Virtue Theory and the Present Evolution of Thomism

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Over the past decade, a quiet revolution has been gathering momentum in the fields of moral philosophy and Christian ethics. These disciplines are undergoing a decisive shift as duty, obligation, and decision yield their central role in the understanding of the moral life lo the long-neglected concepts of virtue, character, and action.[1] In the English-speaking world, Alasdair MacIntyre remains the chief spokesman for the effort. It may interest some to learn that several years before he published *After Virtue* in 1981, the Faculty of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D. C., had decided to reinstate instruction in speculative moral theology, especially treating the matter of virtue theory. In the late 1960s, that is, shortly after the conciliar directive *Optatam totius*, No. 16, urged that the development of moral theology "should be nourished more thoroughly by scriptural teaching," such instruction had been dropped from the curriculum and replaced by courses such as the "Biblical Foundations of Morality."

In some respects, we can credit British scholarship within the analytical tradition as providing the impetus toward a contemporary study of the virtues.[2] Peter Geach, for instance, renders a complete account of classical virtue theory in his small book, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).[3] In this work, the author

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1. In *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), I provide an overview of the nature of the moral virtues, their relation to the intellectual virtues, the centrality of prudence in the moral life, and the structures of the acquisition and development of virtues.

2. Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980), collects a number of essays which discuss specific aspects of Aristotle's ethical arguments. Arthur Flemming, "Reviewing the Virtues," *Ethics* 90 (1980): 587-95, provides a survey of the literature up to that date. For a recent example of moral philosophy's interest in Aristotle, see D. S. Hutchinson, *The Virtues of Aristotle* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987). Finally, J. O. Urmson delivered the 1989 Aquinas Lecture at Blackfriars, Oxford entitled "Aristotle on Excellence of Character," *New Blackfriars* 71 (1990): 33-37.

3. The chapters were originally delivered as the Stanton Lectures (1973-74).

treats the four cardinal virtues, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, as well as the three theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity. Notwithstanding the inclusion of the theological virtues, Geach's work remains a philosophical text. "Faith is God's gift," he writes, "I try here only to remove obstacles to faith." While Geach obviously relies on the texts of Aquinas for his apologetical argument, the majority of ethicians in the back-to-virtue movement contented themselves with Aristotle and other non-Christian sources of moral truth. This may help explain why contemporary debates in Christian ethics actually center on issues other than the development of virtue and moral character. Of course, developments in philosophy usually do require some time to influence theological discussion. Nonetheless, it remains safe generalization to say that virtue theory occupies a small place in the current renewal of moral theology, at least in Roman Catholic circles. Still, it is useful to inquire why the virtue tradition that at one time dominated so much of Christian thinking on moral matters scarcely receives attention today, even from those whose stated purpose includes the revision of Roman Catholic moral theory and practice. This includes the majority of Roman Catholic thinkers who accept St. Thomas Aquinas as a source for theological reflection.

Before the II Vatican Council, two prominent Christian writers did produce properly theological studies on the virtues: Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (originally published as three separate treatises between 1954 and 1959 by Pantheon Books, Inc.), and Romano Guardini, *The Virtues* (Wurzburg, 1963). Even though the prevailing casuistry within official Roman Catholic moral theology relegated these essays to the field of Christian spirituality, these books still merit attention. Guardini in fact titled his work *Meditationen Über Gestalten Sittlichen Lebens*. This reflects the general view held earlier in this century and officially endorsed (by Pius XI) which held that discussion about virtue belongs to the realm of ascetical or mystical theology, but does not pertain to the warp and woof of hard moral theology.

In the United States, the Protestant ethicist Stanley Hauerwas again opened the eyes of the theological ethics community to the importance of virtue for moral theology. *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975) certainly merits an honored place in the history of virtue renewal. But according to Eilert Herms, "Virtue: A Neglected Concept in Protestant Ethics," Hauerwas's inspiration attained neither wide nor immediate recognition.[5] The history of Protestant thought also witnessed a similar eclipse of interest in virtue theory. But now the tide is turning.

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4. *Ibid.,* p. viii.

5. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1982): 481-85.

In recent years, a number of substantial works have appeared in the fields of moral theology and philosophy which take serious account of the place which virtue holds in the moral life. And in these publications, the texts of Aquinas invariably surface. I have chosen to chronicle an evolution of Thomism which is going on mainly in continental thought: in Germany (Tübingen), the theologian Eberhard Schockenhoff; in German-speaking Switzerland (Zurich), the philosopher Martin Rhonheimer; in *la Suisse Romande* (Fribourg), the Belgian Servais Pinckaers, O.P.; and in Italy, the Spanish Ramon Garcia de Haro. However, since Alasdair MacIntyre's recent Gifford Lectures published as *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) clearly merits him a place in some future history of Thomism, I would also like to include the American theologian Jean Porter in my survey. In a forthcoming book from Knox/ Westminster Press, Miss Porter clearly acknowledges her reliance on Professor MacIntyre for her reading of Aquinas's virtue theory.[6]

The extensive use of Aquinas's *corpus* forms the only criterion for calling the authors of these works Thomists. And pluralism, I submit, accurately describes the present state of Thomist morals. Because few of these "evolving" Thomist moralists are well known in the United States, this summary account of their positions on virtue will introduce them to the American audience. Beyond meeting that objective, I also wish to indicate briefly certain "orientations" of Thomist moral philosophy and theology.

First, the Tübingen theologian Eberhard Schockenhoff and his scholarly study *Bonum Hominis: Die anthropologischen und theologischen Grundlagen der Tugendethik des Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1987). Although the author considers the roots of Aquinas's thought in both the biblical commentaries and early systematic works, this 613-page model of German erudition principally inquires into the moral theology of the *Summa Theologiae*. The investigation unfolds in six major moments: First, concerning the doctrines of the *imago Dei* and *beatitudo* as, respectively, the origin and destiny of the human person; second, on Aquinas's conception of human freedom as the basis for his doctrine on virtue; third, on the role and function of

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6. This list excludes an author who deserves mention in any account of contemporary Thomist moral theology. I refer to the work of Michel Labourdette, O.P. As the veritable "doyen" of Thomist moralists, Fr. Labourdette belongs to the generation of du Lubac and company. But he still teaches at the Dominican studium in Toulouse. Until recently, his complete commentary on the *secunda pars* has existed only in mimeographed copies. Recently however, I learned with great pleasure that his editor plans a printed edition for next year.

human emotions in virtue; fourth, on *habitus* as the psychological foundation for virtue; fifth, concerning the specific notion of what constitutes a virtue; sixth and finally, on the notion of infused virtue and the working of divine agency on the human creature. A final section of the book considers each one of the theological virtues.

On Schockenhoff's account, "Bonum hominis" ("Das Gut des Menschen") forms the "Leitidee" of both human and Christian morality. In brief, the author adopts a concordist view concerning the relationship of imperfect and perfect beatitude, that is, human flourishing possesses at least some concrete relevance for beatifying *beatitudo*. In a similar way, since faith remains a virtue of the intellect, it can serve as a point of convergence for philosophy and theology. As much as the whole person engages in the moral life, virtue-shaped emotions facilitate our spiritual desire to achieve its final goal, the bonum hominis. Finally, freedom and (infused) virtue converge in the pursuit of a good which itself terminates the (ultimate) spiritual desire of each person.

Interestingly, Schockenhoff argues that one can measure the stability of a *habitus* not only by reference to the quality of the acts which it produces, but also by reference to the quality of the object which specifies it. Because of this view, the author can ascribe to the infused virtues a greater firmness than that which the acquired moral virtues enjoy. For this author, the infused virtues even provide the prime analogue, that is, the best concrete example and gauge, of all operative *habitus*. Whether or not this view represents the position of Aquinas, the author does draw our attention to the "receptive" side of a *habitus*. The stance, moreover, prepares us for the author's strong insistence on the place of the theological virtues in the Christian moral life.

Eight final theses indicate the various relevances which Aquinas's virtue theory holds for contemporary discussion in moral theology. For example, Schockenhoff contends that Aquinas's notion of virtue allows us to recognize moral science even in concrete and specific actions. He points out that moral science, practical judgment, and actual experience constitute a sort of dynamic circle which links elaborated moral knowledge with individual moral behavior. All in all, *Bonum Hominis* embodies a reliable contemporary version of Aquinas's moral theology.

Martin Rhonheimer's *Natur als Grundlage der Moral* (Wien: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1987) pursues a slightly different objective, one which challenges the use to which some German moral theologians put the distinction between the "categorical" and the "transcendental" in moral decision-making. Since he defines virtue as the "place" where reason and natural inclination integrate, the author stresses the importance of virtue for a correct understanding of natural law theory. However, because it

enlarges on the account of virtue in his book, I am citing from a more recent article by Rhonheimer, "Naturgesetz, Prinzipien der Praktischen Vernunft und Menschliches Handeln," an abridged translation of which will appear shortly in *The Thomist* under the title "Human Action, Natural Law, and the Moral Virtues." In both works, Rhonheimer grounds his "metaphysics of action" in Aquinas's discussions about the eternal and natural law. He insists that we envision natural law, not as an "order of nature," but as an "ordinatio rationis," that is, as an achievement of human reason.

Because he submits Aquinas's moral theory to a powerful Augustinian exegesis, Rhonheimer can easily take issue with those who cite Aquinas to support the existence of an autonomous ethic. For example, Rhonheimer notes the *Tenth Quodlibetal Question* q. 2, a. 2 where Aquinas interprets verse 6 of Psalm 4, "Signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domine" as meaning that divine truth establishes the ground and cause for all human cognition. The same biblical text is to be found at *Summa Theologiae* Ia-IIae, q . 91, a. 2 when Aquinas affirms that "the light of natural reason by which we discern what is good and what evil, is nothing but the impression of divine light on us." Given this confidence in human reason's direct enlightenment concerning moral truth, Rhonheimer, perhaps understandably, defines moral virtue as those dispositions which guarantee that the appetitive powers will not frustrate practical judgments. In other terms, moral virtue constitutes Augustine's "ordo amoris" (*De civitate Dei* 15. 22). Or again, moral virtue remains the condition for natural law to govern effectively in concrete and particular choices of action. As I said, Rhonheimer refuses to distinguish a (transcendental) theonomous from a (categorical) autonomous domain in human actions. Why? In his judgment, such a view effectively disengages both human freedom and moral activity from their privileged participation in the divine perfection of light.

Servais Pinckaers presents his study of moral theology under the title *Les Sources de la morale chrétienne* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987). The Belgian Dominican represents an older generation of scholars who continue to develop the moral teaching of Aquinas. What makes Fr. Pinckaers especially noteworthy in this survey is his long-standing insistence on the importance of a moral theology based on the virtues, gifts of the Holy Spirit, and evangelical beatitudes instead of a moral doctrine based on commandments and rules. Although somewhat eclipsed by the developments in moral theology immediately after the Council, Fr. Pinckaers conserved Aquinas's fundamental intuitions on the moral and theological virtues. Curiously, however, I can find no reference to Fr. Pinckaers in Alasdair MacIntyre's recent writings.

Two elements of Pinckaers's virtue theory deserve special attention. First, Pinckaers stresses the unique character of Aquinas's notion of *habitus*. In an early article, Pinckaers played with the notion that virtue is not a habit. Why? Because virtue insures that our human capacities accomplish their optimum, and this does not imply routine. Of course, a correct understanding of *habitus* leaves room for virtuous originality, and indeed makes it possible. Yet some critics have misunderstood Pinckaers's reasons for talking about virtuous *habitus* as "inner principles" of action. Morals, these critics insist, mean decisions, not inner dispositions. But Pinckaers responds that only virtue insures the full and complete performance of a correct choice.

Secondly, Pinckaers stresses the teleological framework of Aquinas's moral teaching: Augustine, not Aristotle, however provides the key to understanding this moral finality. Inspired by the five major themes which Augustine discloses in the Sermon on the Mount (*De Sermone Domini in Monte*, Bk. 2), Pinckaers signals the search for *le bonheur*, the active pursuit of happiness as the architectonic for Christian living. As a theologian, Pinckaers prefers talking about the role of the Holy Spirit in the moral life instead of elaborating on the function of practical reasoning in discerning moral absolutes. But, as the title of one of his books indicates, there still exists "Ce qu'on ne peut jamais faire," that is, actions intrinsically evil by reason of their constitution. By definition, such deeds do not make us happy.

In his recent book *Cristo, Fundamento de la Moral* (Barcelona: Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias, 1990), the Spanish priest Ramon Garcia de Haro devotes a concluding chapter to virtue. For Garcia de Haro, virtue serves as a cipher for divinization. In itself, this does not distinguish him from the position of Schockenhoff or Pinckaers on the infused virtues. But the program for reaching a virtuous state varies considerably from how the classical moral tradition interpreted the *secunda pars*. Garcia de Haro begins with Christ's teaching as the sole means to establish the grounds for true human dignity, and continues with "metaphysical harmonies" which he discovers between the notions of person, law, liberty. The author continues by emphasizing the role of a conscience which remains sympathetic to both moral law and magisterium, and in two chapters, by enlarging on sin and sinning. The casuists, as you will recall, relied on many of these same categories to develop their school positions.

As the title indicates, Garcia de Haro represents what I will provisionally call "Christocentric Thomism." The members of this school share an active interest in the writings of the Angelic Doctor, but they also choose to place Aquinas within a larger context of specifically

evangelical objectives. These objectives, whether they derive from a reading of the conciliar documents, such as *Lumen gentium*, the encyclicals of John Paul II, such as *Redemptor hominis*, or the distinctive purposes of a founder, such as Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer, require that the person of Christ always functions as the starting point of all legitimate theological enquiry. Of course, we recognize how this method runs counter to that which many interpreters agree Aquinas himself follows in the *Summa Theologiae*. Nevertheless, the custom of reading Aquinas as if he were St. Bonaventure is gaining increasing respectability, and therefore must be considered one of the evolutions to which Thomism submits.

Finally, Jean Porter's *Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990). This book aims at drawing the thought of Aquinas into a clearer dialogue with those who write about theological ethics in the United States. Accordingly, Porter prefaces her study with a brief survey of Catholic moral theology since Vatican II (where Germain Grisez and Richard McCormick, S.J.—it will come as no surprise—represent the major positions) and summary accounts of the dominant themes in the works of Protestant theologians Gene Outka, James Gustafson, and, indeed, Stanley Hauerwas. She then turns to a "reconstruction of the more strictly philosophical components" of Aquinas's moral theory as contained in the *Summa Theologiae*. In chapter two, Porter explains some basic notions which undergird Aquinas's general theory of morals, for example, his notion of goodness as something real; the premise that what is good or best for anyone is so in virtue of its being of a certain kind; the assertion that the self remains a legitimate "object" of theological charity; the view that one discovers intelligibility and organization within the created order; and finally, the conviction that the final perfection of the rational creature transcends the limits which creatureliness itself imposes. In chapter three, Porter gives an account of Aquinas's action theory, illustrated by some good examples. Chapters 4-6 provide her account of the *secunda pars*: the affective virtues, justice, and, in one chapter, "Prudence; Cardinal and Theological Virtues." But ultimately the author proposes that Aquinas can serve only as a starting point for morals, for "we can no longer accept [his] account as it stands" (*Recovery of Virtue*, p. 180).

Fr. McCool's thesis (in *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism*) concerning the pluralistic evolution of Thomism in the twentieth century surely holds true for the present state of Thomist moral philosophy and theology. Although I run the risk of sanctioning premature and, consequently, artificial divisions for a process which

only now has begun to emerge, I would like to suggest some characteristics which allow us to identify certain recognizable strains in the pluralism. In sum, I think we can verify two leanings among Thomist moralists nowadays.

First, the "Teleological Thomists." These emphasize Aquinas's insistence on final causality as both specifying and energizing the course of a good moral life. The theologians Schockenhoff and Pinckaers especially dwell on the significance of *beatitudo* in Thomist moral theology. The vision of God ultimately specifies the kind of life which the Christian must lead and at the same time draws the individual believer to follow that path of blessedness. But, alas, teleology can easily become a dangerous notion. Interpreters, for instance, sometimes confuse teleology with questions about intention and purpose in moral conduct. For example, Jean Porter asks whether Aquinas's teleological frame of reference allows for performing actions "without reference to any wider aim" (*Recovery of Virtue*, p. 76). And in a noteworthy article, Lisa Sowle Cahill points out that some who read Aquinas even interpret his teleology as a species of consequentialism.[7] Thomas Gilby once remarked that end so dominates the *secunda pars* that it should be read to say what it means. I suggest that today this remains an apt remark.

Secondly, the "Christocentric Thomists." As I have said, Garcia de Haro transparently represents this perspective. The Roman theologian Carlo Caffarra reads Aquinas along similar lines (*e.g.*, in his *Living in Christ* [San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 1987]). This perspective of course reintroduces some issues which preconciliar Thomism never quite got around to solving. I refer to the discussions between those who inaugurated the return to les sources of Christian thought, judging them indispensable for the continued viability of the theological enterprise, and those who took issue with this judgment, maintaining that only a realist metaphysics could preserve stability in theology. We usually think about the "New Theology" crisis as related to dogmatic concerns, but it has significance, I submit, for moral theology as well. It was none other than the late Fr. Chenu who felt obliged to explain why Christ appears so infrequently in the *secunda pars*.[8]

Does this mean that some evolving Thomist soon will produce a contemporary version of R. Garrigou-Lagrange's 1937 article, "L'instabilité dans l'état de péché mortel des vertus acquises"?[9] I think

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7. "Teleology, Utilitarianism, and Christian Ethics," *Theological Studies* 42 (1981): 601-29.

8. See his *Toward Understanding St. Thomas*, trans., A.-M. Landry, O.P. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), pp. 313-17.

9. *Revue Thomiste* 42-43 (1937): 255-62.

not. But the distinction between grace and nature still haunts ethics, theological or otherwise.

Some authors, such as Pinckaers and Garcia de Haro, clearly address themselves to Christian believers. They respectively represent a theological teleology and a confessional Christocentrism. But Rhonheimer and Porter, for different reasons, do not intend their studies to serve as examples of confessional literature. Rhonheimer calls his work philosophy, but he likes to emphasize the "identity" of the eternal law and natural law. "Reason," he argues, "does not know eternal law in an 'objective natural order'; rather, reason unfolds and explicitates the eternal law through a 'ratio naturalis' so that one can speak about a natural law. The eternal law is to be found, then, in the 'spirit of God' and participatively in the rational creature's inclinations and proper activities." His emphasis on participation leaves open the question as to how this differs from that participation which we call the grace of the moral virtues. On the other hand, Porter expressly undertakes a "reconstruction of the more strictly philosophical components" of Aquinas's moral theory as contained in the *Summa Theologiae*, but also considers both the theological and infused moral virtues. Although she enjoys the company of a growing number of scholars who analyze the arguments used in theological discourse, her approach raises the question as to how a philosopher can enquire about matters which surpass the competence of reason, such as divine charity, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

By way of conclusion, I submit that, in order to recognize how imperfect beatitude, what we sometimes hear referred to as "human flourishing," and Christ respectively shape a distinctively Thomist moral theology, we will need to take up again the distinction between the infused and acquired virtues. Only Schockenhoff appears willing to review those discussions frequent in the neo-Thomist period, but clearly based upon divergent school positions held by thirteenth- and fourteenth-centuries theologians, which sought to untangle the relationship of the infused moral virtues to their acquired counterparts. This discussion will certainly involve renewed reflection on Maritain's thesis, as expressed in Appendix VII of *The Degrees of Knowledge* (trans. Gerald B. Phelan [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959]): "We do not think that, in the state of fallen and redeemed nature, a complete moral wisdom of the purely philosophical order is possible, be it speculative or practical in mode" (p. 463).