Q. 19, Art. 7, p.148). So, premise 2 is not a universal law, but only a contingent universal statement. But even worse than that, premise 2 is false:

For when we repent, we destroy what we have made; although we may even do so without change of will; as, when a man wills to make a thing, at the same time intending to destroy it later. Therefore God is said to have repented by way of comparison with our mode of acting, in so far as by the deluge He destroyed from the face of the earth man whom He had made (1947, First Part, Q. 19, Art. 7, p.148).

Then, this which occasionally occurs to us when we act (“to make a thing, at the same time intending to destroy it later”), it *always* happens to God when He acts, because each of His volitions and acts do not arise one after another, but all of them coexist together in the eternal and immutable “instant” in which the whole of His life consists (cf. Aquinas 1947, First Part, Q. 9, Art. 1, p. 49-50; and Q. 10, Art. 1-2, p. 52-54).<sup>4</sup> So, this that occasionally occurs to us: ‘when we repent, we destroy what we have made; although we *may* even do so without change of will’, it always happens to the Lord: when He repents, He destroys what He has made; although He does so *forever* without change of will.

The final conclusion is, then, that even if Aquinas’ argument is valid, its conclusion is not precisely in need of better premises for its defense, but it is positively false (of course, with respect to the biblical and theological context of the argument; which, on the other part, validates its premise 1). This, because the falsity of premise 2 — implied in this case by the falsity of its substitution instance 5,  $(S(g) \cdot R(g, h)) \supset W(g)$  (see the last deduction)—, implies the falsity of its conclusion ‘ $W(g)$ ’; and Saint Thomas, as the magnificent arguer he is, was perfectly aware of all of this.

So, what do we learn after all this periplus? Well, we learn that the mere validity of an argument is not enough to justify the truth of its conclusion: in addition, we need to be sure of its premises’ truth. In relation to this, we may add that the formalization of a deductive argument not only allow us to determine its validity, but it contributes to give us a better understanding of its statements’ truth conditions (premises and conclusion, as we could observe with respect to premises 1 and 2 of the last deduction; see footnotes 3 and 4). But the task of formalization requires to be complemented, for its optimal execution, with a necessary conceptual and contextual analysis of the argument; because the grasping of the exact sense of its key terms (such as the sense expressed by the term ‘man’ in premise 1: the collective predication of the term, not the distributive one) permits us to obtain a clear understanding of the statements’ truth conditions in which those terms occur, and eventually a fair formalization sensitive to these details.

Finally, we may learn, from an ontological point of view, that deductive first order logic is fruitfully applicable even to interpretation domains not universally accepted for everybody, as it is the theological one.

## References

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The sense expressed by  $(y)(H(y) \supset R(g, y))$ .

<sup>2</sup>Precisely the context of God's saying in *Genesis* 6:7 consists of His intention of destroying mankind, through the universal deluge, including of course Lamech and his family—who descended from Cain—, excepting Noah and his family—who descended from Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve—to repopulate the world (cf. *Genesis* 4–9).

<sup>3</sup>So, the propositional function  $'H(y) \supset R(g, y)'$  would have many false substitution instances, namely, those with a true antecedent and a false consequent; e. g., that one referred to Noah—with  $n = \text{Noah}$ —:  $'H(n) \supset R(g, n)'$ . Of course, that implies the falsity of the universal quantification of  $'H(y) \supset R(g, y)'$ .

<sup>4</sup>So, the propositional function  $'(S(x) \cdot R(x, y)) \supset W(x)'$  would have many false substitution instances, with a true antecedent and a false consequent, when applied to us, as soon as sometimes we 'make a thing, at the same time intending to destroy it later'; because at least such kind of acts does not imply that our will is mutable (but of course many other kinds of acts do imply it). However, that propositional function would *always* be false when applied to God, because all His acts and volitions are simultaneously coexistent, such that His will never changes. Evidently, all of this implies the falsity of the universal quantification of  $'(S(x) \cdot R(x, y)) \supset W(x)'$ .