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Aquinas on Virtue

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INTRODUCTION

Not every theological ethicist is comfortable with the oft-repeated claim that the best approach to the discipline is offered by virtue ethics. Theological ethics (moral theology, Christian ethics) can be thought of as the systematic attempt, through reasoned reflection on revelation, tradition, and human experience, to answer the question, “How should we live?” Moralists have been searching for a way to improve on the old morals manuals, too focused as they were on the freeze-frame of individual acts divorced from the narrative and relational context of human life. Catholic moral theologians see in virtue a corrective to this legalistic approach and a way to respond to the call of the Second Vatican Council for a greater focus on “the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world.”¹ In parallel, ethicists in the reform tradition argue that an “ethics of character” is necessary to account for the way a moral agent can be formed by and live out the Christian narrative. The turn to virtue therefore calls for more than an extra chapter or two in otherwise unchanged textbooks; rather, virtue has taken on “a major overhaul of the whole methodological apparatus of the discipline.”²

The enrichment of theological ethics through virtue continues apace. Moral theologians see in virtue a way of centering the discipline on the discipleship of Jesus and of drawing out the ethical implications of scripture. Christian social ethics is now turning to virtue, both to elaborate the need for just persons and just social structures and to conceive of the ethics of institutions. Theological studies of specific virtues such as mercy, humility, and charity are enriching the conversation. And, by putting virtue to work in personal ethics, bioethics, and environmental ethics, theological ethicists have shown that virtue is not too vague to have normative implications. Above all, theological ethics has found in virtue a language that resonates deeply with human experience and with our best sense of what is worthwhile and meaningful in human life.

In the light of these advances, it is unsurprising that virtue ethics has been seen as the best approach to Christian moral reflection. The case has been put by Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox theologians.³ Yet many are wary of claims to have found “the” comprehensive account of morality.

Other perspectives—natural law, divine command, or relational-responsibility theories—have their own insights. To be fair to those who own the label “virtue ethicist,” such inclusivity to other approaches often is intended; still, the term itself risks being misleadingly hegemonic.

We need a way to acknowledge virtue’s significant contribution without overclaiming its significance. To this end, it helps to adopt from moral philosophy the distinction between “virtue ethics” and “virtue theory.”⁴ “Virtue ethics” is notoriously difficult to define, yet the phrase does suggest by its constituent terms an *ethics* in which virtue serves as the *basic idea* or *central focus*. Virtue ethics is most frequently presented as an alternative to deontology or consequentialism, and is therefore seen as a self-standing moral theory in which all important ideas are derived from one basic concept—namely, virtue. A virtue theory, in contrast to a virtue ethics, is an account of the nature, genesis, and role of virtue (and the virtues). It does not claim to be an autonomous ethics. The theory of virtue sits well within a more holistic and less hierarchical approach that is open to illuminating connections between virtue and other significant moral concepts, without claiming primacy for any one.

Theological ethics needs a place for virtue but also for commandments, covenant, happiness, law, and grace; it should not, then, advocate a virtue ethics. Yet, as the recent history of the discipline amply shows, a virtue theory is required as an integral and important part. This is one reason, among others, that it needs Thomas Aquinas.

WHY AQUINAS?

The philosopher Julia Annas has argued, and indeed has amply illustrated by her own work, that the classical accounts of virtue constitute our “best entry-point” into any discussion about virtue.⁵ This applies to theology as well: there is no better point of entry into the theological exploration of virtue than through the accounts of Augustine, Aquinas, Erasmus, Jonathan Edwards, and other great patristic, scholastic, humanist, and reform theologians. While a healthy pluralism would not focus on Aquinas to the exclusion of others, the work of this great thirteenth-century Dominican theologian is especially influential and presents a systematic virtue theory of singular power.

At the heart of Thomas Aquinas’s tripartite masterwork, the *Summa Theologiae*, lies the section he calls the *Treatise on Morals* (see I 82.3 ad 2). For the persevering reader who reaches the far shore of this oceanic theological ethics, Aquinas explains what the voyage has been all about: nothing less than “the investigation of the ultimate end of human life and of the virtues and vices” (III pr).⁶ The direct treatment of the virtues and vices can be estimated at about

seven-tenths of the whole of his ethics. There is no question, then, that the virtues play an important role in Aquinas's ethics.

Is virtue, then, the keystone? Not long ago, Aquinas's moral thought was counted as almost synonymous with natural law theory, for which it remains an important reference point. More recent interpretation has, however, highlighted other important aspects of Aquinas's thought. Some argue that Aquinas advocates a eudaimonistic ethic; others emphasize Aquinas's theological anthropology of grace; still others see Aquinas's ethics as act-focused in that it provides a way of determining the moral species of an action through its object, end, and circumstances.

One could go on. Emotion is said to be one of the "major organizing principles" of Aquinas's ethics.⁷ A recent study reminds us that, for Aquinas, the primary rule of the human will, and therefore the fundamental standard of morality, is eternal law.⁸ Others have argued for "the centrality of Christ in Aquinas's view of the moral life."⁹

There is yet more. Aquinas's ethics has been characterized as an "orthological ethics"—that is, an ethics of right reason.¹⁰ And, as has been argued more recently, "the key for an understanding of Aquinas's moral thinking would be the human person as *imago Trinitatis*."¹¹

What are we to make of this bewildering diversity of claims about what idea is central to or fundamental in interpreting Aquinas's ethics? Each is put forward by scholars closely acquainted with the texts, and yet they cannot all be true.

There once was a fashion for pinpointing the fundamental concept of Aquinas's metaphysical thought as the keystone on which all the others depend. Some believed it to be the distinction between essence and existence; others singled out the idea of analogy, or participation, or causation. Each reading made its contribution and opened new perspectives. Because of this history of divergent interpretations, however, it has sensibly been suggested that Aquinas's metaphysics is too complex for any one of these ideas to be singled out as *the* keystone. Each plays an important role. Similarly, what seems to emerge from a survey of the diverse readings of Aquinas's ethics is that the important concepts of his ethical thought are too interrelated to be reduced to a single principle. As Thomas Williams puts it, "Aquinas's moral theory is so systematically unified that no single discussion—whether of the human good, the natural law, the nature of responsible action, or the virtues—can claim pride of place."¹² The quest to find "the" keystone is futile.

It would be misleading to say that Aquinas is a virtue ethicist, if by that one means that virtue is the basis or central focus for his entire ethics. Aquinas is a holistic thinker and there is no basic idea or central focus in his ethics; none serves as the foundation for all the others. Rather, there is a nexus of interrelated ideas.

If Aquinas is not a virtue ethicist, does he offer a virtue theory? Because Aquinas sees ethics as practical rather than theoretical knowledge, some would argue it is wrong to see him as proposing a “theory” of virtue.¹³ However, while we should not project modern presuppositions about theory onto Aquinas’s ethics, there is no need to reject the term altogether. Aquinas speaks of the more abstract and theoretical part of medicine.¹⁴ Likewise, his ethics includes some abstract and some theoretical sections despite being oriented to practice overall. A “virtue theory,” as I shall employ the term, is an account of the nature, genesis, and role of virtue and the virtues in human life. Aquinas offers such an account in *Treatise on Virtue in General* in the *Summa Theologiae* (I.II 55–70).¹⁵ The treatise begins with a definition of virtue in general (55) and then looks at the way virtue forms the capacity of the human soul for thought, desire, and passion (56). The next questions show how virtue can be divided into different kinds and thereby organized into a classificatory scheme (57–62). The question of how a person comes to be virtuous through practice and grace is examined (63). Then follows a discussion of the “properties” of virtue, such as the interconnection between virtues, their existing in the mean, their relative value, and their persistence into the next life (64–67). Aquinas concludes with a discussion of a special set of virtues—namely, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their operations and effects (68–70). This “virtue theory” is later fleshed out in greater detail in the *Secunda secundae*, wherein the specific virtues are examined (II.II 1–170). Aquinas’s rich and sophisticated account of virtue, moreover, does not pretend to be freestanding, since it is embedded in a dynamic and holistic vision of the Christian moral life. It is difficult to imagine a better starting point for an exploration of the central questions of a properly theological virtue theory.

A CAUSAL APPROACH

When I began work on Aquinas’s ethics, I wanted to examine a specific virtue. I chose the cardinal virtue of temperance. It quickly became clear that Aquinas’s treatment of temperance in the *Secunda secundae* does not stand alone. Rather, it presupposes many aspects of his ethics, especially his systematic account of virtue found in the *Treatise on Virtue in General* in the *Prima secundae*. Aquinas begins this treatise with the question, “What is virtue?” His answer is confusing and opaque and presents itself as an evaluation of the Augustinian definition of virtue as “a quality of the mind, by which we live rightly, which we cannot use badly, and which God works in us without us” (I.II 55.4).¹⁶ But the article’s title does not fully express what is being argued. Commentators have squabbled over whether Aquinas’s understanding of virtue is Aristotelian or Augustinian. I suspect that they are missing the central point: in the article

Aquinas is doing something new not previously attempted by the Philosopher nor the Bishop of Hippo. Aquinas is offering a *causal* definition of virtue.

Aquinas inherits from Aristotle the understanding that there are four “causes”—namely, formal, final, material, and efficient. The identification of these four causes or modes of explanation leads to an important principle: the search for a full understanding of anything is a search for its causes. Aquinas applies this principle to understanding law, grace, habit, sin, and, most explicitly of all, virtue. As found in the first sentence of Aquinas’s attempt to define virtue, “The complete rationale of anything is gathered from all its causes” (55.4c).¹⁷ With this interpretive key in hand, I was able to approach temperance in a more systematic way: by investigating its causes.¹⁸

The causal analysis of virtue, however, is not merely a tool for defining virtues; it is also a more general methodological principle. Causes set an agenda for virtue theory: to examine the genesis (efficient cause), role (final cause), and nature (formal and material causes) of virtue and the virtues. Yet the causes also provide a dynamic method of investigation into the key issues: the distinction between intellectual, moral, and theological virtue; the principles and processes of moral development; the relation between virtue and happiness; and so on. The causal approach also provides an authentically theological mode of proceeding since the first cause of virtue is divine: God is virtue’s prime agent, exemplar, and end. The unexpected result of my investigation into a single virtue was to learn that Aquinas provides a hermeneutical principle with which to read his entire virtue theory. Even so, a causal reading of Aquinas on virtue is not without its challenges.

THREE TENSIONS

While many take Aquinas as a source for theological ethics, few agree on how to read his works. A navigational tactic is needed so as not to fall between the hermeneutical cracks. The strategy I have chosen is an attempt to hold together various tensions, indicated by three pairs of opposites: the theological and the philosophical, the return to the source with attention to later tradition, and the historical and the systematic. The danger is to emphasize one pole to the diminishment of the other.

One tension concerns the relationship of theology and philosophy in the interpretation of Aquinas’s ethical thought. “Aristotelian Thomism,” of which Ralph McNerny is an important representative, emphasizes that Aquinas’s theological ethics are based in Aristotle’s work. McNerny sees Aquinas as “the greatest Aristotelian in the history of Western philosophy.”¹⁹ His motivating concern is to defend the legitimacy of a Thomist moral philosophy that can

participate in the “philosophical marketplace” today. He therefore resists those who emphasize Aquinas’s distinctiveness rather than his indebtedness to Aristotle. On the other side are those like Mark Jordan, who propose a strongly Augustinian, non-Aristotelian reading of Aquinas.²⁰

The critique of Aristotelian Thomism, which calls us to acknowledge that Aquinas is first and last a theologian, does have the merit of shaking us out of the remarkably persistent temptation to read him through a reductively Aristotelian lens. Yet a resolutely non-Aristotelian reading can itself lead to interpretive distortions and close off important avenues of dialogue. We should surely welcome the fact that the atheist philosopher Philippa Foot, a leader in the renewal of virtue, can say, “It is possible to learn a great deal from Aquinas that one could not have got from Aristotle.”²¹ An either-or approach is to be avoided. It is precisely Aquinas’s theological commitment to the goodness of creation, and hence to natural human reason, that makes his ethics accessible from a philosophical as well as a theological perspective. Aquinas’s work is best read in its integrally theological context, where it finds its fullest meaning, with openness to philosophical argument.

A second contentious debate concerns the use of the classical commentaries and disputations on the *Summa Theologiae*. I do not hesitate to make reference to three of the most famous, those of Cajetan, John Poinsoot, and the Salamancans (see Note on Sources). It should be noted that the legitimacy of reading Aquinas with the help of this tradition has been seriously out of favor since opposition to Cajetan, Poinsoot, and the Salamancans was voiced by Étienne Gilson and Henri de Lubac.²²

Certainly, it is important to avoid the “fantasy of progressive unanimity among commentators, of a monument built on and out of authoritative consensus,” as Jordan has put it.²³ Leonine Thomism (of which Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange is the best-known twentieth-century representative) is, in my view, questionable in its claim to be *iuxta mentem Thomae* (“according to the mind of Thomas”). Yet, while there is no uniform commentarial tradition, there is a multivocal, conflictual, often problematic but at times brilliantly enlightening tradition. This is especially so of the golden age of Iberian scholasticism in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (whose representatives should not be confused with the more homogenous manualists of succeeding eras). While the historian may legitimately raise questions about an uncritical acceptance of the commentators (or, better, the “disputants,” for their primary concern is not exegesis but argument), my reason for attending to them carefully, albeit critically, is sound: the conversation is all the richer for including them. I hope to show a way of engaging with the great figures of the Thomist tradition that falls neither into slavish appeal to authority nor a denial of the genuine insights they provide on key questions. Once again, the better approach is one

of balance: a historically informed respect for the original source combined with discerning attention to the best of the tradition that flows therefrom.

Finally, the greatest methodological challenge is to offer an exegetically illuminating account of Aquinas's theory of virtue while simultaneously considering what contributions it may have for contemporary discussions in theological ethics. Either task would be difficult enough, but to attempt both inevitably risks confusion.

One question here concerns the tension between history and relevance. Historical Thomism, as evidenced today by scholars such as Jean-Pierre Torrell, rightly insists that Aquinas must be understood in context. This approach has been fruitful in highlighting the diverse genres of Aquinas's works, the development of his thought, and the benefits of situating him in his own milieu.²⁴ A contrasting approach is found in the movement of "analytical Thomism." The term was introduced by philosopher John Haldane to denote the use of the methods and ideas of analytic philosophy to discern and develop what Aquinas has to say.²⁵

The two schools are often suspicious of each other. While the historical approach fears that an (allegedly) ahistorical analytical approach misinterprets, the analytic approach is frustrated by what it sees as an ironic failure to engage argumentatively with a body of work that itself "consists almost entirely of arguments, one after another, page after page."²⁶ Since I am an ethicist, not a historian, my approach is primarily systematic; at the same time, I spend longer on the text itself than some in the analytical school may appreciate. The challenge is to offer a careful exposition and reconstruction of Aquinas's viewpoint while also critically examining what in his account may be true and helpful or, indeed, in need of revision.

The ideal I propose, then, is to keep these tensions together: to be theological yet open to philosophy, to be respectful of the need to "return to the source" while engaging seriously with the Thomistic tradition of commentary and disputation, and to be analytical without neglecting the text. Inevitably there will be compromises. Yet the endeavor is in its own way an effort to follow in the footsteps of Aquinas, who excels at uniting without confusing such apparent opposites.

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

This book has a twofold aim: to substantiate and elaborate a causal reading of Aquinas on virtue and to present, at least incipiently, a causal virtue theory robust enough to be worthy of a place in the theological and philosophical discussion. I am aware that I am asking of the reader a significant investment

of energy, and indeed patience, so it is only reasonable to expect at this stage some indication of the value of taking this causal approach to virtue. First and foremost, the causal reading is not another study of this or that aspect of Aquinas's account of virtue. Rather, it offers a synoptic view of his virtue theory as a whole. Beyond interpretation, it also proposes and illustrates a way of defining specific virtues and of addressing key issues in a theological and philosophical virtue theory more broadly.

Part 1 addresses the question of how to define virtue. Chapter 1 serves as an overture to the book since it introduces the causal approach by applying it to the cardinal virtue of temperance. Chapters 2 through 4 examine Aquinas's question on the essence of virtue (I.II 55). Aquinas's understanding of virtue as a habit is seen to be rich in comparison to the more reductive modern psychological and philosophical versions of "habit." Virtue is a morally *good* habit, and Aquinas defines its goodness by its conformity to divine and human wisdom. The definition of virtue is shown to incorporate the idea of a morally good habit within a more-comprehensive causal perspective. Part 2 digs more deeply into Aquinas's understanding of causation and its role in his ethics, exploring key "causal" concepts such as object, exemplar, end, and agent. Part 3 offers a comprehensive (albeit not exhaustive) account of virtue in terms of all its causes—formal, material, final, and efficient—plus a causal analysis of the most contested question in contemporary theological virtue theory: the relation of grace and virtue. While the navigation of this complex and nuanced theory of virtue is challenging, Aquinas is a worthy conversation partner for anyone searching for a richer, more dynamic, and ultimately more attractive answer to the question, "How should we live?"

NOTES

1. *Optatam Totius: Decree on Priestly Training*, paragraph 16. References to Church documents are taken from the Vatican website, <http://www.vatican.va>.

2. David Cloutier and William C. Mattison III, "Review Essay: The Resurgence of Virtue in Recent Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (January 2014): 228–59.

3. For a recent example see Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, "Virtue Ethics: Natural and Christian," *Theological Studies* 74, no. 2 (2013): 442–73.

4. For the origin of this distinction see Julia Driver, "The Virtues and Human Nature," in *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 111–29.

5. Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 515.

6. III pr: “considerationem ultimi finis humanae vitae et virtutum ac vitiorum.”
7. Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 198–99.
8. John Michael Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).
9. Thomas P. Harmon, “The Sacramental Consummation of the Moral Life According to St. Thomas Aquinas,” *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1034 (2010): 475, 480.
10. Vernon Joseph Bourke, *Ethics: A Textbook in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).
11. Brian J. Shanley, “Aquinas’s Exemplar Ethics,” *The Thomist* 72 (2008): 369.
12. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, ed. E. M. Atkins and Thomas Williams (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xxix.
13. See Denis J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas’s Moral Science* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 3–4, 266–72. Jacques Maritain’s account of the “speculatively-practical” is still instructive. Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite, Or, The Degrees of Knowledge*, The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain, vol. 7 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 481–89. For Maritain’s defense against criticisms similar to Bradley’s, see his *Science and Wisdom*, trans. Bernard Wall (London: Geroffrey Bles and Centenary Press, 1954), 138–45.
14. Super De Trinitate, pars 3 q. 5 a. 1 ad 3.
15. Especially relevant to his virtue theory are three other ethical texts: the *Commentary on the Sentences* III d.33; *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*; and *Commentary on the Nichomachean Ethics*.
16. I.II 55.4c: “virtus est bona qualitas mentis, qua recte vivitur, qua nullus male utitur, quam Deus in nobis sine nobis operatur.”
17. 55.4c: “Perfecta enim ratio uniuscuiusque rei colligitur ex omnibus causis eius.” Aquinas’s term *ratio* is a multivalent one, which I translate as “rationale.” See chapter 5 for discussion.
18. Nicholas Austin, “Thomas Aquinas on the Four Causes of Temperance,” PhD dissertation, Boston College, 2010.
19. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Rev. C. I. Litzinger, (South Bend, IN: Dumb Ox, 1993), ix–x.
20. Mark D. Jordan, *Rewritten Theology: Aquinas after His Readers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 85.
21. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Clarendon, 2002), 2.
22. For a helpful discussion of this rejection see John Deely, “Quid Sit Postmodernismus?,” in *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy*, ed. Roman T Ciapalo (Mishawaka, IN: American Maritain Association, 1997), 68–96.
23. Jordan, *Rewritten Theology*, 5.
24. Thomas F. O’Meara, “Jean-Pierre Torrell’s Research on Thomas Aquinas,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 787–801.

25. John Haldane, “Analytical Thomism: How We Got Here, Why It Is Worth Remaining, and Where We May Go Next,” afterword to *Analytical Thomism: Traditions in Dialogue*, ed. Craig Paterson and Matthew S. Pugh (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 303–10.

26. Robert Pasnau, “Review of *The Ethics of Aquinas*,” ed. Stephen J. Pope, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (January 2003). To be fair to the authors, the aim of the book is primarily exegetical, and their other works exhibit a strong critical engagement.