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978-0-521-15342-3 - Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas's Ethics

John Bowlin

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In this study John Bowlin argues that Aquinas's moral theology receives much of its character and content from an assumption about our common lot: the good we desire is difficult to know in particular, and difficult to will even when it is known, because of contingencies of various kinds – within ourselves, in the ends and objects we pursue, and in the circumstances of choice. Since contingencies are fortune's effects, Aquinas also assumes that it is fortune that makes good choice difficult. And since it is the virtues that perfect choice, Aquinas finds he must treat a number of topics in light of this difficulty: the moral and theological virtues, the first precepts of the natural law, the voluntariness of virtuous action, and the happiness available to us in this life. By noting that Aquinas proceeds in this way, with an eye on fortune's threats to virtue, agency, and happiness, Bowlin places him more precisely in the history of ethics, among Aristotle, Augustine, and the Stoics.

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For Mimi

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While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and
heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.

Genesis 8.22

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One might imagine Aquinas regarding this effort with suspicion. It too easily tempts confusion and scandal. Fortune is a pagan matter. Things that happen *a fortuna vel casus* are imaginable features of the world only if we restrict our inquiries to proximate causes. They vanish as attention is fixed upon higher, distant causes, and Aquinas, no doubt, would encourage us to keep ours fixed upon Divine Providence. Of course, given our short views and fallen nature it is unlikely that we can, and thus it comes as no surprise when Aquinas admits that in this world the effects of chance and fortune seem to abound. Still, he insists that appearances deceive, and insofar as they do we might expect him to borrow Augustine's advice to the person who speaks of fate and means Providence. The person who speaks of the fortuitous and contingent affairs of this world while at the same time conceding their demise in the Divine intellect should "retain his thought, but correct his language" (*sententiam teneat, linguam corrigat*) (*De civ. Dei* v.1; cf. *ST* I.116.1).

But without qualification this hunch misleads, and the fact that Aquinas himself neither corrects his language nor holds his tongue is the best evidence that it does. Repeatedly he insists that we must refer to things subject to fortune's unexpected twists and turns if we are to understand the contours of the moral life, its origins and problems, its rules, virtues, and customs. And yet even as he admits that as moralist he must speak of fortune Aquinas hesitates, he resists. He strains against the necessity, not because it concedes too much to mere appearance, but rather because he yearns for longer views and perfect nature. He longs for a kind of moral life, and in particular a kind of virtue, that can disregard contingency, that fortune can neither constitute nor unsettle. It follows that Aquinas's suspicions are not so much with the resort to talk of contingency and fortune, but with the virtues we praise in this life and that we explicate in these terms. Above all, it is this eschatological setting of his remarks about the moral life, about

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virtue, fortune, and contingency, that I hope to make plain in what follows.

This book began as a dissertation, and I would like to thank the two advisers who guided my first efforts. Victor Preller's enthusiasm for Aquinas's moral theology sparked my interest in a project of this kind, while his mastery of Aristotle's ethics and the Latin Stoics saved me from mistakes both venial and mortal. Jeffrey Stout's uncanny ability to pose the questions that I needed to address, to ferret out doubtful arguments, to distinguish lean from fat, and to determine which bit should lead and which should follow focused my efforts and sharpened my prose. Both remain steadfast mentors, critics, and friends. Fellowship support from Princeton University made my graduate career possible, and the Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation funded an additional year of research and writing. I am grateful for their generosity.

Along the way from dissertation to book, I received a faculty development fellowship from the University of Tulsa that enabled me to write chapters three and four. My thanks goes to Dean Thomas Horne. I also benefited from countless conversations with my colleagues in Philosophy and Religion: Jane Ackerman, Jacob Howland, Russell Hittinger, and the late John Carmody. John Taylor gave careful attention to drafts of a number of chapters. Scott Davis sent on pages of commentary and criticism that were indispensable for my revisions. Stanley Hauerwas and Gene Rogers read the penultimate version and replied with many helpful suggestions. Russ Hittinger also read through the typescript toward the end and gave special attention to my discussion of Aquinas's treatment of the natural law. He saved me from a number of careless missteps in argument, translation, and expression. On exegetical matters our differences remain, and yet after many hours of conversation, we found that they are subtle, more a matter of emphasis and sentiment than substance. To these colleagues and friends, I am happily indebted. For their assistance and encouragement, I am grateful. I share credit for the virtues of this effort with them. Its vices are mine alone.

My series editors, Wayne Proudfoot, Jeffrey Stout, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, guided the project through its initial stages with wise counsel and cautious optimism. My editors at Cambridge, Camilla Erskine, Ruth Parr, Kevin Taylor, and Audrey Cotterell, were patient with my many delays and provided invaluable assistance along the way.

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To my family, Mimi, Nicholas, and Isaac, the debt I owe exceeds all measure. Their love and friendship, faith, and encouragement are gifts for which I am daily grateful.

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<i>De ente</i>	<i>De ente et essentia</i>
<i>De malo</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae De malo</i>
<i>De pot.</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae De potentia</i>
<i>De verit.</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae De veritate</i>
<i>De virt. card.</i>	<i>Quaestio disputata De virtutibus cardinalibus</i>
<i>In Ethic.</i>	<i>In decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis expositio</i>
<i>In Metaph.</i>	<i>In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio</i>
<i>In Perih.</i>	<i>In libros Peri Hermeneias Aristotelis expositio</i>
<i>In Phys.</i>	<i>In octo libros Physicorum Aristotelis expositio</i>
<i>SCG</i>	<i>Summa contra Gentiles</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa Theologiae</i>
<i>Super Iob</i>	<i>Expositio super Iob ad litteram</i>

For classical texts I use the *Oxford Classical Dictionary's* list of abbreviations; for other medieval texts I follow the standard abbreviations.