Human Practice and God's Making-Good in Aquinas' Virtue Ethics

Richard Conrad

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 3rd Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th January 2015.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4865

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

Human Practice and God's Making-Good in Aquinas' Virtue Ethics

Thomas Aquinas is clearly an important practitioner of virtue ethics. Prof. Haldane has related his teaching on virtue to other aspects of ethics, and Dr. Vogler has introduced us to the "infused virtues". I propose to explore further the place of these virtues within his scheme, in such a way that Fr. Pinsent will be able to offer a contrasting slant on them.

Aquinas does not start his mature treatise on ethics, the Second Part of his *Summa Theologiae*, with the concept of virtue, but with the theme of *pursuing a goal*. He starts where Aristotle starts his *Ethics*, with the concept of *eudaimonia* – *beatitudo* in Latin. These go into English as "happiness", "bliss", "fulfilment", "well-being", "flourishing". Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that a life lived in accordance with reason is intrinsically happy-making. This is why, later in the *Summa*, he presents the Natural Law as prescribing what promotes human flourishing, and forbidding what thwarts it. He argues that this kind of happiness is both "fragile" and finite.

Aquinas presents us with a bliss that far transcends anything Aristotle envisaged, a sharing in God's own happiness. In the First Part of the *Summa* Aquinas has demonstrated that, despite God's *radical difference* from creatures, He can be known *as He is,* in the life to come. The Holy Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, want to *give* "Themselves" to us to be known, loved, and enjoyed. When he presents beatitude as our goal, Aquinas argues that only by possessing God in this way can our thirst for truth and goodness be finally, and securely, satisfied. This means that if we compare Aquinas with Aristotle, there is common material; an element of isomorphism; and a profound difference.

The common material includes the conviction that the human being has but one soul. We live *one* life; but a more complex life than anything else does, involving many "faculties", i.e. abilities. Our decision-making involves both thinking and desiring. The "open-endedness" of some faculties, and the complexity of their interaction, mean we stand in need of many *virtues*, "strengths" of mind or character, that – as they are built up by practice – enhance our faculties and constitute a growing moral integrity. These *good habits* are organised by Aquinas under the headings of four "cardinal" virtues, *Prudentia, Justitia, Fortitudo* and *Temperantia*.

At first sight this appears individualistic. Although many virtues ensure that human interactions are just, generous, truthful, tactful, and witty, it can seem that *I* am responsible for building up my good qualities. How do we get started? How do I want to think and love rightly, so that I practise the virtues, when until I have them I *don't* (or don't easily) want to think and love rightly? The implicit answer is that we don't pop into existence with an adult mind and will, surveying a "landscape of choices"; we come into existence as infants, embedded in a family and a society, which may – or may not – form us well as we *gradually* come to "own" our "life story" and become able to do *something* with what "nature" and "nurture" have given. Aristotle's lectures are about *he politike episteme*, and aimed at tomorrow's ruling class, who will have to ensure that society is such as to form young people well. I suggest Aquinas' discussion of Law as aimed at making people good is his way of capturing this element of Aristotle's thought.

The isomorphism between Aristotle and Aquinas is this: for Aristotle, *eudaimonia*, fulfilment, even *pleasure*, is achieved *in the very exercise* of virtue-enriched faculties. In one sense it is a life-long goal, but the *here and now* desire to be truly happy motivates our *here-and-now* decisions. For Aquinas, both limited, natural fulfilment, and perfect beatitude, divine *pleasure*, are achieved *in the*

very exercise of virtue-enriched faculties. In "heaven", the intellect is strengthened, "enlarged", by the "light of glory", so that it can receive the self-gift of God, and be actualised in knowing The Truth; and the will is "enlarged" by Charity, so as to delight in possessing God, and to delight in all those who together with us possess God.

The profound difference between Aristotle and Aquinas derives from this conviction that we *can* attain a *divine,* "non-fragile" happiness. The theme of journeying to a *future* goal is stronger in Aquinas than in Aristotle; after setting out how *beatitudo* is our goal, Aquinas explains why it is appropriate for a being of our kind to attain its goal by a *sequence* of movements. Further, if *God* is our Goal, the natural, human resources Aristotle describes are inadequate to the journey. Even if someone were morally perfect at the human level, fully integrated by virtue, she would not have the resources to journey to a *divine* Goal, nor even to realise that such a Goal is on offer. Hence Aquinas argues for "theological" virtues, *God-given* resources that enable us to lay hold on God. He argues for the existence of these virtues, with a divine Source and a divine dimension, not on the basis of any self-authenticating quality of "religious experience" but on the grounds that resources must be proportioned to their intended outcome. There are three of these virtues: Faith strengthens our intellect so that we assent to what God has revealed of Himself and His plan, and assent to God Himself. Hope is a divine "energy of will" that empowers us to tackle the demands of a journey that would be beyond us were it not for our conviction of God's purpose and God's power to bring us safely home. Charity is a divine love, a divine *friendship*, by which we share God's delight in Himself, in ourselves, and in all those He gives us to care for.

In this life, God's friends already exercise these God-given, God-proportioned, virtues, which brings some element of fulfilment now: typically, Charity leads to joy and peace, as well as deeds of mercy. But the chief task of these virtues is to enable us to do *divine* things that lay hold on a *future*, divine Goal. These are not, usually, trivial things like levitating, but the really great things like saying the Creed and meaning it (because by doing so we have a glimpse into the mind of God), and caring for ourselves, our families, our friends and colleagues, with a deeper care and delight, a share in God's care and delight. When we reach our Goal, Faith and Hope will be replaced by Vision and Possession; Charity will remain, strengthened, as a delight in the God we know and possess.

What you love most, what you prioritise, what you will sacrifice other things for, gives shape and direction to your life. Someone whose top priority is political power, say, will do things that do not directly contribute to that goal, but are still part of a life that is chiefly motivated by the pursuit of political power. On occasion, such a person may sacrifice health, wealth, and quality time with her family, as demanded by her political career. If we are formed by Charity, God becomes our top priority, and for His sake we will if necessary sacrifice life itself, in martyrdom. Aquinas does not, however, focus on what Charity leads us to *give up*, but on what it *enlivens*. At the natural, human level, our goals have an integrating function, and Prudence, a healthy moral perspective, integrates the moral virtues, "deploying" them reasonably. Divine Charity has a yet more powerfully integrating function, producing a "moral beauty". It gives a divine context and a divine richness to all the stuff of human and Christian life, whether this be running our lives and households, the army or the state, wisely; or engaging in trade and legal processes, justly; or exhibiting good taste in public works.

Charity can do this because of what comes with it. *All* the faculties involved in the moral life need to be formed in a new way in the light of a divine Goal, in the context of a life lived towards a future, divine fulfilment. This is where the "infused" virtues come in. These are moral qualities given us by

God to adapt the human psyche, in all its relevant dimensions, for a journey to a divine goal. Aquinas gives an example: the kind of temperance Aristotle speaks of, the kind acquired by practice, means we enjoy eating and drinking in moderation, for the sake of bodily health; but infused temperance empowers us to do battle with sinfulness so that we may more securely journey to a higher life – we are able to go in for fasting (he might have added: feasting at Christmas and Easter!) The stakes are higher, the moral life becomes more dramatic. Merely human considerations are not typically over-ridden, but subsumed into a bigger campaign.

Infused virtues only make sense in the context of a God-shaped, God-directed life. Hence, Aquinas argues, they are inseparable from Charity, and *vice versa*, rather as, for Aristotle, the moral virtues are inseparable from Prudence, and *vice versa*. If you turn from Charity by mortal sin (i.e. a sin that implies you love some limited or illusory good more than you love God), all the infused virtues go: without Charity, your life is no longer God-directed, and there is nothing to enliven or deploy the qualities that integrated your thinking and desiring into a God-directed life.

Aquinas defends an inherited definition of *virtus*: *A virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which one lives rightly, which no one uses badly, which God works in us without us*. He says that the last phrase was not intended to apply to the acquired virtues, which are built up by practice. The infused virtues, however, are God's pure gift; they are given in proportion to Charity, which itself is God's pure gift, and is not given in any proportion to our natural abilities. In this sense, God works them without us; we cannot of ourselves do anything that lays hold on them. They are not given us without our consent – because the effect of the infusion of Charity is to *create* our free consent. Once we have these virtues, their exercise is in fact meritorious: as inspired by the Holy Spirit, good acts enlivened by Charity have a divine worth that lays hold on a growth in Charity and on eternal life.

The infused virtues are not the only thing that comes with Charity: Aquinas gives a special place to "the Gifts of the Holy Spirit". These are not strengths *we* deploy, but ways of being attuned to the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit who, like a craftsman teaching an apprentice, or a friend helping us see things from her perspective, guides us on a journey in which we are "out of our depth".

For our present purposes, we must ask how the infused virtues relate to the acquired ones. Do the God-given virtues render the human, acquired ones redundant? Aquinas does sometimes speak of the infused virtues as the "perfect" kind of virtue. After all, they are proportioned to Charity, which mobilises these resources for a journey to perfect fulfilment. But he also defends the validity of the human virtues, and does not approve Augustine's remark that the pagans' "virtues" are but splendid vices. In a fallen world, even the human virtues are difficult to acquire without God's healing grace; but they can be known about – Aristotle knew about them – and they can be cultivated by good laws. Even as exercised by people who are not "in grace", they are good. Catholic Moral Theology has stood with Aquinas on this issue. It saves a large space for Natural-Law reasoning, and presumes that all human beings, whether or no they hold the Christian Faith, can appreciate many of our ethical arguments, based as they are on what it is good for human beings, as such, to do or avoid, so that we may flourish in accordance with human nature.

Aquinas would hardly have spent so much time discussing what acquired virtues are, and how they may be acquired, if this was all but irrelevant to the Christian life and journey. He does not seem to me to explain at length how and why the acquired virtues are to be integrated into the Christian journey, nor to ask why the Natural Law remains relevant for Christians when we have our sights set on a supernatural fulfilment. But he does, famously, hold that grace does not take away from, or

"bypass", nature, but perfects it. When God grants Charity, this typically affirms, purifies, and gives a new depth to our natural human affections, as well as widening them. God is the one Author of both grace and nature, and the Divine Word who orders all things powerfully *and sweetly*, orders the life of grace even more "sweetly" than the life of nature, to render *the human soul itself* divine.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that in his treatises on the individual moral virtues, Aquinas does not normally disentangle the roles of acquired and infused virtues. He gives us *one* treatise on justice, one on religion, one on generosity, one on magnificence, and so on. It seems to be implied that there is an acquired version, and an infused version, of *each* moral virtue, yet, as a rule – or as an ideal – they are closely intertwined in practical and psychological detail.

Humanity fell from the ideal and has to be brought back to it, through Christ who possessed Charity, virtues, and the Gifts, in such abundance that they flow through Him to us. Conformity to Christ's graceful integrity was perfect in the case of His Mother, who received Charity, and hence the infused virtues, in a high degree – but also had the acquired virtues, presumably in increasing intensity as she cultivated them. In her there was no struggle to integrate the faculties that *we* often find at war with reason, but that did not mean she did not need the acquired virtues, it means they were there to a degree we cannot aspire to. Nature was beautified by grace.

Others are brought back to the ideal in such a way that we are not relieved of that moral striving by which we enter personally into Christ's own strife and victory. In the case of most of us, the human virtues, even after long practice, are present to a limited degree; the infused virtues are limited in intensity because of our limited Charity; and the "fit" between the two kinds of virtue remains imperfect this side of the grave. At least some great Saints, though fired with great Charity, have manifested personality defects or have seemed deficient in certain acquired virtues; holy rulers, for example, have not always exercised perfect political prudence.

An example may help us see one way in which acquired and infused virtues are both needed. Suppose someone born with a liability to addiction, and brought up badly in a dysfunctional family. In his early adulthood he manifests various vices, drinking too much, and experimenting with drugs. Aristotle holds out little hope for him; Aquinas recognises the possibility of God's healing grace. Suppose he is converted, is brought to Faith and Charity. With Charity come the infused virtues, according to Aquinas. The repentant sinner now has the moral strength to persevere in Charity, that is, to avoid *mortal* sin; he has from God the resources to resist serious instances of drunkenness, and to avoid stealing in order to buy drink or drugs. It is unlikely, it is contrary to frequent experience, that he will be so "magically" changed, even by the grace of Baptism, that he will face no further moral struggle. He will need, and will be enabled, to practise temperance, so that gradually acquired virtues build up, and virtuous living becomes second nature. In due course, he will find it easy to drink healthily, and will enjoy "happy-making" recreations rather than the loneliness of drugs. But suppose a new temptation comes his way, and he commits adultery. This serious injustice is contrary to Charity. If Charity goes, the infused virtues go too, according to Aquinas. Until God brings him to repentance, the adulterer does not have the God-given moral resources to live in a way that fits a journey into God – after all, he has abandoned that journey. Do we expect "total moral collapse" to ensue, so that he cannot help but go straight back to drink and drugs? It is unlikely, it is contrary to frequent experience, that he will be so "magically" changed by one sin that the acquired virtues are entirely lost. They will protect him from the vices they have ousted, and he will continue by second nature to drink healthily during the period when grace is lacking.

Aquinas therefore offers an Aristotelian and a more-than-Aristotelian picture of moral integrity, in which "human-sized" virtues, acquired by practice with the help and encouragement of a healthy family and society, are subsumed into, and affirmed by, a God-given, God-like, God-directed moral life which depends on God "enlarging" all our faculties. The primary purpose of "infused" virtues is to bring human nature to its perfection in a project that has to be *super*-natural, because divine. But in a fallen world in which our nature is distorted, we need a great deal of "making good". Part of the job of infused virtues is to make good any lack of acquired virtues, giving us the moral strength to avoid what would thwart our journey into God, and to do what is necessary if it is to be successfully concluded. But acquired virtues also make good a problem with the infused virtues, namely the risk that they can be lost by mortal sin, until restored by the grace of repentance. So, although he speaks of the inseparability of virtues, Aquinas in fact helps us see that we can *gradually* cultivate a natural moral integrity, and God can *incrementally* give a supernatural integrity. Further, the acquired and the God-given forms of integrity need not keep perfect step with each other. Moral integrity is a painstaking project on our part, requiring *realistic* ambition, *and* a gift bestowed from God's side by a patient and complex route only Providence can master. But it is part of God's wisdom that His grace begin to perfect nature in the complexity of our current moral effort, and that the work He has begun will be brought to completion only in the bliss of the coming Kingdom.