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Section 5
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 Question #3

The Human Power to Rationally Deliberate

Aquinas, perhaps the greatest philosopher of his time, was also notably influenced by religion; his religious convictions held that humans are essentially different from animals. Religion told him that the human decision-making process is more elevated than that of animals, because humans are able to deliberate rationally: to consider various means to achieve an end and to decide on the best one (Pereboom, p.35-37). Because he believed that animals do not possess this power, he was convinced that humans are completely free from the instinct to which animals are bound. Although my argument is based upon observation rather than religious prescription, I agree with Aquinas: **while in certain circumstances it may seem that humans are subject to instinct alone, they are in reality always in possession of the power of rational deliberation and thus free from instincts.** Their choices are instead affected by consequent ignorance, which Aquinas defines as a willful disregard of available information, and antecedent ignorance, which he defines as a lack of availability of information that would have changed a person's decision (Pereboom, p.55-56).

Thesis

In this paper I will first show that animal and human decision-making processes are indeed different. I will then proceed to demonstrate that even in circumstances in which it seems that a person's instinct prevails over rational deliberation, in fact rational deliberation is taking place and that ignorance is the cause of any seemingly instinctive or irrational decisions. The objection considered is that of the startle reaction, in which it seems that instinct dominates reactions because of time constraints. In the following reply, I illustrate that even in such circumstances, rational deliberation can take place.

Strategy
 Paragraph

One of the assumptions on which parts of Aquinas' philosophical convictions are founded is that the actions of animals are fundamentally different from those of humans. Aquinas argues that while animals do make decisions, those decisions are not the product of reasoning and deliberation, or "free judgment," but rather of instinct alone (Pereboom, p. 35).

Identifies the assumption on which she'll focus

Clearly, we are unable to penetrate animals' minds to discover their true process of reasoning (if there exists, in fact, such a process in the minds of animals), yet we can infer from observation the level of rationality present in animals by contrasting the probable reactions of an animal and a human in similar circumstances. For example, suppose that both a dog and a human are trapped in an upstairs hallway of a burning house. Heat and smoke are coming from the end of the hallway at which the stairs are located, and the other end is relatively cool and clear. A dog will most likely follow its instinctive fear of fire and retreat to the clear end of the hallway, potentially trapping itself, while a human, though he may feel an instinctive desire to flee the fire, will more likely choose to try to escape the house via the stairs after rationally deliberating.

Illustrates the assumption with a clear example.

This illustrates that animals are bound to their instincts, whereas humans may go against their instincts after rationally deliberating.

While the decision-making processes of animals and humans are fundamentally different, then, is there not some inevitable similarity due to the presence of instinct in both? That is to say, are humans not in some circumstances subject wholly to their instincts? They are not: instinct certainly may influence our actions if we permit it, but the power to deliberate remains whether or not we choose to use it. Ignoring that power is, in fact, a form of what Aquinas calls consequent ignorance (Pereboom, p. 55). Take, for example, a person confronted by an angry adult bear. Because the bear is bigger than the person, the person's instinctive reaction will be to flee. The person has the power, however, to deliberate about whether this reaction is the best.

Explains the problem

Restates her thesis

Perhaps the person has some knowledge of bears and knows that bears, which can run faster than humans, will chase a running person, in which case it would seem that a rational person would choose not to run. Suppose that the person does run, however. Does this indicate that instinct has prevailed completely over rational deliberation? It does not: the knowledge about bears is still available to the person and still figures into deliberation, even if that deliberation takes place in a moment and is not thorough. If the person then follows her instincts, it is still a choice, although it is one made as a result of consequent ignorance, in which the person is avoiding the knowledge she has. Animals, on the other hand, do not have the power to consider acquired knowledge they have on a topic; they are bound to their instincts.

Dissolves potential worries about her thesis

A thoughtful person at this point might interject that there are circumstances under which a lack of time robs us of our power to deliberate and subjects us completely to instinct. Even if when faced with a threat such as an angry bear a person can retain her power to deliberate rationally, there must be some case in which she is unable to do so, in which the startle reaction takes over and he is unable to consider any options other than that toward which his instinct directs him. Think of a person walking down the street at night who is suddenly accosted by a friend attempting to scare him. The person, startled, may very well lash out at his friend in defense against a perceived threat without pausing to consider who the assailant might be. This, surely, is an instance in which rational deliberation fails and the person's actions are wholly dictated by instinct, for if he were to stop to consider his options he would not lash out at his friend. Since his reaction, caused by the instinctive startle reaction in humans, is evidently irrational, it is a case in which instinct prevails and humans are truly prisoners of the same instinct that dictates animal actions. Therefore, when startled, people lose the human ability to deliberate rationally and become subject to animal instinct.

Objection directly targets argument of the preceding paragraph

Raises an objection by offering a worrisome counter-example.

I respond that even in such circumstances human actions are not dictated by brute instinct. The objection above imposes time constraints on rational deliberation; I contend that human beings have the ability to make rational decisions even in extremely short periods of time.

I also put forth that, even when startled, people retain control over their decisions and that seemingly irrational decisions are in fact rational given what the individual's information is at the time at which the decision must be made. Thus, there is a fundamental flaw in the argument above; **there is an assumption that the person's reaction is caused by instinct, because lashing out at a friend would not be a rational decision.** This fails to take into account that the person is completely ignorant of his assailant's identity: therefore, the person's reaction is caused by what Aquinas terms antecedent ignorance (Pereboom, p. 55-6): he does not know that the person accosting him is his friend, and he will likely feel pain and regret later if he injures his friend. His reaction is not a product of instinct alone. Even in the split second between the person's recognition of the supposedly dangerous situation and his reaction, there is a kind of rational deliberation taking place. The person may consider other options, though perhaps at a sub-conscious level: whether to fight or flee, for example. He cannot take into account information of which he is not in possession at the time, i.e., the fact that it is his friend who is accosting him as a joke. Thus, the seemingly instinctive action is in fact a rational decision due to the effects of antecedent ignorance. Additionally, the time limit imposed on his decision does not render the decision irrational and thus instinctive. Although he has a significantly limited amount of time in which to make a decision, he is nevertheless choosing from among several options the one that, based upon the information he has, seems best to him at the time. He may, for example, be choosing between whether to defend himself physically or to attempt to break free and escape without retaliating. Given the information of which he is in possession and the time in which he

Analyzes the objection as an argument. Identifies an assumption in the objection and argues against it.

must make a decision, his decision is rational, not instinctive. Similarly, as Aquinas would have said, a person is not responsible for the circumstances surrounding his decision, only for making the best decision within those circumstances (Pereboom, p. 1-2). Thus even in startling circumstances, a human being retains his power to deliberate rationally and is not subject solely to animal instincts.

This paper considers Aquinas' contention that rational deliberation frees human beings from the instinct to which animals are subject. As shown, humans choose courses of action differently than animals do, namely, by rational deliberation rather than pure instinct. At times, it seems that people are subject to their instincts — such as when startled — but in reality they are still deliberating rationally. Seemingly irrational decisions are the result of ignorance, rather than a failure of the power of deliberation. The paper fails to consider thoroughly, however, the potential time constraints on rational decision-making. Does a person lose any element of her power to deliberate rationally, if she is pressed to make a decision in a short period of time? For the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that there is no time limit in which a person can effectively deliberate. In summary, I agree with Aquinas' stance that the human ability to consider various means to an end renders them in all circumstances free from animal instinct.