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978-0-521-77661-5 - Thomas Aquinas Disputed Questions on the Virtues

Edited by E. M. Atkins and Thomas Williams

Excerpt

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## Disputed Questions on the Virtues

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## On the Virtues in General

The first question is whether the virtues are dispositions.

The second is whether the definition of virtue given by Augustine is appropriate.

The third is whether a capacity of the soul can be a possessor of virtue.

The fourth is whether the aggressive or the sensual parts of the soul can be the possessors of virtue.

The fifth is whether the will is a possessor of virtue.

The sixth is whether virtue is found in the practical intelligence as its possessor.

The seventh is whether virtue is found in the theoretical intelligence.

The eighth is whether the virtues are in us by nature.

The ninth is whether we acquire the virtues by our actions.

The tenth is whether some virtues are infused into us.

The eleventh is whether infused virtue may be increased.

The twelfth is about the distinctions between the virtues.

The thirteenth is whether virtue is found in a mid-point.

### Article 1: Whether the virtues are dispositions

#### *Objections*

It seems that they are not, but rather actions, because:

(1) Augustine says [*Rev* 1.9] that virtue is the good use of free judgement. But the use of free judgement is an action. Therefore virtue is an action.

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(2) People are owed a reward only by reason of their actions. However, everyone who possesses virtue is owed a reward, because anyone who dies in a condition of charity will reach blessedness. Therefore virtue is something meritorious. But it is actions that are meritorious. Therefore virtue is an action.

(3) The more similar something in us is to God, the better it is. But we are most similar to God insofar as we are active, because God is pure activeness; therefore action is the best of the things that are in us. But virtues are the greatest goods in us, as Augustine says [*FC* 2.18, 19]. Therefore the virtues are actions.

(4) Whatever perfects us on our journey corresponds to whatever perfects us when we reach our homeland. But in our homeland we will be perfected by something active, that is to say, happiness, which, according to Aristotle [*NE* 1.7.15, 1098a16], consists in activity. Therefore whatever perfects us on our journey, that is to say virtue, is also an activity.

(5) Contraries are those things that are placed in the same class and are incompatible with one another. But a sinful act is incompatible with virtue precisely by being opposed to it. Therefore virtue comes under the class of action.

(6) Aristotle says [*Heav* 1.11, 281a15] that virtue is the upper limit of a capacity. But the upper limit of a capacity is an activity. Therefore virtue is an activity.

(7) The rational part of the soul is finer and more complete than the sensory part. But the sensory part functions without the mediation of any quality or disposition. Therefore one should not posit any dispositions in the intelligent part of the soul either, as intermediaries to complete the functioning of the intelligent part.

(8) Aristotle says [*Phys* 7.3, 246b2] that virtue is the tendency of something complete towards what is best. But what is best is an activity. Moreover, a tendency must belong to the same class as the thing towards which it makes something tend. Therefore virtue is activity.

(9) Augustine says [*MorCath* 15.25] that virtue is the ordering of love. Order, however, as he himself says elsewhere [*CG* 19.13], is the tendency of things equal or unequal that assigns each to its place. Therefore virtue is a tendency. Therefore it is not a disposition.

(10) A disposition is a quality that is difficult to change. However, virtue is easy to change, because it is lost by committing just one mortal sin. Therefore virtue is not a disposition.

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(11) If we need certain dispositions, i.e. virtues, then we need them for doing things that are *either* (i) natural *or* (ii) meritorious and beyond what is natural. (i) But we do not need them for doing things that are natural; for any nature whatever, even one which lacks sensation, can fulfil its functions without any dispositions; this will be all the more true, then, of a nature that possesses reason. (ii) Again, we do not need virtues for doing things that are meritorious, because God achieves those in us, ‘who works in us both wanting to do something and accomplishing it’ etc. [Phil 2:13]. Therefore either way virtues are not dispositions.

(12) Everything which acts in accordance with its form always acts according to the demands of that form; e.g. something hot always acts by heating. Therefore if some form exists in the mind as a disposition, which we call ‘virtue’, then someone who possesses virtue will always have to function in accordance with virtue. This is false; for in that case anyone who had virtue would have it unshakeably. Therefore the virtues are not dispositions.

(13) Dispositions in our capacities are there to make them function more easily. But we do not need anything else to make us do virtuous actions more easily, or so it seems. For the latter depend principally upon our choice and our will. But nothing is easier to do than something that depends upon our will. Therefore virtues are not dispositions.

(14) An effect cannot be finer than its cause. But if virtue is a disposition, it will be the cause of an action, which is finer than a disposition. Therefore it does not seem appropriate for virtue to be a disposition.

(15) The mid-point and the extremes of something belong to the same class. But moral virtue is a mid-point among the emotions. The emotions, however, come under the class of active things. Therefore etc.

*But on the other hand*

(1) Virtue, according to Augustine [FC 2.19], is a good quality of mind. But this is not possible in any type of quality except the first, which consists of dispositions. Therefore virtue is a disposition.

(2) Aristotle says [NE 2.6.15, 1107a1] that virtue is a disposition that chooses, situated in a mid-point.

(3) The virtues exist in people who are asleep; for virtues are lost only through mortal sin. But virtuous actions are not performed by sleepers,

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because they are not able to use free judgement. Therefore the virtues are not actions.

*My reply*

We must say that virtue, in accordance with the meaning of the word, refers to the fulfilment of a capacity. That is why it is also called a ‘power’, in that something is able to follow through its own impulse or movement because it possesses a potential that has been fulfilled. For virtue, in accordance with its name, refers to the perfecting of a capability; that is why Aristotle says [*Heav* 1.11, 281a15] that virtue is the upper limit of something with respect to its capacity. But because capacity is defined in relation to its actualisation, the fulfilment of a capacity will be found in its accomplishing fully what it does. The end of anything that does something is what it does, since everything, according to Aristotle [*Heav* 2.3, 286a8], is for the sake of what it does, as being its proximate end; for each thing is good insofar as it is fully ordered to its own end. That is why virtue makes its possessors good, and renders their works good, as Aristotle says [*NE* 2.6.2, 1106a17]; in this way it also becomes clear that it is the tendency of something complete to what is best, as he says elsewhere [*Phys* 7.3, 246b2].

All of this is true for the virtue of any kind of thing. For the virtue of a horse is what makes both it and its work good; similarly with the virtue of a stone, or of a human being or anything else.

However, because different things have different sorts of capacity, they are fulfilled in different ways. For (i) one sort of capacity only acts; (ii) a second is only acted upon or moved; (iii) a third both acts and is acted upon.

(i) The sort of capacity, then, that *only acts* does not need anything extra in order to be a principle of activity. That is why the virtue of this sort of capacity is nothing except the capacity itself. The capacity<sup>1</sup> of God is like this, as are the active intelligence<sup>2</sup> and the natural capacities. That is why the virtues of these capacities are not certain dispositions, but the capacities themselves, complete in themselves.

(ii) The capacities that are *only acted upon* are those that only act if they are moved by other things. It is not up to them whether they act

<sup>1</sup> In English we normally refer to God’s *potentia* as ‘power’, because it is activated of itself and always.

<sup>2</sup> The active intelligence fits into (i) because it only acts: it actualises the capacity of the passive intelligence to acquire intellectual understanding. See further p. 46.

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or not; they only act in accordance with an impulse from a ‘virtue’<sup>3</sup> that moves them. Our powers of sense are like this considered in themselves. That is why Aristotle says [*NE* 6.2.2, 1139a19] that the senses are not principles of any actions. These capacities do indeed need something extra to complete them for their activities. However, this is not in them like some form that is immanent in its possessor, but rather only in the manner of a *passive experience*, like an image on the retina. That is why the ‘virtues’ of these sorts of capacities are not dispositions, but rather the *capacities* themselves, insofar as they are actively acted upon by their corresponding active powers.

(iii) The sort of capacity that *both acts and is acted upon* is moved by the powers that activate it in such a way that it is not determined by them to do one thing. It has the possibility of acting or not: for example, our powers that are in some way rational. These capacities are fulfilled for activity through the help of something extra; that, however, is in them in the manner not of passive experience, but of a *form* that rests and remains in its possessor; this happens, however, in such a way that the capacity is not forced necessarily by it to do one thing (for then the capacity would not be in control of its own actions). The virtues of this type of capacity are not the capacities themselves. Nor are they the passive experiences, as in our powers of sense. Neither are they qualities that act in a necessary way, such as the passive qualities of natural things. Rather, they are *dispositions*, such that someone is able to act with them when he wishes to, as Averroes says [*AverSoul* 3.18]. Augustine says [*GMarr* 21] that a disposition is the thing by which one acts, when it is time to do so.

In this way it is clear that the virtues are dispositions, and also how dispositions are distinguished from the second and third type of qualities. Moreover, it is obvious how they differ from the fourth: for a shape does not in itself imply being ordered to an action.<sup>4</sup>

From all this, it is clear that we need virtuous dispositions for three reasons:

(i’) so that we might be *consistent* in what we do, for things that depend only on what we do change easily unless they are given stability by the weighting of some disposition;

<sup>3</sup> The argument here depends on taking the Latin *virtus* in the broad sense of ‘power’.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas follows Aristotle [*Cat* 8] in recognising four types of quality: (1) dispositions (which is what virtues are) and tendencies, (2) natural capacities and incapacities, (3) sensory qualities, and (4) shape.

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(ii') so that we can *readily* do things in the proper way. For unless our rational capacity tends somehow towards one thing because of our disposition, then whenever it is necessary for us to do anything, we will have to begin by working out what to do. This is clear, for example, in the case of someone who wishes to think about something, but does not yet possess dispositional knowledge, or who wishes to act virtuously, but lacks a virtuous disposition. That is why Aristotle says [*NE* 3.8.15, 1117a22] that we act quickly whenever we act in keeping with our dispositions.

(iii') Thirdly, so that we might *take pleasure in* completing things in the proper way. This certainly happens because of our disposition; for since this works in the same way as a nature, it makes the doing of something our own, as if natural to us, so to speak, and therefore pleasurable. Indeed, we take pleasure in things because they are appropriate to us. That is why Aristotle [*NE* 2.3.1, 1104b5] makes it the mark of a disposition that doing something gives pleasure.

*Replies to objections*

(1) 'Virtue', like 'power', can be understood in two ways:

(i) first, in the sense of *matter*, as when we say that our capacity is the thing that we are capable of. It is in this sense that Augustine says that virtue is the good use of free judgement;

(ii) secondly, in the sense of *essence*. In this sense, neither virtue nor capacity is the same as action.

(2) 'To merit' can be understood in two ways:

(i) first, in a *strict* sense. In this sense, 'to merit' means nothing except to do some action for which one may receive a reward justly;

(ii) secondly, in a *loose* sense. In this sense any condition that in any way gives someone status is said to be meritorious. For example, we might say that Priam 'merited' to rule because of his appearance, because it was worthy of a ruler.

When, then, a reward is owed on merit, it is owed somehow because of a quality of disposition that renders someone suitable for the reward. That is the way in which it is owed to baptised babies. Again, it can be owed to actual merit; in this case, it is owed not to the virtue, but to virtuous actions. (However, it is also granted to babies in some sense on account of actual merit, insofar as the sacrament by which we are born again into life becomes effective through the merits of Christ.)



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(3) Augustine says that the virtues are the greatest goods not absolutely, but of their class (just as fire, for instance, is said to be the lightest of physical things). Therefore it does not follow that there is nothing better in us than the virtues; but rather that numbered among the virtues are the greatest goods that exist in their class.

(4) Just as on our journey we can *both* be perfected in our disposition, i.e. have virtue, *and* be perfected in our activity, i.e. perform virtuous actions, so also in our homeland happiness is perfected activity that flows from a fulfilled disposition. That is why Aristotle says [*NE* 1.8.8, 1098b30; 1.8.14, 1099a25] that happiness is an activity in accordance with perfected virtue.

(5) A wicked action destroys a virtuous *action* directly, because they are contraries. However, it destroys a virtuous *disposition* only indirectly, by cutting it off from the source of infused virtue, that is, from God. That is why Isaiah says, ‘Your sins have made a division between you and your God’ [*Is* 59:2]. It is also why the acquired virtues are not destroyed by a single bad act.

(6) Aristotle’s definition can be understood in two ways:

(i) with respect to the *matter* of virtue. Then, we would understand by virtue whatever virtue is capable of, i.e. the upper limit of whatever the capacity is capable of. For example, the virtue of someone who can lift a hundred pounds lies precisely in his being able to lift one hundred, not in his being able to lift sixty;

(ii) with respect to the *essence* of virtue. In this sense virtue is called the upper limit of a capacity because it signifies the fulfilment of that capacity. This is so whether or not the thing that enables the capacity to be fulfilled is the same as the capacity itself.

(7) We have already explained that the reasoning is different for senses and for our rational capacities.

(8) ‘A tendency to x’ refers to that by which something is changed so as to result in x. (i) Sometimes, indeed, change ends in a condition that is in the *same* class, as when a change in the sense of alteration concludes with a quality. That is why a tendency to this sort of end is always in the same class as the end. (ii) Sometimes, however, it has an end that belongs to a *different* class, as when generation<sup>5</sup> concludes with a substantial form. In this sense a tendency does not always come under the same class as

<sup>5</sup> Reading *generationis* for *alterationis*.

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the things towards which it is making something tend. For example, heat makes things tend towards the substantial form of fire.

(9) ‘Tendency’ can mean three things:

(i) the thing that makes matter tend to receive a form, as heat is what makes something tend towards the form of fire;

(ii) the thing that makes an agent tend to act, as speed is a tendency to run;

(iii) the actual ordering of things to each other.

It is in this third sense that Augustine uses the word. On the other hand, the sense of tendency that is contrasted with disposition is the first one;<sup>6</sup> virtue itself, though, is a tendency in the second sense.

(10) Nothing is so stable that it will not by itself disappear at once, if the cause that sustains it disappears. Therefore it is unsurprising if infused virtue disappears when the link with God disappears because of mortal sin. This fact does not conflict with its resistance to change, which can only be understood by assuming the persistence of its cause.

(11) We need a specific disposition for both types of activity: (i) for *natural* activities for the three reasons given above; (ii) for *meritorious* activities as something extra to lift our natural capacity to what is beyond nature, by means of a disposition infused in us. This need is not obviated by the fact that God works in us: for he acts in us in such a way that we too act. That is why we need a certain disposition, so that we are able to act adequately.

(12) Every form is received by its subject in a manner appropriate to the receiver. It is the distinctive feature of a rational capacity that it can go in opposite directions, and be in control of its actions. That is why a rational capacity is never forced to act in the same way because it has received a disposition as a form. Rather, it is able either to do something or not to do it.

(13) It is easy to do in some kind of way the things that depend on choice alone. However, it is not easy to do them as we ought, that is with speed, reliability and pleasure. It is for this that we need virtuous dispositions.

(14) Whenever a movement arises afresh in an animal or human being, it still comes from a mover that is moved, and it depends upon something active that already exists. In this way, the disposition does not evoke the action by itself, but only if it is aroused by some other agent.

<sup>6</sup> Here, as throughout, ‘tendency’ translates *dispositio*, while ‘disposition’ translates *habitus*.