

## Aquinas and the Will to Believe

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I want to discuss the idea that faith is voluntary. This is a traditional teaching, at least in the catholic tradition that I know better. Many things can be meant by such a general statement, but one privileged interpretation, offered by Thomas Aquinas, has received a very large welcome, and is given as an expression of the Magisterium in the recent Catechism of the Catholic Church. There, Aquinas is quoted for this quasi-definition of the *act of faith* : "Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace." (*Ipsum autem credere est actus intellectus assentientis veritati divinae ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam*)<sup>1</sup>. The voluntariness of faith is then the voluntariness of the act of believing (*credere*) the divine revelation. Now, though this sentence is not exactly Aquinas's definition, nor his main statement about what faith is, it certainly contains what Aquinas thinks is necessary and sufficient for the existence of faith. Voluntariness is the feature I want to concentrate upon, but there are other aspects, one being certainty, on which I will also have something to say. I will first have to make some precisions in order to isolate Aquinas's analysis of the act of faith. I will then criticize him for the use he makes of the two criteria of certainty and voluntariness. And finally I will offer a proposal to repare his analysis and to keep with the idea that faith is in some sense voluntary<sup>2</sup>.

1. The first thing to be said is that Aquinas distinguishes faith (*fides*) as a disposition (a virtue) and the act of believing, the *credere*, which is considered as the actualization of the disposition. Both are studied separately in the *Summa theologiae*. First the act of faith (*actus fidei*) II-II, q.2 and then the virtue of faith, q. 4. He relies for each one on a definition he takes from others. The definition of faith is taken from the letter to the Hebrews : "faith is the substance of the things hoped for, the evidence (substance) of things not seen" (XI, *est autem fides substantia sperandarum rerum, argumentum non apparentium*)<sup>3</sup>, and that of the *credere* is taken from Augustine : "to believe is to think with assent" (*de Praedestinatione sanctorum*

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<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 2, 9; cf Dei Filius 3; DS 3010. Quoted by the CCC n. 155

<sup>2</sup> I have to say that the position I defend is very close to that presented by Richard Swinburne, mainly in his *Faith and Reason* (Oxford 1981), ch. 4, and Appendix. But in presenting Aquinas's conception of faith, Swinburne does not focus on voluntariness at all (but on propositional belief vs trust, which is to be found in the lutheran view of faith). And so he does not propose to correct Aquinas the way I do. See nonetheless the remarks on voluntariness on p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> In the article 1, Aquinas criticizes those who refuse to take this statement as a definition of faith.

II, 5 : *credere est cum assensione cogitare*). Now, though a disposition and its occurrent actualization are distinct, they share many features, and voluntariness is one of them. Aquinas takes the act of faith to be under the power of the will, and he considers the disposition of faith as a virtue, having a moral significance, and being meritorious.

Second observation: the quotation given at the beginning does not belong to those texts where Aquinas is trying to say what faith (disposition or act) is, but to a subsidiary question about the merit of faith. This has some relevance, in that two features that are present in the quoted sentence do not appear in what can be called the definitional texts. One is that faith refers to the divine truth, the object of faith is divine revelation. The other is that faith is moved by God, or more generally is a divine gift. As important as those characteristics may seem, they do not appear among the criteria by which Aquinas isolates the act of faith from other psychological attitudes.

This leads to a third precision: Aquinas's own proper characterization of the act of faith, which can be found in many parallel texts. Building on Augustine's definition, Aquinas isolates the act of faith as a species of the propositional attitude of assent to a proposition. The assent presupposes another attitude, that of consideration of a propositional content. Once a proposition (e.g. the proposition that Aquinas was a great theologian) is considered by a mind, an intellect, or rather by a person, (1) she can remain neutral, without assenting to nor dissenting from it: this is doubt. (2) She can assent, but without giving to it a full adhesion. Aquinas distinguishes there between (2.1) suspicion, when the motivation for assent is light, and (2.2) opinion, when the person fears the truth of the negation of the proposition. Finally, (3) the assent can be fully determined (certain), but we have to make some further distinctions, according to the source of the determination. If (3.1) it comes from the considered content, (3.1.1) the assent can be provoked by the sole consideration of the terms that constitute the content, and that is the pure *intelligence (evidentia ex terminis)*, which occurs for example in the apprehension of the first principles (principle of no contradiction, of principles such as the whole is greater than the part). (3.1.2) It can also be mediated by an inference from premises that are self evident, or deducible from such premises, so that the truth of the conclusion is logically warranted, and this is *science*. If (3.2) the assent is not motivated by the sole content, but is still fully determined, then we have the *credere*, which is

the proper act of faith, distinct from any other non-evident beliefs. And Aquinas adds that the source of the certainty has to be the will<sup>4</sup>.

Assent	Determined by the content (involuntary)		Undetermined by the content (voluntary)		
			Given		Suspended
uncertain			opinion	suspicion	doubt
Certain	intelligence	science	Act of faith ( <i>credere</i> )		

So we see that a necessary and sufficient condition for faith is that it is an assent that is both certain and not motivated by the content it is directed to. This is very close to the kantian description of *Glauben* as subjectively sufficient but objectively insufficient. And this condition does without any reference to the proper object of faith (divine revelation), nor with any mention of a divine intervention. Finally, the condition of voluntariness is not even necessary, and we can see it as filling the blank left when it is said that the assent is not motivated by the content (or by the intellectual understanding of the content). It is a psychological fact, for Aquinas, that when assent is given without the constraint of evidence, it must be motivated by the will. Of course, an intellectual consideration of the content is always necessary, for there to be assent, dissent or suspension of judgment. But, in all other cases, the content is not enough for the assent to take place, and an act of will is necessary. Doubt, suspicion and opinion share with the act of faith the condition of voluntariness. But faith shares with science that of certainty (full determination).

I must say that it seems to me a bit “incredible” that a full characterization of faith do not mention its object, nor the reliance on a form of authority, ultimately of God (think of Augustine: “knowledge relies on reason, faith relies on authority”<sup>5</sup>), nor the particular intervention of God to help the believer, with the grace or the gift of faith. But to say that sufficient conditions have been given without mentioning those features does not imply that they are not true features of faith, nor that they are not necessary for faith. It only means that one can isolate the specific psychological attitude of faith without those “true” and maybe “necessary” conditions. So I will not quarrel Aquinas for leaving them aside, since he does mention them in other contexts, as in the quotation given at the beginning. But I will quarrel him with two necessary conditions that he gives, and that are also sufficient and redundant: the condition of certainty and the condition of voluntariness.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Sum. Theol.* II-II, q.2, a.1 c and ad 3 (only text to distinguish between *suspicio* and *opinio*, and to insist on the *cogitatio* that remains in faith but disappears with intelligence and science). See also *In III Sent.* d. 23, q.2, a.2, qa1 ; *Quaest. de ver.*, q. 14, a.1 ; *Super Boet. de Trin.* q.3, a.1 ad 4 ; *Sum. Theol.* II-II, q.1, a.4; *In Hebr.* 11, 1

<sup>5</sup> And see Vatican I, *De Fide*, canon 2 : “it is required for divine faith that revealed truth be believed on the authority of God who reveals it.”

2. Concerning certainty. One can agree or admit that faith understood as the content that is revealed, and to which the believers give their assent, is certain, for example because God cannot deceive nor be deceived. This is a special meaning of “faith”, which we could call “objective faith”, the *fides quae creditur*. But it is clear that our concern is with “subjective faith”, faith as a disposition of the believer, as a virtue, and with the act of faith which is a special kind of assent to a content, the *fides qua creditur*. Aquinas’s description, in those texts, puts faith, intelligence of the principles and science of the conclusions on the same side: the side of assents that are fully determined, certain, in the subjective sense. A mind fully determined about one content cannot dissent from it, and is even unable to doubt and suspend its assent. Aquinas’s view is then that the assent to an article of the Creed is as unavoidable by the believer as the assent to the proposition that it is raining when it is obvious that it is raining, or to the conclusion of an arithmetical proof that has been perfectly understood by the thinker.

I have doubts about certainty being a necessary condition for knowledge<sup>6</sup>. I have doubts about the impossibility of certain opinions concerning mundane matters without any kind of evidence. And I have doubts about certainty being a necessary condition for an act of faith. According to Aquinas’s typology, either I cannot be fully certain that it will rain tomorrow, not that Aquinas was a great theologian, or, since this belief cannot be based on evidence, such a fully determined assent would be an act of faith. This is absurd, and I take it that Aquinas would choose the first option: such a certitude is an impossibility. But I do not see that it is impossible to be fully certain that it will rain tomorrow. Whatever it might be, I mainly have quarrel with the idea that an act of faith is incompatible with a certain form of doubt so that the psychological attitude would be something like a partial belief, or rather a certain degree of belief. One can think that doubt and faith are mutually exclusive. But what to do with great believers (saints) who have admitted that they have spent some time in the night of faith, having doubts about what they nonetheless gave their assent to. The divine intervention might not be paralleled with a firm assent. Let us suppose that on the Morning of the Resurrection, Peter and John stay in front of the empty tomb, John sees and believes, firmly, and Peter is shaken and begins to believe in the Resurrection, but with very little confidence. He is just above the limit between assent and dissent, very close to doubt. He is in the state of suspicion, or of weak opinion. Now, an archangel, Gabriel say, comes to you and

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, « science » in Aquinas is not equivalent to the current notion of Knowledge, though disagreement abounds on this last one. But certainly, Aquinas’s notion is more demanding. Nonetheless, it is not clear to me that even that demanding notion (direct evidence and deductions from direct evidences) requires certainty as a necessary condition. On the distinction between faith and knowledge, see Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, p. 107 ff.

reveals that John's psychological attitude is due only to human psychology and natural states, whereas Peter's attitude is due to a constant and important help coming from God, without which Peter would still resist to believe in the Resurrection. I demand: who has faith? is it true that John has faith, and that Peter has not? My own inclination goes on the opposite side: John believes that Christ is alive, but this is not an act of faith, whereas Peter is close to doubt, but he has faith.

Concerning voluntariness, the objection will not be surprising. Simply because it seems to be widely recognized that belief is a passive and not an active state of mind. Whether we refer to dispositional belief, or to occurrent belief (or judgment), they are not directly under the power of the will. We cannot believe at will that it is or will be raining, or that Aquinas was a great theologian, nor can we stop believing it at will, nor is there any point in ordering to believe it. This seems to be true of strong as well as of weak beliefs, and even of doubt as suspension of assent. If it seems to me to be more probable that it will be raining than not, I cannot suspend my judgment, I am believing *ipso facto*, even if weakly, that it will be raining. I may not act on that belief, I may decide to go out, without umbrella, as if I believed that it would not be raining. I could *deny* that (I believe that) it will be raining. These are actions, that I can undertake or refrain from undertaking, that one can order me to do, etc. Actions are under the power of the will, passive states are not. They may be so indirectly. If a dog barks behind me, I cannot help hearing it just at will. But I can put my fingers in my ears and have an indirect power over what I hear and what I don't. Similarly, I may have an indirect power over my belief, either by inducing me to a state of credulity or incredulity (even by the way of drugs), or just by inquiring into a particular domain so as to end up with beliefs I would not have acquired without inquiry. I may have an indirect power over my belief, or over my standards or policies for belief. But it is not a matter of psychological or philosophical theory, a humean thesis, it is rather a logical truth that belief is not directly up to me: if I knew that my belief (that Aquinas was a great theologian) issued from my will, this would undermine it. If I knew that my belief that it will be raining was motivated by my wish to stay at home, I would not believe it anymore. It belongs to the concept of belief (weak or strong) and to the concept of doubt, that the thinker considers it as happening to him, and not as something he voluntarily does.

Now, one could argue that this might be true of belief in general, but not of the particular case of faith. Here I must first underline that Aquinas equates all non-evidential and non-scientific assents as being voluntary. But let us take this not fully thomistic line. Aquinas says that the believer sees the good that there is in assenting to the revelation (to believe that the

Revelation is true)<sup>7</sup>. This is certainly true. But the question is: does he believe *because of* this consideration? If what I said of belief in general is true, why would it not be of faith? One way would be to say that there is more to faith than propositional belief. I agree and will come back to this later. But we are discussing faith and the act of faith (*credere*) as defined by Aquinas, and he focuses on the assent given to certain propositional contents (the articles of the Creed namely). One feature is proper to propositional faith: the absolute certitude. I just criticized Aquinas for his thesis that the act of faith has to be fully determined. But let us keep only the idea that it has a certain degree of certitude. One could argue that, though the belief state is not voluntary, the degree of certitude is. But I would make the same point: I do not see how one could raise or lower one's own degree of certitude at will. We might do things that would modify our doxastic conditions and influence the degree of firmness of assent, but once set in a particular situation, both cognitively and affectively fixed, I cannot change at will my belief nor its degree of firmness. Both happen to me, they are naturally occurring in me.

Finally, one could say that the introduction of the will in the assent proper to faith is the way one can understand how is exercised the divine influence. The act of faith is moved by the will that is itself moved by the divine grace. But I do not see how this could be the only way for God to act on the believer. The first action of God in the process of faith is the action of revealing, through the prophets, his own truth. Revelation is addressed to the cognitive powers, by the way of a public message. And the private assent to this public message is also a revelation, the revelation to this person that this message revealed to all is true. At least this is the way Jesus speaks to Peter when he tells him, after his explicit act of faith ("You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God"): "Blessed are you for this revelation does not come from flesh and blood that have revealed this to you, but from my Father who is in Heaven" (Mt 16, 17). The divine influence on the particular believer, the influence that *makes him believe*, seems also to be a kind of light, directed to his cognitive powers rather than to his will. I would not deny that grace influences the will, but I would insist that in the case of the act of propositional faith, the intellect is a better candidate for receiving the divine influence. Both the content and the assent have a divine origin, and both can be described in terms of revelation, light, knowledge that are given to mankind, to a people or to a particular person. We have to keep distinct a revelation that makes a content being known or understood, and a revelation that makes it being believed, assented to. Maybe the distinction public-private is not apt, for God can make a particular content being known to only one person, but this is not

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<sup>7</sup> *Quaest. De ver.*, q.14, a.1 *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q.1, a.4 ; q. 2, a.1, ad 3 ; a.2 (which grounds the difference between *credere in Deum*, *credere Deo* and *credere Deum*, on the motion of the will : « the first truth is related to the will as it has the nature of an end »)

enough to provoke assent: a further action is needed to make the content being believed. Aquinas explicitly recognizes it when he says that faith is *from God (a Deo)* a) with respect to the things that are proposed on the outside (*ex parte rerum quae exterius proponuntur*) – the content; and b) with respect to the inner light on the inside (*ex parte interioris luminis*) – the assent<sup>8</sup>. There, the will is not mentioned, and this seems to be better : what is important is the mention of the divine action, and not the handle that is controlled.

3. Wouldn't it be possible to recover in some ways Aquinas's description and the traditional statement that faith is voluntary, is meritorious, and, as far as dispositional faith is concerned, is a virtue ?

I guess it is, and I guess you can see how. We just have to enlarge the concept of faith (disposition and act) so as to include some actions that are under the control of the will. There are actions that prepare the assent, and may lead to it. God's first command is the command to listen (*Shema Israel*). In order to believe some particular content one has to be acquainted with it: this might be the result of a passive encounter, but there might also be some active participation: inquiring, listening to, thinking about. We could say that those actions are *upstream* with regard to the assent proper to the act of faith. And we can also look *downstream*: there are actions that follow the act of faith, that are in a certain accordance with it, even though they are not necessitated by it. The profession of faith is a first example. But so are the behaviors that obey to some indications belonging to the divine revelation (prayer, charity and so on), and that can be said based on faith. Aquinas made an important distinction between dead (or unformed) and living faith (or faith formed by love), according to the presence of charity in the believer. This helps to understand James' remark that the devils also believe, and they shudder (Jas 2, 19). Such a belief and faith is not meritorious, according to Aquinas. Meritorious faith has to go with works, actions, that suppose the presence of love. This is very good indeed. But Aquinas does not go as far as rejecting that such a belief without works is not even voluntary. I would go that far, and say that one can exert the assent proper to faith, without acting on it. Such is the faith of the devils, their faith is dead, it is only the passive result of God's inner revelation.

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<sup>8</sup> *In Boet. De Trin.* q.3, a.1, ad 4. Aquinas says: "... in faith by which we believe in God, not only is there acceptance of the truths to which we give assent, but also something which inclines us to that assent; and this is the special light which is the habit of faith, divinely infused into the human mind. This, moreover, is more sufficient for inducing belief than any demonstration, for, though from the latter no false conclusions are reached, still man frequently errs in this: that he thinks something is a demonstration which is not. The light of faith is also more sufficient than the natural light of reason by which we assent to first principles, since this natural light is often impeded by bodily infirmity, as is evident in the case of the insane. But the light of faith, which is, as it were, a kind of impression of the First Truth in our minds, cannot fail, any more than God can deceive us or lie; therefore this light suffices for making judgment." With this I have no quarrel. But he then adds: "This habit of faith, nevertheless, does not move us by way of intellectual understanding, but more by way of the will; therefore it does not make us comprehend those truths which we believe, nor does it force assent, but it causes us to assent to them voluntarily." And I do not see the justification for this addition.

At this point, one cannot avoid referring to the concept of *acceptance* as opposed to the concept of belief. According to many philosophers, and following Jonathan Cohen, to accept a proposition is to take a special attitude towards it, while believing is just a passive state that has causes but over which one has no direct power. To bet is to take some stand towards a proposition, to build a strategy is to do the same with many propositions. But, as well as one can lie and profess a proposition one does not assent to, one can bet in favor of a proposition that one does not believe, or build a strategy that take as granted propositions that one disbelieve. I can accept an advice given to me in extreme circumstances (mortal danger) by a person I have all the reasons to disbelieve (he always betrayed me before), because I do not see any other way out. In that case I *consider* the proposition as true, I act *as if* it were true, though, if asked what I believe, I might answer that I believe the proposition is false. The necessities of action, or any goal whatsoever, can motivate acceptance even when belief is absent. And the reverse is possible: one can refuse to accept, even reject, what one believes, for some reason or other. Descartes's methodological doubt consists in refusing to accept (to put in the basket of science) those propositions one can believe, but realizes they are not indubitable. Clifford's shipowner should have rejected the belief he had that the boat would not sink. Clifford blames him for his belief, and not only for the decision he took to let the boat sail. But, if belief is a passive state, one cannot be directly responsible for it. The shipowner can be blamed for not having acquired the good policies, or for having accepted his belief, and acted on that belief and acceptance, but not just for believing what he (passively) believed. I understand how there can be an ethics of acceptance, but not how there can be an ethics of belief. The engineers of British Airways and Air France might have been persuaded that the Concorde would not fail a second time after the crash. But they did not accept that belief until all the procedures of test had been satisfied. Of course, the usual situation is to accept what one believes, but belief and acceptance are distinct psychological phenomena, one passive and involuntary and one active and voluntary.

Now, if faith includes some actions before or after the assent, in particular if faith includes the acceptance of the belief that the Revelation, or the articles of the Creed, is true, then we can understand how faith may be said to be voluntary. We could even understand that the divine influence is also given to the will, so that there would be three steps

- the (public) revelation of the content, so that the person can know/*understand* it
- the (private) inner revelation, so that the believer can *assent* to it

- the inner action on the will, so that the believer can *accept* the belief he or she holds and *profess* it, *act* on it, *die* for it.

And of course, if faith is to be understood as living faith or as formed faith (by charity), then there is no problem in saying that faith is voluntary, is meritorious, or is a virtue. At least the problem I mentioned vanishes. So one way to repair Aquinas's analysis is to extend the act of faith further than the only assent to a propositional content.

If this is done, we can draw interesting consequences.

First, the question of the full determination of the assent to the Creed, may be reconsidered, for example as meaning full determination of the acceptance. In that case, one could have doubts about some article of faith, but still accept it without hesitation, and die for it rather than committing apostasy<sup>9</sup>.

Second, since the assent could be moved by God, without having a phenomenal character (as certitude and voluntariness) that sets it apart from other kinds of assents, the believer would have no clue to identify his assent as an act of faith. One could argue that assent to some specific content (like the Trinity of the divine Persons) can be given only with the divine assistance, and so with faith as a gift from God. But that is not obvious. It might be true, but why would any content be such that no one could have purely mundane reasons to believe it? Recall the apologue of Peter and John. The proper consequence to draw seems to me that there is no criterion that one believes what one believes with a divine assistance, that is by faith. Faith is not naturally recognizable. Or: faith is itself an object of faith, and also an object of belief as opinion. Joan of Arc answered the question: "are you in a state of grace?" with the word: "If I am, please God let me in, and if I am not, please God set me in" (*Si j'y suis que Dieu m'y garde, si je n'y suis pas que Dieu m'y mette*). I guess the same could said about faith.

Here, I must add a remark. Contemporary philosophers often consider that belief in the Christian revelation is just propositional faith. I disagree. The idea that faith is not only a belief in a certain content, but also a gift that could be possessed without being received, this idea is well grounded in the Christian tradition. This implies as a consequence, that from a Christian point of view, belief in another content cannot be properly called faith (there is no

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<sup>9</sup> This is the idea suggested by *De veritate*, q. 10 a. 12 ad s. c. 6: « Ad sextum dicendum, quod illa quae sunt fidei, certissime cognoscuntur, secundum quod certitudo importat firmitatem adhaesionis: nulli enim credens firmius inhaeret quam his quae per fidem tenet. Non autem cognoscuntur certissime, secundum quod certitudo importat quietationem intellectus in re cognita: quod enim credens assentiat his quae credit, non provenit ex hoc quod eius intellectus sit terminatus ad illa credibilia virtute aliquorum principiorum, sed ex voluntate, quae inclinatur intellectum ad hoc quod illis creditis assentiat. Et inde est quod de his quae sunt fidei, potest motus dubitationis insurgere in credente. »

faith in the doctrine of the Qoran, only belief, and acceptance). One might want to make a distinction between faith as a general propositional attitude, and supernatural faith. Natural or human faith would be distinct from belief, for example, by including a certain confidence in the source of the content, or by having some particular content. And supernatural faith would imply divine assistance and bear on the content of Revelation. But it is clear that what I am talking about, and what Aquinas is talking about, is supernatural faith, be it or not a species of a more general psychological attitude.

Finally, another consequence of the proposal I am offering is that there is no part of the divine Revelation that we could not believe on the basis of good reasons, without the help of God. Or at least, we have no reason to think it would be impossible to believe on purely human grounds. This opens the door to argumentation in favor of any part of this content (from God's existence or compatibility with evil to the Resurrection of the bodies, or the Trinity of the divine Persons). But at the same time, this implies that no argumentation of that kind would produce (supernatural) faith, only belief and perhaps acceptance. Faith requires a divine assistance. That a certain person has faith might be manifest in some actions that are above the human forces, according to our judgment. But we cannot be sure, no human behavior is obviously above the human possibilities. We can certainly believe (by the way of conjecture) that we or others have faith, and we certainly can base this belief on the observation of our or their behavior. In doing so we also could receive some divine assistance, but I only believe it, maybe by faith, maybe not.

Now to conclude I come back to Aquinas, and I ask: would he have accepted these remarks and mainly the emendation of his quasi-definition of faith that I proposed? Would he have admitted that belief is not voluntary, that the pure assent is a passive reaction, and that only acceptance is really under the power of the will, as well as all other actions that can be based on the belief? Well, since I believe that the distinction between belief and acceptance is a good and useful one, and I believe that Aquinas was a great theologian, so I believe he would have made the distinction, and would have drawn the same conclusions.