

ARISTOTLE AND THOMAS AQUINAS: TWO ACCOUNTS OF THE VIRTUES¹

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Abstraksi

Pada umumnya boleh dikatakan, ada dua perspektif dalam memahami etika, cabang filsafat yang merefleksikan tentang tingkah laku manusia. Perspektif pertama memberi penekanan pada kualitas hidup atau watak pelaku, sedangkan yang kedua lebih memberi perhatian pada norma-norma bertingkah laku. Pertanyaan penting bagi perspektif pertama adalah ‘Manusia macam apa aku harus menjadi?’, sementara bagi yang kedua, ‘Apa saja norma-norma yang harus kuturuti agar tindakanku baik secara moral?’. Bila kualitas hidup moral pelaku dijadikan sebagai pusat refleksi kita berkuat dengan etika keutamaan (aretaic ethics atau virtue ethics), dengan pendukung dan pembela utamanya adalah Aristoteles and Thomas Aquinas, sementara etika yang bertumpu pada norma-norma dikenal sebagai etika kewajiban (deontic ethics atau the ethic of duty) dibela terutama oleh Immanuel Kant. Tulisan ini akan membahas pandangan Aristoteles dan Thomas Aquinas tentang keutamaan.²

Kata-kata Kunci: Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Thomistic synthesis of the Aristotelian philosophy and the Augustinian theology, habits, human virtues and theological virtues.

Introduction

It is only with Aristotle that the account of the virtues decisively constitutes the classical tradition as a tradition of moral thought and

¹ This essay was originally written under the supervision of Joseph d’Amécourt, op., professor of ethics and Thomistic themes at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy. I would like to sincerely thank him for his constructive and critical observations and enlightening suggestions.

² The essay will be based on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I and II and Aquinas’ trilogy on ethics, namely, *The Disputed Questions of Virtues in General* and *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, qq. 49-67 and *The Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*.

makes it a rational tradition.³ The transcendence or the superiority⁴ of Aristotle's account of the virtues over the accounts of his predecessors lies in his unprecedented success in relating the doctrine of the virtues directly to what is the characteristic human function, namely, rationality. The superiority of Aquinas' virtue ethics over Aristotle's, and over the Christian writers on the theme up to his time, is the result of the grand synergetic synthesis he made of the best of Greek thought on the virtues represented by Aristotle and Christian theology characterized by Augustine. Aristotle is considered the symbol of the full consciousness of the natural virtues, while Augustine is the symbol of the effort to give a complete understanding of the Christian virtues. It is properly in Augustine that all previous reflections on the theme gained their precise expression and through him the thought of the first Fathers of the Church entered into the Thomistic synthesis of the Middle Ages.⁵ It is Aquinas who brings the natural human virtues to be perfected by Christian virtues supernaturally infused by the grace of God.

This essay will start with the presentation of Aristotle's account of the virtues followed by that of Aquinas. It will be concluded with a few words about the transcendence and the originality of Aquinas' account of the virtues compared to that of Aristotle.

Aristotle's Account of the Virtues

The Concept of Virtue in Greek Culture up to Aristotle

Either in its Latin proximate derivation *virtus* or in its Greek remote origin *arētē*, the English noun *virtue* literally means strength and power. In ancient Greek spirit, the term *arētē* points to the perfection of some power manifested in good actions.⁶ In the Homeric poems, the word *arētē* is used for excellence of any kind. A fast runner that displays the

³ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Third Edition (London: Duckworth, 2007), p. 147.

⁴ In this paper the term *transcendence* is used in the context of "a successful theory", in which a theory is compared to its predecessors. The criterion of a successful theory is that it enables us to understand its predecessors in a newly intelligible way. It enables us to understand precisely why its predecessors have to be rejected or modified. Another term used in the same sense is *superiority*. In this sense a theory is transcendent or superior to its predecessors if it has successfully resolved a problem better than its predecessors and explained why they have not. Cf. for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science", in Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 3-22.

⁵ G. Bulet, *Vertus morales infuses et vertus morales acquises selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1958), p. 31.

⁶ R.A. Gauthier and J.Y. Jolif (eds. and trans.), *Aristote: L'Éthique à Nicomaque* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1970), p. 109.

virtue of his feet and a horse that runs fast are said to have some virtue, namely, the excellence of running fast.⁷

Before Aristotle there had been concepts about virtue or human excellence. In the Homeric poems, composed about the seventh century B.C., the word *arētē* is used for physical strength. Homeric society exalted the warrior as the paradigm of human excellence.⁸ Along with the development of Greek society, virtue is later connected with wealth and economic prosperity. Virtue then receives an aristocratic and elitist significance.⁹ In the fifth century B.C.E., with the Sophists, and especially with Socrates, there is a decisive shift in understanding the concept of virtue, as it comes to be connected with what makes one characteristically human. For Socrates virtue is knowledge. One performs good acts due to knowledge and bad acts due to ignorance.¹⁰ Plato, in the end of Book I of *The Republic*, says that everything has a function and the function of a thing is that which only it can do or that which it does best, and everything which has a function has its own particular virtue.¹¹ In Book IV of *The Republic*, he connects the division of the virtues to the partition of the soul which in turn, by analogy, determines one's class in the city-state. Alasdair MacIntyre interprets Plato's four basic virtues as follows: courage belongs to the auxiliary guardians whose main function is to defend the state, while wisdom is the privilege of the ruling guardians. With temperance the desires of the inferior multitude must be controlled by the desires and the wisdom of the superior few. Justice belongs to no class but to the society's functioning as a whole, to the total ordering of the state.¹²

From a diachronic point of view, Aristotle takes over the views of his predecessors to present his own view on virtue but in such a way that the insufficiencies of those views are corrected and even transcended. From a synchronic point of view, he does not consider himself to be an inventor but an articulator of an account of the virtues lived and manifested in utterances and actions of an educated gentleman of Athens. Aristotle seeks to be a rational voice of that account of the virtues.¹³

⁷ A. MacIntyre, *op.cit.*, p. 122.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁹ R.A. Gauthier and J. Y. Jolif, *op.cit.*, pp. 109-110.

¹⁰ A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2007), p. 21.

¹¹ Plato, *The Republic*, translation with an introduction by H.D.P. Lee (Middlesex: Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1955), pp. 84-85.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹³ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, *op.cit.*, 147-148.

The Teleological Nature of Aristotle's Account of the Virtues

Aristotle opens his main book on ethics, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, with a convincing declaration about the good as the end (*telos*) of human activities: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."¹⁴ The book is about a series of 'lectures' on what good is noble and just to attain through human action.¹⁵ It is written to motivate the audience to lead a good life by acting, and living well, as well as to judge well human actions.¹⁶ It is intended to help students not "to know what excellence is, but in order to become good."¹⁷

We do many activities we in order to obtain a variety of ends. Some activities we perform for something else, as means to attain other ends; others we pursue for themselves as ends and means to other ends as well. There are other ends, we pursue for themselves *only, and never* for the sake of anything else. This is the final end, which Aristotle calls the chief good and identifies it with happiness (*eudaimonia*).¹⁸ Being happy is identical with living well and doing well.¹⁹ Happiness is unconditionally complete, since it makes life complete without qualification. It is the most perfect of all human goods because all others are ordered to it.²⁰ It is self-sufficient as it makes the life of the person lack nothing.²¹

To be understood properly happiness must be placed in relation to the characteristic human function (*ergon*), namely, his rationality. Happiness is the result of the activity of reason and not of the body. Happiness, therefore, is the activity of the soul in conformity with the best and most complete excellence.²²

¹⁴ *NE.*, I, 1, 1094a1-4. All the citations of Aristotle's works used in this essay are from Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 Volumes (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ *NE.*, I, 4, 1095b3-6.

¹⁶ *NE.*, I, 3.4, 1095a-b.

¹⁷ *NE.*, II, 2, 1103b28-29.

¹⁸ *NE.*, I, 2, 1094a18-22.

¹⁹ *NE.*, I, 4, 1095a15-20.

²⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by C.I. Litzinger, OP, and foreworded by Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame, IND.: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), Book I, Lecture XIV, #172.

²¹ *NE.*, I, 4, 1097b8-15.

²² *NE.*, I, 7, 1097b24-1098a18; Cf. Thomas Nagel, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia", in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (edit.), *Essays in Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 8.

The Doctrine of the Virtues

Toward the Definition of Virtue

In his definition of virtue Aristotle excludes feelings (*pathei*) singling out states (*hexei*) as the genus of virtue.²³ Feeling indicates a kind of passivity, while virtue, properly considered, has to do with activity. It is the characteristic mark of a virtuous person that in one's actions one is not controlled by feelings.²⁴

Aristotle clarifies the meaning of *hexis* in some of his other works. In *Metaphysics* he defines *hexis* as that disposition in virtue of which a thing is well or ill disposed, either in itself or with respect to something else.²⁵ *Hexis*, however, is more than a disposition as it presupposes stability. A mere disposition easily changes, while *hexis* is hard to change, lasting longer, being more stable and permanent.²⁶ In *Categories*, he calls *hexis* a quality by which he means a state in virtue of which things are said to be qualified in a certain way.²⁷ We can only attribute a specific quality to a person or a thing if we are certain that the cause of that attribution is something stable and permanent. In *Physics* he states that some *hexeis* are excellences, while others are defects. Excellence is a kind of perfection and defect is a lack of perfection.²⁸ A thing is perfect when it can no longer be surpassed in excellence and goodness; it lacks no portion of its natural greatness. In other words, as he states in *Politics*, "what each thing is, when perfectly developed, is what we say its nature is."²⁹

The Bipartition of the Virtues

Happiness, the end of human search, is attained by performing activities in accordance with reason. To achieve happiness the exercise of virtue is absolutely necessary. This necessity is put in the following analogy: "And as in Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act rightly win the noble and good things in life."³⁰ Happiness is to be crowned because it is a success,

²³ *NE.*, II, 5, 1105b20-1106a10.

²⁴ T. Irwin, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 400-401.

²⁵ *Met.*, V, 20, 1022b20-12.

²⁶ *Cat.*, 8b20-36.

²⁷ *Cat.*, 8b25.

²⁸ *Phys.*, VII, 3, 246a10-17.

²⁹ *Pol.*, 1252b32-34.

³⁰ *NE.*, I, 8, 1099a3-6.

an achievement.³¹

Happiness is the result of the activity of the soul perfected by virtue. The human soul for Aristotle consists of two major parts.³² The non-rational part has to do only with nutrition and growth. This part human beings share with plants and brutes, and therefore is not peculiarly human. The rational part is, in turn, subdivided into two sub-parts. The first of this is by its essence irrational as it is not originative of rules, but it can be called rational due to its capability of listening to and obeying reason. This is the appetitive part of the soul that can be considered as irrational *par essence* but rational *par participation* in so far as it is capable of participating in reason in the measure that it listens to and obeys the command of reason.³³ The second sub-part of the rational part of the soul is the rational part *par essence*, the part which has reason to the full extent.³⁴

Aristotle's bipartition of the virtues is based on the division of the human soul into two groups. Virtues are divided into two groups: the virtues of thought, called intellectual (*dianoetic*) virtues and the virtues of character, called ethical or moral virtues.³⁵ The division of the virtues is based on the *ergon* of each part of the soul: the *ergon* of the appetitive part, the subject of the moral virtues, consists in determining the mean between two extremes, while the peculiar function of the essentially rational part, the subject of the intellectual virtues, consists in knowing the truth. Moral virtues enable their possessor rightly to determine the mean, just as intellectual virtues enable the possessor to speak the truth. The mean is measured by the conformity of the appetites and actions with the rule commanded by reason, while truth is measured by the conformity of the intellect with reality.³⁶

Ethical Virtues and their Formation

An ethical virtue is a stable disposition concerning actions and passions involving choice; it consists in acting in a mean relative to us, a mean defined by rational principle and in the way a person of practical wisdom would determine.³⁷ Etymologically, the Greek noun *ēthos* means

³¹ *NE.*, I, 12, 1101b12-34.

³² *NE.*, I, 13, 1102a29-30.

³³ R.A. Gauthier and J.Y. Yolif, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

³⁴ *NE.*, II, 1, 1103a1-4.

³⁵ *NE.*, II, 1, 1103a5-7.

³⁶ R.A. Gauthier, *La morale d'Aristote* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), pp. 83-84.

³⁷ *NE.*, II, 6, 1106b36-1107a1.

'character'.³⁸ Generally speaking, it is a person's character that makes one the sort of person one really is. Identical with the good character, ethical virtue is a stable or habitual disposition. Concretely, the question of ethics is not simply how I am to conduct myself, but how I am to become the sort of person for whom proper conduct emanates from a stable disposition. A morally good person is not merely one who acts in a certain way, but one who acts in a properly moral way due to certain character one has which enables one to act in that way easily without internal friction.³⁹

Ethical virtues, or the virtues of character, are the result of the moderation of the appetitive part of the human being. The human being is the only animal which is aware of good and bad. For Aristotle, "it is the human character that alone has a sense of good and evil."⁴⁰ His ethics presupposes that if reason contradicts the appetite it is desirable that reason prevails. That does not mean that the appetite must be supplanted by reason since it serves for a truly human action. Reason itself moves nothing.⁴¹ For a truly human action, the interplay of reason and appetite is necessary. Without one of them, there could be no morally human action.⁴² For Aristotle's ethics the ideal moral person is the person in whom the appetite "speaks, on all matters, with the same voice as reason."⁴³

The virtues of character are acquired through habituation. It is not a virtuous action in itself that makes a person genuinely just or temperate, but the character of the person, who acts knowingly, steadfastly and consistently, from a free choice of action for its own sake.⁴⁴ It is only by repeatedly performing good actions that a person becomes a good person. Virtuous actions must be performed from a firmly and unchangeably good character, and it is the repetition of the action which leads to that stability. Aristotle says: "For the things we have to learn before we can

³⁸ The Greek adjective *êthikos* and its Latin rendition *moralis* (invented by Cicero to translate the Greek word in *De Fato*) means "pertaining to character" where a man's character is his set dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead one particular kind of life. Cf. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

³⁹ L.A. Kosman, "Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle's Ethics", in A.O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 103.

⁴⁰ *Pol.*, I, 2, 1253a15-18.

⁴¹ *NE.*, VI, 1139a36.

⁴² J.O. Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 40.

⁴³ *NE.*, I, 13, 1102b28.

⁴⁴ *NE.*, II, 4, 1105a28-33.

do them, we learn by doing them.”⁴⁵ Learning here must be taken in the sense of ‘having done something well repeatedly’ as is said: “to learn to do what is virtuous, to make it a habit or a second nature to one’s person, is among other things to learn to enjoy doing it, to come to take pleasure, to appropriate pleasure in doing it.”⁴⁶

Since acts leading to virtue, or proceeding from virtue, are penetrated by reason, habituation can be seen as the moralization of character or the rationalization of the appetite. The result of habituation is the stability of character.⁴⁷ It is this stability of character which enables its possessor to accomplish good actions in a firm and infallible way.⁴⁸ Another effect of habituation is that the possessor is disposed well to make right choices and to rectify intentions. The person of stable character is the person who “as it were, a law for oneself”⁴⁹, a living norm or a paradigm of practical excellence.

The virtue of character “is concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us.”⁵⁰ The existence of the mean is consequent to the existence of continuous and divisible things with their triple alternatives: more, less and equal, where more constitutes ‘excess’, less ‘defect’, and ‘equal’ the ideal which is the intermediate between excess and defect, which are the extremes.⁵¹ The mean can be objective or subjective. We have an objective mean if the parts of a thing are considered in themselves without any relation to a specific subject. We have a subjective mean when the equal is considered in relation to a subject. Moral actions are measured by the subjective mean due to their relation to concrete subjects living and acting in some particular situations.⁵² The mean is the norm in virtue of which the rightness of an action can be measured. It will be determined by the conformity of an action to the moral rules prescribed by right reason. It obliges us to act and to feel the passions and act upon them “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim and in the right way.”⁵³

⁴⁵ *NE.*, II, 1, 1103a32-33.

⁴⁶ F. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to Be Good”, in A.O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 77.

⁴⁷ L.A. Kosman, *op.cit.*, pp. 111-112.

⁴⁸ R.A. Gauthier, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

⁴⁹ *NE.*, IV, 8, 1128a33.

⁵⁰ *NE.*, II, 6, 1106b36-1107a1.

⁵¹ *NE.*, II, 6, 1106a25-30.

⁵² J. de Finance, *An Ethical Inquiry* (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1991), p. 475.

⁵³ *NE.*, II, 6, 1106b20-23.

Aquinas' Account of Virtue

Aquinas' Trilogy on Ethics

Aquinas presents his account of the virtues in his three major works on ethics, in which the presence of Aristotle, the Philosopher, as he calls him, is very striking, respectively *The Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Virtutibus in Communi*, and the *Secunda Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*.⁵⁴

Aquinas' *Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics* constitutes one of the classical commentaries of the Stagirite's main work on ethics. This commentary is unique since in it "the teaching of Aristotle can be discovered more readily in Aquinas than in Aristotle himself; that Aquinas is unequalled in his mastery of the whole of Aristotelian doctrine and in his ability to co-ordinate its parts."⁵⁵ Concerning Aquinas' interpretation of Aristotle's works and his mastery of the Stagirite's philosophy in general, Alasdair MacIntyre says: "When I wrote *After Virtue*, I was already an Aristotelian, but not yet a Thomist, ... I became a Thomist after writing *After Virtue* in part because I became convinced that Aquinas was in some respect a better Aristotelian than Aristotle, that not only was he an excellent interpreter of Aristotle's texts, but that he had been able to extend and deepen both Aristotle's metaphysical and his moral enquiries."⁵⁶

*Quaestiones Disputatae de Virtutibus in Communi*⁵⁷ was written as one of the results of his teaching activities as a master of theology in Paris during his second academic sojourn, the period of his most fecund and intensive commitment as a teacher. That was the period in which Aquinas had established himself "a teacher of teachers and an advisor of advisors."⁵⁸ It was written "in the context of an intellectual education, a pedagogy exercised by a teacher toward his disciples, whom he forms as

⁵⁴ ST., Ia-IIae, qq. 49-67.

⁵⁵ The statement is from Harry V. Jaffa's *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (1952) and cited in the 'Introduction' to S. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by C.I. Litzinger, OP, and forwarded by Ralph McInerney (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), p. xi.

⁵⁶ A. MacIntyre, "Prologue to the Third Edition: *After Virtue* after A Quarter of A Century", in *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 2007), p. viii.

⁵⁷ The text of Aquinas we refer to in this essay is Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, edited by E.M. Atkins and Th. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and the Italian translation S. Tommaso d'Aquino, *Le Questioni Disputate: 1 – Le Virtù e 2 – L'Unione del Verbo Incarnato* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2002).

⁵⁸ A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1998), p. 202.

theologians under the aegis of reason and revelation.”⁵⁹

Written with the intention to serve as a guidance for the ordinary Dominican friars, who were not to spend their lives in long academic pursuits, but would be engaged in preaching and hearing confessions, in the *Summa Theologiae*⁶⁰, especially in the ‘moral’ part, that is the *Secunda Pars*, Aquinas presented the character of the moral agent as such, drawing heavily on Aristotle’s ethics. What he had in mind is the formation of the sort of person who appropriates and perfects the powers of the soul required for a moral life in view of a final happiness. He developed an ethics whose focus was the formation of character, envisaging the formation as the actualization of the individual’s potential, the fulfillment of the believer’s natural desire for the good under the inspiration of divine grace and in obedience to divine law.⁶¹ His main interest, therefore, is the person we have to become, which enables us to arrive at our final end in God, namely, beatitude.⁶²

The Eschatological View on the Virtues in the Thomistic Synthesis

Aquinas’ three works on ethics were written in Paris during his second sojourn there from 1268 to 1272, in a context of a vivid intellectual discussion between the bearers of two different traditions of thought, namely, the Aristotelian and the Augustinian. The University of Paris, which up to then had been a distinctively Augustinian institution, was faced with the fast circulation of the then recently rediscovered main works of Aristotle in Western Europe which soon entered the academic stage. In the Faculty of Arts the teachers asserted the autonomy of philosophy as a critical discipline, with its own independent integrity, known as ‘the integral Aristotelianism’. Some masters in the Faculty of

⁵⁹ S.-T. Pinckaers, “The Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas”, in Stephen J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 20.

⁶⁰ All citations of the *Summa Theologiae* made in this essay are taken from Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* in <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.html>.

⁶¹ F. Kerr, *Thomas Aquinas: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 66.

⁶² F. Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 117-118. Cf. Fr. Joseph d’Amécourt, op., “Outline of the Ia-IIae: Its Sources”, material given as part of the lecture titled “Virtue in the Teachings of Thomas Aquinas”, Pontificia Università San Tommaso d’Aquino, Roma, Second Semester of Academic Year 2012-2013. The outline is as follows: beatitude or happiness (qq. 1-5), human acts (qq. 6-21), acts common to men and animal (qq. 22-48). The discussion is followed by intrinsic principles of human acts: habits in general (qq. 49-54), good habits which consists of virtues (qq. 55-67), gifts of the Holy Spirit (q. 68), beatitudes (q. 69), fruits of the Holy Spirit (q. 70), bad habits: vices and sins (qq. 71-89), the extrinsic principles of human acts: Law (qq. 90-108), and grace (qq. 109-114).

Theology considered Aristotelianism as too naturalistic and therefore they strongly rejected it. Aquinas sought to avoid both the extreme naturalism of the integral Aristotelianism and the rejectionism of the conservative theologians. Although he adopted much of the Stagirite's philosophy, he opposed the view that philosophy by itself could offer a comprehensive account of everything. He believed that besides the natural order, there is a supernatural order, the object of theology, which is beyond the competence of philosophy. In the encounter between the natural and the supernatural, the natural is not obliterated by the supernatural order but is completed by it.⁶³ He says: "Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it."⁶⁴ It was Aquinas' unique genius which enabled him to synthesize Aristotelian metaphysics and Augustinian theology.

Writing from an eschatological view of a Christian's life that lies beyond this earthly life, Aquinas' ethical writings' main intention is to help Christians in their itinerary "toward its fulfilment in God, an ascendant itinerary, possibly travelled only through the acquisition of the natural virtues and the exercise of the infused ones with the Christian grace."⁶⁵

The Nature of Virtue

Virtue as Habit

Aquinas defines virtue as a good habit productive of good works.⁶⁶ Habit is a quality inherent in the subject and intrinsically united to it. It is a disposition by which the subject is disposed in regard to something else. Habit gives the idea of the relation a thing has either in regard to itself or in regard to something else.⁶⁷ Habit is distinguished from other qualities by both its durability and tendency to dispose the possessor well or badly.⁶⁸ Habit implies certain lastingness and stability.⁶⁹ Habit points to a stable disposition of the subject viewed in its ontological

⁶³ Cf. Th. Williams, "Introduction" in *Aquinas, Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, edited by E.M. Atkins and Thomas Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 22-24.

⁶⁴ *ST.*, Ia, q. 1, a. 8, obj. 2.

⁶⁵ A. Lobato, "Introduzione" a S. Tommaso d'Aquino, *Le Questioni Disputate: 1 – Le Virtù e 2 – L'Unione del Verbo Incarnato* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2002), p. 11.

⁶⁶ *ST.*, Ia IIae, q. 55, a. 3.

⁶⁷ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 49, a. 1, resp.

⁶⁸ Cf. Bonnie Kent, "Habits and Virtues (Ia-IIae, qq. 49-70)", in Stephen J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 117.

⁶⁹ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 49, a. 2, ad. 3.

constitution as well as an openness of the subject to something else.⁷⁰ Habit implies a double relation, to the subject itself and to its operation which is its end. Since the nature of a thing is ordained to operation, it follows that habit primarily and principally implies some relation to an act.⁷¹

In order to get this habitual disposition three conditions are required. Firstly, the thing must be composed of potentiality and act. Without this distinction, as in the case of God whose substance and operation are identical, there is nothing to be disposed or habituated. Secondly, the subject must have the capacity to be determined in several ways and not only to one operation; as perfection of the subject and its operation habit is the result of some determination of something that is previously indeterminate. As they are related to the good as the end of operation, habits are necessary in order that the powers be determined to the good.⁷² Thirdly, there must be a plurality of elements that can occur and be adjusted in various ways so as to dispose the subject well or ill to its form or to its operation.⁷³

Based on these conditions habits can be located. Firstly, habits are in the sensitive powers of the soul in so far as these powers act at the command of reason, and therefore, they have the capacity to be ordained to various things.⁷⁴ Secondly, intellectual habits are in the 'possible' intellect, as this passive intellect is in potentiality to many.⁷⁵ The human intellect is the subject of habits in so far as it is in potentiality with regard to things intelligible. At first the human intellect is only in potentiality to understand, and afterwards it is made to understand actually.⁷⁶ Thirdly, the will is the subject of habit in so far as it is variously directed to act. Here the reference is not Aristotle, the Philosopher, but Averoes the Commentator who says: "a habit is that whereby we act when we will."⁷⁷

Habits are acquired by repetition of actions, by which the things acquire a tendency toward a determinate direction that can work in the possessor naturally. Habit is called a second nature. Reason makes the inclination of the appetitive part of the soul, which naturally tends

⁷⁰ Cf. M. Pangallo, *'Habitus' e vita morale* (Napoli: LER, 1988), pp. 32-33.

⁷¹ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 49, a. 3, resp.

⁷² *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 49, a. 4, ad. 3.

⁷³ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 49, a. 4, resp.; Cf. Mario Pangallo, *op.cit.*, p. 30.

⁷⁴ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 50, a. 3, ad. 1.

⁷⁵ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 50, a. 4, ad. 1.

⁷⁶ *ST.*, Ia, q. 79, a. 2, resp.

⁷⁷ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 49, a. 3, s.c.; *ST.* I-II, q. 50, a. 5, resp.

to many directions, to be directed to a single direction. By repeatedly performing the same acts reason reinforces it to become habitual which disposes the possessor well to some human end.⁷⁸ The habits which dispose a person to an end which exceeds the capacity of human nature, on the contrary, are infused in a person by the grace of God.⁷⁹

The Definition of Virtue

Although Aquinas bases his philosophical understanding of the virtues on Aristotle's, his attempt to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the concept takes as its starting point the definition of Augustine: "Virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us."⁸⁰

For Aquinas this definition captures perfectly the whole essential notion of virtue as it is manifested in the elements that constitute it.⁸¹ First, it fulfills the requirements of a good definition which consists in stating the genus of virtue that it is a quality or a habit to act and its specific difference that is the good. It is goodness that distinguishes a virtuous habit from other habits. Aquinas says: "Human virtue is a good habit, productive of good works."⁸² Secondly, it reveals the mind or reason as the proper subject of virtue. He says: "Virtue which is referred to being is not proper to humans; but only the virtue which is referred to the work of reason which is proper to humans."⁸³ Thirdly, it relates virtue to human act as it serves its possessor to live righteously, to act well. Fourthly, virtue is more than aptness since it has something specifically to do with the good use of it. The good use of virtue is rooted in the good will. Finally, God is the efficient cause of the theological virtues since they are infused by God. Infused virtues are caused in the human mind by God, but not without human consent.

The Tripartition of the Virtues

The subjects of the virtues are the powers of the soul. A power of the soul can be the subject of a virtuous habit only in dependent relation

⁷⁸ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 9, resp.

⁷⁹ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 51, a. 4, resp.

⁸⁰ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 55, a. 4, obj. 1; *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 2, title.

⁸¹ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 55, a. 4, resp.; Cf. also Bonnie Kent, "Habits and Virtues (Ia-IIae, qq. 49-70)", in Stephen J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 119.

⁸² *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 55, a. 3, resp.

⁸³ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 55, a. 2, ad. 2.

to the soul. A power of itself cannot sustain a virtuous habit. It is the soul which can exist by itself and can sustain a habit through one of its powers. The soul is the proper subject of a human virtue. Virtue is in the soul through one of its powers.⁸⁴

The powers of the soul are divided into two parts: the appetitive part (the sensitive appetite) which consists of concupiscible and irascible powers, and the rational part which consists of the will (the rational appetite) and reason or the intellect. These powers are the subjects respectively of the virtues of temperance and fortitude in so far as they listen to and obey the command of reason.⁸⁵ The command of reason on the sensitive appetite is political, since this latter has certain autonomy. It is different from the way the soul rules the body which is despotic since the body follows entirely the command of reason.⁸⁶ The will is the subject of the virtues which directs one's affections to the other, namely, one's neighbor and God: justice and charity.⁸⁷ The virtues which reside in the appetitive part of the soul are called moral virtues.

The intellect is the subject of the intellectual virtues which reside either in the speculative⁸⁸ or in the practical intellect.⁸⁹ The speculative intellectual virtues are concerned with the perfection of thinking itself, with the acquisition of truth, while practical intellectual virtues are concerned with the perfection of some activity other than thinking, namely, the acquisition of truth about what is to be done or to be made.⁹⁰ The practical intellect is the subject of prudence and art. Prudence is the right reason of things to be done, while art is the right reason of things to be made.⁹¹ Prudence perfects the moral virtues and therefore it is called the cause of moral virtues.⁹² Of the five intellectual virtues only prudence can confer moral rectitude of character.⁹³

The speculative intellect, whose object is truth, is the subject of intellectual virtues which perfect the intellect to know the truth. These

⁸⁴ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 3, resp.; *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 56, a. 1, ad. 3.

⁸⁵ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 4, ad. 2.

⁸⁶ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 4, resp.; *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 58, a. 2, resp.

⁸⁷ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 5, resp.; *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 56, a. 6, resp.

⁸⁸ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 6; *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 56, a. 3, resp.

⁸⁹ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General* a., 7; *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 56 a. 3, resp.

⁹⁰ M.W.F. Stone, "The Angelic Doctor and the Stagirite: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary 'Aristotelian' Ethics" in *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* 101, 1 (2000/2001), p. 106.

⁹¹ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 57, a. 4, resp.

⁹² *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 6, resp.

⁹³ G.M. Reichberg, "The Intellectual Virtues (Ia-IIae, qq. 57-58), in Stephen J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 138.

virtues are intelligence, science, wisdom and faith. Faith has a special role here as it perfects the speculative intellect in so far as it is commanded by the will. To the things that are beyond the capacity of human reason to know such as faith one cannot give intellectual assent if one does not will it.⁹⁴

The moral and intellectual virtues can be acquired with human resources on the basis of human acts.⁹⁵ In so far as one participates in the heavenly city, for a Christian believer, nature is in itself insufficient. One needs the theological virtues which are infused in us by God through God's grace.⁹⁶ Grace is the cause of the theological virtues: faith, hope and charity. Just as the natural light of reason is the root and the cause of the acquired virtues, so the light of grace is the cause and the root of the infused virtues⁹⁷, the virtues which perfect human actions ordained to eternal life.⁹⁸

Different from Aristotle who proposes a bipartition of the virtues, Aquinas proposes a tripartition of them: moral, intellectual, and theological virtues. Moral virtues are temperance, fortitude, and justice. Intellectual virtues are art, prudence, science, understanding, and wisdom. Theological virtues, the virtues infused in us by God, are faith, hope and charity.

The Transcendence of Aquinas' Account of the Virtues to Aristotle's

*Aristotle's and Aquinas' Accounts of the Virtues: A Short Comparison.*⁹⁹

Following Aristotle, Aquinas considers happiness as the reward of virtue¹⁰⁰, but he believes that Aristotle's account is insufficient to direct one to achieve perfect happiness, beatitude. To achieve perfect happiness, which consists in the beatific union of humans with God, one needs supernatural infused virtues. The comparison shows how important is charity for other virtues, for Aquinas, as the principle of all good works leading to one's last end. It is charity which makes other

⁹⁴ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 7, resp.; *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 56, a. 3, resp.

⁹⁵ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 9, resp.

⁹⁶ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 9, resp.; *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 62, a. 1, resp.

⁹⁷ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 2, ad. 21; *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 62, a. 3, resp.

⁹⁸ *Disputed Questions on the Virtues in General*, a. 10, resp.; *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 63, a. 3, resp.

⁹⁹ The comparison is based solely on *Nicomachean Ethics* Books I and II and *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, qq. 55-67.

¹⁰⁰ Cfr. For example *NE.*, I, 9, 1099b15 and *ST.*, Ia-Iae, q. 2, a. 2, obj. 1.

virtues perfect virtues.¹⁰¹ Moreover, human virtues will remain in the life to come in their formal elements, and not in their material elements, as there will be most perfect rectitude for moral virtues and most perfect knowledge for intellectual virtues.¹⁰² In short, natural human virtues are perfected by charity in the afterlife.

Aristotle's Account of the Virtues

Virtue and Happiness: the Object of Political Science

In *NE.*, I, 7 Aristotle defines happiness as the activity of the soul in conformity with virtue, even with the best and most complete virtue, which he identifies in *NE.*, X, 7 as theoretical wisdom. Virtue helps one to be happy and to live well as a citizen of a city-state. As a part of the political science, ethics' peculiar aim is to make the citizens of an earthly city-state good, happy and living well.¹⁰³

Human Action and Practical Reasoning

At many points of his account, Aristotle dismisses reference to the purely theoretical branches of philosophy such as metaphysics and natural philosophy, as he considers them irrelevant to his investigation.¹⁰⁴ As human conduct has no fixity, ethics is concerned with particular cases which are lacking in exactness, for they do not fall under any art or set of precepts. The agent oneself must in each case consider what conduct is appropriate to the occasion.¹⁰⁵ As an exercise of practical reasoning, which is different from theoretical reasoning whose starting points are general truths, ethics is concerned with goals to be achieved.¹⁰⁶

Reason as the Basis of Human Virtues

Virtue and happiness are the activity of the soul and not of the body. Virtue therefore is related to the part of the soul which has reason either *par participation* for having the capacity to listening to and obeying reason, or *par essence* for having reason in the strict sense and in itself.¹⁰⁷ This is the reason for the bipartition of the virtues in ethical and *dianoetic*

¹⁰¹ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 64, a. 4, resp.

¹⁰² *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 67, a. 2, resp.

¹⁰³ *NE.*, I, 1,2, 9 and 13.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Palakuk, "Structure and Method in Aquinas's Appropriation of Aristotelian Ethical Theory", in <http://michaelpalakuk.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/structure-and-method-in-aquinass-appropriation-of-aristotelian-ethical-theory.pdf>, p. 14-15.

¹⁰⁵ *NE.*, II, 21103b27-1104a8.

¹⁰⁶ Mikael Palakuk, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁷ *NE.*, I, 13, 1102a26-1103a3.

virtues.¹⁰⁸

Ethical Virtues in Particular

The whole of Book II of *The Nicomachean Ethics* treats ethical virtue which the author defines as “a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason in which the person of practical wisdom would determine it.”¹⁰⁹ The definition expresses well the three conditions for a virtuous action, namely, that the agent must have knowledge, the agent must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sake, and the agent’s action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character, which is the result of habituation.¹¹⁰

Aquinas’ Account of the Virtues

Virtues Viewed from the Perspective of Man’s Blessed Life

Aquinas sees the virtues from the perspective of a person’s eternal blessed life in heaven. He offers a formal structure, describing what is universally and eternally true of the virtues. His approach is more speculative than practical and is based on sacred doctrine (*sacra doctrina*) which transcends the difference between speculative and practical reason, the domain of philosophy built up by reason.¹¹¹

The Perfect Notion of Virtue

Virtues, relatively called, only confer aptness in doing good work, while virtues, simply called, confer both aptness and rectitude of the will in doing the good.¹¹² Moral virtues and prudence are virtues simply called.¹¹³ They are called cardinal virtues as they represent the perfect idea of virtue.¹¹⁴ Theological virtues infused by God direct a person to supernatural happiness.¹¹⁵ God also infuses other virtues which direct us to other things, yet in relation to God.¹¹⁶ Infused moral virtues will have the character of virtue perfectly, if they produce good works in proportion to a supernatural last end. They receive this perfect character from charity. Infused prudence disposes one well towards his ultimate

¹⁰⁸ *NE.*, I, 13, 1103a4-7.

¹⁰⁹ *NE.*, II, 6, 1106b36-1107a2.

¹¹⁰ *NE.*, II, 4, 1105a30-1105b1.

¹¹¹ *ST.*, I, q. 1, a. 4, resp.

¹¹² *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 57, a. 1, resp.

¹¹³ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 57, a. 4, resp.

¹¹⁴ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 61, a. 1, resp.

¹¹⁵ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 62, a. 1, resp.

¹¹⁶ *ST.*, Ia-IIae, q. 63, a. 3, ad. 2

end by the help of charity. Only the infused virtues are perfect virtues, since they direct one to the ultimate end. Faith and hope also need charity to be called virtues properly.¹¹⁷

The Connection and the Greatness of the Virtues

Moral virtues are connected with prudence as they direct a person to the end which is the function of prudence.¹¹⁸ Prudence is connected with moral virtues as prudence is right reason about the things to be done.¹¹⁹ Moral virtues are connected with each other due to their common relation to prudence.¹²⁰ All the infused moral virtues are connected with charity, which signifies friendship with God.¹²¹ Friendship with God is impossible without faith and hope.¹²²

In so far as they perfect reason, intellectual virtues are more excellent than moral virtues, but in relation to action, moral virtues which perfect the appetite are more excellent.¹²³ Charity is greater than faith and hope as it approaches nearer to God and brings us to the union with God.¹²⁴

The Duration of the Virtues after Death

Moral virtues will remain after this life in their formal element, and not in their material element. They will be most perfect in their rectitude. Intellectual virtues will remain in their formal element, which consists in perfect knowledge, while their material element will cease.¹²⁵ Hope will not remain in the future life, as we shall possess what we hoped for, the enjoyment of God.¹²⁶ Faith will not remain identically but only generically; its genus, knowledge, will remain, as beatific vision is a kind of knowledge, but not identical knowledge, as in this life we have obscure knowledge, while in the future life we have clear vision.¹²⁷

Aristotle's Place in and the Originality of Aquinas' Account

What is the precise place of Aristotle in Aquinas' account of the

¹¹⁷ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 65, a. 2, resp.

¹¹⁸ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 58, a. 4, resp.

¹¹⁹ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 58, a. 5, resp.

¹²⁰ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 65, a. 1, resp.

¹²¹ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 65, a. 3, resp.

¹²² ST., Ia-IIae, q. 65, a. 5, resp.

¹²³ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 66, a. 3, resp.

¹²⁴ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 66, a. 6, resp.

¹²⁵ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 67, a. 2, resp.

¹²⁶ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 67, a. 4, resp.

¹²⁷ ST., Ia-IIae, q. 67, a. 5, resp.

virtues? Aquinas' theological project, and his account of the virtues, are the result of the convergence of two great currents flowing from two kinds of sources: the theological and the philosophical. Since the object of both theological reflection and philosophical search is truth, the sources are referred to as authorities that give light to manifest the truth. The degree of authority of the sources is determined by their "capacity to communicate knowledge, and manifest truth."¹²⁸

The theological sources, above all, the Word of Scripture and its authoritative interpretation in the Church by the Fathers of the Church and other theologians, have a predominant role as they give witness to a higher light that comes from an intellect which is superior to human reason. The philosophical sources, the second source of light that enlightens Aquinas in his account, are represented mainly by Aristotle. Although he refers mainly to Aristotle in his account of the human virtues, Aquinas in fact brings that account to be perfected by the truth and the light coming from the Scripture, more precisely the Gospel. The place of Aristotle, the main proponent of the human virtues, in Aquinas' account is correctly affirmed by Pinckaers as follows: "As a witness to humanity, Aristotle becomes in Aquinas' eyes a servant of the Gospel."¹²⁹

The sources treated so far, that can be regarded as external, are still insufficient to explain the transcendence and the originality of Aquinas' account of the virtues. Beside these sources, there is an interior source, namely his personal genius, which enables him to organize and dispose the materials available to form of them a new synthesis of diverse elements drawn from many sources and of different epochs.¹³⁰ It is his personal genius that enables him to transform the teaching of the pagan philosopher Aristotle and dispose it to explain Christian virtues, those virtues of human nature perfected by the divine grace.¹³¹

Since Aquinas writes mainly as a theologian who thinks "about moral questions in light of God, grace and the sacraments"¹³², the transcendence of his account of the virtues, in addition to his personal genius, flows from another interior source, an even "higher and more

¹²⁸ S.-T. Pinckaers, "The Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas", in Stephen J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 19.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹³¹ A. Lobato, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

¹³² Stephen J. Pope, "Overview of the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas", in *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 31.

interior source, namely, the Word of God with the grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹³³ It is properly these two interior sources that enable Aquinas to present an account of the virtues which is at the same time original and transcendent to the account of the Stagirite. For this reason it is not fair to judge Aristotle’s account of the virtues as myopic¹³⁴, since the sources employed, and the motivation beyond each account, are different. The Stagirite is not to be blamed for failing to insert the infused virtues in their account since the sources for that were not available to him.

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¹³³ S.-T. Pinckaers, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

¹³⁴ Bonnie Kent, *op.cit.*, p. 119.

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