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## Aquinas on Virtue

Austin, SJ, Nicholas

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## CHAPTER 8

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# Passionate Virtue

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Suggested reading: *Summa Theologiae* I 81.2–3;  
I.II 23.1, 24.1, 24.3, 56, 58.2, 58.5; II.II 25.7;  
*On the Virtues* 1.3–5

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A virtue is the perfection of a potential or power (*perfectio potentiae*) (I.II 66.3). Virtue’s material cause is not the perfection itself but the potential for it. The material cause corresponds to the “plasticity” of human nature, to use William James’s term: the capacity of the human psyche to be formed well or badly, like the matter the craftsman shapes and forms.

As with the formal cause, Aquinas introduces an initially bewildering number of distinctions:

Virtue, like any other accident, does not have a *matter-out-of-which*, but it does have a *matter-about-which*, and a *matter-in-which*, namely, the subject. The *matter-about-which* is the object of a virtue, which could not be placed in the above definition, since it is through the object that a virtue is fixed to a species, whereas here we are supplying the definition of virtue in general. This is why the subject is put in the place of the material cause, when it is said [in the Augustinian definition that virtue] is a “good quality of the mind.” (55.4c)<sup>1</sup>

Aquinas distinguishes three matters. First is the *matter-out-of-which* something comes to exist, such as a cake’s flour, egg, and sugar out of which the cake is made; this is its “substantial matter.” Since a virtue is a person’s quality rather than a substance, virtue has no substantial matter out of which it comes to be. Second is the *matter-in-which* a quality exists, such as a statue’s initial lump of bronze, which receives the form of the statue or what we may call its “subjective matter”: the subject or bearer of the form or quality. Third is the *matter-about-which* an act, power, or habit stands: this is its “objective matter” or “material object.” For example, color is the objective matter of

the power of sight. We turn now to a virtue's subjective matter: its bearer or subject.

## THE SUBJECTIVE MATTER

Virtues, like their acts, belong strictly only to persons. While it is the hand that strikes or the eye that sees, strictly speaking it is only the integral human person who strikes or sees (II.II 58.2). Actions belong, in the last analysis, to “suppositis,” or whole subjects only (*Actiones sunt suppositorum*). Similarly, strictly speaking virtue has only one bearer or subject (*subiectum*): the human person. It is Clarence or Gwen who is just, prudent, or temperate. We should avoid hypostasizing or reifying the soul's powers, as though the intellect could be prudent, or the will just, as Clarence is prudent and Gwen is just. As Eleonore Stump puts it, the faculties of the soul are not “homuncular.”<sup>2</sup>

However, Gwen can possess virtuous qualities only because she is a human with apprehensive and appetitive capacities that can be formed well or badly. By a kind of analogy, then, these powers can be seen as the subjects of virtue. While Aquinas prefers not to say a power *is* the subject of a virtue, he is prepared to say this: “Human virtue is in a power of the soul *just as* in a subject” (I.II 56.1, emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> Gwen, in terms of an old scholastic distinction, is the whole subject *that* has the virtue and exercises it (*subiectum quod*); but some faculty or power is the subject *by which* the virtue is possessed and exercised (*subiectum quo*).

What, then, are the virtues' “subjects”? The Augustinian definition says that virtue is a quality “of mind.” Aquinas explains, “Virtue cannot exist in the irrational part of the soul, except insofar as it participates in reason (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.13). And therefore reason, or mind, is the proper subject of virtue” (55.4 ad 3).<sup>4</sup> The mind is virtue's subject. From the next question onward he switches to a more Aristotelian vocabulary: a virtue is a quality that has a power or capacity of the soul (*potentia*) as its subject (56).<sup>5</sup>

It is the powers of intellect, will, and the sensitive appetite (the locus of the passions, which is in turn divided into the irascible and concupiscible) that Aquinas claims can serve as the subjects of virtue (56.3–4, 56.6). The concupiscible power is the subject of the passions of desire and aversion; in contrast, the irascible power has to do with the more spirited passions of impulse and resistance. The distinction between “concupiscible” and “irascible” is often misunderstood as a division of the passions into positive and negative, or between those that tend to good versus those that tend away from evil. In fact, there are concupiscible passions, such as hate, that are “negative” and tend away from evil; there are irascible passions, such as hope, that are “positive” and

tend toward some good. Aquinas's distinction is subtler: the difference lies in whether the good or evil object is *arduous* to attain or avoid: if so, the passions are irascible, if not, they are concupiscible (I 81.2; I.II 23.1). The passions of simple attraction (or repulsion) to good (or evil) are concupiscible. The spirited passions of pursuit (or avoidance) of some arduous good (or evil) are irascible. Peter King gives the example of Jones teasing his dog, Rover, with a bone: Rover begins with a concupiscible desire for the bone but then develops the irascible passion of anger, directed toward the teasing Jones, as a threat to his desired pleasure.<sup>6</sup> The irascible serves the concupiscible as its "champion and defender" (I 81.2).<sup>7</sup>

Which subjects connect with which virtues? The general principle is this: "A certain power is the subject of a virtue when this virtue aims at rectifying the act of that power" (I.II 58.4).<sup>8</sup> For example, justice's subject is the will: Gwen is a just person and is inclined to just acts because of the way her will is disposed to give others their due.

A corollary is that a virtue's subjective and objective matter correspond. For example, since temperance modifies certain concupiscible passions, its subject is the concupiscible power (II.II 141.3; I.II 61.2c). There is an apparent (although not genuine) exception to this rule: continence is about the concupiscible appetite for the pleasures of touch (155.2); its subject, however, is the will (155.3). There is a simple solution: the desires for the pleasures of touch are the *mediate* matter of continence; its *immediate* matter are the acts of the will by which one controls one's desires. Even with continence, then, subject and immediate matter correspond.

Aquinas identifies three necessary conditions for a power of the soul counting as the subject of a virtue. First, since a virtue is an operative habit, its subject must be a power or capacity for operation (I.II 56.1c). Second, since a virtue is necessary only where a power can be disposed either well or badly to its operation, its subject must be a power that exists with some indifference or indeterminacy (49.4c). Finally, if the form of human virtue is the rational good, then only those powers that are potentially rational will qualify as subjects (61.2c). In sum, to be virtue's subject, a power must be operative, indeterminate, and potentially rational.

One argument, a distant ancestor of which was offered by Plato in *The Republic*, seems to make the correlation of powers of the soul and virtues a relatively simple matter. Aquinas argues that there are four cardinal virtues corresponding to the four potentially rational powers of the soul: prudence is subjected in the practical reason, justice in the will, fortitude in the irascible, and temperance in the concupiscible appetite (61.2). This argument establishes that there are *at least* four principal virtues, as there is no reason why there could not be more than one principal virtue in each subject (54.1).

Could a virtue not have more than one subject? It may seem so. For example, to be a just person one needs not only a good will but also an ability to judge what is due to another; to be prudent one needs not only to be able to reason well but also to have a good heart; and so on. While Aquinas would acknowledge these points, he claims that a virtue cannot exist in two powers equally. Since virtues actualize the powers of the soul, their objects must be specifications of those powers. As Aquinas puts it, “Diversity of powers follows the generic conditions of objects, whereas diversity of habits follows their specific conditions; and so wherever there is diversity of powers, there is diversity of habits, but not conversely” (56.2).<sup>9</sup> If temperance exists equally in the will and in the sensitive appetite, for example, there would be two virtues that are distinct in species, not one.

Yet Aquinas does recognize that a virtue can exist in two powers, not equally in each but “by a certain order.” For example, prudence has practical reason as its immediate subject but also presupposes a rightly ordered will (56.2 ad 1). One does not reason well about what should be done unless one is first moved by a rightly channeled desire for the ends that are the principles of practical reason (56.3c; 57.4). Thus the subject of prudence, Aquinas says, is the practical intellect “as moved by the will” or “in order to right will” (56.3c). He is prepared to examine the complex interaction of the capacities of the human soul for thought and desire that enter into most of the virtues. Except with very few virtues, the subject will involve more than one power, albeit “in a certain order” (56.2c).

## THE VIRTUOUS WILL

Which virtues lie in the will as their primary subject? Aquinas claims no virtue is required to perfect the will in order to achieve the agent’s own good: “The object of the will is the good of reason proportionate to the agent, [and] to this extent the will does not require any perfecting virtue” (I.II 56.5).<sup>10</sup> Every being naturally loves itself, and so each being has a natural inclination toward its connatural and fitting good (*bonum proprium*). A virtue in the will is required only for other-regarding virtues to will the good of another (as with justice) or to love a higher supernatural good (as with charity), but not to love the agent’s connatural good, which it does naturally and spontaneously.

We know by experience, however, that the will does not always choose the agent’s good; indeed, many of life’s miseries are due to self-destructive choices, such as entering the wrong relationship or becoming addicted. Is there no need for a virtue that directs and strengthens the will in loving the agent’s own good?

Cajetan defends Aquinas’s idea that there is no moral virtue of self-love; he argues that while the *agent* is not always inclined to choose her own good, the

*will* nevertheless always retains this natural inclination (in I.II 56.6). Though the will can be turned to what is against the agent's good, the deviation is due not to any deficiency in the natural inclination of the will itself but rather in the disordered sensitive appetite that, like undesirable company, turns the will away from its natural bent to the agent's long-term good. One might say that the will's love for the agent's own good is *elastic* rather than *plastic*: absent the corrupting force of disordered passion, the will returns to its desire for the agent's good. Lacking plasticity, self-love is not a suitable matter of moral virtue. Thus, Cajetan argues, there is no connatural virtue of self-love needed in the will.

While Cajetan's solution is elegant, I am not entirely convinced. Aquinas admits that only the virtuous truly love themselves, being friends, as it were, to themselves, whereas the wicked "do not rightly love themselves, but love what they [wrongly] think themselves to be" (II.II 25.7).<sup>11</sup> This disordered self-love, which is really a kind of self-hate, could be the fault of a will distorted by passion. Yet why point the finger of blame at the passions rather than at the will itself, given that, as Aquinas admits, the will itself also suffers disorder due to original sin (I.II 83.3)? True self-love is a love formed by a correct knowledge of one's self and one's good, and it is therefore an attainment of virtue. It seems at least as plausible to claim that the will requires a virtue to love well the agent's own true and proper good.<sup>12</sup>

## VIRTUOUS PASSION

Aquinas claims that the irascible and concupiscible appetites—the seats of the passions—can serve as the subject of virtues (I.II 56.4). For example, fortitude and its parts are located in the irascible appetite as its subject, whereas temperance and its parts are located in the concupiscible appetite, at least as a general rule (61.2).<sup>13</sup>

By identifying the subject of these virtues as lying in the sensitive rather than in the intellectual appetite, Aquinas is affirming both the possibility of intrinsically virtuous passion and the positive moral role of passion even within the cardinal virtues such as fortitude and temperance. His virtue theory suggests an ethics of reason and will, but also of passion. When viewed from the angle of its formal cause, moral virtue is rational in that it consists in conformity to the rational good; when viewed from the perspective of the material cause, many moral virtues are not merely rational, but passionate. But how tenable is this pro-passion viewpoint?

As Hursthouse observes, there is no better source than Aquinas for exploring the relation between virtue and passion.<sup>14</sup> When it was written, the *Treatise on the Passions* (22–48) probably constituted the most sustained treatment of

the passions to date, and it continued to be influential for centuries. Its relative neglect in modern times has now been corrected more than amply, through at least three monographs on the topic.<sup>15</sup> However, judging from its location in the *Summa Theologiae*, the *Treatise* is not intended as a self-standing tract. Rather, it serves as a preparation for the study of the role of the passions in the life of virtue. Our own focus must be on how Aquinas relates moral virtue and the passions in his *Treatise on Virtue in General*.

The “core thesis” is that the irascible and concupiscible appetites are subjects of moral virtues. Aquinas notes a significant objection. It is a necessary condition of a habit being a moral virtue that it be an “elective habit” that is capable of resulting in right choice or election (I.II 56.4 arg 4). But election or choice is substantially an act of the will, as informed by reason (13.1). Its subject lies, therefore, in the “higher” part of the soul of reason and will (as contrasted with the “lower” part of the soul, where the sensitive appetite lies). Because of its subject, a habit located in the concupiscible or irascible appetite seems to fail to fulfil one of the necessary conditions for being a moral virtue. As Aquinas puts it: “The principal act of moral virtue is election (*Nichomachean Ethics* VIII.13). But election is not the act of the irascible or concupiscible, but of reason, as we have said. Thus moral virtue is not in the irascible or concupiscible, but in reason” (56.4 arg 4).<sup>16</sup> John Duns Scotus was later to locate the moral virtues in the will precisely on this basis.<sup>17</sup>

Here Aquinas gets to the heart of the twofold challenge presented by a positive account of the relationship between passion and virtue. First is the problem of the relation between passion and reason. Passions seem to be somewhat chaotic impulses that often conflict with reason; virtue, on the other hand, is characterized by its harmony with practical reason. How, then, can virtue incorporate psychic phenomena that are so nonrational, even irrational? Second is the problem of the relation between passion and the will. We tend to think of passions as phenomena that happen *to* us: they are precisely passions rather than actions. Virtue, on the other hand, is a principle of voluntary human action. How, then, can virtue be concerned with something we undergo rather than something we voluntarily execute ourselves?

Aquinas’s solution is to add precision to the core thesis that the concupiscible and irascible appetites can be the subject of virtue. His modified core thesis depends on a distinction between two ways in which the irascible powers and concupiscible powers, as they exist in human beings, can be considered:

The irascible and the concupiscible can be considered in two ways. First, in themselves, insofar as they are parts of the sensitive appetite. And in this way, they are not able to be a subject of virtue. Second, they can be considered insofar as they participate in reason, through this: that they have a natural aptitude to

obey reason. And thus the irascible or concupiscible can be the subject of human virtue: for thus each is a principle of a human act, insofar as it participates in reason. (56.4)<sup>18</sup>

Aquinas's modified core thesis, then, is that the irascible and concupiscible can be subjects of virtue *insofar as they participate in reason through their natural capacity to obey reason*. As such, they can be principles of a human act and of right election (56.4c and ad 4). How successful is the modified core thesis in explaining the possibility of passionate virtue?

### INCOMMENSURABLE READINGS?

Fergus Kerr alleges that Aquinas's text contains "Janus-like ambiguities" that result in "incommensurable yet equally plausible" readings.<sup>19</sup> One such locus of competing interpretations is Aquinas's claim that the passions can be integrated into virtue because they "participate in reason, through their having a natural aptitude to obey reason" (I.II 56.4).<sup>20</sup>

In Aquinas's theology, the cosmos, human society, and the human soul are all ordered in a hierarchy in which the "higher" move the "lower" as ordained by God (II.II 104.1; I 77.4). Cosmology, politics, and moral psychology all portray an analogous hierarchy. The metaphors of "higher" and "lower" *describe* how things are by nature and as they have been created by God and ordered by His providence; they also *prescribe* how things should be, to conform to His wisdom. As he says, "The virtue of any subordinate thing is that it be well subordinated to that by which it is governed, just as we see that the virtue of the irascible and concupiscible faculties lies in this, that they are well obedient to reason" (I.II 92.1).<sup>21</sup> By this accounting, the moral virtues are habits of obedience: "The moral virtues are certain habits, by which the appetitive powers are disposed to obeying reason promptly" (I.II 68.3c).<sup>22</sup>

The question is how to interpret this obedience. Two possible readings stand out in the literature. The first is the rationalist reading, which sees total and immediate rational control of passion as the ideal. Giuseppe Butera's interpretation of Aquinas tends in this direction, as he rejects the idea of spontaneous virtuous passion independent of reason's immediate command. The second reading is "the pure spontaneity view," which looks for a more positive role for the passions in moral virtue. It claims virtues such as temperance and fortitude incline a person to spontaneous well-ordered passion and consequently to the virtuous action that flows from this passion. Jean Porter, in her early writing on Aquinas, tends to this viewpoint: the virtuous person's "immediate responses will reliably direct him to act appropriately, at least in normal circumstances."<sup>23</sup>



The spontaneity viewpoint posits that formed emotional responses bypass reason and will and the need for continual deliberation.

How to decide between these two readings? The pure spontaneity view does not seem to correspond to Aquinas's, which sees deliberation as necessary for all virtuous acts, even spontaneous ones. He states: "Nor is this [sudden virtuous action] to be understood as meaning that operation according to the habit of virtue can be completely without deliberation, since virtue is an elective habit; but [it means] that the possessor of the habit already has the end determined in his choice; so whenever something suited to that end occurs, it is chosen immediately, unless blocked by some more attentive and weighty deliberation."<sup>24</sup> While virtuous human action may happen without *forethought*, it cannot lack *thought* altogether (see chap. 2). Though the pure spontaneity viewpoint runs aground in light of Aquinas's understanding that will and reason are always involved in virtuous action, the rationalist viewpoint is also problematic, as it gives too little a role to passion in virtue and is difficult to reconcile with some of Aquinas's more positive statements.

I propose a third viewpoint: the "moderate spontaneity view," which acknowledges the place of reason and will in all morally virtuous action but also finds a more positive place for the participation of habits subjected in the sensitive appetite. Moral virtues such as temperance do incline to rectified passion of themselves, and therefore contribute to virtuous deliberation, election, and execution—but only in conjunction with reason and will. This third viewpoint is both a proper reading of Aquinas and the more attractive position. Butera's critique, in my view, only undermines the pure, not the moderate spontaneity viewpoint.

My argument will focus not on the interpretation of texts alone but also on four substantive points in Aquinas's account of virtuous passion: the idea of participative rationality, the distinction between despotic and political authority, the distinction between antecedent and consequent passion, and the contribution of passion to deliberation.

### Participative Rationality

To understand the "moderate spontaneity view" it helps to refer to Robert C. Roberts's critique of Aquinas on moral passion. Roberts distinguishes *intrinsic* from *derivative* rationality: beliefs, actions, and people are intrinsically rational because they are the sorts of things that can be both rational and irrational; bodily movements and buildings are derivatively rational because they derive their rationality from prior events or actions.<sup>25</sup> Roberts interprets Aquinas as making the emotions only derivatively rational since their rationality comes

from obedience to reason.<sup>26</sup> Roberts effectively accuses Aquinas of too rationalistic a position that does not acknowledge the genuine or “intrinsic” rationality of the passions that could make them genuine contributors to virtuous action. Bodily movements are derivatively rational, but the body is not a subject of virtue; if the irascible and concupiscible are only derivatively rational, neither can they be the subject of virtue.

Roberts’s dichotomy between intrinsic and merely derivative rationality leads to a dilemma. Either the passions are seen as possessing merely derivative rationality, in which case virtue is attributed purely to the reason and will controlling passion, or the passions possess intrinsic rationality, in which case the degree to which virtuous action can issue from well-formed, rationalized passion without rational deliberation is exaggerated.

Aquinas offers a way out of this dilemma. He would agree that the body’s movements have a merely derivative rationality in that “the whole motion of the body is referred back to the soul” (I.II 56.4 ad 3).<sup>27</sup> Reason, in contrast, is intrinsically or “essentially” rational (61.2c). Aquinas in effect proposes a third category: *participative* rationality (58.3). By ascribing participatory rationality to the passions, Aquinas evades Roberts’s charge of rationalism without sliding into the opposite extreme that attributes to passion too great a role in virtuous action.

Aquinas characterizes participation as follows: “To participate is, as it were, to take part; and therefore when something particularly receives that which belongs to another universally, it is said to participate in that.”<sup>28</sup> To participate in a quality is to acquire that quality to some extent. As he says, “Everything participating in something is related to that in which it participates as potency to act: for through that in which it participates, the participant becomes actually such.”<sup>29</sup> For Aquinas it is a general principle that “a lower nature, at its highest point, attains to that which is proper to a higher nature, imperfectly participating in it” (*De Veritate* 16.1).<sup>30</sup> Thus through its participation in reason, the human capacity for passion becomes, to some extent, a capacity for *rational* passion: “The irascible and concupiscible take the name of reason or the rational insofar as they participate in some way in reason” (*On the Virtues* 1.10 ad 3).<sup>31</sup> There is a distinction between what is rational *essentially*, such as reason itself, what is rational *derivatively*, like bodily movements, and what is rational *through participation*, or the sensitive and intellectual appetites.<sup>32</sup>

For Aquinas it is a fact of experience that this participative rationality of the sensitive appetite exists: “Anyone can experience this in himself, for by applying certain universal considerations, anger or fear or other things of this kind may be tempered or excited” (*On the Virtues* 1.10 ad 3).<sup>33</sup> One may voluntarily change one’s passions, at least to some extent, by reasoning about the object(s) of one’s passions and seeing them as more or less unjust or threatening or

attractive than one initially feels them to be. Aquinas's account can explain this phenomenon since, for him, the object is presented to the sensitive appetite with the aid of the "particular reason" or "cogitative power" whose function is to apply universal concepts to the particulars perceived by the external and interior senses.<sup>34</sup> As Robert Pasnau suggests, the cogitative power is the capacity of "seeing as."<sup>35</sup> When someone is angry because she sees a thief run off with a poor man's possession, she is responding to an action *seen as* unjust. The sensitive appetite participates in reason insofar as reason influences the object of our passions.

It is because human passions can be originatively rational in this way that they can be measured against the normatively rational and therefore judged as morally good or bad, virtuous or vicious (I.II 24.1). Indeed, "The irascible or concupiscible can be the subject of human virtue, for thus it is the principle of a human act, insofar as it participates in reason" (56.4c).<sup>36</sup>

The participatory rationality of the sensitive appetite suggests a position between rationalism and the pure spontaneity interpretation. Aquinas's viewpoint is not rationalism, because virtuous agency is not attributed to reason and will alone: the sensitive appetite is a principle of a human action, not merely its consequence. However, neither does Aquinas advocate the "pure spontaneity view," according to which the sensitive appetite, when formed by virtue, can issue in virtuous action without reason and will. If the irascible and concupiscible, as perfected by virtuous habits, can participate in reason, they can also *take part* in virtuous election and action. But they cannot *take over* from reason and will. As Aquinas puts it, the sensitive appetite, to the extent that it participates in reason and will, is capable of being a "participant in an election" (*particeps elections*).<sup>37</sup>

Habits subjected in the sensitive appetite can contribute to election and also to the execution of virtuous action: "An act of virtue cannot belong to the irascible or concupiscible alone, without reason. . . . A virtue is not said to be in the irascible or concupiscible as if, through them, the whole act of virtue or its more principal part were completed, but only insofar as, by the habit of virtue, the ultimate completion of goodness is conferred to the act of virtue" (*On the Virtues* 1.4 ad 2).<sup>38</sup> Once again, a virtuous habit in the irascible or concupiscible does not take over from reason and will in the performance of virtuous action, but it does take part in the consummation of a virtuous act. Temperate and brave action is more than simply reason's control alone, but it does not happen without it. Just as the concupiscible and irascible cannot be the subjects of mortal sin by themselves, even if they can "concur" in it (*On the Virtues* 1.4 ad 1), so these powers can be subjects of virtue but only as "concurring" with reason and will.

In the moderate spontaneity view, because the sensitive appetite can be participatively rational, it can take part in virtuous decision and action, together with reason and will.

### Despotic versus Political Authority

Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of rule or authority within the human soul: tyrannical and political. He introduces the ideas in response to an objection (I.II 56.4 arg 3). If a coachman, obeying my instructions, directs the horses in the right way, it is I who am responsible. In the same way, if the irascible and concupiscible powers are rightly ordered, this is entirely due to the directing power of reason and will. Does not the virtue lie with these commanding powers rather than with those that obey?

Aquinas replies that reason rules the sensitive appetite and the soul rules the body, but in different ways. The soul rules the body with a “despotic authority,” just as a master rules a slave, since the response of the body to the soul is immediate and without contradiction, at least in matters such as moving a limb. Aquinas continues:

The irascible and concupiscible do not obey at the nod of reason, but have their own proper motions, by which they sometimes go against reason. Whence . . . the Philosopher says that “the reason rules the irascible and concupiscible by a politic authority,” by which they are ruled as freemen, who have in some respects their own will. And for this reason it is necessary that there be in the irascible and concupiscible certain virtues, by which they are well disposed to act. (56.4 ad 3)<sup>39</sup>

It is only a particular kind of obedience that enables the sensitive appetite to be perfected by virtue. The question is how to interpret this political authority (*principatus politicus*) as opposed to despotic authority (*despoticus principatus*).

There is evidence for a rationalist interpretation. Aquinas says reason’s rule over the sensitive appetite is politic, not despotic, because the lower power *resists* reason, “inasmuch as we sense or imagine something pleasant that reason forbids, or unpleasant that reason commands” (I 81.3 ad 2; cf. I.II 17.7).<sup>40</sup> This suggests that passion’s resistance is what Robert Miner calls a “negative resistance,” or the irrational against the rational.<sup>41</sup> While Aquinas concedes that reason’s authority over the passions is merely political, the norm is tyrannical domination. This mirrors Butera’s interpretation: “The ideal limit of temperance is despotic rather than political control, where the former is the sort of control a master exercises over his slave, who has no

power to resist his master's will."<sup>42</sup> Steven J. Jensen concurs with Butera's interpretation, claiming that "in every instance in which I have found Aquinas using this metaphor, he uses the metaphor precisely as Butera would have him do."<sup>43</sup> In this viewpoint, the reason there is a need for virtue in the sensitive appetite is solely to remove passion's unfortunate tendency to fight against and obscure reason. The norm is a despotic rather than political obedience.

However, there is also evidence in favor of a different interpretation. It is better to be like a freeman than a slave. Indeed, Aquinas contrasts the body, which is like the slave who does not have the right of speaking against his master, with the appetitive powers, which are like freemen who have some right (*ius*) to resist (I.II 58.2). This suggests that the passions may even engage in what Miner terms a "positive resistance" to (erroneous) reason: the capability to correct reason when it is faulty, just as a subordinate may correct someone in a place of higher authority at times without usurping his role as a subordinate. Reason should be "authoritative" rather than "authoritarian." In saying that, unlike the body, the irascible and concupiscible passions have their own "proper motions," Aquinas is implying that they are in some way active and have something of their own to contribute; they are not like puppets, as pure instruments of reason, but more like willing partners. In this interpretation the ideal is not despotic but rather political obedience.

One attractive feature of this second interpretation is that it strikes the mean. A rationalism that dominates passion risks suppressing it. A romanticism that rejects reason's authority altogether paves the way for a different kind of tyrannical domination of bodily and emotional cravings over the mind and will. The ideal is of proper authority over one's passions, neither making them otiose nor letting them run loose.

Interestingly, Poinsett advocates the political rather than the tyrannical authority of reason over passion and offers a compelling argument.<sup>44</sup> He assumes, in accord with Aquinas, that Adam, in the state of innocence, and Christ, in his earthly life, both possessed the moral virtues of temperance and fortitude. However, in these the obedience of the sensitive appetite to reason could not have been despotic. Were it so, the sensitive appetite of Adam or Christ would have been no more capable of virtue than each's body, which despotically serves the reason; the passions themselves would not have been any more praiseworthy than movements of the body. He concludes:

Wherefore, the appetite's being made submissive and rendered non-resistant [to the rule of reason] in this way is not a despotic obedience, that is, a natural slavery, but very much a political obedience. For, the appetite is completely subjected to reason while remaining in its indifference and perfection, and so there

is a moral obedience and submission, and therefore also a virtuous one, derived however [in Adam and in Christ] from the gift of grace, specifically the gift of original justice.<sup>45</sup>

Butera sees temperance and fortitude as purely corrective virtues: they remove from the concupiscible and irascible powers the disorder that is due to original sin and restore their natural tendency to obey reason without resistance. However, in this case Adam and Christ, as free from original sin, would have no need of such virtues. Since they did possess these virtues, these virtues are more than habits of despotic obedience—in Adam, in Christ, and in us.

Butera's temperate person seems excessively controlled in his emotional life. The person in whom there is a political and moral obedience of passion to reason is more emotionally balanced and morally virtuous than one in whom the passions, like slaves, only appear when and how they are summoned to do so by despotic reason.

### **Antecedent and Consequent Passion**

Dispute also exists over another distinction. Aquinas says the passions of the soul are related to reason in two ways: either antecedently or consequentially. Passions that are antecedent to the judgment of reason “obscure the judgment of reason, on which the goodness of the moral act depends” (I.II 24.3 ad 1).<sup>46</sup> Antecedent passions, he adds, diminish the goodness of a virtuous act. Only passions consequent to the judgment of reason have positive moral value, either as a sign of an intense good will that has overflowed into corresponding passion or as a kind of additional impetus to action (*ibid.*).

The distinction between antecedent and consequent passions seems to ascribe to passion a rather minor role in virtue. Antecedent passions cannot contribute positively, and even consequent passions are reduced to assisting in the execution of actions already decided on by reason.

Can passions ever positively influence the will and the intellect? Aquinas recognizes that will and intellect can be affected by passion since “insofar as someone is in some passion, something seems fitting to him that does not seem so without this passion” (9.2).<sup>47</sup> Initially there seems to be no room in the doctrine of antecedent and consequent passion to account for this as anything but a usurpation of proper order. Will and reason should rule over the sensitive appetite rather than vice versa. As Pasnau sees it, Aquinas cannot seem to acknowledge that the passions “help illuminate features of a situation that intellect alone would never grasp.”<sup>48</sup>

However, Pasnau makes the following suggestion for allowing a greater role for the passions within the framework of Aquinas's theory: "[Aquinas] can allow the emotions some weight when they are governed by a disposition that itself has been cultivated over the years through discipline and intelligence. . . . This is not a point that I have found him making, but it is a point that we can easily make on his behalf, using the resources of his theory."<sup>49</sup> While Pasnau concedes that antecedent passions have no moral weight, he interprets "consequent passion" in a broad sense to include not only passions that follow immediately from the command of reason but also those that result from a habit that has been formed by reason. This is similar to training in tennis: while actions initially have to be constantly monitored and corrected, through training those actions eventually become second nature. Instinct and the "feel" of the shot become reliable guides in their own right.

Butera objects to what he calls this "spontaneity view." However, the moderate spontaneity viewpoint does not say that "the antecedent passions of the temperate are controlled by reason via habituation."<sup>50</sup> The argument is not that antecedent passions can be controlled by reason; it is clear that antecedent passion is defined as not so controlled. Rather, passions arising from virtuous habits in the sensitive appetite are consequent passions because they arise from a habit in the sensitive appetite formed by reason.

The textual evidence Pasnau needs does exist, in Aquinas's *Commentary on the Sentences*.<sup>51</sup> There Aquinas notes that the lower powers can receive their rectitude from the higher powers in two different ways. The first is in the manner of a *transient passion*, as when the sensitive appetite contributes nothing to the act. In such a case, the rectitude of the consequent passion is purely extrinsic and lasts no longer than the duration of the act that produces it; it is not accompanied by the ease and delight that is characteristic of virtuous acts. In the second, as when the sensitive appetite receives its rectitude after the manner of an *inherent quality*, there arises a habitual form existing in the power itself; it is an imprint, as it were, of reason. In such a case, delight and ease characterize the production of virtuous passion: the quality has been "turned, as it were, into nature" (*quasi in naturam versa*).<sup>52</sup>

The virtues of the sensitive appetite are therefore more than dispositions to respond promptly to the immediate command of reason (as Butera would claim) since the perfected sensitive appetite, as participating in reason, is itself a principle of rectified and rationalized passion. As Aquinas puts it in *On the Virtues*: "A virtue of the appetitive part is nothing other than a certain disposition or form sealed and impressed on the appetitive power by reason" (1.9).<sup>53</sup> In temperance and fortitude the sensitive appetite itself receives the form of reason, at least participatively, and does not need to wait for the

actual command of the power of practical reason to operate and contribute positively to a moral act.

### Passion and Deliberation

Can the passions contribute positively to deliberation? We have seen that Aquinas thinks that antecedent passion clouds the judgment of reason and diminishes the moral goodness of an action. At first sight this seems to be evidence that Aquinas does not want even to consider the possibility that passion might have a positive role in deliberation. Butera references a passage from *On Truth*: “And so it is that passion antecedent an election impedes the act of virtue insofar as it impedes the judgement of reason, which is necessary in choosing; after the election has already been completed by a pure judgment of reason, a passion that follows helps more than harms, because if in some way it may disturb the judgment of reason, it nevertheless produces promptness in execution” (*De Veritate* 26.6 ad 3).<sup>54</sup> Butera takes this as decisive evidence that any passions disturb rather than help deliberation. The ideal is the “pure judgment of reason” lacking any influence from passion.

The interpretation of the cited text is not as straightforward as it may seem. Aquinas is replying to the Stoic position, here represented by the Roman historian Sallust, which sees passion as inevitably corruptive of reason (arg 3). Aquinas can defeat the Stoic position even when conceding that passion disturbs deliberation since he can argue that passion following the judgment of reason may contribute positively to virtuous action and aid in execution. A temporary concession to an opposing viewpoint for the sake of argument is not strong evidence of Aquinas’s own position. Once placed in context, Butera’s proof-text is not compelling.

Is there any evidence that passion and the habits of the sensitive appetite may contribute positively to rational judgment? It is necessary to attend carefully to the definition of “antecedent” and “consequent” passion. Steven Jensen, who largely shares Butera’s rationalist interpretation, suggests passion causally influenced by the judgment of reason is consequent, whereas passion that influences judgment is antecedent.<sup>55</sup> Note that on this definition a passion could be simultaneously consequent (in relation to one judgment) and antecedent (in relation to another).

There are problems with Jensen’s interpretation of antecedence. Given that Aquinas claims that antecedent passion obscures judgment, the critical question of whether consequent passion could contribute positively to deliberation is resolved negatively and purely by stipulation: it would be an antecedent passion and therefore cloud judgment. But why even a rational passion must



necessarily cloud judgment is left obscure. Furthermore, Jensen's definition leaves open the possibility of a third kind of passion, which is neither antecedent nor consequent and that neither influences nor is influenced by reason. This is something of a slight on Aquinas's acuity since he explicitly claims that passions stand in a twofold, not a threefold, relation to reason.

Is there a better way to interpret antecedent and consequent passions? A causal definition is necessary, as Jensen suggests, but what is the relevant genre of cause? It is not effective but rather formal or participative causality. The following definition is proposed: A consequent passion is one that participates in reason and therefore is, in a way, rational; an antecedent passion is one that does not participate in reason and therefore is irrational, or at least nonrational. Unlike Jensen's definition of antecedence, this definition helps in explaining why Aquinas insists that antecedent passion inevitably clouds rational judgment. It is also an adequate division of all passions and does not lead to the confusing case of passions that are simultaneously antecedent and consequent. And, most important, it also leaves open the substantive question, Can consequent passion (consequent either because it derives from the immediate command of reason or because it flows from a virtuous habit subjected in the sensitive appetite) contribute positively to judgment and deliberation?

There is evidence that Aquinas acknowledges that passion can indeed contribute positively to judgment. Aquinas contrasts purely rational knowledge from a more affective kind: "Rectitude of judgment can come about in two ways: first, following the perfect use of reason; second, on account of a kind of connaturality toward those things about which one must judge in the now. Thus he who has acquired knowledge of moral science rightly judges about matters of chastity by the inquiry of reason, whereas he who has the habit of chastity rightly judges about such matters by a kind of connaturality" (II.II 45.2).<sup>56</sup> For Aquinas, prudence depends radically on this knowledge through connaturality, or affective knowledge, since it is through one's ordered appetitive dispositions that one rightly perceives the end that is the principle of prudential deliberation (I.II 58.5). Prudential judgment is the judgment of someone possessing a connaturality with what is good and honorable. Aquinas, then, allows a significant and indispensable cognitive role for the passions in prudential deliberation. Pasnau's suggestion is confirmed again: Aquinas can and does allow that the passions have cognitive value when arising from a disposition cultivated by reason and will.

What are we to conclude, then, about Aquinas's attempt to incorporate passion into virtue by claiming that habits subjected in the irascible and concupiscible, insofar as they participate in reason by obedience to it, can be virtues? This central thesis can stand only if such habits incline to choice and fully human action. Aquinas's texts generate competing interpretations. As an interpretation

of Aquinas, and as an attractive position in its own right, the middle position acknowledges the spontaneity of virtuous passion flowing from habit while also recognizing that reason and will are not short-circuited in virtuous action. Rather, passion flowing from habits in the sensitive appetite becomes a *participant*, together with reason and will, in virtuous election and action. Habits of passion do not contribute to virtuous action merely by adding motor power and promptness to execution; they do so by inclining the will toward the right ends and, crucially, by supplying connatural knowledge of the ends from which prudential deliberation begins. Moral virtue, for Aquinas, is passionate virtue.

## NOTES

1. 55.4c: “Virtus autem non habet materiam ex qua, sicut nec alia accidentia, sed habet materiam circa quam; et materiam in qua, scilicet subiectum. Materia autem circa quam est obiectum virtutis; quod non potuit in praedicta definitione poni, eo quod per obiectum determinatur virtus ad speciem; hic autem assignatur definitio virtutis in communi. Unde ponitur subiectum loco causae materialis, cum dicitur quod est bona qualitas mentis.”

2. Stump, *Aquinas*, 535.

3. I.II 56.1: “virtus humana est in potentia animae sicut in subiecto.”

4. 55.4 ad 3: “virtus non potest esse in irrationali parte animae, nisi in quantum participat rationem, ut dicitur in I Ethic. Et ideo ratio, sive mens, est proprium subiectum virtutis humanae.”

5. On the soul’s powers see Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae 1a*, 75–89 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 143–70.

6. Peter King, “Aquinas on the Passions,” in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 362.

7. I 81.2: “quasi propugnatrix et defensatrix concupiscibilis.”

8. I.II 58.4: “illa potentia est subiectum virtutis ad cuius potentiae actum rectificandum virtus ordinatur.”

9. 56.2: “diversitas potentiarum attenditur secundum generales condiciones obiectorum, diversitas autem habituum secundum speciales; unde ubicumque est diversitas potentiarum, est diversitas habituum, sed non convertitur.”

10. I.II 56.5: “obiectum voluntati sit bonum rationis voluntati proportionatum, quantum ad hoc non indiget voluntas virtute perficiente.” See also *On the Virtues* 1.5.

11. II.II 25.7: “non recte cognoscentes seipsos, non vere diligunt seipsos, sed diligunt id quod seipsos esse reputant.”

12. Another question concerns whether the will *alone* is the subject of justice (II.II 58.4). For helpful discussion, see Thomas J. Bushlack, *Politics for a Pilgrim Church: A Thomistic Theory of Civic Virtue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), chap. 3.

13. There are some exceptions to this general rule. For example, the virtue that concerns anger is considered a potential part of temperance, not of fortitude, even though

it is located in the irascible. The reason is that form, as what determines species, is more essential to a virtue than matter (II.II 157.3 ad 2). While this virtue shares its subjective matter with the cardinal virtue of fortitude, it shares its form or mode with temperance, being a kind of restraint or moderation.

14. See Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chaps. 4 and 5.

15. Diana Fritz Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009); Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 22–48* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010). In addition, see Paul Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2002). Pasnau's study of the powers of the soul is important background. See Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*.

16. 56.4 arg 4: "principalis actus virtutis moralis est electio, ut dicitur in VIII Ethic. Sed electio non est actus irascibilis et concupiscibilis, sed rationis, ut supra dictum est. Ergo virtus moralis non est in irascibili et concupiscibili, sed in ratione."

17. Bonnie Kent, "Rethinking Moral Dispositions: Scotus on the Virtues," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. Thomas Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 368–69.

18. 56.4: "irascibilis et concupiscibilis dupliciter considerari possunt. Uno modo secundum se, in quantum sunt partes appetitus sensitivi. Et hoc modo, non competit eis quod sint subiectum virtutis. Alio modo possunt considerari in quantum participant rationem, per hoc quod natae sunt rationi obedire. Et sic irascibilis vel concupiscibilis potest esse subiectum virtutis humanae, sic enim est principium humani actus, in quantum participat rationem."

19. Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 210.

20. I.II 56.4: "participant rationem, per hoc quod natae sunt rationi obedire." Compare I.59.4 ad 3; I.79.2 ad 2; and II.II 50.3 ad 1.

21. I.II 92.1: "Cuiuslibet autem subditi virtus est ut bene subdatur ei a quo gubernatur, sicut videmus quod virtus irascibilis et concupiscibilis in hoc consistit quod sint bene obedientes rationi."

22. I.II 68.3c: "Virtutes autem morales habitus quidam sunt, quibus vires appetitivae disponuntur ad prompte obediendum rationi."

23. Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 115. See also Porter, *Moral Action and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 172–73.

24. *De Veritate*, q. 24 a. 12c: "Nec hoc est intelligendum quod operatio secundum habitum virtutis possit esse omnino absque deliberatione, cum virtus sit habitus electivus; sed quia habenti habitum iam est in eius electione finis determinatus; unde quandocumque aliquid occurrit ut conveniens illi fini, statim eligitur, nisi ex aliqua attentiori et maiori deliberatione impediatur."

25. Robert C. Roberts, "Thomas Aquinas on the Morality of the Emotions," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (July 1992): 228.

26. *Ibid.*, 302–3.

27. I.II 56.4 ad 3: “totus motus corporis refertur ad animam.”

28. *In De ebdomadibus* 12, n.24: “Est autem participare quasi partem capere; et ideo quando aliquid particulariter recipit id quod ad alterum pertinet universaliter, [punctuation changed, following Wippel] dicitur participare illud.”

29. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 2 cap. 53 n.4: “Omne participans aliquid comparatur ad ipsum quod participatur ut potentia ad actum: per id enim quod participatur fit participans actu tale.”

30. *De Veritate* 16.1: “natura inferior attingit in sui supremo ad aliquid quod est proprium superioris naturae, imperfecte illud participans.”

31. *On the Virtues* 1.10 ad 3: “irascibilis autem et concupiscibilis sic accipiunt nomen rationis vel rationalis, in quantum participant aequaliter ratione.”

32. *Comm. Ethic.*, lib. 1 l. 20 n.10, n.12; *On the Virtues* 1.5 ad sc 1; I.II 74.2 ad 2.

33. *On the Virtues* 1.10 ad 3: “Hoc etiam quilibet experiri potest in seipso, applicando enim aliquas universales considerationes, mitigatur ira aut timor aut aliquid huiusmodi, vel etiam instigatur.”

34. *De Veritate* 14.1 ad 9.

35. Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 274–78.

36. 56.4c: “irascibilis vel concupiscibilis potest esse subiectum virtutis humanae, sic enim est principium humani actus, in quantum participat rationem.”

37. *Super Sent.*, lib. 3 d. 33 q. 2 a. 4 qc. 2 ad 1.

38. *On the Virtues* 1.4 ad 2: “actus virtutis non potest esse irascibilis vel concupiscibilis tantum, sine ratione. . . . Non ergo pro tanto dicitur esse virtus in irascibili vel concupiscibili, quasi per eas totus actus virtutis vel principalior pars expleatur; sed in quantum, per virtutis habitum, ultimum complementum bonitatis actui virtutis confertur.”

39. 56.4 ad 3: “Sed irascibilis et concupiscibilis non ad nutum obediunt rationi, sed habent proprios motus suos, quibus interdum rationi repugnant, unde in eodem libro philosophus dicit quod ratio regit irascibilem et concupiscibilem principatu politico, quo scilicet reguntur liberi, qui habent in aliquibus propriam voluntatem. Et propter hoc etiam oportet in irascibili et concupiscibili esse aliquas virtutes, quibus bene disponentur ad actum.”

40. I 81.3 ad 2: “per hoc quod sentimus vel imaginamur aliquod delectabile quod ratio vetat, vel triste quod ratio praecipit.”

41. Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*, 107.

42. Giuseppe Butera, “On Reason’s Control of the Passions in Aquinas’s Theory of Temperance,” *Mediaeval Studies* 68, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 152.

43. Steven J. Jensen, “Virtuous Deliberation and the Passions,” *The Thomist* 77, no. 2 (2013): 204.

44. *Cursus Theologicus*, in I.II, Disp.15, Art.2, 9.

45. *Ibid.*

46. I.II 24.3 ad 1: “cum obnubilent iudicium rationis, ex quo dependet bonitas moralis actus.”

47. 9.2: “secundum quod homo est in passione aliqua, videtur sibi aliquid conueniens, quod non videtur extra passionem existenti.”

48. Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 263.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Butera, “On Reason’s Control,” 143.

51. *Super Sent.*, lib. 3 d. 23 q. 1 a. 1c.

52. See the helpful commentary in the Salamancans, *Cursus Theologicus*, Tract. 12, *De Virtutibus*, Disp.1, Dub.2, n.45 (6:218).

53. 1.9: “Unde, si recte consideretur, virtus appetitivae partis nihil est aliud quam quaedam dispositio, sive forma, sigillata et impressa in vi appetitiva a ratione.”

54. *De Veritate* 26.6 ad 3: “Et inde est quod passio electionem praeveniens impedit actum virtutis, in quantum impedit iudicium rationis, quod necessarium est in eligendo; postquam vero puro iudicio rationis iam electio est perfecta, passio sequens plus prodest quam noceat; quia si in aliquo turbet iudicium rationis, facit tamen ad promptitudinem executionis.”

55. Jensen, “Virtuous Deliberation and the Passions.”

56. II.II 45.2: “Rectitudo autem iudicii potest contingere dupliciter, uno modo, secundum perfectum usum rationis; alio modo, propter connaturalitatem quandam ad ea de quibus iam est iudicandum. Sicut de his quae ad castitatem pertinent per rationis inquisitionem recte iudicat ille qui didicit scientiam moralem, sed per quandam connaturalitatem ad ipsa recte iudicat de eis ille qui habet habitum castitatis.”