

## 9. How Can You Become Virtuous?

As we learned in the last section, people run into trouble when their passions overtake their intellect. So how do we overcome these troubles? The answer is by virtue. What is a virtue? We might recall from an earlier chapter that Thomas Aquinas considers a perfect definition to include all four causes: formal, material, efficient, and final. So Thomas appeals to a definition of "virtue" given by Saint Augustine: "Virtue is a good quality of the mind by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us."

Here is how virtue breaks down as a definition with the four causes:

### Fourfold Definition of Virtue

Formal cause	"good quality"
Material cause	"of the mind"
Efficient cause	"God who works in us"
Final cause	"to live righteously"

Simply stated, virtues are good patterns or habits. It is a good deed when you help an elderly lady cross the street. It is not a virtue, it is a deed. However, if you are accustomed to helping the elderly at all times, then this habit is a "virtue."

Similarly, if you punch the old lady, you have committed a sin. Now then, if you fight and abuse old people all the time, you have acquired a "vice."

Virtues, then, are good patterns and vices are evil patterns. Just like jogging or lifting weights, the moral life gets easier and more powerful if you habituate your soul to doing good things. According to Thomas Aquinas, the fourfold hierarchy of the soul is perfected by four corresponding virtues.

Intellect	Prudence
Will	Justice
Irascible Passions	Fortitude
Concupiscible Passions	Temperance

**Four Natural or "Cardinal" Virtues:** The four virtues that perfect the natural soul are called natural virtues or "cardinal virtues." The original arrangement of these virtues can be found in the writings of Plato. They are also found in the biblical book of Wisdom: "She teacheth temperance, and prudence, and justice, and fortitude, which are such things as men can have nothing more profitable in life" (Wisdom 8:7).

The Roman politician and philosopher Cicero (106-43 BC) popularized the fourfold virtue arrangement: "Virtue may be defined as a habit of mind {animi} in harmony

with reason and the order of nature. It has four parts: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance."

**Symbolizing the Virtues:** In the fourth century, Saint Ambrose of Milan codified Cicero's four virtues by calling them the "cardinal virtues." The word *cardo* in Latin means "hinge" or "axis." The idea is that everything turns on these four virtues. These cardinal virtues became enshrined in the Western moral tradition. They are often depicted in art allegorically with the following symbols:

Prudence     book, scroll, mirror

Justice       sword, balance and scales, crown

Fortitude    armor, club, lion, palm branch, tower, yoke, broken column

Temperance  wheel, vegetables, fish, cup, wine mixed with water

I remember the four cardinal virtues by this unusual acronym: PJFT or "peanut-butter, jelly, French toast." If you picture a red cardinal eating a peanut-butter and jelly French toast, you'll never forget the cardinal virtues again.

**Prudence:** Prudence is the habit of proper decision making. Thomas Aquinas cites Saint Augustine's definition as accurate: "Prudence is the knowledge of what to seek and what to avoid." He also cites Saint Isidore who writes: "A prudent man is one who sees as it were from afar, for his sight is keen, and he foresees the event of uncertainties." Now prudence is not merely a perfection of the intellect, but it assumes everything below it, including the will. Aristotle explains prudence like as "something more than a merely rational habit." The poet Dante Alighieri in his *Divine Comedy* described prudence allegorically as having three eyes since prudence allows man to see more clearly and act accordingly. We will discuss how the human soul discerns right actions from evil actions in the next chapter in the section under natural law.

**Justice:** Thomas Aquinas writes more on justice than he does the other virtues. The virtue of justice derives its name from the Latin word *ius* meaning "right" Aristotle explains that "all are agreed in giving the name of 'justice' to the habit which makes men capable of doing just actions." In brief, justice is giving each person his due. This includes our family and friends, our community, our leaders, our nation, and even God himself.

Sins against justice include things like murder, injury, theft, gossip, cursing, vengeance, and cheating. To be a just person entails being fair in all your dealings and being grateful to your benefactors. If someone does a job for you, you pay him

the right amount. If you rent a house, you pay on time. If you receive a loan, you pay it back. If someone gives you a gift, you thank the person. Thomas also states that justice requires us to be friendly and generous with others. Justice also applies to ourselves. If we brag about ourselves, we are giving undue attention to ourselves - a sin against justice.

**Fortitude:** Fortitude is the virtue that perfects our irascible appetites. Cicero wrote that "fortitude is deliberate facing of dangers and bearing of toils." Thomas Aquinas sees martyrdom as the greatest act of fortitude since martyrdom overcomes the fear of death itself for the sake of man's final goal - God.

Fortitude is opposed to fear on one hand, but it is also opposed to the other extreme of daring. For example, cliff diving in uncharted waters would be an overextension of fearlessness. Also, a man who provokes deadly animals for no reason would sin against fortitude. These cases are contrary to fortitude because these acts do not observe the mean between being timid and being foolish.

A person with the virtue of fortitude is courageous. He is strong but not prideful. He is what we call a "go-getter," and he does not falsely fear rejection. For this reason, his life is marked by perseverance. Those who exhibit fortitude also possess patience, which is the opposite of anger.

**Temperance:** The virtue of temperance is that habit that perfects the concupiscible desires for food, drink, and sex. Aristotle explains that "temperance is properly about desires of pleasures of touch."<sup>30</sup> Thomas Aquinas says that sins against temperance are the most disgraceful sins since they make us most like the irrational beasts. Sins against temperance are gluttony, drunkenness, and every form of lustful act seduction, rape, adultery, fornication, incest, and sodomy. For Thomas, temperance also moderates against thinking about sexual relations.

The temperate person eats only those calories that he needs. He drinks in moderation and never becomes drunk. He is chaste in his thoughts, speech, and actions. Thomas also says that speaking and dressing modestly pertains to the virtue of temperance.

**Supernatural Theological Virtues:** The four cardinal virtues are "natural" in that anyone can foster these right habits so as to become a virtuous person. Someone who makes good decisions (prudence), gives everyone their due (justice), proves courageous (fortitude), and moderates that drive for pleasures (temperance) is a virtuous person. However, Thomas Aquinas holds that there are three supernatural

virtues that exceed man's natural capacities: faith, hope, and charity. These three supernatural virtues cannot be cultivated by a natural man but come exclusively from Jesus Christ through the Catholic Church. These three supernatural virtues are therefore called "theological virtues." Thomas teaches these are given in Christian baptism and strengthened through the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

**Virtue of Faith:** Faith is the belief or trust in all the teachings of Jesus Christ given to the Twelve Apostles. This is the "faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). Thomas states this teaching is summarized in the fourteen articles of the Apostles' Creed - seven articles pertaining to the Godhead and seven articles pertaining to the human nature of Christ.

### **Seven Articles Pertaining to the Godhead**

1. God is One "I believe in God"
2. Father "the Father Almighty"
3. Son "and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord"
4. Holy Spirit "I believe in the Holy Spirit"
5. Nature (Creation) "Creator of heaven and earth"
6. Grace (Redemption) "the holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins"
7. Glory (Glorification) "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

### **Seven Articles Pertaining to Christ's Human Nature**

1. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
2. born of the Virgin Mary,
3. suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;
4. He descended into hell.
5. On the third day He arose again from the dead;
6. He ascended into heaven,
7. and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

These fourteen articles are articulated and arranged in the Apostles' Creed which has been rightly and validly ratified as the true faith of Christ by the Pope who has the duty of drawing up a Creed of what ought to be believed always and everywhere: "It belongs to the sole authority of the Sovereign Pontiff to publish a new edition of the symbol, as do all other matters which concern the whole Church such as to convoke a general council and so forth."<sup>33</sup> If someone believes everything taught by the Christ and the Apostles, he has the supernatural virtue of faith.

**Virtue of Hope:** Hope is the second theological virtue, and its object is everlasting happiness. Hope applies the truths of the virtue of faith to the self. It is one thing to believe Jesus Christ died on the cross for sinners. However, it is another thing to believe that this sacrifice applies to me personally and that I might attain the eternal happiness of Heaven. This personal application of the faith is the virtue of hope. One can sin against hope by going to two extremes. On the one hand, someone might falsely believe there is no hope for him with regard to attaining heaven. This is the sin of despair. On the other hand, someone might falsely assume he will enter Heaven regardless or without the grace of God. This is the sin of presumption.

**Virtue of Charity:** The third and highest theological virtue is charity or love. The object of charity is God and our neighbor. The virtue of charity leads us to love God and others. Charity brings about joy, peace, mercy, and acts of kindness. Charity is opposed to hatred, strife, sloth, envy, discord, sedition, and scandal - like faith and hope, this supernatural charity is only possible by grace. In order to ascend to the divine life of eternal beatitude in Heaven, one must die with the virtues of faith, hope, and charity in the soul.

One can have faith (believe all the right things), but not have hope or charity. One can also have faith (believe all the right things) and have hope (that is, personally hope for eternal life), but not have charity. All this means that one can believe the right things but not love God or love his neighbor. Such a person, says Thomas Aquinas, will not go to Heaven since faith must be formed by love.<sup>34</sup>

**Virtue Ethics:** Since Thomas Aquinas defines virtue as a quality or habit of the soul, the person that is virtuous must be habituated rightly. Thomas reasons this way because he understands ethics as something natural to human nature. Human nature comes endowed with certain powers. These powers act toward objects. Here's a diagram for clarity. nature > powers > actions > objects

Now habits perfect the powers belonging to human nature. The intellect is formed by the virtue of prudence. The virtue is formed by the habit of justice. The irascible passions are formed by the virtue of fortitude, and the concupiscible passions are formed by the virtue of temperance. A good person is not merely who does a good deed - he is one who is practiced in good deeds.

Ethics is thus a learned and applied life of virtue. Nowadays, college freshman are typically exposed to situational ethics in introductory philosophy courses. They are usually given difficult, even impossible, moral dilemmas and then asked to solve

them. For example: “An out of control train containing one thousand adults is heading toward a cliff. Yet, the train track leading to the cliff forks. However, at the opposite fork there are one hundred infants tied to the tracks. You stand at the fork with a lever. If you leave the lever in the original position, the runaway train will fly over the cliff and the one thousand adults will die. If you move the lever to the opposition position, you will divert the runaway train away from the cliff, but this will lead to the train running over the one hundred innocent infants. What do you do?

These kinds of "philosophical experiments" are misguided and juvenile. Their ultimate aim is to lead students into a form of utilitarianism - choosing the most useful option; or into a form of consequentialism - choosing the option with best-foreseen outcome. Both schools are very dangerous.

The fact of the matter is that human persons are rarely presented with an extreme moral dilemma like the one depicted above concerning the runaway train. The moral life is one of small every day decisions that add up over time to big decisions. According to Thomas Aquinas, virtuous people are the only ones who can rightly decide the big moral decisions of life because only virtue allows someone to perceive and act accordingly. This is because every moral act involves up to hundreds of bits of information and several different options - not merely two. These decisions also require experience.

If Thomas Aquinas were teaching a class full of college freshman, he would not present them with a simplistic runaway train dilemma with two limited decisions. Rather, he would likely state the following: “Listen, as you grow older you will be faced with many difficult challenges in life. You will be required to make difficult moral decisions. How will you know what to do? You begin now by making small right decisions every single day. It's like lifting weights. Do not worry yourself with the question: "Will I be strong enough to bench press a five hundred pound telephone pole to free a pinned child?"

Instead begin by bench pressing a 135 lbs three times a week and begin to build your strength for anything might happen. Do not ask yourself, "How will I win the Olympic gold medal in the mile?" Instead, begin running every day. Then you will come closer in attaining it. This is the moral life. Begin by doing small things well. Actively form your conscience. Seek the truth. Do not darken your intellect. Submit your passions to right reason. Do this every day for 365 days per year. If you fail, keep trying. Forty years from now, if you are a general of an army in a tough spot, then and only then will you know what to do and when to do it. The

ability to make that right decision begins with the ability to make small right decisions.

This is virtue ethics. How do you keep your temper from flaring up? You begin by doing things you do not like to do so as to learn patience. How to you become prudent? Start by making a prudent decision - do not sleep in and skip class. Get up and get dressed. Start exercising. Do you want to become just? Do not ever lie. Say "thank you" to your waiter. Open the doors for people. Soon you will become habituated to performing good deeds. Over years, you will become virtuous and see more clearly than others. These virtues will have strengthened your natural human faculties.

The virtues are as old as Aristotle. However, Thomas Aquinas integrated the cardinal virtues and the theological virtues by applying his maxim "grace perfects nature." The four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance are perfected by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. In the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas begins with the three theological virtues and then descends to the four cardinal virtues. This ordering and integration amplifies the reality of grace perfecting nature. That which is supernatural provides fulfillment for that which is natural.