

Introduction

Virtue plays a central role in Thomas Aquinas's moral theory. Agents are good because their acts are good. Virtues are capacities by which agents are able to produce these good acts consistently, pleurably, and for their own sake. This book presents Thomas's more general account of virtue in its historical, chronological, philosophical, and theological contexts. It attempts to help the reader to understand what Thomas himself wished to teach about virtue, even if the material might seem at times distant from contemporary ethical discussions.

Many of Thomas's writings are on moral theory, and a large part of them is on the virtues. This importance of the virtues can be seen in Thomas's most significant work, the *Summa Theologiae*.¹ The Second Part of its three parts (hereafter *Secunda Pars*) is about moral matters, and it is much larger than the other parts. This *Secunda Pars* itself includes a First Part (hereafter *Prima Secundae*), which is on more speculative general topics, and a Second Part (hereafter *Secunda Secundae*), which covers moral matters that are relevant to every moral agent as well as to those that belong to particular kinds of life. Thomas himself describes the *Prima Secundae* as "a common consideration of virtues and vices and other things pertaining to moral matter."² It includes what the moral theorist must know before considering particular cases. The *Secunda Secundae* organizes the moral particulars that concern all moral agents around the four cardinal virtues, namely prudence, justice, courage or fortitude (*fortitudo*), and temperance, and the three theological virtues, namely faith, hope, and charity. The other virtues are all reduced to these virtues, and the various vices are considered in opposition to the virtues. Thomas states that by organizing particular moral theory in this way, "nothing of morals will be

¹ Leonard Boyle, "The Setting of the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas – Revisited," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 1–16.

² "communem considerationem de virtutibus et vitiis et aliis ad materialem moralem pertinentibus ..." Thomas, *S.T.*, II-II, prol.

passed over.”³ Thomas’s Dominican predecessor William Peraldus (d. 1271) had written a *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus* that followed a similar plan; it covered the moral life according to the virtues, the beatitudes that Jesus Christ enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount, and the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost.⁴ But it was not nearly as systematic and lacked the complete theological overview of Thomas’s work.⁵ Nevertheless, the *Summa Theologiae* largely is about what later theologians would describe as moral theology, and its moral teaching is mostly organized around the virtues.

In order to understand Thomas’s account of virtue, we must first look at the relationship between theology and philosophy. Thomas’s theology presupposes a developed moral philosophy.⁶ He does not set out to develop his own new moral theory in these writings. He accepts as true much of what was written by established authorities, including not only previous Christian writers but also philosophers such as Aristotle, whose entire *Nicomachean Ethics* was recently translated into Latin. When Thomas was a student in Cologne (1248–1252), his teacher Albert the Great (c. 1200–1280) was among the first to comment on this new complete version, and Thomas seems to have assisted in compiling Albert’s notes. Aristotle influences not only Thomas’s understanding of particular moral topics but also his account of moral philosophy as a practical science.

An Aristotelian science can be described as knowledge of or a habit of knowing conclusions by demonstration from evident principles that are prior, universal, and necessary.⁷ The conclusions are known to be true by means of other known truths. Such science is acquired by human effort and differs from the ordinary knowledge that comes from nature or experience. A practical science is widely speaking about what is subject to human action. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is a work on the practical science of ethics, which is that part of moral philosophy which is concerned with an individual’s action.⁸ The other two parts of moral philosophy are about human action in the context of the other two natural human unities.

³ “nihil moralium erit praetermissum.” Thomas, *S.T.*, II-II, prol.

⁴ William Peraldus, *Summa aurea de virtutibus et vitiis* (Venice, 1497). John Inglis, “Aquinas’s Replication of the Acquired Moral Virtues,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27 (1999): 6–13.

⁵ Boyle, “Setting of the *Summa Theologiae*,” 9–10.

⁶ For Aquinas’s understanding of the relationship between faith, theology, and philosophy, see Thomas M. Osborne Jr., “Natural Reason and Supernatural Faith,” in *Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae: A Critical Guide*, ed. Jeffrey Hause (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 188–203; John Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1997.

⁷ For the relationship between such science and theology, see Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith*, 78–98.

⁸ Thomas, *SLE*, lib. 1, lect. 1 (Leonine, 47.1, 4). For the subject of moral philosophy and moral theology, see William Wallace, *The Role of Demonstration in St. Thomas Aquinas: A Study of Methodology in St. Thomas Aquinas* (River Forest, IL: The Thomist Press, 1962), 143–162.

Household economics is about the family, and political science is about the political community. The individual's virtue, which is studied in ethics, is also considered in these other moral sciences.

Moral philosophy needs to be distinguished both from productive sciences or skills and from speculative sciences. Skills, such as boatbuilding or carpentry, are also practical, but they are more about making products than about human action as such. In contrast to the practical sciences, speculative sciences are about objects that are not subject to human action, such as movable being and mathematical being. Metaphysics is a speculative science whose subject is being as such. God, even if he is not part of the subject of metaphysics, is at the very least a principle of the subject of metaphysics. Consequently, metaphysics is a kind of philosophical theology.

Thomas's theological account of ethics draws greatly on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. During his lifetime, Aristotle's works became foundational for philosophical education. Nevertheless, Aristotle is not his only philosophical authority, and he does not think that the development of philosophical knowledge ended with Aristotle's death. Thomas, along with his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, had great respect for Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), who was the first to make Greek philosophy generally available to Latin readers. Although Cicero generally was a kind of Academic Skeptic, his moral philosophy largely reworked older Stoic notions.⁹ His main targets seem to have been proponents of Epicureanism, who founded morality on pleasure. The Stoic Macrobius (c. 400) wrote a commentary on Cicero that contained an influential summary of the various virtues and their relation to each other. Thomas's taxonomy of virtue also relies heavily on the *De Virtutibus et Vitiis*, which was a somewhat Aristotelian part of the mostly Stoic *Peri Patheon*, which in his time was falsely attributed to the Aristotelian Andronicus of Rhodes.¹⁰

For Thomas and his contemporaries, theology is a science distinct from all of these philosophical sciences, including even that part of metaphysics that is concerned with God. The philosophical sciences can be acquired through human effort. In contrast, sacred science is a theology that requires the revelation of truth through Sacred Scripture. Thomas's understanding of Scripture was shaped by the authority of the Catholic Church as well as

⁹ Raphael Wolf, *Cicero: The Philosophy of a Roman Skeptic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 125–200.

¹⁰ Michel Cacouros, "Le traité pseudo-Aristotélicien *De virtutibus et vitiis*," in *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques, Supplément*, ed. Richard Goulet et al. (Paris: CNRS, 2003), 506–546.

by Church writers and earlier medieval theologians. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) was the most important of the Latin Fathers, but Thomas was also influenced by Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) and Gregory the Great (d. 604). Through the writings he not only learned a kind of theology, but he also came into contact with their appropriation of Stoic and Neoplatonic philosophy. This Neoplatonism in particular shaped his reading of Stoic and Aristotelian philosophy.

Thomas was primarily a theologian who relied on the truths of Sacred Scripture. Philosophical writers were not his only authorities. However, in doing theology he practiced and developed a philosophy that has its roots in the traditions of ancient Rome and Greece. Like his contemporaries, he adopts the notion of theology as a science comparable to the philosophical sciences. In his period, theological studies were preceded by years of study in the philosophical sciences, perhaps in a university or in the religious houses of orders such as the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Not everyone who studied the philosophical sciences in a university went on to theology, but theologians were all proficient in philosophy. Theology, unlike metaphysics, considers not only God in himself but also all of creation in reference to God, including human actions. Consequently, theology includes theological ethics, which depends both on philosophical ethics and on Sacred Scripture.

It is difficult or even impossible to separate Thomas's theology from his philosophy if we think of philosophy as some sort of personal world-view. But if we think of theology and philosophy as distinct sciences, we can see how Thomas practices and develops both. Philosophical ethics studies human acts with the aid of human reason alone. Theology is concerned with such acts insofar as they are understood additionally through revelation. It is not clear that we should call Thomas's philosophy "Christian philosophy" just because he was a Christian or a theologian. Nevertheless, Thomas is primarily a theologian, who develops and uses moral philosophy in the context of his theological work.

Thomas's broader dialectical approach relies on earlier theologians and on Aristotle.¹¹ Previous scholastic theologians, such as Peter Abelard (d. 1142) and Peter Lombard (d. 1160), had developed a method of theology according to which the author must develop his own view in response to competing common opinions. In such cases, the authority of Augustine might be pitted against that of Gregory the Great or a quotation from one

¹¹ John Jenkins, "Expositions of the Text: Aquinas's Aristotelian Commentaries," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5 (1996): 49–54.

of Augustine's works might be contrasted with a quotation from a different work. This use of conflicting authorities became the foundation of the disputed question format in which many scholastic works were written. Furthermore, Thomas's careful reading of Aristotle exposes him to the method whereby an enquiry begins with common opinions, and most especially the common opinions of the wise. From the perspective of a thirteenth-century reader, Aristotle's evaluation and use of such opinions fitted nicely with the use of authorities in the scholastic tradition. Thomas, like his contemporaries, would think it ridiculous to attempt to build one's own personal philosophy and theology apart from building on previous traditions of enquiry.

This book does not attempt to give a full account of Thomas's moral theology.¹² It does not fully address Thomas's position that the virtues are insufficient for the full Christian life. A complete picture of the moral life would explain how we need not only virtues but gifts of the Holy Ghost by which God moves us. Moreover, it does not discuss the central importance of the beatitudes, which are Jesus Christ's statements about happiness in his central discourse on morality, the Sermon on the Mount. Thomas's account of the virtues is to some extent separable from his account of the gifts and of the beatitudes, even though every acting Christian needs the gifts and should practice the acts described by the beatitudes.

It is important to keep in mind not only the theological context of Thomas's work but even his immediate historical context. Thomas, like any philosopher or theologian, often wrote in response to questions that were pressing at his time, and he addressed these questions by drawing on the conceptual resources that were available to him. For instance, we will see that Thomas does not attempt to pull a definition of virtue out of thin air but that he considers and adapts several traditional definitions that were used by his contemporaries. Were we to ignore the historical context, the variety of definitions and some of his remarks on them would be unintelligible. Similarly, we will later look at how Thomas distinguishes between acquired and infused moral virtue. If Thomas were faced with a variety of theories about how they interacted, we could expect a developed account. But since we know historically that he was among the first to distinguish clearly between them, it is unsurprising that his treatment of their cooperation is scanty. It was not well-travelled ground during his lifetime.

¹² For the importance of the gifts and beatitudes, see Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed., trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 134–164.

Similar insight can at times be gained from special attention to Thomas's own development. His writings on ethics cover nearly the whole of his roughly twenty-year working life.¹³ We will see several instances of how in different works he can give different accounts of apparently the same topics. Sometimes these different accounts might be compatible with each other, but they might also indicate a change in his understanding or even a fuller development of his thought. In general, I attempt to use Thomas's different writings to shed light on each other. But at times we need to see how he changes in light of the various options that were available to him.

Thomas's earliest text on the ethics is his *Commentary on the Sentences*, which is a revised record of his teaching of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, which was the standard textbook on theology. Thomas lectured on this work in the early 1250s, as part of his progress toward becoming a master in theology. This text is obviously less mature than his later writings, and it follows more or less the conventional order of theological studies. Thomas addressed several ethical issues in his disputed questions *De Veritate*, which he gave in the late 1250s, and the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, which was finished around 1265. In the late 1260s, when Thomas was teaching in Rome, he began his *Summa Theologiae*, which was meant to provide an alternative to Lombard's *Sentences* and perhaps to provide an alternative way of teaching moral theology. But most of his work on ethics was written after he returned to Paris in 1268. This Second Regency (1268–1272) in Paris was his most prolific period, and much of his work was on ethics.

During this Second Regency, Thomas seems to have composed several works that were complementary to the material that he was developing for the *Secunda Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*. He compiled an outline on and then wrote a full commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This commentary contains no Christian theology, and it remains an important source not only for Thomas's thought but also for the study of Aristotle. There has been much disagreement over whether Thomas's philosophical commentaries should be seen as a guide to his own thought.¹⁴ In this book I rely on this commentary in particular to show how Thomas understood Aristotle

¹³ For Thomas's historical context and dates, I follow Jean-Pierre Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1: *The Person and His Work*, rev. ed., trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005). A helpful chronology can be found in Porro Pasquale, *Thomas Aquinas: A Historical and Philosophical Profile*, trans. Joseph G. Trabbic and Roger W. Nutt (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 439–443.

¹⁴ For a history of disagreements concerning the nature of this commentary, see Tobias Hoffmann, Jörn Müller, and Mattias Perkams (eds), introduction to *Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–12.

during the Second Regency, and we will see that in his other works he uses Aristotle's work as a guide to philosophical moral science. In this book we will see how Thomas thinks that Aristotle gave a preliminary account of the moral and other sciences, at least insofar as they are attainable by human reason. However, he also uses the insights of later writers who add material to Aristotle's account and also give it greater accuracy and precision. Moreover, Aristotle did not have access to divine revelation. Thomas's primary concern is with theology, which is based on divine revelation.

During this same Second Regency, Thomas also gave disputed questions on the virtues, including a general treatment of virtue, the *De Virtutibus in Communi*, and a discussion of the cardinal virtues, the *De Virtutibus Cardinalibus*. Perhaps also in this period he put the final touches on his related disputed questions of sin and vice, the *De Malo*.

Often there is a stark contrast between what he wrote in his early *Commentary on the Sentences* and those texts on ethics that he wrote nearly twenty years later. We will see that at times themes from the *Sentences* commentary appear in some of his later works but not in others. We should keep in mind that opinions about whether and how Thomas develops his view or changes his mind are often conjectural. But the same caution should apply to descriptions of how earlier and later passages might be reconciled.

Although this book addresses all of the most significant texts in which Thomas writes on virtue, its structure follows the section on the virtues in general that we find in the *Prima Secundae*, qq. 56–67. The order of the discussion moves from the more general to the more specific and finishes with an account of the properties of virtue. Chapter 1 considers Thomas's definition of virtue as a good operative habit. To understand this definition, we must first consider how "habit" is a philosophical term that has no counterpart in ordinary English. Moreover, Thomas explains and defends this definition in light of the various authoritative definitions that are available to him, including especially definitions from Aristotle and Peter Lombard.

Chapter 2 is on the distinction between intellectual and moral virtue, which was first clearly delineated by Aristotle. The moral virtues correspond to what are most commonly recognized to be virtues, such as justice and courage. Intellectual virtues are habits of knowing that do not on their own make the agent good. Prudence, however, is significant as an intellectual virtue precisely because of its connection with the moral virtues. Prudence depends on moral virtue, and each moral virtue depends

on prudence. Thomas emphasizes that the one virtue of prudence covers the material that belongs to all of the distinct moral virtues.

Chapter 3 considers the various divisions of moral virtue. This chapter describes Thomas's response to the Stoic thesis that the virtuous person lacks passions. Aristotle himself states that some moral virtues are about the passions. Thomas addresses this dispute in light of Augustine's account of the disagreement between the Stoics and the Peripatetics, who were Aristotle's later followers. He shows that he is willing to find some truth in different traditions, even though he primarily follows Aristotle. Moreover, he accepts from earlier Christian sources the originally Stoic and Neoplatonic doctrine that there are four cardinal virtues, namely prudence, justice, courage or fortitude, and temperance.

The topic of the cardinal virtues brings up a difficulty in translation that is best addressed in the beginning of this work. I will use both "courage" and "fortitude" to translate Thomas's use of the Latin word "*fortitudo*" to indicate this cardinal virtue. It seems to me that the word "*fortitudo*" has a wider use in Thomas's work than might be inferred from the sole use of the English word "courage." Although Aristotle uses courage to indicate a mean with respect to daring and the fear of death in battle, Thomas thinks that this habit is about difficult objects more generally.¹⁵ Thomas often follows Aristotle's presentation of courage, but in the *Summa Theologiae* he explains that the principal act of courage or fortitude is endurance, which can also be a distinct virtue, and the primary exemplar of such courage is martyrdom.¹⁶ For merely stylistic reasons, I will generally use "courage" to indicate the virtue insofar as it involves death in battle, and is a cardinal virtue, and I will use "fortitude" when a broader usage is needed. But for our purposes the terms are more or less interchangeable.

Chapter 3 ends with a discussion of the Neoplatonic thesis that there are different kinds or stages of virtue that lead to contemplation. The lowest level, the political, is merely about human affairs. But in the purgative stage, the subject is prepared for contemplation, and the highest human stage is a freedom from passion that is available only to those in heaven and the most perfect saints.

The focus on virtue as a preparation for contemplation prepares for Chapter 4's description of the distinction between natural and supernatural virtues. Natural virtues are acquired through human effort and are

¹⁵ Aristotle, *EN* 3,6–7; Thomas, *S.T.*, II-II, q. 123. See Jennifer Herdt, "Aquinas's Aristotelian Defense of Martyr Courage," in *Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics*, 110–128.

¹⁶ Thomas, *S.T.*, II-II, q. 124, art. 2.

studied by philosophical ethics. Supernatural virtues must directly come from God. Their existence is known only through revelation. Thomas's predecessors and most subsequent theologians typically identified these infused or supernatural virtues with the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The theological virtues are directly about God. But Thomas thinks that there must also be distinct infused moral virtues that exist alongside the acquired moral virtues. These infused virtues are specifically distinct from the acquired moral virtues that share the same matter and from the theological virtues that are about God. We will see that to understand much of what Thomas says about the virtues, we must delineate clearly between how such different virtues can be discussed in different contexts. Unfortunately, in some texts it is not clear whether Thomas is considering acquired or infused moral virtue, or even both together indistinctly.

Chapter 5 is about the properties of virtue. These properties follow upon a virtue by the simple fact that it is a virtue. There are four such properties that seem rather loosely connected: the mean of virtue, the connection between the virtues, the order of the virtues, and the duration of virtue after this life. Despite this somewhat loose ordering, each of these properties must be studied if we are to understand Thomas's account of virtue as a whole.

Chapter 6, which is the last chapter, considers the importance and contemporary relevance of Thomas's understanding of the virtues in light of what has been established in the previous chapters. The virtues are not basic to Thomas's understanding of moral goodness in the way that they are in some contemporary versions of virtue ethics. Nevertheless, they are needed to organize and account for the various ways of living a full life. Contemporary sciences might add precision or material to Thomas's account, but it is not clear that they require radical changes to it.

The goal of this book is to help the reader to learn from Thomas despite the differences between his texts themselves and the contemporary reader's tendency to hold background assumptions that make it difficult to assimilate what the various texts contain. I attempt to guide the reader through the various perils resulting from unfamiliarity with the relevant texts, as well as with the philosophical and historical contexts.

CHAPTER I

The Definition of Virtue

Thomas begins his discussion of virtue in the *Prima Secundae* by devoting q. 55 to its definition.¹ Peter Lombard had drawn from Augustine of Hippo's works the definition of virtue as a "good quality of the mind, by which we live rightly, which no one uses badly, which God alone works in a human."² In the first three articles of q. 55, Thomas argues that virtue is a good operative habit. In the fourth article he argues that Lombard's Augustinian definition of virtue is the most complete definition. This definition became widespread because the work in which it appeared, Lombard's *Sentences*, was the standard textbook for theology for many centuries. Thomas provides an account and defense of this standard definition not only in the *Summa Theologiae* but also in his early *Commentary on the Sentences* as well as in the roughly contemporaneous *De Virtutibus in Communi*, art. 1–2. However, in the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas more clearly connects this traditional definition with the more precise account of virtue as a good operative habit. His understanding of how the different definitions are related seems to be influenced by earlier writers such as Philip the Chancellor (d. 1236) and Albert the Great, who themselves inherited several definitions of virtue.³ Thomas adds to this tradition in part by developing a lengthy and more sophisticated account of habits in general. Although his

¹ An earlier version of some of the material in Chapter 1 was published as "Operative Habits and Rational Nature," in *El Obrar Sigue Al Ser: Metafísica de la persona, la naturaleza y la acción*, ed. Carlos A. Casanova and Ignacio Serrano del Pozo (Santiago de Chile and Valparaíso: RIL, 2020), 189–208.

² "bona qualitas mentis qua recte vivitur et qua nullus male utitur, quam Deus solus in homine operatur": Lombard, *Sent.* lib. 2, d. 27, cap. 1 (1.2, 480). See Philip, *Summa de Bono*, 525; Albert, *De Bono*, tract. 13, q. 5, art. 1, n. 101 (Col., 28, 67). This is largely a compressed form of the description of virtue in Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio*, 2.19 (CCSL 29, 271). See Lottin, *PM*, 3.1, 101.

³ Philip, *Summa de Bono*, 525–542; Albert, *De Bono*, tract. 13, q. 5, art. 1, nn. 101–115 (Col., 28, 67–76). For Albert's discussion and dependence on Philip, see Stanley Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency: The Moral Philosophy of Albert the Great* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 159–161. For the influence of Philip on Albert and Thomas, see Rollen Edward Houser, introduction to *The Cardinal Virtues: Aquinas, Albert, and Philip the Chancellor* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 2004), 3–4, 42–56.