Virtue Ethics in the Medieval Period

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Varieties of Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethics in the Medieval Period.

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I

The invitation to speak on the theme of 'Virtue Ethics in the Medieval Period' was qualified with the phrase "please feel free to interpret that broad remit in any way you like". I intend to exercise that liberty for several reasons.

1. The topic is too large to be surveyed in brief, [1] both on account of the extent of the medieval period which runs in the Latin west to a thousand years, from the end of the Western Roman empire c.400 to the beginning of the Italian renaissance c.1400, and because of its intellectual diversity. The idea that virtue might be one of the central features of ethics is rightly associated with Aristotle, and his *Nicomachean Ethics* had a deep influence in the high middle ages, especially in the thirteenth century, but diverse notions of virtue, and of the virtues, (including Aristotelian ones), were in circulation long before then via the writings of Cicero such as *De Inventione* and Augustine. In the former's manual on oratory the medievals read that:

> That which either wholly or in some considerable portion of it is sought for its own sake, we call honourable … the former is virtue which is a habit of the mind, consistent with nature, and moderation, and reason.

[1] That said I have in the past attempted such surveys as in 'Voluntarism and Realism in Medieval Ethics' *Journal of Medical Ethics* 15, 1989; and 'Medieval and Renaissance Ethics' in P. Singer ed. *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

> Wherefore, when we have become acquainted with all its divisions, it will be proper to consider the whole force of simple honesty. It has then four divisions--prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Prudence is the knowledge of things which are good, or bad, or neither good nor bad. … Justice is a habit of the mind which attributes its proper dignity to everything, preserving a due regard to the general welfare. … Prudence is a deliberate encountering of danger and enduring of labour [and] Temperance is the form and well-regulated dominion of reason over lust and other improper affections of the mind. [2]

More salient, however, were the accounts given by Augustine based firmly on Christian scripture, and it is striking how differently he characterises the cardinal virtues (with an eye, of course to the theological ones: faith, hope and charity and especially the last of these):

> As to virtue leading us to a happy life, I hold virtue to be nothing else than perfect love of God. For the fourfold division of virtue I regard as taken from four forms of love. For these four virtues (would that all felt their influence in their minds as they have their names in their mouths!), I should have no hesitation in defining them: that temperance is love giving itself entirely to that which is loved; fortitude is love readily bearing all things for the sake of the loved object; justice is love serving only the loved object, and therefore ruling rightly; prudence is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it. The object of this love is not anything, but only God, the chief good, the highest wisdom, the perfect harmony. So we may express the definition

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[2] Cicero, *De Inventione*, Book II , Chapter 53 from *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, Literally translated by C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1888) Vol 4: online at http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/cicero/dnv2-8.htm.

> thus: that temperance is love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God; fortitude is love bearing everything readily for the sake of God; justice is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man; prudence is love making a right distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it.[3]

Quite apart from the considerable and unsurprising difference between these two 'Roman' authors separated by the birth of Christianity and the dying of Rome, there is great diversity of opinion about these issues even in the period from c 1150 to 1300 – from the death of Peter Abelard (1079-1142) to that of Duns Scotus (1266-1308). This also takes in the lives of Robert Grossteste (1175-1253), Albert the Great (1193-1280), Thomas Aquinas (1221-1274) and Bonaventure (1225-1274). Of these six major figures, two were secular clergy (Abelard and Grossteste (though the former later became a monk), and four were members of the recently founded mendicant orders the Franciscans (est. 1209): Scotus and Bonaventure, and the Dominicans (est. 1216): Albert and Aquinas.

2. Any adequate treatment of the idea of virtue as an element in ethical thought would have to discuss medieval conceptions of psychology and these do not easily map into contemporary understandings. Unlike modern psychology the former combine the empirical with the metaphysical and the supernatural, both in the sense of what occurs in nature but is not naturally caused (*supernaturale per accidens* as in the miraculous restoration of sight and the *praeternaturale* as in extrasensory perception) and what affects the life of the soul purely spiritually (the *supernaturale per se* as in the presumed infusion of grace). One might suppose that it is possible to set aside these latter aspects

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[3] Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* (*Of the Morals of the Catholic Church*) Chapter 15, translated by Richard Stothert in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 4. Edited by Philip Schaff.(Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887): online at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1401.htm.

and focus exclusively on the natural(istic) side of psychology but this assumes that the metaphysical and supernatural are separable 'add-ons' whereas in medieval conceptions of psychology they saturate the subject, certainly up to the twelfth century where again the reception of Aristotle. Quite apart from the challenge they present to modern secular accounts of cognition and volition these aspects posed problems to the medieval themselves in their attempts to understand the causality of virtuous action and the scope for merit and responsibility. To some extent the 'discovery' of Aristotle's *De Anima* (*Perì Psūchês*), initiates the development of a non-theological though generally still non-naturalistic account of the mental powers of human beings and it is only among the Parisian Averroists that one begins to see anything like a naturalistic account of the nature and operation of human minds, and that was somewhat suppressed.[4] This is connected to the following point.

3. The medievals do not distinguish between philosophy and theology in the ways that we do, for example by discipline or genre. So we may find a member of a theology faculty discussing Aristotle's views on virtue from the perspective of the idea that all true virtue is under the governance of the supernatural and infused virtue of charity, meaning by that primarily the love of God and only secondarily the love of one's fellow human. Or we might find a master of arts addressing a disputed question about the meaning of the supernatural virtue of charity by interpreting 1 *Corinthians* 13 [5] through

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[4] For a brief account of the development of medieval thinking about mind deriving from study of the *De Anima* see John Haldane 'Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy of Mind' in S. Guttenplan ed., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995)

[5] "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things".

the medium of Aristotelian categories. We moderns and post-moderns have more or less separated philosophy and theology [6] but the medieval position is somewhat analogous to that of the pre-Socratics with regard to what we now distinguish as philosophy and science, i.e. the distinction is partial and indeterminate.

Indeed there is something to be said for the claim that ethical theorising as we now recognize it did not exist in medieval thought until the reception of Aristotle's ethical writings in the early thirteenth century which introduce a distinction between *theoria* (the contemplation of the necessary), *praxis* (action towards the achievement of happiness in the circumstance of contingency), and *poesis* (material production). The last category corresponds to the medieval concept of *artes mechanicae* (the 'mechanical arts' of agriculture, architecture, clothes-making, cooking, metal-working, trade, and weapon-use) while the first, termed by the medieval *scientia divina*, can easily be related to *theologia* as the study of the eternal unchanging cause of the being and natures of things. This, then, calls for a third kind of study, that of the principles of action conducive to or constitutive of human happiness.

Of course, figures prior to the Aristotelian reception discussed these matters but as part of theology, not recognizing the need for, or even the credibility of a non-religious field of enquiry and with the dominant concepts being charity (*caritas*), sin or transgression (*peccatum*), merit (*meritum*) and blessedness (*beatitudo*) in contrast to those of practical wisdom (*prudentia*) or natural happiness (felicitas) though those are also referred to particularly under the influence of Cicero. Thus, for example, while Peter Abelard, who is widely regarded as the leading philosopher-theologian of the twelfth century, discusses the highest human good (*summum bonum*) and the notions of virtue and vice (*virtus et vitium*) he does so within the context of beliefs about God's will and

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[6] I say 'more or less' to take account of the view of the late Richard Rorty that mainstream analytical philosophy retains elements of a theological world view; see, for example, *An Ethics for Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

the value of consenting to it, and about Christ's teaching that "whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" (*Matthew* 7: 12).

4. It is not clear, in fact, that anyone in the medieval period is a 'virtue ethicist' if that means someone who holds that the moral assessment of actions derives exclusively from the evaluation of character, and that character is morally attributable to the agent as its source. Indeed, I doubt that many medieval thinkers would consider that there are intrinsic features of character that are in and of themselves good, since everything created is relational and has value by virtue of its being ordered towards the will of God. The nearest the medievals come to a theory according to which moral goodness (a term whose use is somewhat anachronistic) *might* be said to reside in an aspect of the agent is in a position voiced by William Ockham who holds that virtue is fundamentally a disposition to perform interior acts of will.[7] He says that these are virtuous on account either of being in accord with right reason (*recta ratio*) or by being motivated by the love of God and thereby obedience to His will. Quite what constitutes right reason in a practical context is left obscure but in either case it looks as the value of virtue is either derivative from the value of something else to which it is a response, or that its value consists simply in its being chosen. Rather than pursue this issue further it is more useful to look at the more fully elaborated 'intentionalism' of Peter Abelard whom seems to have been Ockham's influence in this as in several other matters.

Abelard is sometimes described as being a proto-Kantian in as much as he locates moral goodness not in what is done but in the *intention* with which it is done, even to the point of discounting what actually happens as lying outwith the agent's control. On this account it might seem that he should be categorised as a 'virtue ethicist'

[7] See *Circa virtutes et vitia* which is one of a set of occasional questions. The text is gathered in the *Opera Theologica* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute Press, 1967-1986) Vol. VIII and a translation by Rondo Keele is available online at http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/circavirtutes.htm.

especially given the opening of his work *Know Thyself, or Ethics* (*Scito teipsum, seu Ethica*) where he writes that "We consider morals to be the vices or virtues of the mind which make us prone to bad or good works" (548) [8] but this classification is too hasty. Abelard distinguishes between the following four elements as candidates for the primary locus of moral worth: 1) habits or character, 2) natural appetites or desires, 3) consent to (or rejection of) what one desires or is habitually inclined to, which consent then gives rise to a corresponding intention, and 4) action (555-6). He writes that "mental vice which makes us prone to do bad things … is not, however, the same as sin and nor is sin the same as bad action" (548) and then argues in detail against the idea that 1) 2) and 4) are determinative of moral value. Desire is eliminated on the grounds that one may do what is wrong without desiring to do *it* per se (and correspondingly one may intend to do right without having an independent desire for the particular action[9]).

Likewise character traits may dispose one in certain ways but these are simply facts of one's make up and what matters morally is whether one goes along with or struggles against irascibility or lechery (his examples) or acts out of natural generosity when one ought not to. He concludes "whatever [disposition] is common to good and bad people alike is of no importance to virtue and vice" (549). As regards the idea that deeds (whether action types or instances) are the source of moral value Abelard presents a number of objections but in brief his claims are that two people may act in

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[8] See the translation of the text in *Peter Abelard's Ethics* by D.E. Luscombe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) p. 3. All quotations are from this translation, an extensive selection from which is to be found in Richard Bosley and Martin Tweedale eds. *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy* (Peterborough, ON.: Broadview Press, 1997). Incorporated page references are to this source. For discussion of the nature of Abelard's account of the locus of moral value see M. Lutz Bachmann 'Modern Aspects of Peter Abelard's Philosophical Ethics' and P. King. 'Abelard's Intentionalist Ethics' in *Medieval Philosophy*, Special issue of *The Modern Schoolman*, 72 (2 & 3) 1995; 201-211 and 213-231.

[9] In Nagel's terms there may be no unmotivated desire to act in that way and the intention to do so, and the desire to fulfill that intention may be arrived at after deliberation. See Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) Ch. 5.)

the same way for the same purpose and one be right and the other wrong, and more generally that actions themselves are morally indifferent:

> The doing of deeds has no bearing upon an increase of sin and nothing pollutes the soul except what is of the soul, that is the consent which alone we have called sin, not the will which precedes it nor the doing of the deed which follows. (553).

In this last observation and in the discussion that surrounds it Abelard has in mind, and often alludes to scripture passages such as in Matthew where Jesus says "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (5: 28) which, in order to distinguish will from consent, Abelard glosses as "whosever shall look in such a way as to fall into consent to lust" (553); and later "the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders" (15:18-19). He also invokes Augustine quoting him as saying "The Law [scripture] ordains nothing except charity and prohibits nothing except cupidity" (554 from *De doctrina christiana*, Book III, Ch. 10).

The views presented and argued for in *Know Thyself* (and returned to in his *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew and a Christian*) are at once recognizably similar to the Kantian claim that the root of the moral lies in the will, but at the same time are alien to modern moral philosophy in being cast in terms of sin and (dis)obedience of divine command. They are also at times difficult to make sense of, in part because of a tendency to speak of 'will' where we would be inclined to refer to desire, though this difference is diminished if one substitutes 'want' which hovers between the volitional and the appetitive. There is also the fact that he opposes desire-cum-will and character traits to *consent* where we might well be inclined to argue that consent itself may be an expression of virtue or vice.

These differences are due I think, not only to his attachment to a spiritualized conception of the agent but to his lacking the kind of moral psychology that is now familiar to us through the development of Humean, Kantian and Aristotelian approaches. The first and second would be a long while in development but the third was about to arrive on the scene and to change it significantly bringing both the possibility of a distinct science of ethics and a more complex account of the relation between character, intention, purpose, action, and consequence. It is not accidental, I think, that Abelard's ethical theory was not much discussed in the century following his death and positions similar to it only gained prominence in Catholic moral theology with the development of the idea that conscience is determinative of moral culpability – a view fiercely criticized in its popular interpretation by Elizabeth Anscombe who is, of course, one of the main sources of the revival of interest in Aristotelian approaches to moral theory, the first of her famous three theses being that "it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking".[10]

That said, there are issues raised by Abelard that are relevant to the prospects of virtue ethics, in particular the question whether any independently describable character trait can be the basis for evaluating the moral worth of an action. Likewise, while Augustine's views may seem similarly distant both in their inseparability from a particular interpretation of Christian ethics and the texts in the Gospels and Epistles upon which it is based, and again in their strongly dualistic psychology, there are points in his writings that present analogous challenges to the idea of an ethics based on

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[10] See 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe* (Exeter: ImprintAcademic, 2005), p. 13 also related essays in that collection and in a subsequent volume *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G.E.M. Anscombe* (Exeter: ImprintAcademic, 2008) oth volumes edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally.

character. Unlike Abelard and contrary to some superficial accounts of the history of philosophy in the high medieval period Augustine and Augustinian ideas continued to be influential, in part because of his standing as one of the Latin Church Fathers, but also because of the perceived clarity and incisiveness of his thought.

5. Before proceeding to discuss the reception and use of Aristotle's *Ethica*, and the views of Aquinas, therefore, I wish to return briefly to Augustine with regard to the role and limitations of the idea of virtue. First, in his commentary on *The Sermon on the Mount*, we can see a source of Abelard's concern with consent but also a recognition of the importance of reason in correcting desire, and of the liability of choice to establish habit:

> [T]here are three things which go to complete sin: the suggestion of, the taking pleasure in, and the consenting to [some action]. Suggestion takes place either by means of memory, or by means of the bodily senses, … if it give us pleasure to enjoy this, this pleasure, if illicit, must be restrained. Just as when we are fasting, and on seeing food the appetite of the palate is stirred up, this does not happen without pleasure; but we do not consent to this liking, and we repress it by the right of reason, which has the supremacy. But if consent shall take place, the sin will be complete, known to God in our heart, although it may not become known to men by deed.
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> … Hence, just as we arrive at sin by three steps—suggestion, pleasure, consent,— so of sin itself there are three varieties—in heart, in deed, in habit,— as it were, three deaths: one, as it were, in the house, *i.e.* when we consent to lust in the heart; a second now, as it were, brought forth outside the gate, when assent goes forward into action; a

> third, when the mind is pressed down by the force of bad habit, as if by a mound of earth, and is now, as it were, rotting in the sepulchre.[11]

Second Augustine is himself influenced by Cicero and aspects of Stoic understandings of virtue but he also dissents from the Stoic view on various grounds two of which are relevant to present concerns. First, while allowing that a virtuous mind is praiseworthy and that the Stoics are right to celebrate it as admirable and value you it as a constituent of human happiness he presses the question of where the capacity for virtue and its actualization derive from. One of his purposes, of course, is to suggest that these are gifts of God, but leaving that theological claim to one side we can read him as pressing the point that if we think of happiness as depending on virtue and virtue as being a character of mind then we have to ask whether possession of such a characteristic is a matter of contingency outwith our control, or if it is something for which we can claim credit, but the latter he thinks makes no more sense since the ability to develop the ability will itself be a contingent endowment. We can see in this objection the problem, if it is a problem, of 'moral luck' or in terms more apt to Augustine the issue of the unmerited reception of grace – a matter that featured in his own battle against Pelagianism and that would again prove divisive among theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries . Third, at various points he argues that character traits are only virtues if they are directed towards an appropriate end and their potential to contribute to human happiness depends upon the objective value of that end. Of course he is again aiming at the idea that only God can serve as that end and hence only traits that are directed towards God can be virtues, but we can abstract from the particular theological claim to derive a general point of some importance.

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[11] Augustine *On the Sermon on the Mount*, Bk 1, Ch. 12, 34-5, translated by William Findlay *in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 6. Edited by Philip Schaff.(Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.) online at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/16011.htm

The concept of virtue is teleological twice over: it is that of a state of mind, broadly construed, consisting in part in a disposition to seek or to avoid certain objects or actions, and it is part of the idea that such a disposition in so far as it is a virtue, or an aspect of such, that these objects or actions are good, either in themselves simply or as contributing to an objective good. In short the idea of virtue and the specification of particular virtues depends upon an independent characterisation of human goods or of the human good. The Stoics and others of like mind have wanted to say that a good life is one lived in accord with the virtues *and* that the virtues are such because they are conducive to the living of a good life but to avoid circularity it is necessary either to indicate how the life of virtue is in and of itself good, or to specify the human good such that it is intelligible how certain dispositions contribute to realizing this. Given that dispositions are specified by their ends and that vices are no less dispositions than are virtues it looks as if the only way of differentiating them is by reference to something external, viz. good and bad.

II

The foregoing has been comprised in part of reservations about the idea that someone interested in virtue ethics (in the contemporary secular understanding of this as a kind of ethical theory to be set alongside, and in competition to, consequentialist and deontological theories) should look hopefully to the medieval period for inspiration or support. I have, however, referred to the reception of Aristotle's *Ethics* and its influence on later medieval writers, and one may expect, therefore, that it is to this later period that one may look for medieval discussions of virtue that may be of interest to present-day concerns. There are relevant ideas to be found there, though I think that to some extent they give reason to see virtue as only part of an account of ethics, complementary to elements that relate to the consequences of action and to the kinds of actions chosen, as well as to the intention with which an agent acts and the circumstances in which s/he does so.

Additionally I think that the conditions in which these authors were writing and their experiences, as well as their religious anthropology provide a background which we can easily overlook but which it is important to bear in mind, in part because, for all our material advancement, those conditions remain in place, and because while we may have reservations about the theology invoked in explaining features of the human condition those features seem still to be with us, and however we might otherwise seek to explain them they need to be to be taken account of in any realistic ethical thinking.

Since the revival of scholasticism at the end of the nineteenth century the best-known medieval philosopher-theologian has been Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) who is generally characterised as having sought to effect a synthesis of Christian theology and Greek philosophy through an appropriation of central ideas of Aristotelianism.[12] Aristotle's ethical works were first translated into Latin in Aquinas's lifetime, and around 1270 Thomas (who did not read Greek) produced a commentary on the *Ethica Nichomachea* based on a Latin translation attributed to his Dominican contemporary William of Moerbeke. This translation, known as the *recensio recognita* ('revised presentation') is in fact a revision of the first Latin translation of the full ten books of the *Ethics* produced c. 1246 by Robert Grossteste (1175-1253) and known as the *recensio pura* [13] That first translation was known to Aquinas's teacher Albert the Great (1193-1280) who used it to produce the first full exegesis and commentary on the *Ethics* which he presented in lectures and seminars at the Dominican *studium generale* in Cologne around 1250.

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[12] For an interesting discussion of this and the surrounding narrative about the thirteenth century move from Augustinianism to Aristotelianism see Bonnie Kent, *Virtues of the Will*: *The Transformation of Ethics in the Thirteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1995) Ch. 1.

[13] The earlier Latin translations were partial and known respectively as the *Ethica Vetus* comprising Books II and III, which was produced at the end of the twelfth century, and the *Ethica Nova* consisting principally of Book I produced in the first decades of the thirteenth plus fragments of Books VII and III translated in the same period.

One of Aquinas's early biographers relates that Thomas attended and partly transcribed Albert's presentations but whether or not that is so the text itself must have been in his mind when he wrote his own commentary based on the Moerbeke revision twenty years later. Perhaps the most notable feature of Albert's project, which will have struck all who encountered it, is the boldness of devoting considerable effort and time to studying and presenting to theology students the ethical writings of a pre-Christian, pagan-philosopher. One might think this would bode well for the project of relating medieval discussions of virtue to contemporary interests given the atheological character of the latter, but in fact Albert's approach is unusual if not unique within the high medieval period and may be explained by his wish to understand and present a text from ancient philosophy rather than to integrate it with existing Christian thought or to provide an alternative foundation for thinking about how to act. In other words he is not engaged in commentary with the intention of establishing a new kind of ethics in the way that Derek Parfit reads Henry Sidgwick.[14] Certainly Aquinas being part of the next generation had moved beyond that purely expository interest and it is significant that in his treatment of the virtues theological considerations are either directly involved or present in the immediate background.

There are several aspects of Aquinas's view that I think need to be emphasised in part because they are sometimes overlooked or misrepresented and because they suggest ideas that we might wish to take account of in our own theorizing, even if taking account of them means setting them aside. Before identifying these, however, it is necessary to observe the great difference that exists between Aquinas's philosophical ethics and contemporary theorising on account of the seeming absence from his work of two issues that have dominated twentieth and twenty first century Anglophone moral philosophy. Remarkably these matters derive from two works published within a quarter century by two Cambridge philosophers, viz. Henry Sidgwick's *Methods of*

[14] See *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon) 453-454.

Ethics (1874 and subsequent editions through to the posthumous 7th edition of 1907), and G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903). The issues are respectively 'the duality of practical reason' the problem as Sidgwick saw it of the competing rationality of self and other regarding actions, and 'the nature of goodness' conceived as a common property of good things. The first has bedeviled ethical theory and the second generated and sustained metaethics, but neither seems present in Aquinas. One might think this is evidence for Parfit's view that it is only in the modern period with the rise of secular ethics that moral philosophy has begun to make real progress, or one may think that these two works have introduced spurious questions.

However that debate might continue, I shall proceed to the points in Aquinas's treatment of ethics that are of special interest in the present context. In very general terms his is a teleological theory of right action. There is a good for human beings corresponding to the fulfillment of their natures and the elements of this good can be discerned by looking to natural inclinations.

> Since good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law. Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances: inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature: and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law. Secondly, there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specially, according to that nature which he has in common with other animals: and

> in virtue of this inclination, those things are said to belong to the natural law, "which nature has taught to all animals" [Pandect. Just. I, tit. i], such as sexual intercourse, education of offspring and so forth. Thirdly, there is in man an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society: and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural law; for instance, to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things regarding the above inclination. [15]

The general form of this approach corresponds to the ergon argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1.7) and the place of virtue is as a habituated disposition to choose in accord with practical rationality where the content of this is specified not in Kantian style by its logical form but by the object over which it is defined, namely the human good as that related to human nature. He writes that "a moral virtue is a habit tending towards a good deed well done" and adds "and moral virtues taken in this way are connected, as nearly all agree".[16] This latter introduces the idea commonly referred to as the 'unity of the virtues' but in saying nearly all agree he probably has in mind also the views of Plato, the Stoics and Augustine that the virtues are manifestations of a single power or disposition either in the case of the first two 'wisdom' or in that of Augustine charity, views that hold to the 'identity of the virtues'. Aquinas retains something of the identity tradition but drawing on Aristotle argues that the several virtues require to be directed by prudence such that the operation of any moral virtue implies the intellectual virtue of prudence and the operation of prudence requires taking account of the range of moral virtues, so there is a mutual entailment: any or all virtues > prudence, and prudence > the virtues. He writes:

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[15] *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 94, a 2, responsio available online at http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2094.htm#article4

[16] Summa Theologiae, Ia IIae, q. 65, a 1, responsio.

> [N]o moral virtue can be without prudence; since it is proper to moral virtue to make aright choice, for it is an elective habit. Now right choice requires not only the inclination to a due end, which inclination is the direct outcome of moral virtue, but also correct choice of things conducive to the end, which choice is made by prudence, that counsels, judges, and commands in those things that are directed to the end. In like manner one cannot have prudence unless one has the moral virtues: since prudence is "right reason about things to be done," and the starting point of reason is the end of the thing to be done, to which end man is rightly disposed by moral virtue. Hence, just as we cannot have speculative science unless we have the understanding of the principles, so neither can we have prudence without the moral virtues: and from this it follows clearly that the moral virtues are connected with one another. (Op. cit).

Both the identity thesis and the weaker unity thesis are often rejected on the grounds that make virtue all or nothing and do not allow for their partial or progressive acquisition. That issue would be avoided if they were thought to be innate or superadded from without but in fact Aquinas's view is not vulnerable to this objection since unlike the Stoics, for example, and perhaps also Augustine he allows that virtue(s) may be incompletely formed – virtue is not an all or nothing attribute, like life, but admits of degrees, like heat. Secondly he distinguishes two senses in which it may be said that an agent is virtuous:

> Moral virtue may be considered either as perfect or as imperfect. An imperfect moral virtue, temperance for instance, or fortitude, is nothing but an inclination in us to do some kind of good deed, whether such inclination be in us by nature or by habituation. If we take the

> moral virtues in this way, they are not connected: since we find men who, by natural temperament or by being accustomed, are prompt in doing deeds of liberality, but are not prompt in doing deeds of chastity. (Op. cit).

In sum he is able to allow for the evident fact of fragmentary and partial virtue. What he is insistent upon, however, is that true virtue is only present where there is practical wisdom. His moral epistemology recognises three kinds of judgement or forms of understanding corresponding to degrees of generality in statements about the good:

> 1) *synderesis* which involves grasping the most general principles beginning with the first: "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided" and extending to those relating to the fundamental inclinations listed in the earlier quotation beginning with the good of life;
> 2) *scientia moralis* which pertains to the working out of secondary moral rules derived from these previous ones, eg that theft should be punished;
> 3) *conscientia*: which is the drawing of particular judgements in accord with right reason which in the practical case is an exercise of prudence or practical wisdom.

He writes:

> Moral virtue can be without some of the intellectual virtues, viz. wisdom, science, and art; but not without understanding and prudence. Moral virtue cannot be without prudence, because it is a habit of choosing, i.e. making us choose well. Now in order that a choice be good, two things are required. First, that the intention be directed to a due end; and this is done by moral virtue, which inclines the appetitive faculty to the good that is in accord with reason, which is a due end. Secondly, that man take rightly those things which have reference to the end: and this he cannot do unless his counsel, judge and

> command aright, which is the function of prudence and the virtues annexed to it, as stated above (57, A5,6). Wherefore there can be no moral virtue without prudence: and consequently neither can there be without understanding. For it is by the virtue of understanding that we know self-evident principles, both in speculative and in practical matters. Consequently just as right reason in speculative matters, in so far as it proceeds from known principles, presupposes the understanding of those principles, so also does prudence, which is the right reason about things to be done.[17]

Just as his previous elaboration about the fragmentary and partial construction of virtuous character addresses the objection that the unity thesis renders virtue impossible (absent innatism of miraculous infusion, which amount logically to the same thing) so his remarks about the necessity of prudence for moral virtue provide a basis on which to respond to some of the situationist criticisms of the idea of stable character traits. To put it briefly what they may show is not that there is no such thing as virtue but that the subjects whose behaviour is reported may be partially formed intheir moral psychology, or have some grasp of certain rules but lack prudence in the exercise of them.

Two final points should be mentioned. First, in contrast to Abelard and Scotus who argue that actions and character traits may be indifferent, showing that that the locus of moral value (and virtue) resides elsewhere, viz. in consent and intention, Aquinas insists that while action types may be classified as good, bad and neutral any intentional instance of a type will be drawn by some aspect of the situation to the side of either the good or the bad inasmuch as it advances or impedes the good of life; and further holds that any moral character trait will as it exists in an agent be either a virtue

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[17] *Summa Theologiae*, q58, a 4 responsio.

or a vice depending on whether it conduces to or is partly constitutive of human good or evil.

The second is connected to the first part of the previous one, the claim that there are no indifferent actions. He writes:

> It sometimes happens that an action is indifferent in its species, but considered in the individual it is good or evil. And the reason of this is because a moral action, as stated above (Article 3), derives its goodness not only from its object, whence it takes its species; but also from the circumstances, which are its accidents, as it were; just as something belongs to a man by reason of his individual accidents, which does not belong to him by reason of his species. And every individual action must needs have some circumstance that makes it good or bad, at least in respect of the intention of the end. For since it belongs to the reason to direct; if an action that proceeds from deliberate reason be not directed to the due end, it is, by that fact alone, repugnant to reason, and has the character of evil. But if it be directed to a due end, it is in accord with reason; wherefore it has the character of good. Now it must needs be either directed or not directed to a due end. Consequently every human action that proceeds from deliberate reason, if it be considered in the individual, must be good or bad.[18]

This interesting passage tells us two things about Aquinas view of virtue and its relation to the question of the primary locus of moral value. First, as previously noted virtues are disposition to choose the good and hence the explanation of their value is given in part by the good to which they are ordered. Second, where the consequentialist gives evaluative primacy to the outcome of an action be it unforeseeable, unforeseen, foreseen, or only intended, and the deontologist locates primary value in the act type, in

[18] *Summa Theologiae* Ia, IIae, q. 18, a 9 responsio.

Aquinas's terms it species, he invokes choice and intention, and since these are the powers shaped by virtue that also, but he does not assign evaluative priority to this either. Rather he is a pluralist about the sources of moral rightness: disposition of agent, action type, intended (and to some degree foreseeable) outcome and particularities of circumstance. Certainly having read the *Ten Books* of Aristotle's *Ethics*, and remembered his teacher Albert's exegesis and commentary on them, and then composed his own commentary he takes virtue seriously and develops a moral psychology more complex than his predecessors into which he fits it; but as I indicated earlier 'virtue ethics', if it is to be a distinctive approach, has to accord evaluative priority in moral assessment to traits of character and that Aquinas does not do. On that account I judge him not to be a virtue ethicist. This conclusion along with the several others I have extracted from his ethical writings is, I think, of more than historical interest for the reasoning that sustains them applies quite generally and could usefully be brought to bear in contemporary discussions.

Addendum

The revival of interest among philosophers in the idea of virtue prompted by the writings of Elizabeth Anscombe, Stuart Hampshire, Georg Von Wright, Philippa Foot and others focused for a long time on the idea that certain innate or habituated dispositions are conducive to, or perhaps necessary parts of living well; and the mental picture conjured by that idea was of the bright eyed, bushy tailed animal living well on the strength of a well ordered life-style regime. It is perhaps unsurprising that people from relatively privileged backgrounds participating in academic life in elite institutions, in an age in which science and medicine promised to contain or cure the natural evils of life, might accentuate the positive; though in fact I think they were also aware of how badly things could go, though perhaps seeing this in the lives of others. It is only relatively recently however that Anglophone philosophers have considered the

role of virtue in sustaining life under conditions of threat in which the best that can be hoped for may be the mitigation of natural and intentional evils. Writings of Alasdair MacIntyre (*Dependent Rational Animals*) and Martha Nussbaum (*Hiding from Humanity*) are valuable contributions to this 'realistic' tendency.

For the medievals the evidence of natural and moral evils was everywhere to be seen, and for members of the mendicant orders such as Albert and Aquinas it was a frequently before them. In addition they shared a view of the human condition in which it was blighted by sin, both species-specifically inherited and personal. War, famine, plague, arbitrary will and sectional rivalries were common determinants of the conditions of life and it worth bearing this in mind when reading what they have to say about action and virtue, which generally has a remedial cast to it. One might respond by saying that while that is interesting it is not something that we need carry over as a condition of our thinking, given the security and comfort of our lives. But a few moments reflection should remind us of the enduring fact of human vulnerability.

Four years ago in December 2010 the earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince and southern Haiti killed somewhere between 100,000 and 300,000 people, injured 300,000 more and displaced over one and a quarter million Haitians. Ten years ago, on December 2004, the Sumatran earthquake produced a tsunami that spread across the Indian Ocean striking a dozen countries from southeast Asia to the Eastern coast of Africa. In total 230,000 people are estimated to have died, though only 185,000 of these deaths were confirmed; 125,000 people were injured and 1,740,000 were displaced. Thirty years prior to that (in 1976) the Tangshan earthquake in northeast China killed somewhere between 250,000 and 650,000 people and injured another 800,000. These three relatively recent events took the lives of over 1,000,000 and cost the homes of twice that number. Additional major earthquakes over the same period account for a

further quarter of a million dead and half a million injured. Turning from natural to moral evils the death count in wars in Africa, the middle east and Asia during the same period is about twelve million with as many again injured and or displaced.

So much for the dramatic, large-scale blighting and ending of lives. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime maintains a Global Study on Homicide (see https://www.unodc.org/gsh/en/data.html). Statistics from this for 2012 (the last year for which figures are available) show 50,000 murders in Brazil, 43,000 in India, 33,000 in Nigeria, 26,000 in Mexico, 18,000 in the Congo, 16,000 in South Africa and the same in Venezuela, 15,000 in the United States, 14,000 in Columbia, 13,000 each in Pakistan and the Russian Federation, 11,000 in Ethiopia, 8,000 in Myanmar and the same in the Philippines, 6,000 each in Guatemala, and in Tanzania, and 4,000 in Bangladesh. So without adding the many smaller numbers that is 300,000 murders in 2012. Figures rise and fall in previous years but over the period since the first of the earthquakes I cited – the Tangshan 1976 disaster - the figure is over 10,000,000 so all in all the total of violent deaths is of the order of 25,000,000.

In an article entitled "We lost all we had in a second: coping with grief and loss after natural disaster", (*World Psychiatry*. 2013, 12 (1) 69-75) Samanthika Ekanayake discusses ways in which 39 survivors in the Matara district of Sri Lanka coped with the effects of the of the 2004 Tsunami disaster. Most were Buddhists and one respondent observed:

> We lost all we had in a second. Soon after the incident, we were really hopeless and lost all our hopes for the future. Even now, we don't go after sophisticated material things due to that experience. As it was shown in Buddha's preaching, now we understand the temporary nature of life." Another replied "How can I tell my friends that I became homeless because of my own siblings? How can I tell neighbours that my kids

> neglected me after the tsunami? If I discuss these things with the people I know, then it brings shame to my own people. So I don't talk or discuss my problems with anyone. I reveal all my problems in front of the Buddha's statue, then I feel relaxed and calm.

In broad outlines, the situation today is as it has always been: we are born into a world not of our own making, under conditions we did not choose, in circumstances over which we have little control, with no real knowledge of what may occur in the near future; and increasingly we are given reasons to wonder whether even what we ourselves choose to do is the expression of free, deliberated choice or is rather the working out of impersonal forces. Reflecting on these facts we might look afresh at the medieval preoccupation with grace, charity, merit, sin and redemption, viewing these not necessarily through their theological lenses but seeing them as ways of conceptualizing the contingencies, vulnerabilities, evils and hopes that surround the human condition, and we might then wonder whether contemporary ethical theory is seriously lacking in seeming still to have very little to say about, or even to show much consciousness of these facts.