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THE RETURN TO VIRTUE:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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The last forty years have witnessed a remarkable and growing interest in virtue ethics. Moral theologians have rightly celebrated this new interest and encouraged it. Students of Aquinas have especially welcomed this interest, because the return to virtue ethics offers opportunities for the renewal of moral theology along Thomistic lines. At the same time, however, the return to virtue also presents a number of challenges. In the medieval French, from which our English word comes, to challenge (*chalenger*) originally meant "to accuse," and ultimately derived from the Latin "*calumniare,*" "to accuse falsely."[1] From the medieval perspective, a challenge was a false accusation that touched one's honor and thus required a response through combat. The logic here is interesting. It implies a traditional awareness that falsity and error (especially when they touch us personally) are great incentives to action: they provoke us; they challenge us to respond. From this perspective, the return to virtue is a true challenge. It has occasioned a number of false (and ultimately dangerous) conceptions of virtue that touch intimately the Christian conception of the moral life, and thus should provoke us to respond. In what follows, I shall briefly and selectively trace the history of the return to virtue ethics and sketch the benefits for moral theology of this return. I shall then address some of the challenges that this return to virtue occasions, and conclude by suggesting the unique contribution that students of Aquinas can make toward responding to these challenges.

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1. Cf. "Challenge, v.," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, *OED Online* June 2011), <http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.nd.edu/view/Entry/30299>.

Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, in the introduction to their 1998 collection of readings in virtue ethics, state that their volume offers "a detailed map" of the emergence of virtue ethics in moral philosophy during the second half of the twentieth century.[2] According to this reading, the return to virtue is a phenomenon occurring in Anglo-American moral philosophy. Crisp and Slote trace the initial impetus for this return to Elizabeth Anscombe's 1958 essay "Modern Moral Philosophy."[3] To understand why her article has had such an impact, we must first understand something of the landscape of moral philosophy in Britain after the Second World War. At that time, academic moral philosophy remained locked in debates concerning the character of moral goodness, debates pursued between Deontologists and Utilitarians. Was the moral good determined by one's adherence to universal and impersonal formal rules (such as Kant's categorical imperative) as the Deontologists held, or was goodness instead a function of an act's utility toward attaining satisfaction or contentment, as the Utilitarians held, adhering to the tradition of thought developed by Jeremy Bentham, John Stewart Mill, and Henry Sidgwick? The question, therefore, was whether rules or consequences had priority in moral analysis.[4]

Anscombe responded that these divisions are of little importance, because both sides in this debate share the same unjustified and outmoded notion of moral obligation. Both sides affirm that the morally good act is one that we have an obligation to perform. From where, however, does this obligation come? Why am I obliged to maximize the satisfaction of the greatest number or to act according to impersonal universal rules? Indeed, Anscombe went further to argue that rules and utility were so formally conceived by these two ethical traditions that one could find a way to describe almost any action as useful or lawful. In essence, Anscombe was asking the meta-question, Why be moral? Anglo-American philosophy, she argued,

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2. *Virtue Ethics*, ed. ROGER CRISP and MICHAEL SLOTE (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

3. G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–26. Reprinted in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. CRISP and SLOTE, 26–44.

4. See ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 51–78.

had no *philosophical* answer to this question. Instead, philosophers were continuing to employ a notion of obligation that was a vestige of their culture's religious heritage: a notion of obligation based on divine law imposed by God upon human action. This "*law* conception of ethics" gave terms such as "ought" or "should" a special "moral sense" implying an absolute verdict that one "is bound" or "is required" to do the actions to which these terms refer.[5] Anscombe noted that after the general abandonment of the Christian conception of divine law, ethics finds itself in a curious situation: "It is as if the notion 'criminal' were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten."[6] In this context, moral "ought" has become "a word of mere mesmeric force" employed without any rational explanation for its binding power in human action.[7] Instead of wasting time in debates over the priority of rules or consequences, therefore, moral philosophers need to develop a *philosophical* justification for moral obligation. What is needed, Anscombe affirmed, is "an adequate philosophy of psychology," which we subsequently learn is her term for a renewed Aristotelian analysis of human action, human flourishing, and the traits of character (virtues) that make this flourishing possible.

> For the proof that an unjust man is a bad man would require a positive account of justice as a "virtue." This part of the subject-matter of ethics is, however, completely closed to us until we have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is—a problem, not of ethics, but of conceptual analysis—and how it relates to the actions in which it is instanced. . . . It can be seen that philosophically there is a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human "flourishing."[8]

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5. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 5.
6. Ibid., 6.
7. Ibid., 8.
8. Ibid., 4–5, 18.

Anscombe went so far as to assert that we should stop doing moral philosophy until such a philosophical psychology is developed, because otherwise we will simply be writing nonsense.[9]

Although Anscombe's essay caused something of a stir when it was published, the invitation to develop a new ethics of virtue did not immediately receive a response.[10] Indeed, it was almost twenty years before the first Anscombe-inspired attempts at virtue ethics appeared, with the publication in 1977 of Peter Geach's *The Virtues*, and then a year later the publication of works by Philippa Foot and James D. Wallace, both of which were entitled *Virtues and Vices*.[11] It wasn't until the 1981 publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, however, that virtue ethics began to transform how ethics was taught in English-language philosophy departments on both sides of the Atlantic.[12] This book, more than any other, has rehabilitated the study of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and sparked a veritable cottage industry of books purporting to develop a virtue ethics based on the insights of Aristotle.

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9. Ibid., 1.

10. Only after Wittgenstein's later work became more well known, especially his arguments against private language, did interest in virtue ethics began to rise. Like the riddles of a Zen koan, the clipped and repetitive questioning of WITTGENSTEIN's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) sought to disenthrall us from the Cartesian conception of interiority and moral agency (with its reliance on an *a priori* analysis of inner states), and reveal that our understanding of the moral life was the product of our initiation into the life and language of a community. Only in light of this anti-Cartesian perspective did a return to Aristotle begin to seem plausible. Moreover, as a number of early commentators on Wittgenstein recognized, a return to Aristotle would make possible a return to the Scholastics, because studying Aristotle meant rejoining a tradition of enquiry that included the Scholastics. As Antony Kenny long ago noted, "One side effect of Wittgenstein's liberation of philosophy from Cartesian prejudices is that it enables those who accept it to give a more sympathetic welcome to the writings of pre-Cartesian philosophers, and in particular medieval scholastics" (ANTHONY KENNY, *The Legacy of Wittgenstein* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1984], xi).

11. PETER GEACH, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); PHILIPPA FOOT, *Virtues and Vices: and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); JAMES D. WALLACE, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978).

12. ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1981; 2nd ed., 1984; 3rd ed. 2007).

From the Thomistic perspective, the benefits of this renaissance of virtue ethics are many. A whole generation of students in philosophy has been led by their professors to begin moral enquiry with the question of happiness: what constitutes human flourishing? They have also been taught to see the answer to this question as necessarily related to traits of character that dispose us to engage in excellent action; and whether these students conclude that human flourishing is a dominate good (consisting in one focal activity such as the contemplation of truth), or an inclusive good (attained by living the full gamut of the virtues), they nonetheless take it for granted that the moral goodness of an act should be gauged in relation to integral human fulfillment. All of this has disposed a large number of students to be receptive to a Thomistic conception of the moral life and has fostered a veritable renaissance of interest in Aquinas's moral thought.[13] (It has also inspired more than a few vocations to the Dominican Order.)

In essence, the rehabilitation of virtue ethics has reinserted elements of Anglo-American philosophy into the longstanding Western tradition of moral enquiry concerning the nature of human happiness.[14] From the perspective of moral theology, this rehabilitation disposes students of philosophy to take seriously the arguments of patristic and scholastic thinkers, especially of Augustine and Aquinas, concerning human excellence and fulfillment. A side effect of this encounter has been a new confrontation with both the grandeur and the limits of philosophy. These Christian thinkers recognized that the philosophers they were reading were not pursuing a profession but

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13. I would like here to thank two philosophers in particular who have influenced my own life and thought in this regard: Fr. Vincent Guagliardo, O.P., who introduced me to the thought of Alasdair MacIntyre by placing a copy of *After Virtue* into my hands in the fall of 1984, and Prof. David Solomon, whose lecture on Elisabeth Anscombe in his graduate seminar on virtue ethics at the University of Notre Dame revealed the deeper implications of the return to virtue and encouraged me to study Wittgenstein's later works. Both these professors changed the course of my life and have had a lasting influence on my studies. (For a subsequent reworking of Prof. Solomon's graduate lecture on Miss Anscombe, see DAVID SOLOMON, "Elizabeth Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy': Fifty Years Later," *Christian Bioethics* 14 [2008]: 109–22.)

14. DARRIN M. MCMAHON, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006).

a way of life, the *vita philosophica*.[15] The importance of studying philosophy was not that it might enable you to make a career at a major university, but that it might help you live a noble and happy human life. At the same time, however, these Christian thinkers recognized that, although philosophical enquiry could identify some of the traits of character integral to human fulfillment and could sketch something of the nature of this fulfillment, philosophy was of itself unable to attain the excellence and fulfillment it sought.[16] Indeed, as Aquinas notes, the best of the philosophers themselves recognized this.[17] From the Christian perspective, therefore, philosophical enquiry, through its pursuit of human fulfillment and the traits of character that make this fulfillment possible, is a preparation for the Gospel. In other words, the return to virtue has had the unforeseen consequence of

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15. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, edited with introduction by Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

16. The twin goals of the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* are to celebrate the dignity of the philosophical quest and to recognize the limits of this quest. See especially *Fides et Ratio*, n. 1–6.

17. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 48, n. 14–15: "Since Aristotle saw that there is no other knowledge for humans in this life than through the speculative sciences, he maintained that humans do not achieve perfect happiness, but only their mode of happiness. From which it is sufficiently clear how even the brilliant minds of these men suffered from the narrowness of their perspective". With regard to the English translations of primary Latin texts, the translations are my own, but I draw feely and heavily upon standard English translations. Specifically, my translations of the *Summa theologiae* are based on Fr. Laurence Shapcote's translation, known to the world as the translation made by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1922). Although numerous editions of this translation exist, I have employed the three volume Benziger Brothers' edition (New York, 1947–48). (For more on Fr. Shapcote's extraordinary translation, see Fergus Kerr's editorial comment, "The Shapcote Translation," *New Blackfriars* 92 [2011]: 519–520.) My translations of the *Disputed Questions on the Virtues* draw on Ralph McInerny's translation, *Disputed Questions on Virtue* (South Bend, IN: Saint Augustine's Press, 1999). For quotations from Augustine, I have drawn on the translations of Frank J. Sheed, Edmund Hill, and Markus Dods. I have also consulted the French translations made under the direction of M. Poujoulat and M. l'abbé Raulx (Bar-le-Duc, 1864–1872). The above quotation from the *Summa contra gentiles* is based on Vernon J. Bourke's translation, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three: Providence, Part I* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975). My Greek translations of Aristotle are also my own, but I have been guided by the revised Oxford translations in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: the Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

leading new generations of students to rediscover with Augustine that "you have made us for yourself, oh Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."[18]

The euphoria that this return to virtue can produce in students of Aquinas, however, too often has blinded them to important differences between popular accounts of virtue ethics and Aquinas's conception of virtue.[19] These differences offer true challenges to any Christian theologian who wishes to present the Christian life from the perspective of the virtues. First, there is the challenge of moral subjectivism. Some forms of virtue ethics celebrate traits of character that are based on a purely subjective conception of human flourishing, arguing that the goal of human life is whatever a community or a tradition of enquiry decides that it is. Indeed, whatever Alasdair MacIntyre's intentions were at the time, his insistence in *After Virtue* that he wanted to return to a form of teleology that did not depend on Aristotle's "metaphysical biology"[20] led many readers to conclude that MacIntyre was in fact promoting a form of community-based moral relativism.[21] (This is largely how MacIntyre is still interpreted in France.) MacIntyre has since recognized in print that not only was he wrong to reject the principles of Aristotle's philosophy of nature—which is what MacIntyre meant by "metaphysical biology"—he also should have articulated explicitly that the form of tradition-based rationality he had long promoted presupposes principles of practical reasoning implicitly known by all: it presupposes knowledge of the primary precepts of the natural law.[22] Other virtue

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18. *Confessions*, 1.1 (PL 32:661).

19. I myself fell prey to this in an early essay on the common good, where I failed to distinguish the infused and the acquired cardinal virtues and offered an account of grace's role in the acquisition of acquired virtue that borders on the semi-Pelagian! See MICHAEL SHERWIN, "St. Thomas and the Common Good: The Theological Perspective: an Invitation to Dialogue," *Angelicum* 70 (1993): 307–28. "Delicta iuventutis meae et ignorantias meas ne memineris, Domine."

20. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed., 196–97.

21. Robert Wachbroit was one of the first to articulate this charge of relativism (*Yale Law Journal* 92 [1983]: 564–76). MacIntyre responded to his criticism in the postscript to the 2nd ed. of *After Virtue* (272–78); Wachbroit responded to MacIntyre's response in a letter to the editors who published his original review (*Yale Law Journal* 94 [1985]: 1559–65).

22. See ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court

ethicists, however, question the existence of such principles and con-
cede the subjective and relative character of their conceptions of
virtue.[23] Although the existence of subjectivist conceptions of virtue
is not necessarily an argument against virtue ethics, it does reveal
that the return to virtue is not necessarily a return to a Christian, or
at least a Catholic, conception of right and wrong. Any attempt to
renew moral theology by centering the Christian life on the virtues,
therefore, must articulate the universal and objective character of the
human flourishing (beatitude) it proposes and of the principles of hu-
man action that direct us toward this flourishing. It must also, as the
work of Servais Pinckaers has shown, articulate the role of rules and
law in the pedagogy of virtue.[24]

A second challenging feature of virtue ethics is its elitism. A truly
Aristotelian conception of virtue recognizes that very few people are
actually able to discover the virtues and live according to them. From
Aristotle's perspective, only an elite few become virtuous. Most peo-
ple are "from the hour of their birth … marked off for subjection."[25]
They, like beasts of burden, are incapable of virtue because of the
poverty of their natural gifts and of the environments in which they
were raised. Aristotle in fact has little hope for one raised in bad
habits from birth. As he states in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "It makes
no small difference whether we form habits of one kind or of another
from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all*
the difference."[26] This moral elitism, with its focus on human effort
toward perfection, has traditionally led Protestant thinkers to reject
virtue ethics as Pelagian and unbiblical; they regard it as an ethic that

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Press, 1999), x; *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and
Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 127–48, 194; *First
Principles and Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (Milwaukee, WI:
Marquette University Press, 1990).

23. See, for example, Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Ox-
ford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For a general treatment of moral relativism in
virtue ethics, see Christopher W. Gowans, "Virtue Ethics and Moral Relativism,"
in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven D. Hales (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell,
2011), 391–410.

24. See Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: The
Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 354–74.

25. *Politics*, 1.5 (1254a19).

26. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1 (1103b24–25).

has no place for the central Christian experience of conversion and of the centrality of Christ.[27]

An attentive reading of the New Testament should indeed provoke theologians to study whether a virtue perspective is compatible with the scriptural conception of the moral life. The Greek term for virtue (ἀρετή) appears only three times in the New Testament: once in Philippians (4:8) and twice in 2 Peter (1:3.5). The context of these references is revealing. In Philippians, Paul speaks of virtue while calling his readers to practice what he has taught them:

> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any virtue (ἀρετή), if there is anything worthy of praise, ponder these things and what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:8–9)

Paul invites his readers to "ponder" (λογίζεσθαι) virtue from within a larger call to imitate Christ. We are to have the mind of Christ:

> Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:6–11)

Paul tells the Philippians that this movement from suffering and death to new life and glorification is possible for them because "God

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27. It should be noted, however, that both Luther and Calvin employed the language of virtue in their own works. What they rejected was the apparent Pelagianism of the overly philosophical accounts of acquired virtue. See TERENCE IRWIN, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study*, vol. 1: *From Socrates to the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 744–74, and JENNIFER A. HERDT, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 173–218.

is at work in [them] both to will and to do" (Phil 2:13). This empowerment in Christ permits Paul to affirm that "for me life is Christ and death is gain" (Phil 1:21) and to say that "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). Paul can say this even while recognizing his own weakness. It was famously while asking the Lord three times to remove "a thorn in the flesh" that Paul received from him the assurance, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Paul is thus proposing a conception of moral excellence markedly different from that of Aristotle. The Christian is called to live virtue from within a process of self-emptying that requires a passage through suffering and death to resurrection, new life, and glory. All of this, even virtue, becomes possible because of our incorporation into the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The power (grace) that God gives us through this incorporation enables us to do all things in him who strengthens us.

Second Peter (1:3–8) is even more explicit about the divine source of virtue. The letter affirms that we are called to participate in God's own "glory and virtue" (δόξῃ καὶ ἀρετῇ) by becoming "partakers of the divine nature" (θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως). It is as partakers in God's nature and virtue that we receive the call to live virtue, a call that begins with faith: "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue (ἀρετήν)." There then follows a list of particular virtues—knowledge (γνῶσις), self-control (ἐγκράτεια), perseverance (ὑπομονή), piety (εὐσέβεια), and brotherly love (φιλαδελφία)—that is capped by charity (ἀγάπη). These specific virtues and their relation to each other and to the theological virtues of faith and charity merit extensive study. Here, however, we wish only to note how Second Peter portrays virtue as flowing from God's virtue by means of one's participation in the divine nature.

The divine source of these excellences abolishes the exclusive character of virtue and thus places New Testament morality in direct opposition to the moral elitism of classical philosophy. God's grace empowers even the poor, the weak, and the outcasts to live heroic lives of virtue. As Paul famously explains, God institutes a reversal of values, choosing the weak and foolish, in order to reveal more effectively the wisdom and strength that comes from Christ and his cross (1 Cor 1:19–31).

If we turn to the New Testament's treatment of specific virtues we find a similar dynamic. For example, the New Testament employs with varying frequency three of the four Greek terms for the cardinal virtues that Aristotle analyses in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: prudence (φρόνεσις), justice (δικαιοσύνη), and temperance (σωφροσύνη). The New Testament authors, however, offer a markedly different picture of the source and role of these virtues in the moral life. The New Testament describes John the Baptist as preparing the people to receive Christ by leading them to the "prudence of the just" (φρονήσει δικαίων [Lk 1:17]). Through Christ's redemptive action, God has poured grace upon us according to all manner of wisdom and prudence (σοφία καὶ φρονήσει [Eph 1:8]), so that we may understand his mysteries. Christ himself is our wisdom and our justice (1 Cor 1:30). It is from him that we receive the "gift of justice" (Rom 5:17), and in him that we become the "justice of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Biblical justice principally concerns right relationship with God through the act of faith (Rom 9:30), but we live this justice by being just in our actions toward others (Mt 5:20 and 25:46). All Scripture, we are told, is useful for the "training in justice," so that we may be "complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tm 3:16–17). The New Testament authors agree with pagan ethicists that justice requires courage and temperance, but here again these traits of character are understood differently. First, although the Greek term for courage (ἀνδρεία)—whose roots in the common Greek word for man (ἀνήρ, ἀνδρός) imply that courage has a purely human source—appears not at all in the New Testament,[28] the New Testament frequently employs more generic equivalents for courage, such as power (δύναμις), strength (κράτος), force (ἰσχύς) and perseverance (ὑπομονή).[29] Employing these terms, the New Testament authors call us to pray for God's strength so that we can bear or escape future trials and do combat with our spiritual enemies (1 Pt 4:11; Col 1:11; Phil 4:1; 1 Thes 3:8; Eph 6:12). This combat

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28. The traditional deponent Greek verb "to be courageous" (ἀνδρίζεσθαι) does appear once in the New Testament (1 Cor 16:13), but Paul seems to be paraphrasing a passage from the Greek version of 1 Maccabees (2:64), where Paul replaces the call to stand firm courageously in the law with a call to stand firm courageously in the faith.

29. See Ceslaus Spicq, *Théologie morale du Nouveau Testament* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1965), 354.

is possible because "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power (δυνάμεως), love and temperance (σωφρονισμοῦ)" (2 Tm 1:7). For the biblical authors, therefore, even the cardinal virtues are divine excellences, given to us by God and for which we should pray. This was already affirmed in the book of Wisdom, when it states that "the fruits of [Wisdom's] works are the virtues, for she teaches temperance, prudence, justice and fortitude" (Wis 8:7). A fuller account of biblical morality would also show that the cardinal virtues are themselves subordinated to a very non-Aristotelian list of biblical virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Much more could be said about the New Testament conception of virtue, but this brief sketch shows that even though one can speak of the New Testament containing a virtue ethics, moral theologians must distinguish this ethics from a purely pagan or philosophical conception of virtue.

Saint Augustine was acutely aware of the unique character of Christian virtue. His failed attempt to make the Plotinian assent toward union with God and his discovery that he had to descend with the humanity of Christ to rise with Christ to new life led Augustine to develop a theology of virtue rooted in the life of grace.[30]

> The highest good can come to men only through Christ, and him crucified, by whose death death itself is conquered and by whose wounds our nature is healed. Therefore, the just man lives by faith in Christ. For from this faith he lives prudently, courageously, temperately, and justly, and thus through all these true virtues he lives rightly and wisely because he lives faithfully.[31]

For Augustine, the virtues, even the cardinal virtues, are divine excellences that flow from grace and are lived through God's agency.

> Christ, who is "the virtue of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24), gives different virtues in this place, and who, to provide all the virtues that are necessary and useful in this valley of tears, shall give one virtue, Himself. For in Scripture and in many writers four virtues are described useful for life: prudence, by which we discern between good and evil; justice,

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30. See *Confessions*, 7.17–21 (PL 32:744–48).
31. *Against Julian*, 4.19 (PL 44:747); see also *On the Trinity*, 13.26 (PL 42:1036).

by which we give each person his due, "owing no man any-
thing" (Rom 13:8) but loving all men: temperance, by which we
restrain lusts; fortitude, by which we bear all troubles. These
virtues are now by the grace of God given to us in this valley
of tears.[32]

Although Augustine accepts the philosophers' list of virtues, he re-
defines these virtues in relation to Christian charity. For Augustine,
the virtues are all forms of well-ordered love, which integrate our
actions into the love of God.[33] "Hence it seems to me that a short
and true definition of virtue is ordered love."[34] Augustine sharply dis-
tinguishes Christian virtue from pagan virtue, viewing the latter as
corrupted by a disordered love.[35] Indeed, Augustine famously denies
that pagan virtues are real or true virtues at all, even going so far as
to describe pagan virtues as forms of vice.[36]

   Scholars often contrast Augustine's negative description of pagan
virtue with Aquinas's apparently more optimistic view that pagan ex-
cellences are true but imperfect virtues.[37] What this standard account
of Aquinas as an anti-Augustinian fails to recognize, however, is that
in the *City of God*, Augustine criticizes pagan virtue from within pa-
gan criteria concerning what constitutes a virtue. When Augustine
affirms that the excellences of the ancient Romans were not true
virtues, he does so from within a pagan philosophical conception of
virtue and its requirements. Stated another way, it's not his Christian
commitments that prevent Augustine from affirming that the pagans
have true but imperfect virtues; instead, what prevents this are the
presuppositions concerning the requirements of virtue that Augus-
tine shares in common with his pagan interlocutors, who—on their
own terms—have no place for a notion of true but imperfect virtue.

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32. *Exposition on the Psalms*, 83.11 (PL 37:1065–66).
33. Cf. *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, 1.15.25 (PL 32:1322).
34. *City of God*, 15.22 (PL 41:467): "Unde mihi videtur, quod definitio brevis et vera
virtutis ordo est amoris."
35. Cf. *Against Julian*, 4.19–22 (PL 44:747–49).
36. Cf. *City of God*, 19.25 (PL 41:656): "For although some suppose that virtues
which have a reference only to themselves, and are desired only on their own ac-
count, are yet true and genuine virtues, the fact is that even then they are inflated
with pride, and are therefore to be reckoned vices rather than virtues."
37. See *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) II-II, q. 23, a. 7.

It would have been cold comfort, for example, for an aristocratic Roman Stoic or a Platonic disciple of Porphyry to learn that, although the traits of character they were so diligently striving to attain could be called "true virtues," these virtues fail in their primary task of leading them to happiness and fulfillment. The Stoic example is particularly instructive. When the Stoics claim that their virtues constitute happiness to such an extent that they are unable to suffer, no matter what misfortunes befall them, even torture, these thinkers are advancing a notion of virtue that leaves no conceptual space for imperfect virtue.[38] Virtue either makes you perfectly happy, or it's not virtue. In the pagan context of Augustine's world, therefore, a theory of true but imperfect virtue would have been unintelligible. Later, once their pagan interlocutors have receded into the mists of history, Christian theologians such as Aquinas and his contemporaries, as they discussed amongst themselves the relationship between nature and grace, could indeed develop a notion of true but imperfect virtue.

Once again, however, we should not overstate Aquinas's optimism concerning pagan virtue. Although he does indeed hold that the pagans could acquire through their own actions the cardinal virtues that orient them toward natural human fulfillment and the common good of the community, Aquinas offers several important caveats. First, he affirms that without the aid of grace the passions will never be entirely obedient to reason, a view that renders pagan virtue truly imperfect.[39] Indeed, since the goal of the moral virtues is precisely to order rightly human affectivity, it is difficult to see how the acquired virtues of the pagans could lead to the integrated moral excellence sought by Aristotle. Second, Aquinas affirms that without the aid of grace, the pagans could not persevere in virtue: sooner or later (and with a certain regularity) they would commit actions that are seriously and directly opposed to their virtues. They would en-

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38. See, for example, SENECA, *To Helvia On Consolation*, 4.2–3 and 5.1–2, in *Moral Essays*, with an English translation by JOHN W. BASORE, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1932), vol. 2, p. 425, and SENECA, *On the Happy Life*, 4.2–3 in *Moral Essays*, vol. 2, p. 109–10.

39. Cf. *ST* I, q. 95, a. 1.

gage in mortal sin.[40] Lastly, Aquinas describes the happiness attainable in this life as profoundly limited and fleeting. Indeed, Aquinas quotes the book of Job to express this: "Man born of a woman lives but briefly and is full of many miseries" (Job 14:1). He describes the character of these miseries by alluding to Augustine:

> This present life is subject to many unavoidable evils: to ignorance on the part of the intellect; to inordinate affection on the part of the appetite; and to many penalties on the part of the body, as Augustine diligently describes in the *City of God* (14.4). Likewise neither can the desire for good be satiated in this life, because although we naturally desire the good that we have to be permanent, the goods of the present life pass away, since life itself passes away, which we naturally desire to have, and continually will to have permanently.[41]

Aquinas's description of the pagans' true but imperfect virtue, therefore, is far from optimistic. The acquired pagan virtues leave the passions disordered, do not empower those who acquire them to avoid serious sin and lead to an imperfect, perilous and fleeting happiness. Aquinas's account of pagan virtue is thus very close to Augustine's own account of them. Aquinas shares with Augustine the recognition that grace makes possible what wounded nature could not attain on its own. He also recognizes with Augustine that it is infused virtue that has priority in the Christian life.

Aquinas goes beyond Augustine, however, by being more attentive to the relationship between nature and grace in the Christian life. Aquinas does this by drawing extensively on Aristotle's analysis of the natural world and of human action. Although scholars have written volumes on Aquinas's use of Aristotle, they too often fail to notice that Aquinas draws on Aristotle's treatment of the acquired virtues not merely to understand the dynamics of natural virtue, but more importantly as a means of understanding the character of the infused virtues (including the infused cardinal virtues) described in the New Testament. Since it is by analogy with nature that we understand the workings of grace, Aquinas first studies acquired virtue as

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40. Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 2 and 8.

41. *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 3. English translations of the *ST* come from: *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger, 1948).

a means of grasping something of the mystery of infused virtue.[42]
For example, Aquinas follows Aristotlev in affirming that we de-
velop the acquired virtues by repeatedly doing acts of these virtues.[43]
Aquinas then asserts that an analogous dynamic is at work with the
infused virtues, whether these be the theological virtues or the in-
fused cardinal virtues. We grow in the infused virtues by engaging
in their respective acts. There is this difference, however: while each
act of an acquired virtue directly develops and deepens that virtue,
acts of infused virtue only dispose to growth in virtue according to
the mysterious economy of merit.[44] Like a tree that suddenly sprouts
new greenery after lying dormant, so too the Christian who lives the
infused virtues will suddenly grow in these virtues, through God's
grace.[45] Aquinas draws on the Aristotelian virtues, therefore, not be-
cause he equates the Christian life with the acquired virtues, but be-
cause the acquired virtues offer analogies for understanding the in-
fused virtues, which are indeed at the heart of the Christian life. In
other words, St. Thomas uses Aristotle's analysis of virtue for biblical
and Augustinian ends.

The importance of the unique character of infused Christian virtue
is illustrated, as alluded to above, by the phenomenon of adult con-
version. Augustine drew on his own experience to explain this. Saint
Augustine is clear that, before the grace of conversion, he was pros-
trate before his sexual passions, praying the pathetic prayer of ad-
dicts through the centuries: "Grant me chastity and continence, but

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42. Contrary to the standard account, a number of recent studies have argued that
the treatment of the cardinal virtues in the *Secunda secundae* has as its true object
the *infused* cardinal virtues, and that when these questions refer to the acquired
virtues, they do so only to provide analogies for understanding the life of grace.
See Angela McKay, *The Infused and Acquired Virtues in Aquinas' Moral Philosophy*
(Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004); Gabriel Baumann, *La surnaturalisa-
tion des actes humains par la grâce. L'enracinement ontologique des vertus morales in-
fuses chez S. Thomas* (S.T.D. diss., University of Fribourg, Switzerland, 2008); Markus
Christoph, *Justice as an Infused Virtue in the* Secunda secundae *and Its Implications
for Our Understanding of the Moral Life* (S.T.D. diss., University of Fribourg, Switzer-
land, 2010).

43. *ST* I-II, q. 63, a. 2.

44. Cf. *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, q. 1, a, 11, corp. and ad 14; *ST* I-II, q. 114,
a. 1, 4, and 8.

45. *ST* II-II, q. 24, a. 6.

not yet."[46] It was the grace of conversion that enabled Augustine to rise from sin and to lead a holy life. In other words, Augustine experienced something not explicitly known to Aristotle: God's grace. Augustine discovered that grace, by incorporating us into the life and mission of Christ, enables us to recover from a bad moral formation, to recover from a life of vice. Grace empowers us to live the virtues, but virtues of a very special kind: the infused virtues, both theological and cardinal. The grace of conversion empowers us to live by faith, hope, and charity, and to perform the acts of the cardinal virtues that incarnate this loving trust in God. This does not mean, however, that the grace of conversion removes all struggle: far from it. As Aquinas notes, drawing on St. Paul, "there always remains the struggle between the flesh and the spirit, even with moral virtue."[47] Aquinas notes that one source of struggle comes from the lingering effects of our acquired vices, which can hinder even a saint's ability to live the infused virtues: "one who repents receives by grace charity and all the other virtues, but because of the lingering dispositions from his prior sins he experiences difficulty in the performance of the virtues which he receives habitually."[48] This is why keen observers of human character, such as the Venerable Bede, were led to affirm that certain saints seemed to lack some of the moral virtues.[49] From Aquinas's perspective, although these saints may have lacked acquired virtue and thus have struggled with the lingering effects of their previously acquired vices, with the grace of conversion these saints received all the infused virtues (theological and cardinal) necessary to live the Christian life.[50] What Bede and others observed in the lives of the saints was simply that living from the infused virtues was difficult because of the contrary inclinations remaining in these saints from their pre-conversion sinful actions.

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46. *Confessions*, 8.7 (PL 32:757): "da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo." W.H. Auden famously paraphrased Augustine's prayer in the concluding lines of his poem "The Love Feast": "Make me chaste, Lord, but not yet."

47. *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 14.

48. *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, q. 5, a. 2, ad 2.

49. BEDE, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 17.10, 1.5 (PL 92:541); cited in *ST* I-II, q. 65, a. 3, obj. 3.

50. *ST* I-II, q. 65, a. 3, ad 2 and ad 3.

The experience of the divided self even after conversion points to the dependence of the infused cardinal virtues on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.[51] Contemporary psychology, especially research into addiction, suggests that those who still feel drawn to their addictions must live the infused cardinal virtues from within a hope-filled and loving trust in God. This loving trust is twofold. They must trust that sobriety really will lead them to their deepest happiness, and they must trust that God gives them the strength here and now to live this sobriety. This twofold trust is necessary because, on the level of psychological experience, neither feature of Gospel morality may *feel* true. The desire to return to one's addiction may be the only thing that feels right. As one recovering addict, the poet Mary Karr, has eloquently observed, even while praying to God to keep her sober, she recognized that "I still very much fancied the idea that glugging down Jack Daniel's would stay my turmoil, even though doing so had resulted in my driving into stuff with more molecular density than I."[52] It is in this context that the experience of the divided self can help us understand the relationship between infused and acquired virtues. St. Thomas portrays the acquired virtues as removing obstacles that inhibit our living the infused virtues.[53] From a contemporary perspective we can say that by living the life of grace we gradually integrate our personalities—our acquired habits and dispositions—into our life of infused virtue ordered toward the love of God and the kingdom of heaven. Mary Karr, for example, shares that as she persevered in prayer her attitude toward both God and others began to change. Even though trusting anyone, let alone God, did not come easily to her, she eventually began to feel "in a bone-deep way the degree to which I'm watched over—how everyone is. And how my stone heart is moment by moment softening as I embrace that."[54] St. Augustine had a similar experience when, upon his conversion, he felt as if "a secure light shone

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51. As we have seen, Augustine asserts this dependence explicitly (*Against Julian*, 4.19 [PL 44:747]; *On the Trinity*, 13.26 [PL 42:1036]; *Exposition on the Psalms*, 83.11 [PL 37:1065–6]); Aquinas does so as well (*ST* I-II, q. 63, a. 3 and q. 65, a. 2).

52. MARY KARR, "Facing Altars: Poetry and Prayer," in *Sinners Welcome* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 78.

53. *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 14.

54. MARY KARR, *Lit: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 383.

in my heart, scattering all the darkness of doubt."[55] From the security of this light of faith, he was able to live a new life of virtue.

If Thomas Aquinas's theology of infused virtue can help explain the dynamics of adult conversion and of healing from addiction, this suggests that students of Aquinas are uniquely equipped to help the Church renew its understanding of moral development in the Christian life. To do this, however, students of Aquinas must also become conversant with certain aspects of contemporary philosophy and science. First, a growing body of research and experience in the social and psychological sciences suggests that the human person is more resilient and capable of transformation than Aristotle and the ancients recognized.[56] Thus, even on the natural level, a person can profoundly change his character and his manner of living. Secondly, this same research reveals that these transformations of character take place within a community, through initiation into the practices of that community. As with Aquinas's use of Aristotle, these contemporary insights into character transformation offer the moral theologian analogies for understanding how the Christian learns to live the theological and infused cardinal virtues: by means of one's initiation into the practices of a community. Moreover, since the social and psychological sciences are analyzing lived human experience (where grace is ubiquitously active), students of Aquinas can also point to the limits of a purely naturalistic model of moral transformation. Indeed, many organizations, such as elite military units or world-class sports teams, recognize the role of God and of a spiritual life as integral parts of the organization's goal of excellence.[57] Such insights, when studied with care, can both deepen Catholic moral theology's understanding

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55. *Confessions*, 8.12 (PL 32:762): "quasi luce securitatis infusa cordi meo omnes dubitationis tenebrae diffugerunt."

56. See CRAIG STEVEN TITUS, *Resilience and the Virtue of Fortitude: Aquinas in Dialogue with the Psychosocial Sciences* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), and THOMAS LEWIS, FARIS AMINI, and RICHARD LANNON, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

57. ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, "The Idea of an Educated Public," in *Education and Values: Richard Peters Lectures*, ed. GRAHAM HAYDON (London: University of London, Institute for Education, 1987), 15–35; ALASDAIR MACINTYRE and JOSEPH DUNNE, "Alasdair MacIntyre on Education in Dialogue with Joseph Dunne," *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 36 (2002): 1–19.

of God's action in the world and help our contemporaries cooperate with this action, whether they are Catholic Christians or not.

This essay began by suggesting that the return to virtue is a mixed blessing. While it has reinserted aspects of contemporary philosophy into a tradition of moral enquiry concerning the goal of human life and the character of human flourishing, it has also posed anew the twin challenges of moral relativism and moral elitism that have often been a feature of virtue ethics. Far from discouraging us, however, these twin challenges should lead students of Aquinas to renew both the biblical foundations of Catholic virtue ethics and its contact with contemporary research in philosophy and the social and psychological sciences. By doing so, we will truly be renewing Catholic moral theology in a way that is faithful to both revelation and human experience.

DOMINICANS
AND THE CHALLENGE
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