

EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF VIRTUE IN AQUINAS' VIEW

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Abstract:

Hidup moralitas tidaklah cukup jika hanya mengandalkan kemampuan penalaran. Alasannya: di dalam kemampuan penalaran itu kesesatan cara berpikir dapat terjadi. Kesesatan cara berpikir ini tentu saja tidak disadari oleh si subyek. Ketidaksadaran akan kesesatan cara berpikirnya menghantar si subyek itu sendiri kepada kebutaan terhadap tindakannya. St. Thomas Aquinaslah yang menekankan pentingnya keutamaan dalam hidup moralitas. Salah satu persoalan yang muncul adalah pendapat umum yang mengatakan bahwa keutamaan dapat ditemukan dalam perbuatan-perbuatan buruk, misalnya keberanian seorang penjahat untuk membunuh. Dengan demikian konsep keutamaan terbuka untuk didalami baik definisi maupun pengertiannya. P. Foot menyatakan bahwa keberanian yang ada di dalam tindakan-tindakan buruk bukanlah keutamaan. Sedangkan St. Thomas Aquinas menegaskan bahwa keutamaan adalah perintah yang pasti dari jiwa yang dapat diperoleh manusia melalui kebiasaan.

Keywords: courage, good/bad action, habit, ordering of soul, reason, virtue.

There are many studies about virtue¹, and especially about virtue according to the Thomistic perspectives².

The aim of this paper is to follow Saint Thomas Aquinas' concept of virtue, as treated in his work: *Summa Theologiae* I-II,q.56,a.5: then we shall try to present Filippa Foot's Interpretation about *S.Th.* I-II,q.56,a.5 and to restate Aquinas' precepts about virtue, finishing with some critical reflections.

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- 1 George Henrik von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966); Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley, 1978); James Wallace, *Virtues and Vices*, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1978); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1996); John L. Treloar, "Moral Virtue and the Demise of Prudence in the Thought of Francis Suárez", in *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* (formerly *The New Scholasticism*) (3) 1991; Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Ed.), *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Roger Crisp (Ed.), *How Should One Live?: Essays on the Virtues*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
 - 2 Frank Yartz, "Virtue as an Ordo in Aquinas", in *Medieval Studies* (47) 1969-70, pp.305-319; Mario Valentino Ferrari, "La disputa su virtù e felicità e l'eudemonismo estetico di Tommaso d'Aquino", in *Rivista Teologia*

The definition of a virtue given by Aristotle is justly famous: it is, he writes:

a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it³.

But Aquinas does not believe that the use of reason alone is sufficient to ensure that people are truly good or that they live a truly moral life. For that, he says, we need virtues. Quoting St. Augustine, Aquinas defines a moral virtue as:

“... *bona qualitas mentis* ... Et ideo, ut discernatur virtus ab his quae semper se habent ad malum, dicitur *qua recte vivitur*: ut autem discernatur ab his quae se habent quandoque ad bonum, quandoque ad malum, dicitur, *qua nullus male utitur*”⁴.

Aquinas, in his definition of virtue⁵, said that virtues can produce only good actions, and that they are dispositions “of which no one can make bad use”⁶, except when they are treated as objects, as in being the subject of hatred or pride. The common opinion nowadays is, however, quite different. With the notable exception of Peter

Morale (8) 1976, pp.627-653; Giuseppe Abba, “La funzione dell’habitus virtuoso nell’atto morale secondo lo Scriptum super Sententiis di San Tommaso d’Aquino”, in *Salesianum* (42) 1980, pp.3-34; Giuseppe Abba, “La nuova concezione dell’habitus virtuoso nella Summa Theologiae di San Tommaso d’Aquino”, in *Salesianum* (43) 1981, pp.71-118; Giuseppe Abbà, *Lex et Virtus: Studi sull’evoluzione della dottrina morale di San Tommaso d’Aquino*, Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 56, (Roma:LAS, 1983); Dolores Miller, “Moral Virtue, Eudaimonia, and the Prime Mover”, in *The New Scholasticism* (60) 1986, pp.1-34; Kevin M. Staley, “Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Ethics of Virtue”, in *The Modern Schoolman*, (4) 1989, pp.285-287.

3 *EN* 1106,a.36-1107,a.3, W.D.ROSS (Trans), “Nicomachean Ethics”, in Robert Maynard HUTCHINS (Ed), *The Works of Aristotle Vol.II*, Great Books of the Western World 9, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, INC, 1952), p.352; Cf. Battista MONDIN, “Virtù”, in *Op.Cit.*, p.653: “Aristotele divide le v. (virtù) in due gruppi principali: dianoetiche (dell’intelletto) ed etiche (della volontà o libera scelta). Le prime concorrono allo sviluppo delle facoltà intellettive; mentre le seconde presiedono al controllo delle passioni e alla scelta dei mezzi al raggiungimento del fine ultimo”; Also Cf. A. Chadwick RAY, “A fact about Virtues”, in *The Thomist*, (3) 1990, p.430: He argues that “the opening sentence of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* affords a factual basis for sustaining the no-bad-use thesis as descriptive of virtues as we find them;...”; There are five points which need to be noted in this definition, see Joseph de Finance, *An Ethical Inquiry* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1991), pp. 475-476.

4 *S.Th.*I-II,q.55,a.4. Emphasis is mine.

5 My professor explains the concept of Aquinas’ virtue very well, Mario Pangallo, “*Habitus*” e vita morale: *Fenomenologia e fondazione ontologica* (Napoli-Roma: LER, 1988), pp.52-57; cf. Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp.239-244.

6 *Ibid.*: Cf.*S.Th.*I-II,q.56,a.5: “Sed tamen si qui sunt habitus in talibus viribus, virtutes dici non possunt. Virtus enim est habitus perfectus, quo non contingit nisi bonum operari: unde oportet quod virtus sit in illa potentia quae est consummativa boni operis. Cognitio autem veri non consummatur in viribus sensitivis apprehensivis; sed huiusmodi vires sunt quasi praeparatoriae ad cognitionem intellectivam. Et ideo in huiusmodi viribus non sunt virtutes, quibus cognoscitur verum; sed magis in intellectu vel ratione”. Emphasis is mine.

Geach⁷, hardly anyone sees any difficulty in the thought that virtues may sometimes be displayed in bad actions. Von Wright⁸, for instance, speaks of the courage of the villain as if this were a quite acceptable idea, and most people take it for granted that the virtues of courage and temperance may aid a bad man in his evil work. It is also supposed that charity may lead a man to act badly, as when someone does what he has no right to do, but does it for the sake of a friend.

There are, however, reasons for thinking that the matter is not so simple as this. If a man who is willing to do an act of injustice to help a friend, or for the common good, is supposed to act out of charity, and he so acts where a just man will not, it should be said that the unjust man has more charity than the just man. But do we not think that someone not ready to act unjustly may yet be perfect in charity, the virtue having done its whole work in prompting him to do the acts that are permissible? And is there not more difficulty than might appear in the idea of an act of injustice which is nevertheless an act of courage? Suppose for instance that a sordid murder were in question, a murder done for instance for gain or to get an inconvenient person out of the way, but that this murder had to be done in alarming circumstances or in the face of real danger; should we be happy to say that such an action was an act of courage? Or a courageous act? Did the murderer, who certainly acted boldly, or with intrepidity, if he committed the murder, also act courageously?⁹

2. Philippa Foot's Interpretation¹⁰

What are we to say about this difficult matter? There is no doubt that the murderer who murdered for gain was *not a coward*: he did not have a second moral defect which another villain might have had. There is no difficulty about this because it is clear that one defect may neutralize another. As Aquinas remarked, it is better for a blind horse if it is slow¹¹. It does not follow, however, that an act of villainy can be courageous; we are inclined to say that it took courage, and yet it seems wrong to think of courage as equally connected with good actions and bad.

One way out of this difficulty might be to say that the man who is ready to pursue bad ends does indeed have courage, and shows courage in his action, but that in him courage is not a virtue. Later I shall consider some cases in which this might be the right thing to say, but in this instance it does not seem to be. For unless the murderer consistently pursues bad ends, his courage will often result in good; it may enable him to do many innocent or positively good things for himself or for his

7 Peter Geach, *Op.Cit.*, pp.8-9.

8 George Henrik von Wright, *Op.Cit.*, pp.136-154.

9 We resume it from Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices", in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Ed.), *Op.Cit.*, p.175.

10 *Ibid.*, pp.163-177.

11 *S.Th.I-II*, q.58, a.4

family and friends. On the strength of an individual bad action we can hardly say that the courage in him is not a virtue. Nevertheless there is something to be said even about the individual action to distinguish it from one that would readily be called an act of courage.

Perhaps the following analogy may help us to see what it is. We might think of words such as *courage* as naming characteristics of human beings in respect of a certain power, as words such as *poison* and *solvent* and *corrosive* so name the properties of physical things. The power to which virtue-words are so related is the power of producing good action, and good desires. But just as poisons, solvents, and corrosives do not always operate characteristically, so it could be with virtues. If A (say arsenic) is a poison it does not follow that A acts as a poison wherever it is found. It is quite natural to say on occasion that A does not act as a poison though A is a poison and it is A that is acting. Similarly courage is not operating as a virtue when the murderer turns his courage, which is a virtue, to bad ends. Not surprisingly the resistance that some of us registered was not to the expression “the courage of the murderer” or to the assertion that what he did took courage but rather to the description of that action as an act of courage or a courageous act. It is not that the action could not be so described, but the fact that courage does not here have its characteristic operation is a reason for finding the description strange.

In this example we were considering an action in which courage was not operating as a virtue, without suggesting that in that agent it generally failed to do so. But the latter is also a possibility. If someone is both wicked and foolhardy they may be so with courage, and it is even easier to find examples of a general connection with evil rather than good in the case of some other virtues. Suppose, for instance, that we think of someone who is over-industrious, or too ready to refuse pleasure, and this is characteristic of him rather than something we find only one occasion. In this case the virtue of industry, or the virtue of temperance, has a systematic connection with defective action rather than good action; and it might be said in either case that the virtue did not operate as a virtue in this man. Just as we might say in a certain setting A is not a poison here though A is a poison and A is here, so we might say that industriousness, or temperance, is not a virtue in some. Similarly in a man habitually given to wishful thinking, who clings to false hopes, hope does not operate as a virtue and we may say that it is not a virtue in him.

3. Aquinas' Understanding

Aquinas says that in one sense a virtue is a power (in the material sense) and in another sense it is not (essentially)¹². That is, he says we call whatever we can do

12 *De Virtutibus in Communi*, q.1, a.1, reply 1: “... quod sicut *potestas*, ita et virtus accipitur dupliciter. Uno modo *materialiter*, prout dicimus, id quod possumus, esse *nostram potentiam*, et sic Augustinus bonum usum liberi arbitrii dicit esse virtutem. Alio modo *essentialiter*; et sic neque potentia neque virtus est actus”. Emphasis is mine.

one of our powers, and gives as an example Augustine's statement that the good use of free will is a virtue. But essentially speaking, Aquinas says that virtue is neither power nor act. Aquinas speaks of virtue as the complement of potency.

The Thomistic terminology is somewhat foreign to our usual way of speaking and undoubtedly there is much dissimilarity in the use of the word *power* here¹³ (the modern use seems to resemble the material sense and the Thomistic view seems most concerned with the essential sense; but there is a distinction worth noting. Virtue is not something which one has, or a power which one has, but it is a certain set disposition or ordering of the powers which one has (in classical terms, an ordering of one's soul), which gives one the ability to have one's right perceptions govern one's desires or fears. Perhaps the description of virtue as a habit which enables a man to fulfill his natural capacities seems both consistent with the Thomistic view and also accessible to moderns.

Thus, in the same way in which gymnastic training might give an athlete the habit of coordination which enables him to run with strength and grace, the coordination is not the power - it describes a certain ordering of muscles and impulses which perfect one's natural powers¹⁴. Virtue has an analogous status on the moral level: through training, one develops habits - such as the ability to overcome one's desires - and this then means that reason and will and desire can cooperate to do what a man chooses; virtue perfects certain powers in the reason and will; it is not the power itself. The classical view of virtue, then, distinguishes the virtues from the powers which they perfect.

4. Critical reflections

Foot seems to wish to posit that courage is, in the instance under consideration, a virtue but does not always act as a virtue. What is it acting as? What could we call it? We find it proper to call arsenic a medicine when it functions as such; what could we call this courage which the murderer seems to display? A strength? A power? But these are all approbative terms and in this context seemingly rather synonymous with virtue and that is the very designation which we wish to avoid. And further, it seems that courage in this context ought not to be considered a valuable characteristic, for it is something which enables one to do bad acts. Therefore much as we were willing to designate arsenic as a medicine when it had beneficial effects, are we willing to call courage, a fault when it leads to bad acts?

Foot's analogy suffers from another fundamental difficulty and that is that the analogy seeks to compare a substance (poison) with a relation (courage) and is thus

13 Cf. Giuseppe Abbá, *Felicitá, vita buona e virtù: Saggio di filosofia morale* (Roma: LAS, 1995), pp.181-186.

14 Cf. Edward J. Gratsch, *Aquinas' Summa: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Alba House, 1985), pp.110-111.

perhaps doomed from the outset. Foot indicates that she thinks it proper to compare something like poison to something like virtue because both have “powers”¹⁵: virtue the power of producing good actions and good desires, and poison, we suppose, the power of producing harmful effects. But I believe that it is significant that whereas we might wish to call whatever has harmful effects in certain contexts a poison, we would not conversely wish to call whatever has the power of producing good effects, a virtue.

Indeed, as I have suggested something like arsenic is poisonous (on occasion) because in certain contexts or interactions it has the power to have harmful effects. And many things, like penicillin, which are usually beneficial, may in some circumstances be harmful and thus properly labeled poisonous. A substance gains the label poisonous because of its effects - and is labeled a poison when it usually has harmful effects. Using this analogy, Foot concludes that courage is a virtue, in the same sense that arsenic is a poison: that is, it is something which usually produces good actions in certain circumstances - although in some circumstances it is capable of aiding bad actions (in which case in Foot’s terms it is a virtue, but not acting as a virtue).

But virtue, in Aquinas’ view, is not the same sort of thing. That is, whatever usually has good effects is not always called a virtue nor would what sometimes has good effects be called virtuous (if we had a term with this connotation). More specifically, courage is not called a virtue because it usually has good effects. It is called a virtue because it designates a certain ordering of the soul, a certain relation between the parts of the soul which either exists or does not exist. And this ordering of the soul, called courage, is what enables man to have certain powers - it is not itself the power, nor is it so labeled because it has this power.

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