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THE MEANING OF VIRTUE IN ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

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UNTIL MODERN TIMES, THE RELATIONSHIP OF MORALS TO RELIGION WAS TAKEN for granted, and writers as far different in philosophy as Plato and Avicenna, or in theology as Aquinas and Luther, never questioned the basic truth expressed on Mt. Sinai when Yahweh gave the Jews the Decalogue, the first precepts of which were to honor God as a foundation for the secondary precepts of the moral law.

But something new has entered the stream of human thought: the concept of man's autonomy, a concept that wishes to dispense with religion in its bearing on morals, on the grounds that the very notion of religious values is only a mental construct. Whatever bearing such values may have on ethical principles, it is not as though the concept of God was a necessary condition for being moral in the current, accepted sense of the term.

When Julian Huxley boldly proclaimed that he knew nothing of a personal Deity, be he Yahweh, or Allah, or Apollo, he was saying more than meets the eye. "I am not merely agnostic on the subject," he insisted. "I disbelieve in a personal God in any sense in which that phrase is ordinarily used."¹ His protest was born of a conviction that the practical effect of theism is to stultify human effort. While the fifth-century monk Pelagius denied the existence of grace because he felt this encouraged lazy dependence on supernatural aid, latter day critics of religion would remove the existence of God for the same reason except that their Pelagianism is more complete, perhaps because their confidence in Man is so extreme.

ARISTOTLE AND AQUINAS

To illustrate and examine the relation between religion and morality, I have chosen Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century theologian whose principles were the standard of ethical teaching up to the Reformation and since then have become fundamental in Christian moral theology. Since Aquinas depended so heavily on Aristotle, it will pay to review the Aristotelian position on ethics, see its religious dimension, and then study Aquinas somewhat in depth-by way of contrast with Aristotle-as the mainstay of an ethical system which believes that God and religious values are primary, and that true goodness is to be measured in terms of an ultimate finality, reasoned by man's natural intellection but fully possessed only on the basis of the Christian faith.

The broad outline of Aristotle's teaching is found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*, where he writes at great length of the human good. The good for man, according to Aristotle, is an active use or exercise of those faculties which are distinctively human, that is, the powers of mind and will, as distinct from the lower faculties of feeling, nutrition and growth.

Human excellence thus defined shows itself in two forms: in the habitual subordination of the senses and

lower tendencies to rational rule and principle, and in the exercise of reason in the search for the contemplation of truth. The former kind of excellence is described as moral, the latter as intellectual, virtue.

A well-known feature of Aristotle's ethics which deeply influenced Aquinas is the theory that each of the moral virtues is a mean between excess and defect; thus courage is a mean between cowardice and rashness, and liberality is a mean between stinginess and prodigality.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle sets forth the importance of the political community as the source and sustainer of the typically human life. But for Aristotle the highest good for man is found not in the political life, nor even in the performance of the moral virtues as such. The highest good consists in the theoretical inquiry and contemplation of truth. This alone, he says, brings continuous and complete happiness because it is the activity of the highest part of man's complete nature, and of that part which is least dependent on externals, namely the intellect of intuitive reason. Therefore, through contemplation of the first principles of knowledge and being, man participates in that activity of pure thought which constitutes the eternal perfection of the divine nature, which is God.

In Thomas Aquinas, much of the structure of Aristotle and a great deal of his insight are retained, to the point that a superficial reader might suspect that Aquinas merely baptized the Stagirite or put Aristotelian concepts into a Christian mold. Actually, the change from one to the other was radical, and a correct understanding of Christian morality must take this mutation into account.

Aquinas believed what Aristotle never dreamed: that man is more than a composite of body and soul, that he is nothing less than elevated to a supernatural order which participates, as far as a creature can, in the very nature of God. Accordingly, a person in the state of grace, or divine friendship, possesses certain enduring powers, the infused virtues and gifts, that raise him to an orbit of existence as far above nature as heaven is above earth, and that give

him abilities of thought and operation that are literally born, "not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Nowhere else does the true character of the supernatural appear more evident than in the endowments of infused virtue which some people possess and others do not, and that make some capable of spiritual actions which others cannot perform.

In the Thomistic system, the soul is the substantial form of the body, which gives man all that is properly human and places him essentially into the natural order; sanctifying grace or justification, by analogy, is the accidental form of the soul, which gives the same man all that is properly divine and puts him habitually into the family of God. Comparing the two with each other, the soul is the foundation of natural existence, as sanctifying grace is the principle of supernatural life.

Yet we know that the soul is not all we have in the body, that the soul itself has powers through which it operates and by which it gives statement to its rational nature. Even so, by a divine consistency, the "soul of the soul," as sanctifying grace has been called, must have channels for the deifonni life that God confers on the just. They are the virtues, theological and moral, according to their respective purposes, not unlike the native abilities through which mind and will come into contact with us.

THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

Etymologically, Aquinas derived "virtue" from the same root as the Latin *vir* (man) and *vis* (power), suggesting that in its primitive sense, virtue implied the possession of such masculine qualities as strength and courage and, in the moral order, of goodness and human perfection.

The Scriptures have several equivalents for the Vulgate virtue, notably *ischus* (strength or power), *dunamis* (might), and *arete* (moral excellence or perfection). In the Hebrew Old Testament there is no specific word for virtue, but in the Septuagintarete is used in the books written originally in Greek to mean



Aristotle

moral goodness or a particular moral quality.² In the New Testament the Greek word for virtue is used only five times: twice to describe the powers of God, twice meaning moral vigor and only once meaning moral virtue in particular.³

In the patristic period, theological virtues were the subject of frequent writing and, in Pelagian times, of controversy. The commentaries of the Fathers on St. Paul offer a complete treatise on every phase of faith, hope and charity, and St. Augustine's *Enchiridion* (or *Manual of the Christian Religion*) was always referred to by him as "a book on Faith, Hope, and Charity." For Augustine, therefore, a summary of these virtues was an epitome of the essentials of Christianity.

However, a scientific study was not made until the Middle Ages, in the great *Summae* of Peter Lombard, Peter of Poitiers, William of Auxerre and Alexander of Hales, and terminating in the definitive work of St. Thomas. His analysis of theological virtue remains standard, and figures extensively in all of his major writings, especially the *Summa Theologica*.

St. Thomas defines virtue as "a good habit bearing on activity" or a good faculty/habit (*habitus operativus bonus*). Generic to the concept of virtue, then, is the element of habit, which stands in a special relation to the soul, whether in the natural order or elevated to the divine life by grace.

The soul is the remote principle or source of all our activities; faculties are the proximate sources built into the soul by nature; habits are still more immediate principles added to the faculties either by personal endeavor or by supernatural infusion from God. Consequently, the soul helps the man, faculties help the soul, and habits help the faculties.

Habits reside in the faculties as stable dispositions or "hard to eradicate" qualities that dispose the faculties to act in a certain way, depending on the type of habit. If the habit is acquired, it gives the faculty power to act with ease and facility; if it is infused, it procures in supernatural activity not readiness, but the very activity itself. Natural or acquired habits result from repeated acts of some one kind; they give not the power to act, but the power to act readily and with dexterity. Thus in the natural order, the faculty without the habit is simple power to act, while the faculty with the habit is power to

act with perfection. Since custom is parent to habit, it is called second nature. Faculty is like first nature, and habit second nature.

Not every habit is a virtue, but only one that so improves and perfects a rational faculty as to incline it towards good—good for the faculty, for the will and for the whole man in terms of his ultimate destiny.

There is a broad sense in which we can speak of the natural dispositions of any of our powers as innate virtues, but this is a loose rendering and leads to confusion. More properly, the infused virtues should be contrasted with the acquired habits, in which the autonomous will of the individual plays the dominant role. My consistent effort to concentrate on a given course of action, repeating the process over a long period of time and in spite of obstacles, gradually develops a tendency to perform the action spontaneously and almost without reflection, yet to a degree of perfection that someone else without the virtue cannot duplicate.



The infused virtues are independent of the process. They are directly produced by God in the operative faculties of a man, and differ mainly from the acquired virtues because they do not imply the human effort which determines the faculty to a particular kind of activity, namely facility induced by repetition. God Himself pours in (*infundere*) the infused virtues, not by compulsion or overriding the free will of man, but without dependence on us; as Augustine says, these infused virtues "are produced in us by God without our assistance." They are supernatural gifts, freely conferred through the merits of Christ, and raise the activity of those who possess them to the divine level in the same way that sanctifying grace elevates their nature to a share in the life of God. They are supernatural precisely because they transcend the natural capacities of mind and will either to acquire or operate.

Among the infused virtues, however, some are concerned directly with God and operate in a field in which the unaided reason cannot work; they are called theological. Others have as their object not God Himself, the final end of all things, but human activities that are

penultimate and subordinate to the final end; they are called moral and, because four of them (prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice) are primary, they are said to be cardinal (*cardo*, hinge) in human conduct.

Aquinas argued for the necessity of theological virtues from a simple analysis of man's elevation to the supernatural order. Our final happiness may be considered in two ways. One is commensurate with our human nature, and therefore is a happiness obtainable by the use of our native powers of mind and will. The other is immeasurably higher, surpassing nature, and is secured only from God by the merciful communication of His own divinity. To make it possible to attain this higher destiny in the beatific vision, we must have new principles of activity, which are called theological virtues because their object is God and not, as in moral virtues, merely things that lead to God; because they are infused in the mind and will by God alone, as opposed to the habits acquired by personal exercise; and because they would never be known to us, except through divine revelation.

Reflecting on the data of Scripture and tradition, Thomas finds a striking reasonableness in the kind of virtues that God infuses in the soul. They direct us to supernatural happiness in the same way that our natural inclinations lead to our connatural end, that is, in two ways. First, we must have light for the mind, both of principles and practical knowledge, and second, we must have rectitude in order for the will to tend naturally to the good as defined for us by reason.

Both of these, however, fall short of the order of supernatural happiness, in which "the eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love Him." Consequently, in both cases man had to receive something additional to lead him to a supernatural end.

For his intellect, he receives supernatural principles, held by means of divine light, which are the articles of belief accepted on faith. His will is directed to the same end in two ways: as an intentional drive moving towards that destiny to attain it (which is hope), and as a kind of spiritual union that somehow transforms the will into the goal it is seeking (which is charity).

Theological virtues supply for the mind and will what neither faculty has of itself, namely, the salutary knowledge, desire and love of God and of His will,

without which there could be no supernatural order, which means voluntary choice of suitable means to reach the heavenly goal to which we are elevated. These virtues make us well adjusted to our last end, which is God Himself; hence they are called theological, because they not only go out to God - as all virtue worthy of the name must do but they also reach Him. To be well adjusted to our destiny we must know and desire it; the desire demands that we are in love with the object to which we are tending and are confident of obtaining it. Faith makes us know the God to whom we are going, hope makes us look forward to joining Him, and charity makes us love Him.

Unlike the virtues known to philosophy, faith, hope, and charity are not applications of the golden mean between extremes. In Aristotle's language, a moral virtue is a certain habit of the faculty of choice, consisting of a mean (*mesotes*) suitable to our nature and fixed by reason in the manner in which a prudent man would fix it. It is a habit which consists in a mean between excess and defect. Courage keeps the balance between cowardice and reckless daring; sincerity between ironical deprecation and boastfulness; and modesty between shamelessness and bashfulness.

But a theological virtue can be measured by what the virtue demands or by what our capacity allows. Concerning the first, Aquinas says that "God Himself is the rule and mode of virtue. Our faith is measured by divine truth, our hope by the greatness of His power and faithful affection, our charity by His goodness. His truth, power and goodness outreach any measure of reason. We can certainly never believe, trust or love God more than, or even as much as, we should. Extravagance is impossible. Here is no virtuous moderation, no measurable mean; the more extreme our activity, the better we are."²⁴

Nevertheless, there is a valid sense in which even the theological virtues observe a kind of mean, or better, a center of gravity to which they tend. As far as God is concerned, He can never be believed in, trusted or loved too much. But from our point of view, we should exercise these virtues according to the measure of our condition. Christian faith goes midway between heretical extremes, for instance between Pelagianism which dispenses with divine grace and Jansenism that denies a free will; Christian hope must choose a path among the numerous prospective means of salvation; and Christian charity must find a balance in the myriad opportunities for loving

God.

INFUSED MORAL VIRTUES

Besides the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, St. Thomas teaches that a person in divine friendship receives an infusion of the moral virtues, whose immediate object is not God Himself but the practice of human actions conducive to man's final end. Just as faith, hope and charity correspond in the supernatural order to natural knowledge, hope and love, so there are other divinely infused habits to supplement and match these theological virtues, habits which are elevated counterparts of the acquired virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice.

Aristotle was again the basic source upon which St. Thomas built the now familiar structure of the cardinal virtues, which are reduced to four because of the objective order of morality. The mind must first discover this order and propose its commands to the will; prudence, or the habit of doing the right thing at the right time, is reason's helper. The will, in turn, must execute these commands in its own field; justice is the habit of giving everybody his due, temperance is helper to the will in its management of the appetite's desires, and fortitude helps to manage the same appetite's aversions.

Just as there are four faculties which contribute to our moral acts-intellect, will, appetite of desire and appetite of aversion-so there must be four virtues to keep these faculties straight: prudence for the mind, justice for the will, temperance for the urge to do what is pleasant, and fortitude for the instinct away from what is painful. The Latins summarized their functions in the words *circumspice* (look around), *age* (act), *abstine* (keep away from) and *sustine* (bear up with).

All other virtues in the moral order can be referred to as the potential parts of this tetrad. In view of the practical value of these virtues as possessions of nature (also infused by grace), it is worth examining this tetrad in some detail.

The principal act of prudence is the practical

executive command of right reason, and the following virtues come within its orbit: *good counsel*, sound *judgment* when the ordinary rules of conduct are concerned, and a flair for *dealing* with exceptional cases.

As regards justice, its classical type renders what is due between equals; but other virtues also come under the general heading of justice. Some render what is owing to another, but not as to an equal. Others deal with a situation where both parties are equal, yet the due or debt, though demanded by decency, cannot be enforced by law, and so is not an affair of strict justice. In the first category of these phases of justice comes *religion*, which offers our service and worship to God, then *piety* and *patriotism*, which render our duty to parents and country, then *observance*, which shows reverence to superiors, and *obedience* to their commands. In the second category come *gratitude* for past favors, and *vindication* when injury has been done; also *truthfulness*, without which social decency is impossible, liberality in spending money, and *friendliness* or social good manners.

The respective parts of fortitude, on the attacking side, are confidence, carried out with magnificence, which reckons not the cost, and magnanimity, which does not shrink from glory. On the defensive side is patience, which keeps an unconquered spirit, and can be protracted into perseverance.

Finally, the subordinated kinds of temperance are *continence*, which resists lust and evil desires concerned with touch, *clemency* which tempers punishment, *meekness* that tempers anger, *modesty* in our deportment, including disciplined *study*, reasonable *recreation* and good *taste* in clothes.⁵

Aquinas concluded by arguing for the necessity of infused moral virtues from the principle of consistency between the natural and supernatural. It is obvious, he reasoned, that a person in the state of grace performs actions of virtues other than just the theological, that is, of justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude. These actions are essentially supernatural, and therefore require, besides the state of grace, moral habits that are equally



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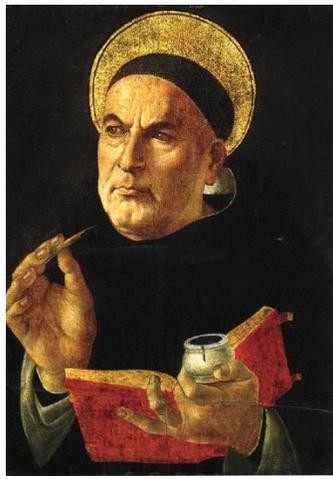


supernatural. Otherwise we should postulate an imbalance in the moral order, since God's ordinary providence uses secondary causes of the same kind as the effects produced. If we are to have truly supernatural acts of justice and chastity, for example, we should have infused supernatural virtues that proximately bring about these actions.

In the last analysis, there must be infused moral virtues in addition to the theological, because of faith in the person justified. A moral virtue, by definition, avoids extremes. It does not offend against right reason by excess or by defect. But once the faith is had, there is no question of limiting the practice of moral virtue by reason alone. Faith sublimates reason as the standard of moderation; and just as prior to faith there are acquired virtues commensurate with reason to assist the natural mind and will in the performance of morally good acts, so with the advent of faith there should be corresponding supernatural virtues commensurate with the light of faith to assist the elevated human faculties in the performance of supernaturally good actions in the moral order.

A slight problem arises from the fact that the infused virtues are necessarily spiritual and the infusion must directly take place in the mind and will, in spite of the fact that two of the virtues, temperance and fortitude, involve the sense appetite. One explanation is to have the virtues immediately enter the spiritual faculties, and these in turn affect the lesser powers as called upon for moral action.

Here, if anywhere, the familiar dictum that "grace does not destroy but builds upon nature" is eminently true. All that we say about these virtues as naturally acquired qualities holds good for the infused virtues, but



Aquinas

much more. With reason enlightened by faith, the scope of virtuous operation is extended to immeasurably wider horizons. By the same token, faith furnishes motives of which reason would never conceive, and theological charity offers inspiration that surpasses anything found in nature.

EPILOGUE

Aquinas and Aristotle both recognize that virtue is not its own reward and has little meaning apart from an ultimate goal. A man is virtuous because his actions correspond to an objective norm, which for Aristotle was knowable by reason and for Aquinas by reason and faith.

But where Aristotle almost identified morally good conduct with an aesthetic mean between opposite extremes, Aquinas saw the good man with a vision that Aristotle never enjoyed. For Aristotle, a man was basically virtuous because he displayed a beautiful balance in his moral actions, not unlike the harmony displayed in a work of art. Hence the attractive aspect of virtue is often stressed by Aristotle and his modern imitators, at the expense of morality proper. What was missing were two dimensions of morality that only the Christian religion brought into full light: that internal dispositions and their consequent actions are virtuous not mainly because of an aesthetic harmony of agent, conduct and environment, but because they advance their possessor in the direction of his final destiny to eternal life after death; and that virtue is more than a reasonable balance between behavioristic extremes, since it postulates a primal obligation to a divine Lawgiver, whose will is manifest in conscience and faith, and to whom obedience is due as man's Creator and Lord.



NOTES

1 Julian Huxley, *Religion without Revelation* (New York, 1958), 18.

2 Virtue as moral goodness (Wisdom 4:1, 5:13; II Maccabees 6:13), and as particular moral quality (Wisdom 8:7).

3 Divine powers (I Peter 2:9; II Peter 1:3), moral vigor (II Peter 1:5, *bis*), and moral virtue (Philippians 4:8).

4 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 62, 3.

5 *Ibid.*, II-II, 48,1; 58, 5-6; 61, 1-2; 79, 1; 80, 1; 103, prologue; 128, 1; 143, 1; 144, 1; 145,,1; 147, 1; 161, prologue; 166, 2; 168, 2; 169, 1.