

Aquinas on the Unity of Perfect Moral Virtue

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In attempting to assemble a substantive account of Aquinas's synthetic virtue theory, one encounters a lacuna in the area of moral virtue. For, while insisting on the two species of moral virtue, the acquired and infused, Aquinas devotes the greatest proportion of the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae* to the analysis of the acquired moral virtues and neglects a correspondingly full exposition of their infused counterparts.¹ Then, in the scattered references in which Aquinas does compare and contrast the two species of moral virtue, although he affirms that the acquired and infused moral virtues can coexist in the Christian,² and that the presence of acquired moral virtues exerts³ a positive impact on facility in the performance of virtuous acts,⁴ he does not discuss precisely how the two species of moral virtue interrelate in the moral actions of the Christian who possesses both.

Accordingly, we need to investigate the following. First, is it in accord with Aquinas's theory of virtue to say that, in the Christian who acquires human virtue, the acquired and infused moral virtues coexist in a parallel fashion enabling the individual to perform purely natural acts of virtue at one time and purely supernatural acts of virtue at

¹ See ST 2-2.47-170.

² See *In III Sent* 33.1.2.4, s.c.; ST 2-2.47.14 ad 1; 53.1 ad 3.

³ In the course of this paper, the human soul, its powers and their perfections, and the habits and virtues, are frequently described in a way that connotes hypostatization: the soul understands; the will desires; prudence directs; the acquired moral virtues exert, etc. Aquinas insists that one must always remember that it is the person who wills, the person who is prudent, the person who is virtuous. Reference to the soul, powers, or virtues is only for purposes of analysis and classification, and a certain reification of them is not intended to obfuscate the principal point that habits and powers of the human person are properties of a substantial human being pertaining to the accidental category of quality (see ST 1-2.56.5).

⁴ See ST 1-2.65.3 ad 2.

virtue adequately defined possesses that perfection in a relative sense, or *secundum quid*.⁸

(2) The terms matter and form when applied to the relation of these two types of virtue are also analogical since both are spiritual qualities when used in reference to virtue.⁹ When it is said that Aquinas presents the acquired and infused moral virtues in a relation of matter to form, what is presupposed is the act-potency relationship that is constitutive of matter and form. Therefore, such an assertion should not be taken to mean that the acquired moral virtue is literally like matter or that the infused moral virtue is literally like form. Rather, it should be understood to mean that the same potency-act relationship that characterizes the affiliation between matter and form is similar to the relation between acquired and infused moral virtue. Therefore, each acquired moral virtue is related to its infused counterpart as a determinable or perfectible principle, that is, that which is in potency to the actualization by its infused analogate. Correlatively, each infused moral virtue is related to its acquired counterpart as the determining or perfecting principle, that is, that which actualizes the potency of its corresponding acquired moral virtue.

(3) The term "perfect moral virtue" is applied in its absolute sense only to human virtue transformed by grace.¹⁰ "Perfect moral virtue" is the term that will be used to designate a single, indivisible, composite moral virtue consisting of two ordered principles. It must be noted, however, that in Aquinas's virtue theory, the term "perfect virtue" is also used analogously. Thus, absolutely perfect moral virtue is to the infused moral virtue as relatively perfect moral virtue is to the acquired moral virtue. A unified virtue whose form is an infused moral virtue and whose matter is an acquired moral virtue is said to be perfect absolutely (*simpliciter*).

(4) Finally, Aquinas's doctrine of the relation of nature and grace, although a problem far broader than this thesis, can be illuminated by

⁸ See ST 1-2.65.2

⁹ The analogous application of principles of matter and form to acquired and infused moral virtue is an example not of a mere metaphor but of an analogy of proper proportionality. That is, the relation of the one analogate—form to matter—is similar or properly proportional to the relation of the other—infused moral virtue to acquired moral virtue.

¹⁰ This virtue is distinguished from a unified habit in which an intellectual virtue, such as prudence, informs a moral virtue as its matter. In the latter case, the virtue is said to be a perfect moral virtue only relatively, that is, *secundum quid*. Because of its supernatural form, only virtue constituted by the union of an infused and acquired moral virtue is perfect in an absolute sense. The perfection of acquired moral virtue, though perfect in the natural realm, is relativized when compared to moral virtue which is perfect *simpliciter*.

paper, it is used in its scholastic sense. In short, it does not mean some automatic reflex or response passively developed through repetition (as a twentieth century person might speak of a habit of smoking) but represents deliberate qualifications of human powers whose exercise always constitutes a freely chosen act. These qualities are so firmly imbedded in the person that one is able to execute them consistently and with ease. In *ST* 1-2.49 Prol., Aquinas identifies the intrinsic principles or sources of human acts as faculties and *habitus*. The concept of the faculties is discussed in the *Prima Pars*; *habitus* are discussed in the *Prima Secundae*. Aquinas makes the distinction that, although operational *habitus* perfect the faculties that are directed toward activity and are sources or principles of activity in the most complete sense, bodily or natural *habitus* such as health, beauty, and strength are also sources of activity, albeit indirectly, since “*natura est principium actus*.”¹⁵

Aquinas's concept of a habit, the genus of virtue, lays a foundation for the thesis of this paper in two ways. First, it highlights the active and passive power of a habit, a cardinal concept in the theoretical part of the thesis which involves the concept of habits related to one another as potency to act or matter to form. The human soul, as substantial form, is the act of the human composite and the remote source of all human activity. As Aquinas explains:

And since life is manifested according to diverse operations in diverse grades of living things, that by which we first perform any of the works of life is the soul, for the soul is that by which we first eat and feel and move as to place, and likewise that by which we first know. Therefore, this principle by which we first know, whether it is called intellect or the intellective soul, is the form of the body.¹⁶

In the order of action, however, the soul is in potency to further actuation by its powers which have the capacity to perform particular acts. There is, however, nothing in the power which guarantees stable patterns of

word “habit” could confuse contemporary connotations of the word with the scholastic meaning.

¹⁵ *ST* 1-2.49.3: Leonine, 6: 312.

¹⁶ “Et cum vita manifestetur secundum diversas operationes in diversi gradibus viventium, id quo primo operamur unumquodque horum operum vitae, est anima: anima enim est primum quo nutrimur et sentimus, et movemur secundum locum; et similiter quo primo intelligimus. Hoc ergo principium quo primo intelligimus, sive dicatur intellectus sive anima intellectiva, est forma corporis.” *ST* 1.76.1: Leonine, 5: 208-9.

the appetite like the substance of the soul is related to the accidental form of a power, that is, as form to matter.

The material and formal principles of a composite human habit, for example, the habit of a particular science, have the following significance. The habit that is the material component, for example, the habit of memory, is the necessary substratum for the perfecting form (the habit of science) and, while maintaining its own essential form, the habit of memory is further defined by the form that it receives from the superior habit. The reality of the composite habit of science transcends that of either component principle. Therefore neither the habit of memory nor the habit of science *in se* is a habit in an absolute sense. Alone the inferior or superior habit is imperfect or incomplete, but together the ordered components form one complete or perfect habit that is unified by the form of the superior habit.

When we move from Aquinas's discussion of the genus of virtue, *habitus*, to virtue itself, especially human or acquired virtue, three points of central interest vis-à-vis my thesis emerge. First, Aquinas's analogous use of the term "virtue" creates a fluid hierarchy of human virtue. Insofar as the criterion for superior human virtue is that which inheres in the most perfect human faculty, the intellect, and that which is directed to the noblest human activity, contemplation, then intellectual acquired virtue ranks higher than, or is superior to, acquired moral virtue. When Aquinas, however, defines human virtue in its absolute sense as that which involves the will directed to the formal good, then acquired moral virtue ranks as virtue in an absolute sense (*simpliciter*) while intellectual virtue is virtue in a restricted sense (*secundum quid*).

For Aquinas, the speculative virtues are more excellent than the moral virtues, objectively speaking, because they proceed more directly from the rational part of the human soul and are directed to the ultimate end, the contemplation of God. They are less excellent in the fullest sense of virtue, however, because they lack an act of the will directed to a formal good. Since only the will, or faculties directed by the will, is directed to *bonum ut bonum*, only virtues that perfect these appetites are virtues strictly speaking. Therefore, in the order of human virtue, only moral virtues are virtues in an absolute sense. "(T)hus only the habits pertaining to the appetitive part can be called virtue, not, how-

"(T)herefore, for right reason about things to be done which is prudence, it is necessary that man have moral virtue." ("ideo ad rectam rationem agibulum quae est prudentia, requiritur quod homo habeat virtutem moralem." ST 1-2.58.5: Leonine, 6: 376.)

Aquinas demonstrates that relatively perfect moral virtue is materially an acquired moral virtue and formally a virtue of prudence. Aquinas defends the Socratic notion that knowledge is virtue to the extent that this notion recognizes that distinctively human behavior lies in reason, for reason points out what is good or evil. But just as firmly, Aquinas asserts that knowledge alone fails to insure good human activity; the human appetites, both rational and sensitive, are capable of presenting formidable opposition to the direction of reason and demand the perfection of the moral virtues to dispose them to obey reason, that is, to obey the direction of prudence. The "seeds of virtue" are passive principles because they are receptive to the form of the perfected or acquired virtue; and they are active agents because, like the natural principle of fire, they induce their own form into the power from which their action originates. In this way, natural dispositions, with a graduated impact, impress their form on their respective powers and on each act that proceeds from their powers, until by the frequent repetition of these acts, the habits of the virtues and sciences are perfected. Therefore, perfect moral virtue in the human order, or relatively perfect moral virtue, is a composite virtue that is formally a virtue of prudence and materially a virtue of justice, temperance, fortitude or their allied virtues.

Furthermore, with the composite nature of relatively perfect moral virtue, a single human virtue consisting of ordered components that are in a matter-form relationship, Aquinas sets the precedent for the composition of an absolutely perfect moral virtue. That is, through the unifying presence of prudence, Aquinas defines the prototype of each species of human virtue, both intellectual and moral, as a composite virtue. Similarly, through the unity of charity, he defines absolutely perfect moral virtue as a virtue that is formally an infused virtue and materially an acquired virtue. For Aquinas, the principle that charity is the 'form' of the virtues means, in its most general sense, that charity perfects the acts of the other virtues by commanding or directing them to their ultimate end, in effect, by making the justified capable of acts of love that would otherwise exceed the power of the human will.

In *De veritate*, Aquinas offers one explanation of how charity informs the other virtues and their acts and, as a consequence, is the source of unity for Christian life and conduct. He suggests that we think in terms of how two principles or agents, one higher and one lower, are ordered to one another: the higher principle is formal in relationship to the lower principle which is material. In the virtue of faith, for example, where the knowledge of the intellect (in this case, the lower principle) is commanded by the will (higher principle), the knowledge of the intellect operates as a material principle and the direction of the will as a formal principle. Since charity is the perfection of the will, charity is the form

except for prudence, is a mediate one. Prudence maintains its command of the other moral virtues in the supernatural plane; charity informs prudence directly and, through prudence, the other infused moral virtues. In one sense, then, charity and prudence connect the infused moral virtues, but charity is their ultimate bond because all the divine virtues are directed to the end of charity. In other words, an infused moral virtue, having received its perfect form from charity, is also able to effect, produce, and create its own form or perfection in its acquired counterpart, enabling the acquired virtue to function just like itself.

Finally, although Aquinas teaches that an acquired moral virtue and its infused analogate have the same material act, they have different formal objects or motives.²⁶ The motive for practicing supernatural temperance in regard to food, for example, is a supernatural measure: Christians should chastise their bodies and bring them into subjection. The motive for practicing natural temperance in regard to food is a natural measure: food should not harm the body nor hinder reason. The end of the acquired moral virtues is good behavior in human affairs; the end of the infused moral virtue is to perfect the person as a citizen of heaven.

It is evident, however, that the mean which is imposed on desires of this sort according to the rule of human reason differs from that mean which is imposed according to the divine rule. For example, in the consumption of food, by human reason the mean is established that it should not injure bodily health nor impede the act of reason. But according to the rule of divine law, it is required that, by abstinence from food and drink and from other like things, man *should chastise his body and reduce it to servitude*.²⁷

Because of the ordered relationship of imperfect to perfect principles, Aquinas demonstrates that the motive and end of acquired moral virtue is included within or the material component of the motive and end of infused moral virtue. As far as the intention of an act is concerned, Aquinas insists that the human agent is able to intend more than one

²⁶ See ST 1-2.63.4; *De virtutibus* 10 ad 7, 8, 9; *In III Sent* 33.1.2.iv.

²⁷ "Manifestum est autem quod alterius rationis est modus qui imponitur in huiusmodi concupiscentiis secundum regulam rationis humanae, et secundum regulam divinam. Puta in sumptione ciborum, ratione humana modus statuitur ut non noceat valetudini corporis, nec impediatur rationis actum; secundum autem regulam legis divinae, requiritur quod homo *castiget corpus suum, et in servitutem redigat*, per abstinentiam cibi et potus, et aliorum huiusmodi." ST 1-2.63.4: Leonine, 6: 411; see also ST 1-2.63.4 ad 1.

of Christ, though composed of the material-formal causes of human and divine activity, is a single activity.

Dionysius posits a *theandric* operation, that is, a *divine-male* or *divine-human* operation in Christ, not through some confusion of the activities or powers of both natures but, through this, that his divine action uses his human action and his human action participates in the power of the divine action.³¹

Fourth, the Divine Law, though composed of the material-formal elements of the Old Law and the Gospel Law, is a single law.

From these examples we can deduce, *mutatis mutandis*, what Aquinas might have said if, in one of the articles in his treatise on virtue in the *Summa Theologiae*, for example, he had asked the question "How do the acquired and infused moral virtues function within the justified person?" Moral virtue in the Christian, though composed of acquired and infused moral virtue, is an indivisible but composite virtue that is formally an infused moral virtue and materially an acquired moral virtue.

II.

Thomistic commentators from the post-scholastic era (ca 1500-1700) to the modern period (1700-1943) generally restricted their discussions of Aquinas's doctrine on the relationship between the acquired and infused virtues to the question of facility, that is, whether or not each kind of virtue, natural and supernatural, facilitates the acts of the other. R. F. Coerver³² gives 1943 as a cutoff date for contemporary discussion of the question of facility in the infused virtues. His 1946 dissertation on the topic notes that many theologians of his day had discarded the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic facility and, with the exception of the manuals of Merkelbach (1871-1942) and Hervé (1881-1958), "few of the modern theologians devote much space to the interrelation of the acquired and infused moral virtues and to the question of whether or not facility is possible in the infused moral virtues by the acquisition

³¹"Dionysius ponit in Christo operationem *theandricum*, idest *divinam-virilem* vel *divinam-humanam*, non per aliquam confusionem operationum seu virtutem utriusque naturae, sed per hoc quod divina operatio eius utitur humana eius operatione, et humana operatio participat virtutem divinae operationis." ST 3.19.1 ad 1: Leonine, 11: 240.

³²R. F. Coerver, *The Quality of Facility in the Moral Virtues*, The Catholic University of America Studies in Sacred Theology, No. 92 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1946).

virtue *do* generate acquired habits, and these acquired habits, in turn, contribute to the facility of the infused moral virtues.³⁹

The insight that led four centuries of Thomistic commentators to use the issue of facility as a way to reconstruct Aquinas's theory of the relation between acquired and infused virtue is essentially a sound one. Approaching the question of the relation, however, between the two species of moral virtue through the concept of facility will only lead to an accurate interpretation of Aquinas's view regarding perfect Christian moral virtue when facility is assessed within its full context: first, within the perspective of Aquinas's notion of the composite nature of perfect virtue; second, within the context, outlined above, of Aquinas's teaching on other issues that deal with a single, ordered reality such as the unity of the human person, Christ's activity, the divine law, and the informed human act; and third, by means of a careful implementation of the relevant Thomistic principles which figured in the theories of both Suárez and Billot.

In the very way that Aquinas defines the facility proper to the acquired and infused virtues respectively, he indicates that both ought to be integral qualities of the moral activity of the Christian and, therefore, characteristics that ought to mark the Christian life. The intrinsic facility of the infused virtue cannot be operationally functional without the extrinsic, and the extrinsic facility of the acquired virtues cannot be depended on in the midst of temptation to sin unless united to the perfection of intrinsic facility. If extrinsic-intrinsic types of facility, proper to the acquired and infused moral virtues, respectively, are ordered components of a single reality related to each other as matter to form, *a fortiori*, the virtues that generate those respective qualities must also be so ordered.

Therefore, in a search for the theoretical explanation for the causality of the acquired virtue that confers extrinsic facility on the performance of supernatural acts of virtue, one must not make the mistakes that Suárez and Billot did.⁴⁰ First, one must not attribute extrinsic facility,

³⁹Coerver, *Facility*, 40-62.

⁴⁰In the opening paragraphs, I raised the question of whether it is in accord with Aquinas's theory of virtue to speak about a Christian performing purely natural acts of virtue at one time and purely supernatural acts of virtue at another. In ST 2-2.47.14 ad 1, Aquinas gives this example: a Christian who lacks the corresponding acquired virtue of diligence (*industria*, a virtue necessary for prudence) could perform purely supernatural acts of diligence but these acts will only fit the person for making good decisions in regard to supernatural affairs. In order to perform acts that will enable the Christian to make sound decisions in human affairs as well as in supernatural situations, the "fuller" kind of diligence must be present, namely, a virtue which is materially a virtue of acquired diligence and formally a virtue of infused diligence. I have not,

tion by grace implies the perfection of what is human. Although ordered to grace, human nature is impotent of itself to attain it. It can only be lifted above its own limitations by a gratuitous act of God and by a superior nature. Therefore, grace could never detract from nature. Rather, witnessing to the dignity of the human person as an *imago Dei* who is open to and fit for grace, the supernatural life of God confers on human nature the very completion toward which it tends.

The third determination of the thesis is that acquired and infused moral virtue together form a unity, a single, indivisible virtue that is supernatural in character. The moral virtue infused by charity rewards the human act with a perfection that far exceeds its finite scope. The intrinsic relation between acquired and infused virtues within perfect moral virtue is analogous to Aquinas's view of the alliance between nature and grace in the justified. The Christian person existentially has a single nature consisting of human and divine causes, and this nature is a divinized one. God, who is perfect unity and perfect activity, not only shows human persons who they are, but also unifies and activates them in ways they are not able to be or do on their own. The greater the unity and actuation in human nature itself, the more is it *capax Dei*, open to divinization; the greater its divinization, the surer the union between God and the Christian.

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