I-II, QUESTION 55, ARTICLE 4

Whether Virtue Is Suitably Defined?

TEXT	PARAPHRASE
[1] *Whether virtue is suitably defined?*	Is the traditional definition of virtue fitting?

"Virtue is a good quality of the mind that enables us to live in an upright way and cannot be employed badly – one which God brings about in us, without us." St. Thomas respectfully begins with this widely accepted definition because it would be arrogant to dismiss the result of generations of inquiry without examination. The ultimate source of the view which it encapsulates is St. Augustine of Hippo, but Augustine did not use precisely this wording. His more diffuse remarks had been condensed into a formula by Peter Lombard,[2] and the formula was then further sharpened by the Lombard's disciples.

Although St. Thomas begins with the tradition, he does not rest with it – he goes on to consider whether the received definition is actually correct. The first two Objections protest calling virtue a *good* quality. The third protests calling it a quality *of the mind*. The fourth objects to the phrase that it *enables us to live rightly* and the fifth to the phrase that it *cannot be employed badly*. Finally, the sixth protests the statement that *God brings it about in us, without us*.

Although, in the end, St. Thomas accepts the definition, he does not accept it quite in the sense in which some of his predecessors did. In particular, Peter Lombard had presented it as a definition of *all* virtue, but St. Thomas does not agree. As stated, St. Thomas thinks it characterizes only infused virtue – the spiritual dispositions poured into us as an undeserved gift of divine grace.

[2] Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, II, Distinction 27, Chapter 1: *Virtus est, ut ait Augustinus, bona qualitas mentis, qua recte vivitur et qua nullus male utitur, quam Deus solus in homine operatur* (Virtue, says Augustine, is a good quality of the mind that enables us to live in an upright way, that nobody uses badly, and that God alone works in man).

However, he points out later that with a single slight modification, the definition can be made to apply to acquired virtue as well – to the dispositions we develop by practice and habituation. Once that change is made, the definition becomes fully universal.

For the moment, St. Thomas treats the distinction between infused and acquired virtues as a given, but later in the *Summa*, he explains, explores, and defends it. At the right time in this book we will give it more attention.

Objection 1. [1] *It would seem that the definition, usually given, of virtue, is not suitable, to wit: "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."* [2] *For virtue is man's goodness, since virtue it is that makes its subject good.* [3] *But goodness does not seem to be good, as neither is whiteness white. It is therefore unsuitable to describe virtue as a "good quality."*	**Objection 1.** Apparently the definition customarily assigned to virtue is unfitting: the one that says "Virtue is a good quality of the mind that enables us to live in an upright way and cannot be employed badly – one which God brings about in us, without us." For since virtue is the very quality of something that *makes* it good, a man's virtue and his goodness are the very same thing. Hence, to call his virtue good is to call his goodness good. But to call goodness good is absurd, like calling whiteness white. So to call a virtuous quality a "good" quality is inappropriate.

[1] The Objector reminds us of the entire definition in order to attack its first element.

[2] Virtue "makes" man good in the sense that if he has virtue he is good, and if he doesn't, he isn't.

[3] Snow is white, but whiteness itself has no color, because it is not matter; the number six is even, but evenness itself is not even, because it is not a number. The Objector argues that in the same way, a virtuous man is good, but goodness itself is not good. But if goodness cannot be called good, then virtue – which is the same thing – cannot be called good either.

Objection 2. [1] *Further, no difference is more common than its genus; since it is that which divides the genus.* [2] *But good is more common than quality, since it is convertible with being. Therefore "good" should not be put in the definition of virtue, as a difference of quality.*	**Objection 2.** Moreover, the traditional definition places virtue in the genus of quality, since it is a quality of the mind. Now we classify the things in a genus into species by considering the differences among them, and in the case of virtue, the difference we are considering is a quality some minds have and others lack. Very well, what quality is it? A *good* quality, we are told. But goodness is much too broad a criterion to distinguish among members of a genus, because being and goodness are equivalent: *everything* that has being is good in *some* respect.

[1] Suppose one marine biologist divides the genus of water-dwellers according to the kind of water in which they dwell, and another divides them according to their skin color. Notice that the former biologist has chosen a difference which *inheres* in the genus of water-dwellers; only water-dwellers can be distinguished according the kind of water in which they dwell. If we want our definitions to correspond to the essential forms of things, this is the way to proceed. But the latter biologist has chosen a difference that does *not* inhere in the genus of water-dwellers, for color might be used to distinguish many things far beyond the genus – a fish might be red or blue, but so might a parrot or a snake. This kind of definition is not necessarily bad – in fact, for certain special purposes, it may be quite useful – but it does not correspond to the essential forms of things.

Now since we are trying to find out the essential form of virtue, and since we agree that virtue belongs to the genus of qualities, we should be considering differences that *inhere* in the genus of qualities and that therefore do not apply beyond it. However, the Objector protests that "good" is not a difference of this kind. It would be bad enough that besides good and bad qualities there are also good and bad meals, good and bad men, and so forth. But it is even worse than that, for in a certain sense, good is universal – as we are about to see.

[2] Goodness and essential being are co-extensive. Their "convertibility" is well expressed by St. Augustine when he writes, "Yet all things should rightly be praised in virtue of the fact that they are! For they are good merely in virtue of the fact that they are."[3] Even a bad person is good *just insofar as he is a person*; even a bad song is good *just insofar as it is a song*. To forestall a possible objection, we must add that what St. Augustine means by "things" is not all things but only the sorts of things that classical philosophers call substances, or natures. For example, he would say that the body is good, but he would not say that sickness is good; sickness is not a nature but a privation or deficiency in the proper order of a nature. It is not a *something* but rather a *something wrong* or a *something missing*.

Objection 3. [1] *Further, as Augustine says (De Trin. xii, 3): "When we come across anything that is not common to us and the beasts of the field, it is something appertaining to the mind."* [2] *But there are virtues even of the irrational parts; as the Philosopher says (Ethic. iii, 10). Every virtue, therefore, is not a good quality "of the mind."*	**Objection 3.** Still further, Augustine points out that differences of mind are what distinguish us from irrational creatures such as beasts. But the distinguishing quality of virtue cannot lie in minds, because, as Aristotle, the preeminent philosopher, points out in the third book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, even our irrational powers can have virtues. Thus, not all virtues are good qualities of the mind.

[3] Augustine of Hippo, *Augustine: On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, trans. Peter King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Book 3, Chapter 7, Section 21.

[1] One must take the quotation marks which are so often inserted into the Blackfriars translation with a grain of salt, because St. Thomas is usually paraphrasing rather than quoting. What he probably has in mind is the place where St. Augustine says, "But that of our own which thus has to do with the handling of corporeal and temporal things, is indeed rational, in that it is not common to us with the beasts; but it is drawn, as it were, out of that rational substance of our mind, by which we depend upon and cleave to the intelligible and unchangeable truth, and which is deputed to handle and direct the inferior things."[4]

[2] The term "soul" refers to the pattern, or formal principle, the presence or absence of which makes the difference between a human corpse and an embodied human life. In the passage cited, Aristotle observes that temperance and fortitude are virtues of the irrational "parts" or powers of the soul, reminding us of his earlier remark that temperance is chiefly concerned with the regulation of pleasures. The Objector's point is that if even something irrational, such as the appetitive power of the soul, can either have or lack virtue, then virtue has nothing essential to do with rationality.

By the way, in calling the powers of the soul "parts," St. Thomas does not mean that the soul can be disassembled into components which can then be built back up, otherwise the essential unity of the soul would be in question. He distinguishes among several senses in which something can be called a part of something else. The integral parts of a principal thing really are components – they are the distinct elements that must concur for its perfection or completion. In this sense the wall, roof, and foundations are parts of a house. The subjective parts of a principal thing are its species or kinds. In this sense *ox*, *lion*, and *dog* are subjective parts of the genus animal. The potential parts of a principal thing are various things connected with it, directed to certain secondary acts or matters, which do not have its whole power. Only in the last sense are the appetitive power and the reasoning power "parts" of the soul.[5]

St. Thomas calls Aristotle "the Philosopher" not because Aristotle is the only philosopher but because he is the greatest one. Employing similar metonymical expressions, he calls St. Paul "the Apostle," St. Augustine of Hippo "the Theologian," Peter Lombard "the Master," Averroes "the Commentator," and each of the jurisconsults quoted in Justinian's *Digest* "the Jurist," and with equal respect calls Moses Maimonides "Rabbi Moses." We should not suppose from his respectful manner of referring to Aristotle that St. Thomas always agrees with him; where necessary, he corrects him, and even where he does agree with him, he often reworks and extends his argument, making it clearer, more precise, and more capacious. For instance, as we see later, he reorganizes

[4] Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan (public domain), Book 12, Chapter 3, available at http://newadvent.org/fathers/1301.htm.

[5] II-II, Q. 48, Art. 1. We consider the idea of the potential parts of a principal virtue more closely in II-II, Q. 80, Art. 1, in connection with the principal virtue of justice.

Aristotle's own diffuse classification of the virtues according to a more powerful fourfold scheme and adds a whole new level to it by considering not only the acquired but also the infused dispositions of character, along with their corresponding effects.

Objection 4. [1] *Further, righteousness seems to belong to justice; whence the righteous are called just.* [2] *But justice is a species of virtue. It is therefore unsuitable to put "righteous" in the definition of virtue, when we say that virtue is that "by which we live righteously."*	**Objection 4.** Still further, rightness seems to concern justice, which is why the same people are called both right and just. But justice is not the whole of virtue; it is one virtue among others. Thus, to include rightness in the definition of *all* virtue – as we do when we say that virtue is that "which enables us to live rightly" – is inappropriate.

[1] The Latin term St. Thomas uses is *rectitude*, from which we derive the English word of the same spelling, meaning straightness or uprightness as contrasted with crookedness. It is derived from the verb *rego*, which means to guide, govern, or regulate. We use uprightness as a synonym for justice in English, too, but in English we lack the overtones of guidance (which is too bad).

[2] The Objector argues that if rectitude is a synonym for the specific virtue of justice, then it is incorrect to say that it refers to virtue in general.

Objection 5. [1] *Further, whoever is proud of a thing, makes bad use of it. But many are proud of virtue,* [2] *for Augustine says in his Rule, that "pride lies in wait for good works in order to slay them."* [3] *It is untrue, therefore, "that no one can make bad use of virtue."*	**Objection 5.** Besides, pride is a vice, so anyone who is proud of something is employing the thing wrongly. But as Augustine reminds us in his *Rule*, many are proud of virtue: "Pride lies in ambush even for good deeds so that it can destroy them." So they *are* using virtue badly; so virtue *can* be used badly.

[1] The Objector's counterexample depends on the fact that the Latin term *usus* is much broader than the English term "use." In many cases where Latin speaks of using something, in English we would speak instead of exercising it, enjoying it, or having some other involvement with it. So, although an English-speaking reader might mount the same protest, he would probably come up with a different counterexample – perhaps that the virtue of fortitude can be employed for robbing banks, or that the virtue of friendship can be exercised by helping a companion conceal an act of dishonesty.

[2] The influential *Rule of the Servants of God*, composed by St. Augustine, is not a detailed set of ordinances but an explanation of the principles for the regulation of a community of persons consecrated to the monastic life. He remarks in Chapter 1, Section 7 that although every other kind of sin lies in the evil deeds themselves, pride lurks in wait (*insidiatur*) even for good deeds, so that they are ruined and lost.

[3] The Objector reasons that since it is possible to be proud of virtue's works, virtue can indeed be put to bad use.

Objection 6. [1] *Further, man is justified by virtue.* [2] *But Augustine commenting on John 14:12:*[6] *"He shall do greater things than these," says [Tract. lxxii*[7] *in Joan.: Serm. xv de Verb. Ap. 11]:* [3] *"He who created thee without thee, will not justify thee without thee."* [4] *It is therefore unsuitable to say that "God works virtue in us, without us."*	**Objection 6.** Still further, virtue is what makes a man just, what puts him in the right. But in a comment on Christ's remark to His disciples in the Gospel of John that he who believes in him "will do greater things than these," Augustine remarks, "He who created you without you, will not justify you without you." Thus, to say that God brings about virtue in us "without us" is unfitting.

[1] In the broadest sense, to be justified is to be *made* just or upright, and what accomplishes this is virtue. Protestant readers should take note that neither the Objector nor St. Thomas himself is claiming that this can take place without the supernatural grace of God. We return to this point in the Reply.

[2] The RSV-CE translates the verse, "he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father." In his *Tractate 72 on the Gospel of John*, Chapter 1, St. Augustine takes it as his springboard for a broader discussion of the relation between what man does and what God does.

[3] St. Augustine makes remarks like this in several places. The version of the remark most closely matching St. Thomas's paraphrase is in Sermon 169, Chapter 11, where St. Augustine says *qui ergo fecit te sine te, non te iustificat sine te*, "therefore He who made you without you, will not justify you without you," using the word "made" (*fecit*) instead of St. Thomas's "created" (*creavit*), which is more precise. Although *Tractate 27 on the Gospel of John* does not contain the remark exactly, it strongly suggests it, for at one point St. Augustine comments that without us, God made us, and a little later he remarks that the grace of Christ works in us, though not without us.

[4] The Objector takes the idea that God brings about virtue in us *without us* to mean that He brings it about without any involvement on our part whatsoever. As we will see in the Reply to the Objection, St. Thomas considers this interpretation mistaken.

On the contrary, *We have the authority of Augustine from whose words this definition is gathered, and principally in De Libero Arbitrio ii, 19.*	**On the other hand,** the traditional definition comes to us by the authority of St. Augustine himself, for it is drawn together from his own words, especially in the second book of *On Freedom of the Will.*

[6] Correcting the Blackfriars citation, which gives the verse as John 15:11 instead of John 14:12.
[7] Correcting the Blackfriars citation, which gives the tractate as xxvii (27) instead of lxxii (72).

The "on the other hand" section of a disputation is not the writer's own view but a restatement of the traditional view which has just been challenged. Here St. Thomas simply points out the traditional source from which the definition is derived – St. Augustine's remarkably wide-ranging dialogue *On Freedom of the Will*, which St. Thomas quotes often. Following are some of the remarks from the dialogue St. Thomas may have in mind (not all of them, however, from Book 2).

- "With respect to chastity, well, seeing that it is a virtue, who would doubt that it is located in the mind itself?"[8]
- "Hence if it is precisely by a good will that we embrace and take delight in this will, and put it ahead of all the things that we are unable to retain just by willing to do so, then, as the argument has shown, our mind will possess those very virtues whose possession is the same thing as living rightly and honorably. The upshot is that anyone who wills to live rightly and honorably, if he wills himself to will this instead of transient goods, acquires so great a possession with such ease that having what he willed is nothing other for him than willing it."[9]
- "Consider justice, which no one uses for evil. Justice is counted among the highest goods there are in human beings – as well as all the virtues of the mind, upon which the right and worthwhile life is grounded. For no one uses prudence or courage or moderateness for evil. Right reason prevails in all of them, as it does in justice itself (which you mentioned). Without it they could not be virtues. And no one can use right reason for evil."[10]
- "No one uses the virtues for evil, but the other goods – namely, the intermediate and small goods – can be used not only for good but also for evil. Hence no one uses virtue for evil, because the task of virtue is the good use of things that we can also fail to use for good."[11]
- "Instead, you conform your mind to those unchangeable rules and beacons of the virtues, which live uncorruptibly in the truth itself and in the wisdom that is common, to which the person furnished with virtues whom you put forward as a model for your emulation has conformed and directed his mind."[12]
- "Thus if every good were taken away, what will be left is not something, but instead absolutely nothing. Yet every good is from God. Therefore, there is no nature that is not from God."[13]
- "But since we cannot rise of our own accord as we fell of it, let us hold on with firm faith to the right hand of God stretched out to us from above,

[8] Augustine of Hippo, *Augustine*, Book 1, Chapter 5, Section 12.
[9] Ibid., Book 1, Chapter 13, Section 29.
[10] Ibid., Book 2, Chapter 18, Section 50.
[11] Ibid., Book 2, Chapter 19, Section 50.
[12] Ibid., Book 2, Chapter 19, Section 52.
[13] Ibid., Book 2, Chapter 20, Section 54.

namely our Lord Jesus Christ; let us await Him with resolute hope and desire Him with burning charity [love]."[14]

- "These are not mediocre goods: that the soul by its very nature takes precedence over any material body; that the soul has the ability, with the help of its Creator, to cultivate itself and by religious efforts it can acquire and possess all the virtues through which it may be freed from the torments of trouble and the blindness of ignorance."[15]

I answer that, [1] *This definition comprises perfectly the whole essential notion of virtue.* [2] *For the perfect essential notion of anything is gathered from all its causes. Now the above definition comprises all the causes of virtue.* [3] *For the formal cause of virtue, as of everything, is gathered from its genus and difference, when it is defined as "a good quality": for "quality" is the genus of virtue, and the difference, "good."* [4] *But the definition would be more suitable if for "quality" we substitute "habit," which is the proximate genus.* [5] *Now virtue has no matter "out of which" it is formed, as neither has any other accident; but it has matter "about which" it is concerned, and matter "in which" it exists, namely, the subject.* [6] *The matter about which virtue is concerned is its object, and this could not be included in the above definition, because the object fixes the virtue to a certain species, and here we are giving the definition of virtue in general.* [7] *And so for material cause we have the subject, which is mentioned when we say that virtue is a good quality "of the mind."*	**Here is my response.** The traditional definition completely encompasses the entire rational meaning of virtue – all that the concept includes, without leaving anything out. For the complete rational idea of each thing is drawn together from all four of its causes – formal, material, final, and efficient – and the definition of virtue in question *does* collect all four of its causes. The *formal* cause of each thing, including virtue, is grasped from the genus to which it belongs and the difference which distinguishes it from other elements in that genus. This is done when virtue is defined as a "good quality," for virtue belongs to the genus of quality and differs from other qualities because it is a good one. It would have been still better to define it as a good *habit*, because habit, or disposition, is the *kind* of quality that it is, but "quality" will do. The *material* cause of a thing is its matter, which may be taken in three senses: the matter *of* which it is composed, the matter *to* which it pertains, or the matter *in* which it exists. Now virtue is not composed *of* anything – it is an "accident" or nonessential property of something else (a mind), and no accident is composed of anything. So matter in the first sense could not have been included in its definition. Virtue does have matter *to* which it pertains – its object, that to which it is directed – but this could not have been included in the definition either, because we are speaking of virtue in general, and the object of virtue depends on what kind of virtue we are talking about. That leaves matter in the third sense, the thing *in* which virtue exists, which is the

[14] Ibid., Book 2, Chapter 20, Section 54.

[15] Ibid., Book 3, Chapter 20, Section 56.

[8] *The end of virtue, since it is anoperative habit, is operation.* [9] *But it must be observed that some operative habits are always referred to evil, as vicious habits: others are sometimes referred to good, sometimes to evil; for instance, opinion is referred both to the true and to the untrue: whereas virtue is a habit which is always referred to good: and so the distinction of virtue from those habits which are always referred to evil, is expressed in the words "by which we live righteously":* [10] *and its distinction from those habits which are sometimes directed unto good, sometimes unto evil, in the words, "of which no one makes bad use."*	mind – thus, quite properly, the definition states that virtue is a good quality *of the mind*. The *final* cause of a thing is its end or purpose. Virtue is a habit or disposition concerning things that are done; so its end or purpose is operation. But we must say more than this about its final cause, because some operative dispositions always tend toward evil (in particular, the vices tend toward evil), and others may tend either toward either good or evil (for example, opinions – intellectual dispositions to believe something – may be either true or false) – but virtue always tends toward good. The definitional phrase "which enables us to live rightly" distinguishes virtue from the first kind of operative habit, and the definitional phrase "which cannot be employed wrongly" distinguishes it from the second.
[11] *Lastly, God is the efficient cause of infused virtue, to which this definition applies; and this is expressed in the words "which God works in us without us."* [12] *If we omit this phrase, the remainder of the definition will apply to all virtues in general, whether acquired or infused.*	The *efficient* cause of a thing is the force, means, or agency by which it comes into being. Since the definition in question concerns only "infused" virtue, the agency that infuses it into us is God. This is fittingly made clear by saying that God brings it about "in us, without us." If we wish to make the definition more general, so that it applies not only to infused virtues but also to virtues acquired by habituation, then this phrase may be omitted.

[1] Though usually St. Thomas employs words sparingly, here he permits himself a redundancy in order to emphasize that the traditional definition contains everything it should: both "perfect" (*perfecte*) and "whole" (*totam*) convey the idea of completeness. The term that the Blackfriars translate as "essential notion" and that I render as "rational meaning" is the very broad term *rationem*.

[2] St. Thomas borrows the fourfold classification of the causes of a thing from Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 5, Chapter 2. The word "cause" broadly means that which explains what it is. The pattern or functional organization of a thing is its formal cause, or form. The constituents or elements of which it is composed, or to which it is essentially related, are its material cause, or matter – matter being anything that can receive a form. The purpose for the sake of which it exists is its final cause, or end; we may add that the meanings of the term "purpose" as applied to purposes in things, purposes in minds, and purposes in the mind of God are not identical but analogical. Finally, the force, means, or agency by which something comes into being is its efficient cause, or

power. For example, the matter of the heart is muscle; its form is a functional arrangement of interlocking chambers; its power is embryogenesis; and its end is pumping blood. Aristotle explains in his own way:

> "Cause" means (1) that from which, as immanent material, a thing comes into being, e.g. the bronze is the cause of the statue and the silver of the saucer, and so are the classes which include these. (2) The form or pattern, i.e. the definition of the essence, and the classes which include this (e.g. the ratio 2:1 and number in general are causes of the octave), and the parts included in the definition. (3) That from which the change or the resting from change first begins; e.g. the adviser is a cause of the action, and the father a cause of the child, and in general the maker a cause of the thing made and the change-producing of the changing. (4) The end, i.e. that for the sake of which a thing is; e.g. health is the cause of walking. For "Why does one walk?" we say; "that one may be healthy"; and in speaking thus we think we have given the cause. The same is true of all the means that intervene before the end, when something else has put the process in motion, as e.g. thinning or purging or drugs or instruments intervene before health is reached; for all these are for the sake of the end, though they differ from one another in that some are instruments and others are actions.[16]

[3] An illustration of the general point is that the genus of man is "animal," his difference from other animals is "rational," and so his form is "rational animal." In the same way, the genus of virtue is "quality," its difference from other qualities is "good," and so its form is "good quality."

[4] St. Thomas points out that a virtue is not any kind of quality but the kind of quality called *habitus*. This Latin term is much broader than its English cognate, "habit," which we tend to use for things we do without thinking about them. By contrast, a *habitus* can be any kind of dispositional quality whatsoever, whether natural, acquired, or infused – even a tendency concerning *how or what* we think.[17]

[5] Since virtue is not composed of anything, one might be inclined to say that it has no matter. However, it is essentially related to certain matter, and this is the matter that we call its material cause. One way in which a virtue may be essentially related to matter is that this matter is its *object*. The object of generosity, for example, is the giving of things to others.

[6] However, different virtues have different objects. For example, the object of temperance is not the same as the object of fortitude. So no particular object of virtue is properly included in the definition of virtue in general.

[7] Another way in which a virtue may be essentially related to matter is that this matter is its *subject* – that *in which* the virtue inheres. In what then does virtue inhere? It inheres in the mind. Therefore, the mind is its material

[16] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross (public domain), Book 5, Chapter 2.

[17] Occasionally English speakers do use the term "habit" in the broader sense. For example, in Robert Louis Stevenson's story "The Suicide Club," one of the characters says, "I am in the habit of looking not so much to the nature of a gift as to the spirit in which it is offered" (public domain).