

Sub Specie Boni, Sub Ratione Boni.

Imagination and Estimation in Aquinas's Guise of the Good

Francesco Orsi

University of Tartu, Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics

According to the thesis sometimes known as “the guise of the good”, we can only want or desire something (or intentionally do something) if it appears good to us in some respect. Typically, when introducing this thesis, one finds contemporary authors using the Latin phrase *sub specie boni*. In medieval Latin formulations, however, the standard formula is that whatever we will, we will *sub ratione boni*, or that we can only will something *sub ratione boni*, i.e. under the *ratio* (aspect) of good/goodness. Much more rarely does one find the expression *sub specie boni*, i.e. under the appearance or semblance of good/goodness. This seems especially true in Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). First, I present textual evidence for this terminological difference in Aquinas, and show that *sub specie boni* occurs almost exclusively in contexts where the agent wants something on the basis of, mistakenly, taking something bad to be good. But why reserve *sub specie boni* for these cases? In the second part of the article, I compare the role played by the cognitive powers of imagination and estimation in the evaluations which are proposed to the will, concluding that not imagination, but estimation is, at least in part, the key to Aquinas's view of the will. I also highlight differences between the evaluations of estimation and those of conscience. Once we bring out these contrasts, *sub specie boni* turns out to be an expression with its own significance, and not just a rhetorical variant of *sub ratione boni*.

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1. Introduction

In medieval Latin formulations of the view sometimes known as “the guise of the good”, the standard formula is that whatever we will, we will *sub ratione boni*, or that we can only will something *sub ratione boni*, i.e. under the *ratio* (aspect) of good/goodness. Much more rarely does one find the expression

Corresponding author's address: Francesco Orsi, email: francesco.orsi@ut.ee.

sub specie boni, i.e. under the appearance or semblance of good/goodness. This seems especially true in Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). In the first part of this article, I present evidence for this terminological difference in Aquinas, and show that the second construct (*sub specie boni*) occurs almost exclusively in contexts where the agent wants something on the basis of, mistakenly, taking something bad to be good. But why reserve *sub specie boni* for these cases? In the second part, I compare the role played by the cognitive powers of imagination and estimation in the evaluations which are proposed to the will, concluding that not imagination, but estimation is, at least in part, the key to Aquinas’s view of the will. I also highlight differences between the evaluations of estimation and those of conscience. Once we bring out these contrasts, *sub specie boni* will turn out to be an expression with its own significance, and not just a rhetorical variant of *sub ratione boni*.

2. *Sub Specie Boni* and *Sub Ratione Boni* in Aquinas: Textual Evidence and Matters of Translation

Recent debates have brought back into fashion the traditional thesis that we can only want or desire something (or intentionally do something), if it appears good to us in some respect. I will call this the Thesis. Typically, when introducing the Thesis, one finds authors using the Latin phrase *sub specie boni*:

...the view that only the (believed) good attracts, that we always act *sub specie boni*. (Stocker 1979, 747)

All of [our] intentional actions are [...] directed at outcomes regarded *sub specie boni*: under the guise of the good. (Velleman 1992, 3)

...the claim that we act intentionally *sub specie boni*: “under the guise of the good.” (Setiya 2007, 16)¹

The use of the expression *sub specie boni* is in these contexts mostly ornamental: it does not add much or anything to the formulation of the Thesis, which is then more precisely articulated in the course of the discussion. At best, it is a gesture towards the Scholastic tradition in the background of the Thesis (hence the Latin). In fact, the phrase “under the guise of the good”, which has become increasingly popular thanks to David Velleman’s influential article, is probably not best understood as a translation of *sub specie boni*, if the latter phrase is supposed to capture the Thesis *in its full generality*. The notion of “under the guise of...” is more naturally used to indicate the

¹ As it happens, all these three authors go on to criticize the Thesis (another notable example is Williams 2011, 65, on which see Orsi 2024). Advocates of the Thesis (e.g. Tenenbaum 2007) tend to rather not use any Latin. But I will not speculate as to why this is so.

deceptive appearance or semblance of something, but the Thesis clearly covers equally cases of desire where the appearance of good is correct as cases where it is incorrect.

While there is nothing wrong with ornamental or allusive uses of a Latin phrase, what should strike the historian is that *sub specie boni* is *not* how the Thesis was typically formulated in medieval discussions. The standard phrase was another, and significantly harder to translate into English: *sub ratione boni*. Here I will be almost exclusively interested in Aquinas's corpus (given what is to come in the second part of this article). Lexicographical evidence establishes this prevalence beyond any doubt. One finds 69 occurrences of *sub ratione boni*, well represented and distributed across Aquinas's main works.² (The variant *in ratione boni* occurs 14 times in contexts where the will is discussed, although it usually qualifies verbs of cognition—e.g.: "...is apprehended in/according to the *ratio* of good(ness)"—rather than directly verbs indicating desire or willing.)

Here are three representative sample uses of the phrase, which I leave untranslated for the moment:

[T]he will can tend to nothing except *sub ratione boni*. (ST I, 82.2, ad1)³

Whatever a human being desires [*appetit*], they desire it *sub ratione boni*. (ST I–II, 1.6)

[I]n order for the will to be good, it must tend to the good *sub ratione boni*; in other words, it must will the good for the sake of the good [*propter bonum*]. (ST I–II, 19.7, ad3).

The first sentence occurs in the context where Aquinas distinguishes, in general, the will from other "appetitive powers" of the soul, namely the sensory, non-intellectual, appetites (which he indicates as the concupiscible and the irascible, roughly following in the footsteps of Aristotle's *epithumia* and *thumos*). The second one belongs to Aquinas's discussion of the last end of human appetites and here, significantly, what is *sub ratione boni* is the object of desire in general (*appetitus*), not only of the will: because also desires strictly belonging to the non-intellectual appetites have the last end (happiness *qua* perfection or beatitude) in sight, at least for human beings. The third quotation instead is found in a discussion of normative ethics, so

² I have consulted the editions and English translations available at <https://aquinas.cc>. Since I have often modified the proposed translation, all translations can be considered as mine.

³ References to *Summa theologiae*: ST part, question.article (and, if applicable, *ad*, i.e. response to objection, otherwise it refers to the main body of the answer). References to *De veritate* and *De malo*: *DeVer/DeMalo*, question.article (and, if applicable, *ad*, i.e. response to objection, otherwise it refers to the main body of the answer). All other Aquinas references are explained in full in the citation.

to speak, where Aquinas examines the conditions for the will to be morally good. If what you want is *de facto* good, but (per hypothesis) you don't think it good, or more realistically, you don't think it as good as it in fact is, and not seek it for this goodness, then your will is out of order, not unlike when you want something which is bad, even if you think it good.

On the other hand, Aquinas uses *sub specie boni* only six times, and he does so in relatively incidental rather than topical discussions of the will. Almost all are contexts where the *species boni* is a deceptive appearance or semblance of goodness leading us to committing wrong acts, so much so that the contemporary phrase "under the guise of the good" may in fact be an acceptable translation of *sub specie boni* in those contexts. It will be instructive to report them all, again leaving the phrase untranslated:

[1] [O]ne who wishes to commit fornication, even though he knows that fornication is bad in general, yet he judges this act of fornication to be good for himself at that time, and he chooses it *sub specie boni*. (*DeVer*, 24.2)

[2] [T]hat [the will] tends toward evil at times only happens when evil is proposed *sub specie boni*. (*DeVer*, 24.8)

[3] [I]t is in the power of free choice [*liberi arbitrii*] not to use a habit, and it is able to propose to itself, *sub specie boni*, that it not use a habit. But this cannot happen regarding grace among the blessed. (*DeVer*, 24.8, ad2)

[4] Now, God can be known in two ways: in himself, or in his effects. In himself it is impossible that he not be loved: for whatever is loved, is loved *sub specie boni*. (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, chapter 13, lecture 2, n.1137)

[5] [N]othing so casts out all good as hypocrisy [*simulatio*]; for evil that is concealed *sub specie boni*, cannot be provided against, because it is unknown. (*Catena Aurea on Matthew*, chapter 7, lecture 8, Pseudo-Chrysostomus)

[6] There is great danger of deception on entering religious life, since Satan transforms himself into an angel of light (2 Cor 9:14) and, *sub specie boni*, misleads the unwary. (*Refutation of Teaching that Deters from Religious Life*, chapter 8)

As can be seen, in passages 1, 2, 5, 6 Aquinas is directly addressing the problem of choosing or desiring something evil. In passage 3 he is also addressing, by implication, the same problem: the blessed ones (e.g. saints and angels) have good habits infused by God's grace, which precludes them from choosing evil (thus the blessed are "confirmed in goodness"). But this does not apply to the good habits that we, mere mortals, may acquire, and thus we have the freedom (*liberum arbitrium*) to choose not to use those good

habits, this choice thus happening under a *mistaken* appearance of good. Only passage 4 does not concern the issue of choosing evil.

Aquinas's case is representative of a general trend, as one would expect. A search with the phrase "sub ratione boni" in the Brepolis Library of Latin Texts (LLT) reports (until the year 1500) 414 occurrences, while "sub specie boni" gathers 200 entries.⁴ And the same pattern seen in Aquinas emerges: practically all reported occurrences of *sub specie boni* appear in contexts where the *species boni* is a deceptive semblance of goodness leading us to committing wrong acts. Besides, within the same search, the phrase *sub ratione boni* does not appear at all in Latin writings before the XIII century—not even in the all-important *Sentences* by Peter Lombard (written around 1150). Whether or not the earliest LLT reported occurrences are in fact the first ones, this is strong evidence for the special use reserved to this phrase in mature Scholastic philosophy, vis-à-vis the presence of pre-XIII century (though still infrequent) occurrences of *sub specie boni*.⁵

The popularity of *sub ratione boni* in the XIII century might have something to do with the increasing reception of Aristotle's works.⁶ At least judging by Aquinas's corpus, it seems that *sub ratione boni* was regarded as an acceptable gloss on certain Aristotelian passages, even while Aristotle uses nothing analogous to the Latin phrase. For example, commenting on the division of causes in the *Physics*, Aquinas writes:

[Aristotle] says that it makes no difference whether the final cause is a true or an apparent good, because what seems to be good can only move *sub ratione boni*. (*Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, book 2, lectio 5, note 186)

Or, when explaining why, for Aristotle in *De anima*, opinion or belief, but not imagination alone, can *immediately* affect our passions or desires (a point I will return to), Aquinas says:

[A]ppetite is not acted upon or moved by the simple apprehension of a thing which imagination brings forth; rather, it is necessary that it be

⁴ LLT database updated to 20.12.2024. Many of these occurrences (69 *sub ratione boni*, 97 *sub specie boni*) originate from works of the later Scholastic Denis the Carthusian (1402–1471), who appears to be overrepresented in this search.

⁵ Of course, both in Aquinas and other authors, one also finds all sorts of variants expressing, in context, the same or a similar idea. Here is a non-definitive list: *ratio boni* not preceded by *sub* or *in*; something being willed *as* good (*ut bonum, inquantum bonum*), without mention of *ratio*; the use of other value terms like *appetibilis* (desirable) or *conveniens* (suitable, on which see later); and of course the phrase *sub ratione mali* when the topic is aversion to something or whether we can want something under the aspect of evil.

⁶ However, the expression is in use already at least a generation before Aquinas, e.g. by Alexander of Hales (1185–1245), at a time when access to Aristotle's works was still "patchy and riddled with problems" (Schumacher 2020, 4).

apprehended *sub ratione boni* [...]; and this, in man, opinion brings about by its composing and dividing. (*Commentary on De anima*, book 2, lectio 28, note 635)⁷

Finally, commenting on the very beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas first clarifies that “good is what all things [*omnia*] desire” is to be understood as a kind of definition of a cause (being good) by its proper effects (being desired) (therefore not as a subjectivist reduction of what is good to what is desired). Then he tackles the potential counterexample of people desiring evil:

There is no problem from the fact that some men desire evil. For they desire evil only *sub ratione boni*—that is, insofar as they think [*aestimant*] it good. Hence their intention primarily aims at good and only incidentally falls upon evil. (*Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1, lectio 1, note 10)

Before leaving this terminological section, a few words need to be spent on matters of translation, since I have so far left the key phrases untranslated. It seems relatively safe, at least in Aquinas, to translate *sub specie boni* variously as “under the guise/appearance/semblance of good(ness)”, in each case highlighting the misleading or deceptive nature of the good (though I’ll come back to this in section 5). *Sub ratione boni* is, however, notoriously harder to translate. We can assume that *sub* and *boni* mean the same as in *sub specie boni*. The object of will, what one wants, is in some way layered “under” (*sub*) something, in a sense of “under” not too distant from the contemporary notion of something being wanted or an action being intentional *under* a certain description. Further, *boni* (genitive of the neuter noun *bonum*) should be translated as the abstract “of goodness” or “of (the) good”, but not as “of a good”, even though naturally some good, i.e. some concrete value (pleasure etc.), will be what, in the eyes of the agent, makes the object of desire have the *ratio* of goodness or belong to the good. Moreover, this abstract meaning of *bonum* parallels the meaning of *verum* (the true, truth) in the analogous phrases *sub specie veri*, *sub ratione veri* (referred to believing or apprehending something), which sometimes accompany statements of the Thesis. The main issue, then, is how to translate *ratio*.

⁷ In a popular collection of philosophical propositions (probably compiled by Johannes de Fonte around 1300), another proposition from *De anima*, 433a 27–29, is glossed as follows: “[T]he appetible object always moves the appetite *sub ratione boni*, be that the apparent or the real good” (in Hamesse 1974, 188). Again, no analogous expression to *sub ratione boni* occurs in Aristotle’s text. For the claim that the Scholastic *sub ratione boni* is a radical departure from the historical Aristotle, see (Kent 1995, 174). For a more moderate view, see (Orsi 2023, 29–31).

One *could* opt for the literal “under a/the reason of good(ness)”. “Reason” here does not entail anything particular to do with rationality, although, when Aquinas uses the phrase to characterize the will, as an intellectual appetite non-human animals lack, the connection with reason as a higher cognitive faculty does seem to be part of the connotation of *ratio boni*. It is reason, or intellect, that provides the concept of goodness, which is operative in the acts of the will but not (or not *per se*) in the acts of the sensitive appetites, and certainly not in non-human animals’ appetites.

Moreover, it is not too much of a stretch to understand *ratio boni* as, in part, alluding to the reason(s) why the agent thinks (sometimes mistakenly) that the object of their will is good: the “good-maker(s)”, as one would say in contemporary jargon, like pleasure, health, justice etc. From this perspective, while Latin does not have articles, sometimes “under a reason of goodness” may be preferable to “under the reason of goodness”, e.g. when this is followed by illustrations of just what appears to the agent to be good and desirable about their action. As far as it goes, then, a literal English translation is less misleading than it might seem, because *ratio* in *sub ratione boni* does hold a connection both to “reason” (uncountable) as a faculty, and to “reasons” (countable).

Aquinas scholars, however, have adopted a variety of alternative translations of *ratio*, among which “reason” barely ever occurs. “Aspect” (“under an/the aspect of the good/of goodness”) seems to be the most frequent—and in what follows, I will mostly conform to this—but one can also find “character” (Donagan 1988), “note” (McInerny 1992), “formality” (McInerny 1992, Osborne Jr 2014), “formula” (Stump 2003) and, less often, “idea”, “concept”, “notion”, “consideration”. I believe each of these variants can preserve the basic claim that we, as (adult) humans provided with higher cognition, never simply desire or will something by way of brute attraction to the object, or simply by an instinctive evaluation (like animals do), but always by a (usually tacit) exercise of evaluative thought, for which some concept of goodness needs to be operative.

Of course, this happens also when our desires go wrong: we desire *sub ratione boni* when we desire something bad no less than when we desire something good. But it may have seemed rhetorically useful, at least in some contexts, to prefer *sub specie boni*, to mark the bad cases from the good ones (I return to this in section 5). The two expressions (or at least *species boni* and *ratio boni*) are tellingly juxtaposed in a passage by Peter John Olivi (1248–1298) about the role of Satan in tempting certain people to heresy. Despite

Olivi's many disagreements with Aquinas, this passage can be held out as exemplary of a Scholastic "lexical consensus":⁸

He [Satan] knows well that falsehood is not accepted except under some semblance of truth [*sub aliqua specie veri*], nor can evil be loved except under some semblance of good [*sub aliqua specie boni*]; and therefore he mixes some aspects of truth and good [*aliquas rationes veri et boni*] with falsehoods and evils, so as to offer gall and poison under honey. (Olivi 2002, 155, in his *Quodlibeta quinque: quodlibetum* 2, question 16)

As can be seen here, a *species* or semblance of goodness is always, also, a *ratio* or aspect of goodness, under which something is willed or loved (in this particular case, Olivi refers to the thought of having God "on one's side", which makes certain doctrines and actions appear good to the heretic). But is, in some sense, the opposite also the case? Is the *ratio* of goodness also always a *species* of goodness? To answer this question, we need to take a closer look at the cognitive powers involved in willing something *sub ratione boni*.

3. From Imagination to Estimation

One can easily miss what is exactly required by Aquinas to explain the process of doing something under the aspect of goodness, if one only attends to the passages containing *sub ratione boni* or officially outlining the difference between intellectual appetite (will) and sensitive appetite. A first point to notice—rarely remarked in the literature—is that for Aquinas it is the more specific evaluative concept of suitability (*convenientia*) that needs to be operative insofar as the will is concerned:

[I]f some good is proposed which is apprehended under the aspect of the good [*in ratione boni*], but not under the aspect of the suitable [*in ratione convenientis*], it will not move the will. (*DeMalo*, 6.1)

Suitability is a general evaluative concept provided by the intellect (at least when the will is concerned, though Aquinas regularly talks of *convenientia* also with respect to the sensitive appetites). However, unlike *generic*

⁸ I say "lexical", because not all Scholastic authors actually agreed on the Thesis, even if they agreed that *ordinarily* a semblance or aspect of goodness explains sin. William of Ockham (1287–1347) stands out as rejecting the Thesis, as he argues that "the will is able to will something bad that is neither really nor apparently good, and able to will against a good thing that is neither really nor apparently bad" (William of Ockham 1984, 443) and, by implication, able to will something under the aspect of evil. Ockham's dissenting view became a well-known target (e.g. it is reported and criticized by Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), in 1597, in his 23rd *Metaphysical Disputation*, section 5, paragraph 3, in (Suárez 1861, 864), available also at Suárez 2011). On Ockham, see (Adams 1999).

goodness, suitability indicates a relation between the good thing and the agent or some aspects of its nature. A certain end or action is, or appears to be, suitable to/for *me*, or to/for some parts of *my* nature (the sensitive or the rational). The fact that suitability directly addresses the agent in the first person is what, at least in part, explains the motivating power of this notion over and above the generic concept of goodness: a judgment about goodness, or even goodness for human beings, does not necessarily address me.⁹

Now, if the relevant thoughts about suitability are in the first person, this entails that the functioning of the will requires *particular* evaluative thoughts. In the case of an eminently practical act of will such as choice (*electio*), this requirement is most obvious: a choice is always a choice of a certain action, as what *I* should do, *here* and *now*. This is less obvious in the case of acts of will which lie, as it were, more remotely from action, like *intentio* ("intention", in the sense of having an end prior to any deliberation about means, e.g. intending to become as rich as possible).¹⁰ But Aquinas's statement quoted above applies here as well: if my will is moved so to form an *intentio* with respect to becoming as rich as possible, then I must think of this as something suitable for *me*. It even applies to the last end: I desire perfection or beatitude as what is (by definition) thoroughly suitable for *me*, although in this I do not differ from other human beings, nor for Aquinas do I have the possibility to desire otherwise.

But if it is always particular evaluative thoughts that move the will, then the intellect must systematically collaborate with a cognitive power dealing in particulars, like the senses. Now, evaluative properties or concepts (goodness or suitability) are not, as such, accessible to the five, external senses. What about imagination? For Aquinas, imagination in general enables the operations of the human (but not angelic or divine) intellect by the help of its own products, which Aquinas calls in Latin (following the Greek) *phantasmata* ("phantasms"):

In the present state of life in which the soul is united to a passible body, it is impossible for our intellect to understand anything actually [*in actu*], except by turning to the phantasms [*convertendo se ad phantasmata*]. (ST I, 84.7)

A question immediately arises: whatever sort of phantasms would be the right kind to serve the intellect in its proposals of something *as good* or *as suitable*? Since goodness and suitability are not accessible to the senses, then

⁹ "Good for me", given its relational nature, could admittedly be a variant of "suitable for me".

¹⁰ For the differences between *intentio*, *electio*, and other acts of will, see (Stump 2003).

there cannot be phantasms *of them*. Aquinas's answer is about truth, but it seems applicable to evaluative properties too:

Incorporeal things, *of which there are no phantasms*, are known to us by comparison with perceptible bodies, of which there are phantasms. Thus we understand truth by considering a thing about which we speculate [*speculamur*] the truth. (*ST I*, 84.7, ad3, emphasis mine)

We understand or cognize suitability, then, by considering the phantasms of perceptible bodies (e.g. water, food, but also pleasure, which is something perceptible), which we regard as suitable to us. Of course, often the intellect proposes, as suitable, objects which are themselves incorporeal (like virtue, knowledge, God), so in this case the intellect presumably operates by the help of double phantasms, as it were.

Note that Aquinas is not talking about what happens when, say, we idly wonder what truth or goodness might be, but about the intellect *in actu*, that is, in every judgment or concept-application it performs ("when it uses knowledge already acquired", *ST I*, 84.7, ad3). So, when I judge that eating a plate of pasta would be good, i.e. suitable for me, the intellect is relying, *as an enabling condition for its application of the concept of suitability*, on some available phantasm (of the pasta itself or of the pleasure which, for example, makes the eating good), no less than when I judge that the beatific vision of God would be suitable for me. The second case is only more complex because of the non-bodily nature of the valuable object, but the concept of suitability requires neither more nor less than in the first case for its application.

To this extent, imagination plays some role in (human) judgments of value, and in turn in the acts of will guided by these judgments. But it isn't a "phantasm of goodness", or what we may call an act of "phantasmatic evaluation", which somehow underlies or supports the intellectual evaluation. Aquinas is clear about the absence of "evaluative phantasms". Of course, phantasms of *what* we judge good, and hence desire, often do accompany and sustain our evaluations and consequent desires. This is perhaps best seen when evaluation and desire go wrong. As Bonnie Kent puts it, "Aquinas holds the incontinent responsible to the extent that the incontinent retains control over his imagination" (Kent 1995, 174). The incontinent performs acts which, according to her best judgment, are wrong. And yet, since the Thesis also covers incontinent acts, she must have apprehended an aspect of goodness about her action. An especially vivid phantasm of, say, basking in the sun (or of the associated pleasure), induced her, or her intellect, to apply the *ratio boni* to basking in the sun (as opposed to, say, doing her homework). And we have some power to modulate our imagination, by turning

it away from some phantasms (or towards other phantasms), in this way influencing the evaluations made by the intellect.

So far, then, we have uncovered two roles for the imagination in acting under the aspect of the good: (1) an entirely general enabling role played by phantasms in exercises of concept-application, including the relevant concept of goodness *qua* suitability; (2) an influencing role played by the “phantasmatic presentation” of the objects of desire, which may play out in favor of or (more often) against doing what is right. But these roles, however important, are merely ancillary. They do not explain how the evaluations themselves, which underlie acts of will, are essentially agential, in the sense described above of addressing me *qua* agent.

However, there is another cognitive power, also dealing in particulars, which Aquinas variously indicates with the terms “estimative power”, “cogitative power”, or “particular reason” (*ST* I, 79.4).¹¹ This, like imagination, is still one of the “sub-intellectual” powers, but it does two crucial jobs, which lend it an affinity and proximity to the intellect: (a) apprehending *intentiones* (roughly, contents) which are not as such received through the senses, e.g., that a certain food is suitable to eat, or harmful, through an operation of “collation” or comparison (*collatio*) of particular contents; (b) making inferences from one particular content to another, e.g. arriving at the apprehension that this mushroom must be harmful because it looks like that other, harmful, mushroom.

Here we can see why Aquinas, in his commentary above on Aristotle's *De anima*, pointed out the insufficiency of imagination. Imagination and its phantasms do not *per se*, or immediately, affect desire, but only in the presence of an evaluative apprehension, and this is what the estimative power

¹¹ A similar power is present also in non-human animals (“the natural estimative”), but in them it works by instinct rather than by the performance of certain cognitive operations. Moreover, in animals this power only grasps some practically relevant contents (“this is dangerous to me”), but doesn't categorize individual objects (“this is a wolf”), as the human estimative does for humans. Aquinas in fact calls “estimative” proper the former function, and “cogitative” proper the latter: “[T]he estimative power does not apprehend any individual insofar as it is under a common nature, but only insofar as it is the terminus or principle of some action or passion” (*Commentary on De anima*, book 2, lectio 13, note 398). He also speaks of the cogitative power in humans “taking the place” of the estimative in animals (*ST* I, 81.3). With these caveats in mind, I will still mostly use “estimation” for the human power. See (Klubertanz 1952) for a groundbreaking, comprehensive commentary (both on Aquinas's sources and on Aquinas's texts); (Black 2000) for a quick overview of Aquinas's sources; (Tellkamp 2012) for the development of Aquinas's view and terminology; (White 1998) and (Lisska 2016) for two different analyses of the strictly cognitive, rather than purely practical, functions of cogitation in humans. De Haan (2014b, only partially engaged in Aquinas exegesis) explores the specifically *perceptual* layers of the cogitative power, somewhat narrowing the gap between animals and humans.

contributes: even if limited to particulars, an *estimation* (in Aquinas's sense) is already an evaluative opinion or belief of sorts, going beyond the phantasms of imagination.

Now, some passages suggest that the estimative power roughly stands to the sensitive appetites as the intellect stands to the will: when the contents apprehended by the estimative power are evaluative ones, the sensitive appetite will be moved one way or another (e.g. I will be afraid of eating that mushroom), just as when the intellect arrives at (the right kind of) evaluative judgment, the will is moved one way or another. For example:

Just as the imagination of a form, without estimation of suitability or harmfulness, does not move the sensitive appetite; so neither does the apprehension of the true [move the will] without the aspect of goodness and desirability. (ST I–II, 9.1, ad2)

However, focusing on these passages may be misleading, because it risks obscuring the systematic role estimation plays *also* for the will. As insisted above, the will is only moved by what the agent sees or thinks as suitable *for them*. But the intellect alone is unable to yield such particular apprehensions (“our intellect is directly cognizant of the universals only”, ST I, 86.1.) Rather, the intellect provides a general concept of suitability (and, if needed, the general concept of the suitable thing, e.g. wealth), which is then the role of estimation to bring to bear on a particular end or action *of mine*, or at the very least on *me* as a particular *relatum* in the relation of suitability.

To clarify: it is the involvement of the intellect which makes my evaluation a case of general concept-application. Aquinas typically qualifies the *bonum* proposed to the will with terms like “universal” or “in common”, because it is a general notion of goodness or suitability that is deployed, as opposed to, one may say, the mere here-and-now goodness-for-me deployed when estimation is *all* that takes place, cognitively speaking, as is the case for animals and for human passions (at least considered *qua* passions).¹² But estimation—whether as yielding an immediate particular apprehension (job (a) defined above) or a particular apprehension by inference (job (b))—is what “particularizes” (for lack of a better term) the evaluative apprehensions necessary for the will to operate.

As far as I can see, the threefold relation here outlined between the will as an appetite that operates *sub ratione boni*, the notion of suitability for me, and the estimative or cogitative power is generally neglected in Aquinas scholarship *focusing on the will and action theory*. The contribution of estimation to the appetitive powers is discussed almost exclusively in relation to

¹² Of course it might be wrong to call “here-and-now goodness-for-me” a concept in the first place, especially if it entails that animals too can use concepts, something Aquinas would deny.

emotions in humans or animals, rather than in relation to will and human action.¹³ Some studies, admittedly, do point out the relevance of estimation ("particular reason" here is indeed a better term) for the structure of practical reasoning and for the exercise of the virtue of prudence. There are passages where Aquinas assigns to the particular reason the role of providing the minor premise in a practical syllogism, where the major premise is provided by the "universal" reason: Sons should honor their parents (major premise); I am a son, and this act is a way of honoring my parents (minor premise, which is by definition the correct one when the reasoning is that of the prudent person).¹⁴

What I am emphasizing here, however, are three different points. First, the role I am attributing to estimation should be placed, if anywhere in a practical syllogism, in or better "around" the conclusion of the syllogism, rather than just in the minor premise (even if the minor premise is indeed contributed by estimation or particular reason). The conclusion, assuming it to be a judgment informing the act of choice, is admittedly an output of reason rather than of estimation. But estimation (about the act's suitability for me) is what grounds these outputs of reason in the here-and-now of my agency (I expand on this in the next section).

Second, on the present interpretation, estimation is present at *any* stage of the will, not only in choices or other acts of will resulting from a practical syllogism or from deliberation. As pointed out above, any act of will presupposes an evaluation of something as suitable *for me*, even when the end is specified in very general terms, like "health" or "virtue", rather than particular ones like "taking this medicine" or "performing this act of courage". Some authors do hint at a more pervasive role for estimation (cogitative power, particular reason) with respect to the will, beyond the case of the practical syllogism, e.g.:

One of the main functions of the *vis cogitativa*, according to St. Thomas, has doubtless to do with the cognition of values as realized actually or possibly, in particular things and situations, and with the adjustment, so to say, of the will to particular ends. (Allers 2009, 73–74).

¹³ See, among many others, (King 2012b), (Miner 2009), (Perler 2012) (comparing Aquinas's account of emotions with others), (Toivanen 2020) (also not only on Aquinas).

¹⁴ The example comes from the commentary on book three of the *De anima* (lectio 10, note 845). See also *ST* I, 81.3. On prudence, see the explicit references to the cogitative power in the commentary to book six of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (lectio 7, note 1215; lectio 9, note 1249), as well as the more oblique ones in the *Summa theologiae* (e.g. *ST* II–II, 47.3, ad3, and 49.2, ad1, ad3). Relevant scholarship here includes (Klubertanz 1952, (in particular, 164–166, 214–219, 247–254)), (Pasnau 2002, 252–257), (De Haan 2014a), (Bielinski 2021).

[B]ecause it understands the singular ends of practical action, the cogitative power not only participates in practical reason's *deliberations* and *decisions* about means ordered to the ends, the particular reason must also contribute to the phase of human action whereby we *intend* an end. And though there is less textual evidence to support it, we might, by parity of reasoning, also infer that Thomas is committed to the cogitative power's participation in any acts of practical reason whereby we might *wish* for a singular thing or *enjoy* a particular good that has been obtained through the *execution* of some human action. (De Haan 2014a, 310)

The present interpretation differs from these accounts, however, in that it takes the particularity grounded in estimation to have to do (in the first instance) with the first-personal reference to “me” as a term in the suitability relation, rather than only with a particularized description of the end or action which is the object of my volition. Going back to the practical syllogism, we should in fact see estimation already at work in (or, like I said, “around”) the major premise. If and when I am successfully guided by the principle that sons should honor their parents, then this intellectually known principle must necessarily have a practical resonance at the level of my will, and this—like any other act of will—is itself undergirded by an estimation of suitability for me: it is suitable for me that sons honor their parents, quite independently of the subsequent estimations that it is suitable *for me as a son* to honor *my* parents, or that it is suitable for me to do *this* parent-honoring action.¹⁵

Third, as I explain in section 5, appreciating the role of estimation for the will casts new light on the meaning of, and alternation between, the notions

¹⁵ One author appears to disagree, at least insofar as the will has also “intellectual affections” which are “influenced directly by universal reason without mediation from particular reason” (Lombardo 2018, 123). The reference is to places where Aquinas speaks of affections of the will (like joy, love, anger) “without passion” (e.g. *ST* I, 82.5, ad1; *ST* I–II, 22.3, ad3, 31.4, ad2, ad3). But I would argue, first, that an affection being “without passion” does not entail being unmediated by estimation or particular reason, if that means being unmediated by a judgment of suitability for me. As Peter King writes (calling them “pseudopassions”), “in the analogue to a passion, the will adopts the object of the passion” (King 2012a, 26), thus adopting, or relying on, a judgment of suitability for me provided by estimation. Moreover, for humans within this life, even intellectual affections are bound to involve passion at some level, since having them is constitutive of virtue: e.g. see passages like *DeVer*, 26.7, ad2, ad5, and *ST* I–II, 59.5, ad3: “good operation in God and the angels is altogether without passion, as it is without a body: whereas the good operation of man is with passion, as it is produced with the body’s help”. Finally, since angels and God function, cognitively speaking, differently from embodied humans, it is true that *their* affections do not involve the mediation of estimative or cogitative power. If my interpretation implies that willing *sub ratione boni* must mean something different when referring to the angelic or divine will, so be it. But that’s material for a different work.

of *sub ratione boni* and *sub specie boni*. If I am right, the choice of one or the other wording, at least in Aquinas, has more to do with the details of the cognitive powers underlying the will than is commonly acknowledged.

4. What About Conscience?

It might be objected that I am misattributing to estimation a role that, for Aquinas, is actually played, fully within the remit of higher intellectual powers, by the tandem of “synderesis” (the habitual knowledge or cognition of value principles, like “health is a good thing”) and conscience (as an act of application of this habitual knowledge: the act of judging “this medicine is good for me as promoting my health”) (see e.g. *ST* I, 79.12–13, and *DeVer*, questions 16–17). Isn't conscience the very act of bringing intellectual notions of value to bear on me and my will—after all, conscience by definition speaks to *me*?¹⁶

Now, it is true that synderesis, *qua* habit or disposition, and conscience, *qua* act manifesting that disposition, are part of Aquinas's overall story about value judgments. However, first: apprehending something under the aspect of the good, in the context of the will, does not necessarily amount to manifesting one's own synderesis. This is clear from cases of incontinent action: for Aquinas, the incontinent is someone who (1) possesses, *qua* habitual knowledge, the correct value principles, but (2) fails to manifest, i.e. use or apply, that knowledge in certain particular cases, as if they had momentarily lost it (see e.g. *ST* I–II, 77.2). So, for the incontinent, by definition it cannot be *conscience* that speaks to them as proposing something as good for them. But *something* does speak to the incontinent, deceptively proposing a course of action (e.g. basking in the sun all afternoon) as more suitable to them than another (doing one's homework), hence directing their will.¹⁷

Estimation—as said above, in cooperation with or better *co-opting* intellect or reason—appears to be the best candidate here. In fact, Aquinas regularly brings up estimation in contexts explaining the sin of incontinence:

[T]he [correct] judgment and apprehension of reason is impeded on account of a vehement and inordinate apprehension of the imagination and judgment of the estimative power [...] the result being that the judgment of reason often follows the passion of the sensitive appetite, and consequently the will's movement follows it also. (*ST* I–II, 77.1) [The incontinent] estimates that he must choose this particular

¹⁶ See (Hoffmann 2012) for an overview of Aquinas on conscience.

¹⁷ Perhaps even more tellingly, conscience has no place in explaining sins from malice, where mistaken evaluations of suitability are (usually) the result of corrupt habits: “[T]o anyone that has a habit, whatever is *suitable* to him in respect of that habit, is as such lovable, since it thereby becomes, in a way, connatural to him” (*ST* I–II, 78.2, emphasis mine).

thing now [which he, habitually, knows to be wrong]. (*ST* II–II, 156.3, ad1)

Second, Aquinas makes a more general point (albeit still exemplified by cases of sinning) about the difference between judgment of conscience and “judgment of free choice” (*iudicium liberi arbitrii*):

They differ from each other, since the judgment of conscience consists in simple knowledge [*in pura cognitione*], whereas the judgment of free choice consists in the application of knowledge to the inclination of the will [*in applicatione cognitionis ad affectionem*]. (*DeVer*, 17.1, ad4)

For example, I may judge, by conscience, that it is evil for me to have sex with a certain woman. This is a particular judgment addressing me. But, despite being a particular judgment addressing me, this is still a matter of “speculating in the realm of principles [*speculando per principia*]” (*DeVer*, 17.1, ad4), while, being deceptively impressed with the suitability of sexual pleasure, my judgment of free choice inclines me in favor of having sex with the woman. In this judgment of free choice, another cognitive power dealing in particulars is operative, and the best candidate is estimation, again having co-opted intellect or reason in the process.

The point appears to generalize: even when a judgment of conscience is the kind of intellectual act that guides the will in its choice of means, or adoption of an end, still the estimative power needs to be operative, in order to enable the evaluation made by conscience to pass from the realm of principles to the realm of “free choice”—in particular, by contributing towards the practically required appearance of *suitability for me* of the action or end conscience judges to be the best.

Note that, again, I am not talking here about the role of estimation or cogitation plays, *qua* “particular reason”, in inserting the minor (particular) premise in a practical syllogism leading up to choice. As remarked above, this is well-established in the literature. I am instead pointing at a fundamentally *non-logical* interaction between three evaluative judgments about particulars: the judgment of conscience, the judgment of free choice, and estimation as a bridge supporting transitions from the former to the latter. When all goes well in this interaction, the judgment of free choice (and the act of choice itself) will be the result of the judgment of conscience.¹⁸

¹⁸ I see my proposal as expanding on an observation by Ralph McNerny about the difference between conscience and prudence: the incontinent (by definition not virtuous, therefore not prudent) “knows what he ought to do, his conscience is all right, but his knowledge of the good is not complemented by an effective appetitive disposition to the good as good” (McNerny 1974, 303). The latter disposition, as I’m arguing, is sustained and made “effec-

The transition from conscience to free choice is, in some respects, similar to the transition from “all-in” to “all-out” normative judgments, as these concepts are explained by Donald Davidson (1980a, 1980b). “All-in” judgments are those reached once the normative weight of all relevant factors has been considered, but they are not *per se* practical, because their validity is conditional on the absence of new relevant factors which might overturn the verdict (Davidson calls them “conditional” in this sense). “All-out” judgments, on the other hand, are final and unconditional, and for this reason (for Davidson) coincide with practical or volitional states of intention, whereby the agent's mind (i.e. will) is, at least for a time, “made up”.

To clarify: unlike for Davidson, for Aquinas, insofar as *liberum arbitrium* is only expressed in a *judgment*, we are still not in the presence of a volitional state like choosing. Aquinas's version of the Thesis does not *identify* acts of will with normative judgments. Moreover, as seen before, the point about the requirement of suitability holds for acts of will across the board, not only for those most proximate to execution (as Davidson's intentions seem to be). However, the analogy still holds, to the extent that both Aquinas and Davidson recognize a gap to be bridged between (even the most conclusive) intellectual normative cognition and the realm of volition proper.

5. Conclusion: *Sub Specie Boni* Strikes Back

The contents grasped by the estimative power in its evaluative apprehensions are, importantly, still one cognitive step lower than the intellect's contents. They are (or refer to) *sensibilia per accidens* (incidentally sensible things), i.e. things which neither impinge on our senses (like colors or shapes, which are instead *per se* sensible things), nor are bundles of sensations, and yet are the object of a perceptual kind of apprehension.¹⁹ Once we see this, the phrase *sub specie boni* (in particular, as *sub specie convenientis*) makes a surprise comeback as more than just a rhetorical variant of *sub ratione boni*. The *species* of suitability, as argued before, cannot be an appearance in the same way in which phantasms of the imagination are appearances. But it belongs to the “stuff of the senses”, and Aquinas points out how easily we can go wrong at just this level of cognition:

tive” (in the prudent) by correct estimations of the good as something suitable to oneself. Compare also: “The prudential judgment [...] has a motivational force that moral science [and conscience] lacks, and this force results from connaturality, by which the good of virtue is apprehended as *conveniens*, that is, correspondent, agreeable, good for me in the here and now” (Hoffmann 2013, 181). The difference between conscience and estimation seems to be missed by commentators who see the estimative power as simply “put[ting] the individual action to be undertaken under a general rule” (Lisska 2016, 258).

¹⁹ See (De Haan 2014b), and (Lisska 2016, chapter 10).

Much more [than in the case of external senses] is sense deceived concerning incidental sensible objects, as when it judges that gall is honey by reason of the color being similar. (*ST I*, 85.6)

In this example, the mistake of estimation is, of course, purely factual (a miscategorization of gall as honey), but add the association of honey with gustatory pleasure, and you immediately get also a mistaken evaluative estimation of suitability: this stuff is suitable for me to eat. It is probably no coincidence that, as seen in section 2, Olivi would also later use the gall and honey example (albeit metaphorically: “honey” there stood for the aspect of goodness that deceptively attracts the heretic).²⁰ In all of these cases, whether factual or evaluative, it is the estimative power which presents something under a potentially deceptive *species*. The intellect, often, gets deceived in turn, insofar as it is co-opted by the lower cognitive power, the latter being typically “in tune” with the sensitive, non-intellectual appetites. The notion of *sub specie boni*, thus understood, appears to earn a theoretical significance of its own, as contributing to explaining why we end up willing something *sub ratione boni*.

Given the scarcity of the expression *sub specie boni* in Aquinas’s corpus (as remarked in section 2), I am not attributing to Aquinas any worked-out view about its relation to *sub ratione boni*. But once the roles of estimation and the concept of suitability in the acts of will are properly appreciated, the interpretation offered here makes sense of why the phrase *sub specie boni* is almost exclusively reserved (in Aquinas, but also other medieval authors) for cases where the will has gone wrong. As we might put it, in these cases, the *species boni* is misleading the *ratio boni*, so the concrete act of the will is better indicated in terms of *sub specie boni*. In the good cases, on the other hand, the *species boni* does not mislead the *ratio boni*, albeit being still necessary for the will’s operations, so it remains in the background.

In conclusion: in addition to proposing a more exact picture of the cognitive powers underlying the will (intellect, imagination, estimation), this article has defended this picture on the basis of its ability to explain an important lexical variation (*sub ratione boni* vs. *sub specie boni*), whose very existence and explanation seem so far to have escaped scholarly attention.

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²⁰ In fact the gall/honey example was already used by Avicenna (d. 1037), from whom the very notion of the estimative power seems to have been taken by Christian authors. See (Black 2000, 61).

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