

The Principles of Virtue¹

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Abstract

This work seeks to point out the differences between natural moral life and supernatural moral life as of the principles which makes them possible. More precisely, the intention of this paper is to offer an account on the interplay between the principles of the natural moral virtues (those that the agent person can acquire and cultivate through his own efforts) and the infused moral virtues (which cannot be acquired and cultivated by the agent's efforts, but only possessed by him because God grants them to him) within the moral theory of Thomas Aquinas.

Keywords: Ethics, Thomas Aquinas, Natural Moral Virtues, Infused Moral Virtues, Human Nature, Divine Grace

[OS PRINCÍPIOS DA VIRTUDE]

Resumo

Este trabalho procura salientar as diferenças entre a vida moral natural e a vida moral sobrenatural a partir dos princípios que as tornam possíveis. Mais concretamente, pretende-se aqui oferecer uma explicação de como interagem os princípios das virtudes morais naturais (aquelas que o sujeito agente pode adquirir e cultivar mediante os seus próprios esforços) e das virtudes morais infusas (que não são

¹ An earlier version of this paper, "Ethical Supernaturalism," appeared in Jennifer Frey and Candace Vogler eds. *Self Transcendence and Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology and Psychology* (New York: Routledge 2019). Substantial portions of that chapter are reproduced here with the publisher's permission.

adquiridas e cultivas através dos esforços do agente, mas possuídas por ele porque Deus lhas concedeu) dentro da teoria moral de Tomás de Aquino.

Palavras-chave: Ética, Tomás de Aquino, Virtudes Morais Naturais, Virtudes Morais Infusas, Natureza Humana, Graça Divina

Introduction

According to Aristotle, moral perfection consists in becoming most fully what one already is. We attain moral goodness when we realize our already possessed potential.

Moreover, although our ability to attain this goal is in some respects outside our control (looks, wealth, and upbringing, for instance, can all either enhance or diminish our chances) our own actions are the most important factor in our attainment of moral goodness. I will call an ethical system like Aristotle's, where moral goodness (1) consists in realizing already possessed potential and (2) is achieved through natural means (i.e., it is achieved through one's own natural resources, upbringing, society, etc.), a "natural" ethic. In this article, I am interested in examining the difference between the kind of ethic Aristotle describes, and the account of the moral life offered by Thomas Aquinas. On the one hand, Aquinas seems to be very much an Aristotelian, for he not only appropriates but expands upon many of Aristotle's key insights. Where Aristotle merely says that we become good by fulfilling our nature, for instance, Aquinas explicitly describes the capacities that allow us to pursue such fulfillment. But, at the same time, Aquinas also insists that one's highest moral perfection does *not* consist in merely becoming a better version of what one already is, in the fulfillment of already possessed capacities.² The highest possible moral perfection, for Aquinas, consists in participation in the divine life and is made possible only when we are transformed by God's free gift of grace. Aquinas likewise claims that the virtues that order one to this latter kind of perfection cannot be attained by one's repeated good acts but must be bestowed by God. I will call an account like this—an account where unqualified moral goodness cannot occur unless our nature is elevated or transformed, and where such a transformation cannot occur through our own efforts—a "supernatural" ethic.

All of this seems rather problematic, if not even downright paradoxical. If true perfection cannot be achieved by our own efforts, why does Aquinas spend so much

² Aquinas does, of course, hold that we all naturally possess a "passive potency" or what some scholars call a "special obediential potency" for supernatural beatitude, namely the capacity for our nature to be elevated to participation in divine life by God's free gift of grace. Such a potency is far different, however, from our capacity to order ourselves to the good proportionate to our nature. Since we can achieve the latter sort of good through our own efforts, Aquinas refers to this latter potency as an "active potency."

time describing how it is that one cultivates Aristotelian natural virtue? The traditional response by Thomists has been to focus on how Aquinas believes Aristotelian natural virtues are related to the supernatural virtues that God bestows along with grace. Usually, scholars propose that Aquinas envisions some sort of supporting role for Aristotelian natural virtue, i.e., that one needs to cultivate Aristotelian natural virtues to somehow “round out” one’s infused virtues, or that that the Aristotelian natural virtues provide the “matter” that the supernatural virtues perfect.³ In this article, however, I want to approach this question from a different angle, namely by examining how Aquinas thinks that the gift of grace affects the very principles that allow us to cultivate Aristotelian virtues in the first place. I will describe two very different ways in which one might try to accommodate those principles, and argue that both are ultimately problematic. I will then propose an alternative account which, I will argue, avoids the problems of the first two accounts. I will end by considering how the interpretation I propose fits into the debate over the relationship between natural and supernatural virtue.

This article will have three parts. In the first part, I will examine how Aquinas not only appropriates but expands Aristotle’s account of nature and our ability to cultivate the natural virtues. In the second part of this article, I will examine Aquinas’s account of how the gift of grace transforms nature. Then, in the final part of this article, I will examine two different ways of understanding how Aquinas envisions the transformative effect of grace on nature and argue that both options are ultimately problematic. I will then propose a third way which, I will argue, both avoids the difficulties posed by the other two and allows for a more intuitive understanding of the respective roles of the infused and acquired virtues in the Christian moral life.

Aquinas’s Aristotelian Roots

I described a “natural” ethic as an ethical system (1) where moral perfection consists in becoming the best version of what one already is and where (2) moral goodness is achieved through natural means. My choice of both criteria was, of course, inspired by Aristotle. For it is Aristotle who insists that all things have a “function” and that good things are those that perform their unique function well. And while Aristotle acknowledges that at least part of what enables us to perform our function well lies outside of our control (looks, wealth, and upbringing, for instance, can all enhance or diminish our chances of fulfilling it) our own actions are the most important factor in whether or not we achieve moral perfection: our repeated good acts create the virtues that are the most important ingredient in our flourishing. But – as I will point out in this section – in certain key respects, Aquinas seems to offer an even stronger natural

³ For a thorough overview of the various strategies scholars adopt, see Christof (2010). For examples of various reconciliation strategies by contemporary scholars, see Goris and Schoot (2017).

ethic than Aristotle does. For Aquinas not only adopts the Aristotelian account of nature but seems to think that nature provides us with far more resources to work toward the fulfillment of that nature than Aristotle does.

Aristotle says that a good human being performs its unique function well, and he says that this means exhibiting the excellence of reason in the activities of life. But beyond insisting on the need to cultivate virtues, Aquinas offers a more substantial account of the resources nature gives us to cultivate virtue in the first place. Aristotle says that we are all “by nature” capable of virtue and that virtue is “up to us,” but he also seems to believe that quite a bit about actually becoming virtuous depends on luck: we need to be born in the right place (namely Athens) and have the right upbringing and the right amount of external goods. Aquinas, though, locates the capacity to act according to right reason squarely within us. Although even on Aquinas’s account circumstances and upbringing are hardly irrelevant to the cultivation of virtue, on his account the key player is still nature itself.

Aquinas thinks that we all, by the very constitution of our nature, have the capacity to cause habits ordered to our natural fulfillment (i.e., natural virtues) in ourselves through our repeated good acts. In different texts, Aquinas asks whether virtue is “natural” to man: i.e., whether we possess virtues by the very constitution of our nature. He consistently responds that although we do not naturally possess the virtues, we do possess a natural “aptitude” for them (*De Virtutibus in Communis* a. 8; *Summa Theologiae* I-II q.63 a.1).⁴ One thing “having an aptitude” could mean is that the thing in question is particularly suited to be changed in some way, even if it cannot bring about the change on its own. A piece of clay is particularly suited to be manipulated and molded in various ways, but it does not (of course) mold and shape itself. Conversely, though, we might mean that the thing in question has an aptitude not only to *be* changed, but also to *bring about* the change in itself. When we say that someone has a natural “aptitude” for languages, for instance, we seem to attribute to her not merely a passive receptivity (like that of the clay) but also an active one: the person who has an aptitude for languages doesn’t just receive knowledge of language from an external source in the way that a sculptor imposes shape on clay. She herself plays a causal role in her acquisition of the language: she is in some sense both the sculptor and the clay. Aquinas thinks our aptitude for natural virtue⁵ is just like that: he thinks, that is to say, we have *both* an active and a passive “aptitude” for virtue; it’s not just that dispositions to act virtuously can be imposed on our appetites and will, but that our intellect and will also themselves have the capacity to cause the very acts that produce those dispositions. He thinks, moreover, that our very nature gives us

⁴ All quotations of the *De Virtutibus in Communis* in this article are taken from the translation by E.M. Atkins (2005). All quotations of the *Summa Theologiae* in this article are taken from A. Freddoso’s in-progress translation: www3.nd.edu/~afreddoso/summa-translation/TOC.htm.

⁵ Throughout this article, the term “natural virtue” refers to virtues that are ordered to the perfection of our created human nature, as opposed to those virtues ordered to our supernatural perfection.

that capacity (*DVC* a. 8; *ST* q.63 a. 1). All of this is of course deeply Aristotelian. But Aquinas attributes to us even more natural resources for the cultivation of virtue than Aristotle does. For he holds that nature also gives us the very starting points or “seeds” of the acquired moral virtues.

When Aquinas explains how it is that we are naturally capable of causing natural virtue in ourselves, he consistently points to the basic, orienting knowledge that—in his view—we all possess from our very first interactions with the world. Aquinas thinks that from our very first interactions with the world, we know, and are motivated by such naturally known, moral principles. These principles, says Aquinas, give us a vague and inchoate knowledge of our natural good and hence are the “seeds” of the virtues (*DVC* a. 10; *ST* I-II q.63 a. 3). They are “seeds” of virtue because they provide us with the basic orientation to our good and the basic principles of action that makes virtuous action possible. Aquinas says, tellingly, that the ends of the natural virtues “pre-exist” in these seeds; that is to say, this basic moral knowledge gives us an inchoate grasp of and desire for our natural fulfillment. Aquinas will argue that these “seeds of virtue,” together with our natural ability to reason, allow us to produce acts ordered to our natural fulfillment and, when we produce such acts repeatedly, to cultivate the natural virtues.

The second important “active principle” that enables us to cultivate the natural virtues in ourselves is reason itself, which can move from these naturally known moral principles to a correct conclusion about what should be done. Aquinas does not, of course, think it is always easy to reason from our basic moral knowledge to a correct conclusion about what we should do. Indeed, we might well require the help of parents and teachers, just as we require their assistance in the acquisition of speculative knowledge. What Aquinas does think, however, is that when we receive such assistance, our teachers only minister to our reason; a teacher can help our reason to move along the appropriate paths, but it is ultimately our own reason that must arrive at the appropriate conclusion (*DVC* q.11 a. 1). It is in the same way, says Aquinas, that medicine is related to healing: the body might make use of medicine, but it is ultimately the body that must heal itself.

Since the powers of our soul are receptive to habituation, we can also, if we do such actions frequently enough, cause habits ordered to right action (i.e., virtues) in ourselves through our repeated good acts. In Aquinas’s words, we can cause the natural virtues in ourselves because we naturally possess both the active and the passive principles of virtue. Aquinas, then, thinks that our very nature gives us the resources to develop habits ordered to our natural fulfillment: both an orientation to our natural fulfillment, in the form of naturally known basic moral principles; reason itself, which is capable of applying this basic moral knowledge in concrete instances; and passions that are susceptible of habituation.

Where the cultivation of natural virtue is concerned, then, Aquinas seems to offer a thoroughly natural ethic. We all by nature possess an orientation toward

natural virtue, and we all – again by the very constitution of our nature – possess the resources we need to develop that ordering into full blown virtues.

The problem, of course, is that Aquinas does not think that the goal of the moral life is to become the best version of what we already are, to perfect our already possessed capacities. Aquinas thinks that the goal of the moral life is to become something far better than we already are – to participate in the divine life – and he thinks that this cannot occur without direct divine intervention. Specifically, he believes that God bestows the gift of grace. “Grace” can mean different things in different religious traditions, and even within traditions, it is often used in different ways. In this instance Aquinas means that God bestows a habit that inheres in the very essence of the soul (rather than in one of its powers) with the result that the habituated human nature is now ordered to supernatural beatitude rather than a purely natural fulfillment. Aquinas also holds that God bestows corresponding virtues along with grace, so that the powers of the soul are also appropriately ordered. These are commonly referred to as “infused” virtues. All this seems to pose a problem. If the goal is not the attainment of the good proportionate to our created nature and the cultivation of natural virtue, why spend so much time discussing it? Or, since Aquinas *does* spend so much time discussing it, shouldn’t it be the case that the cultivation of natural virtue has some continued role to play even in the life of grace? But on the other hand, if we attempt to carve out some supporting role for natural virtue, aren’t we conceding that Aquinas *does* (at least to some extent) offer a purely natural ethic?

Although scholars have offered a variety of answers to these questions, in what follows I want to explore the notion of infused virtue from a different angle, one that is implied by Aquinas’s text. Specifically, I want to examine Aquinas’s assertions in various texts about the need for and role of the “theological virtues,” aka the divinely given virtues of faith, hope, and love. Though Aquinas believes that all the moral virtues are bestowed along with grace, he believes that the divinely given virtues of faith, hope, and love are logically prior and that they play a foundational role in grounding the other divinely given virtues. As I will show, Aquinas consistently motivates his account of the theological virtues by insisting that man needs the same kind of resources to pursue supernatural union with God that he already possesses at the natural level. Whatever account Aquinas ultimately wishes to give of the relationship between nature and grace, or of natural virtue and supernatural virtue, it will begin with whatever fit he envisions between the theological virtues and the natural principles described above.

Ordering the Natural to the Supernatural

In the preceding section I described the features of Aquinas's account that would – if he considered natural fulfillment the goal of the moral life – suffice to make his account a “natural” ethic. But here matters get a bit more complex. For while Aquinas does think that natural fulfillment is a genuine kind of fulfillment, he also thinks that man is only truly fulfilled by a more than natural fulfillment. This seems to put nature and our pursuit of its perfection in an awkward place. However, the guiding thesis of this article is that, even though Aquinas is not interested in offering the kind of autonomous “natural” ethic Aristotle lays out, nature is not as awkwardly situated in his account as it might seem, and that we can shed some light on nature's role by examining what Aquinas thinks actually occurs when God bestows the gift of grace on man. In some sense the answer is obvious: it is well known, for instance, that Aquinas thinks that the theological and moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are bestowed along with the gift of grace. But what is less obvious – and what matters quite a bit for present purposes – is the question of how these additional gifts are related to nature. This is what I will examine in this section. As will be clear, Aquinas envisions a specific role for each infused habit, and in each case the gift remedies a specific way in which our natural resources are insufficient for the pursuit of our supernatural fulfillment.

In question 62 of the *prima secundae* Aquinas considers the theological virtues. God bestows the theological virtues, Aquinas argues, because our good is twofold. We have one good that we can pursue through our own natural resources, and one – participation in the divine life – that entirely surpasses our nature. Since our natural resources sufficiently direct us to the former good but not to the latter, we need to be ordered to our divine good by the supernatural equivalent of whatever it is that orders us to our natural good: “Since this second sort of beatitude exceeds any proportion to human nature, a man's natural principles, by which he proceeds to act well in a way proportioned to his nature (*secundum suam proportionem*), are not sufficient for ordering the man toward this beatitude” (*ST I-II q.62 a. 1*). Thus, says Aquinas, man needs to be given new principles that do at the supernatural level what the principles he already possesses do at the natural level:

“Hence, principles by which he might be so ordered toward supernatural beatitude have to be divinely added to a man – in just the way in which he is ordered by his natural principles toward his connatural end (though not without God's help). And these principles are called theological virtues.” (ST I-II q.62 a. 1)

Each theological virtue supplies something specific that our natural principles lack.

In the preceding section, we saw that (at least according to Aquinas) man is capable of pursuing his natural good because he has, by his very nature, an inchoate knowledge of it on the part of his intellect and a desire for it on the part of his will. Aquinas believes that in order to pursue our supernatural good we need a similar knowledge and desires that correspond to it.⁶ This is why he believes we need the theological virtues. Our intellect naturally knows first principles that guide us in speculative and practical matters: enough to allow us to pursue the good proportionate to our nature (ST I-II q.62 a. 3). But in order that we can pursue the divine good, says Aquinas, our intellect needs something more, namely: "certain supernatural principles that are grasped by a divine light (*divino lumine capiuntur*), and these are the things to be taken on faith (*credibilia*), with respect to which there is faith" (ST I-II q.62 a. 3). Similarly, since we naturally tend to what is connatural to us, our will already tends to the good of reason. Thus in order for our will to be ordered to the divine good, Aquinas says that we need to first, be united to that good in some way, and, second, see the attainment of that good as possible: "Each thing's appetite naturally moves and tends toward the end that is connatural to it, and this movement proceeds from the thing's being conformed in some way to its end (*iste motus provenit ex quadam conformitate rei ad suum finem*)" (ST I-II q.62 a. 3). The theological virtue of charity achieves the former, while the theological virtue of hope achieves the latter:

"The will is ordered toward its supernatural end both (a) with respect to the movement of intention, which tends toward the end as something possible to attain, and this pertains to hope, and also (b) with respect to a certain spiritual union through which the will is in some sense transformed into its end, and this is accomplished through charity." (ST I-II q.62 a. 3)

Especially because it will be important for what follows, it is important to note that Aquinas believes that there is a distinct dis-similarity between what our natural speculative and practical first principles provide us with and what the theological virtues, as principles, provide us with. Aquinas certainly believes that each set of principles provides us with an inchoate knowledge of and desire for some good: our naturally possessed principles give us an inchoate knowledge of and desire for the good of reason, and the theological virtues, in turn, give us an inchoate knowledge of and desire for our supernatural good. But Aquinas also thinks that the former ordering is more self-sufficient than the latter. That is to say, together with our natural ability to reason and our natural desire for the good of reason, our naturally possessed

⁶ A great deal of ink has, of course, been spilled over the question of whether man can be said to have a "natural desire" for supernatural beatitude. A full treatment of such questions is outside the scope of this article. All that matters for present purposes, however, is that man does not naturally possess the kind of order to supernatural beatitude that he does to the good proportionate to his nature. This point is uncontroversial.

first principles give us everything we need to cultivate the natural virtues. Teachers might initially help our reason to move along the appropriate paths, but recognizing the appropriate action in a given situation is something that we do on our own. As we develop the natural virtues, we come to rely on the assistance of teachers less and less: we become increasingly adept at recognizing how to pursue the good of reason in a particular instance. But Aquinas does not, importantly, think we ever become similarly “self-sufficient” at applying the knowledge given us by the theological virtues.

While Aquinas repeatedly compares the theological virtues to our naturally known moral principles, he also repeatedly insists that they do not order us to our supernatural fulfillment as completely or as entirely as our natural principles order us to our natural fulfillment:

“There are two ways in which human reason is perfected by God: (a) by its natural perfection, i.e., in accord with the natural light of reason, and (b), as was explained above (q. 62, a. 1), by a certain supernatural perfection through the theological virtues. Even though this second sort of perfection is greater than the first, nonetheless, the first is had by a man in a more complete way than is the second. For the first sort of perfection is had by a man as a full possession, so to speak, whereas the second is had as an incomplete possession, since we know and love God in an incomplete way.” (ST I-II q.68 a. 2)

Because the theological virtues direct us to our good in an “incomplete” way, we cannot—as when we order our acts to our natural good—be the ultimate cause of acts ordered to supernatural beatitude:

“Now it is clear that if a thing has a nature or form (or virtue) completely, then it can operate in its own right (per se) in accord with that nature or form (though this is not to exclude the operation of God, who operates interiorly in every nature and will). By contrast, if a thing has a nature or form (or virtue) incompletely, then it cannot operate in its own right without being moved by another.” (ST I-II q.68 a. 2)

In the case of our natural good, our reason and our first principles of action are sufficient to enable us to perform appropriately ordered acts: “With respect to what falls under human reason, i.e., in relation to man’s connatural end, a man can operate through the judgment of reason” (ST I-II q.68 a. 2). But even with the new order provided by the theological virtues, reason is insufficient:

“On the other hand, with respect to man’s ultimate and supernatural end, toward which reason moves one insofar as it is formed in an incomplete way by the theological virtues, the movement of reason is not itself sufficient

without the prompting and movement of the Holy Spirit from above.” (ST I-II q.68 a. 2)

Aquinas believes that we become capable of receiving this “prompting and movement” thanks to a further divine gift also bestowed along with grace, namely the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It’s clear from the preceding that Aquinas believes we need and receive new principles, new sources of action, if we are to be ordered to a good that transcends our nature. His very description of these new principles clearly conforms to his Aristotelian understanding of nature. Thus, nature at the very least provides the guiding principles of its own transformation. But we are still left with the question of what *happens* to nature when these new sources of action are added. Aquinas says that faith, hope, and love function at the supernatural level “just as naturally known principles do at the level of our natural activities” (DVC a. 10); but how does natural activity align with supernatural activity? How does our natural habitual knowledge of the first speculative and practical principles relate to the knowledge God infuses with the theological virtue of faith? How does our natural desire for the good of reason relate to the desire that arises when God unites us to himself in charity? In what follows, I will describe what some common interpretations of Aquinas’s view of the relationship between the natural and supernatural virtues imply about the relationship between these two sets of principles. I will argue that, under these interpretations, the two sets of principles remain in an uneasy relationship with each other, and the tension between nature and grace remains. I will then propose a better account of the relationship between these two sets of principles and offer some concluding thoughts about what my proposal means for the relationship between natural and supernatural virtue.

Parallel Principles?

There is very little scholarship devoted to the question of how Aquinas believes the natural and supernatural principles described in the preceding section are related to each other. There is, however, a great deal of literature devoted to the question of how Aquinas believes the natural and supernatural virtues are related to each other. In this section I wish to make two points. First, I will argue that the former question is prior to and presupposed by the latter: a thesis about how grace affects the natural virtues will necessarily imply a thesis about how grace affects our natural principles. Second, I will examine what the traditional account of the relationship between the natural and supernatural virtues implies about the relationship between man’s natural and supernatural principles. The traditional account, I will argue, implies that even in a Christian in a state of grace, the natural and supernatural principles of action play

distinct but parallel roles, and the account thus does nothing to resolve the tension between grace and nature.

In the preceding section, we saw that Aquinas envisions a direct connection between virtue and the “principles” or seeds that initially order man to virtue. The principles that order man to natural virtue, moreover, are very clearly distinct from the principles that order man to supernatural virtue: the former cannot do the job of the latter or vice versa, because each gives man an inchoate knowledge of and desire for a very different kind of good. It might seem only natural to suppose that these new principles replace or transform the old; that our natural inchoate knowledge of and desire for the good of reason becomes an inchoate knowledge of and desire for supernatural beatitude; that our natural knowledge of the first practical principles is deepened and broadened to include knowledge of the truths of faith; and so on. But if Aquinas envisions this kind of continuity between the natural and supernatural principles of virtue, then there is no room for the separate cultivation of natural virtue in the Christian moral life. For if the principles or “seeds” of the natural virtues are transformed in this way, then every morally good action will stem from those transformed, supernatural principles and hence be an act of supernatural, rather than natural, virtue. At least given the examination of the preceding section, it would seem that the only way it will be possible for the Christian in a state of grace to cultivate *natural*—as opposed to supernatural—virtues will be in the event that his original natural principles and their operation remain distinct from the operation of the supernatural principles he receives along with grace, even after he receives grace and the theological virtues. As I will show in what follows, traditional accounts of the relationship between the infused and acquired virtues seem to assume just this. Such assumptions, I will argue, only serve to deepen, rather than diminish, the apparent tension between Aquinas’s Christian commitments and his Aristotelian sympathies.

Interpreters of Aquinas have attempted to explain his view of the relationship between the infused and acquired virtues in a variety of ways. One very common strategy is to maintain that the Christian simply possesses two distinct kinds of virtue, one natural and one supernatural. Though they uniformly agree that the supernatural virtues are the most important, they also insist that the Christian’s natural virtues play some sort of necessary supporting role. Some scholars, for instance, argue that Aquinas believed the Christian cultivates natural virtues insofar as he pursues the civic good and supernatural virtues insofar as he pursues his supernatural good.⁷ On this view, grace perfects the natural virtues and renders their acts meritorious, but the perfection is “extrinsic” rather than “intrinsic”: even in the Christian the natural

⁷ Though I think this view is deeply problematic, I also think that this is almost certainly the view that Aquinas puts forward in his early *Commentary on the Sentences*. I simply think that if this is also Aquinas’s mature view, then Aquinas is wrong. For a fuller discussion of this point, see Knobel, “Aquinas’s *Commentary on the sentences* and the Relationship Between Infused and Acquired Virtue” (forthcoming).

virtues are still ordered to man's natural, rather than his supernatural, fulfillment.⁸ This means that the Christian sometimes acts out of (meritorious) natural virtue and sometimes out of supernatural virtue. This in turn requires one to explain what determines whether one acts out of natural or supernatural virtue. At least some scholars seem to believe that whichever good I in fact pursue in a concrete instance is determined by the motive with which I act: if I go to war in order to defend my country (say), I make use of natural virtue, but if I go to war for the glory of God, I make use of supernatural virtue (Reichberg 2010, pp. 337–368).

Still other scholars find in Aquinas a distinction between the kind of virtue “necessary for salvation” – i.e., supernatural virtue – and a “fuller” version of virtue, which involves both natural and supernatural virtues. These scholars argue that supernatural moral virtues enable us to perform morally good actions in those areas “necessary for salvation” but not necessarily in other areas of life; in order to act rightly in those areas of life that are not “necessary for salvation,” one needs to cultivate the natural virtues. Michael Sherwin (2009), for instance, argues that this distinction can explain the clear moral failings of many saints. St. Louis IX, for instance, while widely recognized for his holiness, also seemed to lack virtue in important respects, most notably in his decision to launch the seventh crusade and in his neglect of the needs of his country and his queen (p. 29–52, 41). Sherwin argues that St. Louis IX's moral deficiencies indicate that he possessed supernatural virtues but failed to cultivate the natural virtues: he possessed virtue “in those things necessary for salvation” but not in other areas of life. Joseph Pieper offers virtually the same explanation in his discussion of prudence, again distinguishing between the kind of prudence sufficient for salvation (infused prudence) and a “fuller” prudence, namely infused prudence that is supplemented by a natural prudence that I acquire through my own repeated good acts.⁹

Both of the interpretations described above treat the cultivation and practice of natural virtue as something distinct from the activity of supernatural virtue, even in the Christian moral life. But if, as Aquinas consistently claims, natural and supernatural virtues are not just ordered to different goods but also originate from different principles, then it is not merely that the Christian sometimes performs acts of natural and sometimes acts of supernatural virtue, it must also be the case that the Christian sometimes operates from one set of first principles and sometimes from another. When he pursues the civic good (on the first account) or reasons about

⁸ This view is characteristic of interpretations of Aquinas put forth in the early 1900s. See for instance Coerver (1946) and Falanga (1948).

⁹ Though a full discussion of this view is beyond the scope of the present article, I find this interpretation deeply problematic. First, I am not at all convinced that it is desirable or even possible to carve up the moral life in this way. Why should we think that only some of our acts are directly ordered to supernatural beatitude (as the first interpretation implies), or that some actions, like an overenthusiasm for launching crusades (or an inability to recognize the needs of one's wife!) are “unnecessary” for salvation? What, indeed, does it even mean for something to be “necessary” or “unnecessary” for salvation? Moreover, the textual basis for this interpretation is slim at best.

matters “unnecessary for salvation” (on the second account), he will take his natural knowledge of and desire for the good of reason as his point of departure. But when he pursues the supernatural good (on the first account) or reasons about matters “necessary for salvation” (on the second account), he will turn out to have reasoned from the new, supernatural principles given by grace.

When we consider interpretations like those described above in light of Aquinas’s assertions about the difference in the principles from which acts of natural and supernatural virtue arise, the implication is clear: the new principles given in grace provide a second option for action; they exist alongside our natural principles, playing parallel but distinct roles. The implication of accounts like the ones above is that I can *either* reason from my naturally known first practical and speculative principles (albeit now more perfectly, since my nature has been healed by grace) *or* I can make use of the new supernatural principles that I grasp by divine light. When I order my acts to the political common good (on the first interpretation) or reason about things unnecessary for salvation (on the second interpretation) I operate according to my natural knowledge of and desire for the good of reason. Grace might perfect that natural knowledge and desire and even my ability to reason about how best to pursue those goods, but it does not change what my acts are fundamentally *about*, namely, the pursuit of the good of the present life (or things unnecessary for salvation, on the second account). But when I order my acts to my supernatural good (or, on the second interpretation, reason about things necessary for salvation) I operate according to the new principles of action that God bestows along with grace, namely the theological virtues. These views imply, that is to say, that the new principles of action that God bestows along with grace remain not only distinct but separable from the principles we all naturally possess. I can be proficient at acting according to the former without being proficient at acting according to the latter, and vice versa. Perhaps more importantly, these interpretations imply that it is not merely possible but sometimes completely appropriate to set aside the new supernatural principles of action that one receives along with grace. I will refer to this as the “parallel principles” view.

I think that the parallel principles view is problematic for many reasons, but the problem most pertinent to the present discussion is that it does nothing to resolve the tension between nature and grace, between a natural ethic and a supernatural ethic, as I alluded to at the beginning of this paper. On this account a nature perfected by grace seems to oscillate between performing acts ordered to its natural good and performing acts ordered to supernatural beatitude. On accounts like these, Aquinas’s moral theory consists of an uncomfortable and unclear marriage between a natural ethic and a supernatural ethic; nature remains in an uneasy and unclear relationship with grace. We can emphatically assert that the two sets of principles and their associated virtues complement each other, but doing so doesn’t shed any light on the details.

Transformed Natural Principles?

An alternative to holding that grace provides a new set of principles that operates alongside our natural principles (what I have described as the “parallel principles” view) is to hold that the new principles received by grace perfect our already possessed natural principles.¹⁰ With respect to the new foundational knowledge given by faith, for instance, it would not be the case that the knowledge of “supernatural principles grasped by a divine light” exists alongside our knowledge of the first speculative and practical principles as an alternate first principle that I use only when ordering my acts to my supernatural, rather than my natural, good, but that my grasp of my original first principles is now informed and deepened by the knowledge given me by faith; the knowledge given me by faith illuminates and transforms even my natural knowledge of first principles. One’s natural desire for the good of reason, similarly, would now be informed by hope and charity, so that one would now properly desire one’s natural good insofar as it was part of or conducive to one’s supernatural good. I will call this view the “transformed principles” view.¹¹

This view or something like it is implied by those contemporary interpreters of Aquinas who insist that any pre-existing acquired virtues are “taken up” or “transformed” by the gift of grace, so that all the Christian’s virtues are infused virtues.¹² If every morally good act of the Christian is necessarily an act of infused virtue, then it would follow—given Aquinas’s own account of how virtuous acts arise—that every morally good act of a Christian in a state of grace arises from those principles. On such a view, Aquinas really does ultimately offer a supernatural ethic, and a natural ethic only insofar as one’s attempts at attaining natural fulfillment dispose or prepare one to receive the gift of true perfection from God¹³ (DVC a.11, Shanley, 1999) But this is also a non-traditional interpretation. In what follows, I will mention some of the difficulties I think this view must overcome.

The first and most obvious challenge that this view must overcome is the apparent elimination of the natural virtues. The “parallel principles” view not merely accommodates Aristotle but provides a clear role for the cultivation of Aristotelian natural virtue in the Christian moral life. But on this view, natural virtue as such has no place. The Christian should not strive to cultivate the natural virtues because they

¹⁰ I say “an” alternative because it seems to me that there are a number possible ways the principles bestowed along with grace could be related to our original natural principles. I present this one because I think it is the view that some contemporary interpreters of Aquinas implicitly hold.

¹¹ It would be a consequence of this view that even traditionally non-moral activities, like

¹² The account put forward by Bill Mattison would be an example of this view (Mattison, 2011, pp. 558–585).

¹³ Aquinas says *that* this occurs, he is somewhat vague on the details of just *how* the cultivation of natural virtue disposes us to receive the gift of grace. Some scholars, most recently Brian Shanley (1999), have speculated about how exactly the cultivation of natural virtue might prepare one for the gift of grace.

represent an inferior kind of perfection. To attempt to cultivate and perfect purely natural virtues would be to attempt disregard, at least in some aspects of one's life, the great gifts that are given in grace. This seems not merely unwise, but even sinful. But if this is the correct picture of the Christian moral life, then Aristotle seems to go out the window. And since Aquinas's account is so clearly and so thoroughly indebted to Aristotle, it seems that something must have gone awry somewhere.¹⁴ In my view, however, this apparent problem is a non-starter.

The worry described above is at heart the worry that nature is disregarded. But it should be clear from the preceding sections that this is not at all true. The Aristotelian account of nature is present at every step in Aquinas's account of grace. It is the Aristotelian description of nature that Aquinas looks to in order to see what needs to be transformed, and it is that same nature that Aquinas believes is transformed. Nature remains. An inchoate knowledge of and desire for the end of human life remains, even if what is known and desired is fundamentally changed. The powers of the soul remain, even if their fulfillment changes. Reason remains, even if it is now assisted in its acts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What is no longer part of the picture is a purely natural fulfillment, or virtues ordered to a purely natural fulfillment. But this, in my view, is entirely as it should be.

A different worry and deeper worry, and one that I think does raise some genuine philosophical questions, has to do with the (in)ability of this interpretation to accommodate and explain imperfection and growth. Even if grace and the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are infused at the moment of baptism, those God given helps do not altogether eradicate one's previous habits. But on the transformation view, every morally good Christian act will be an act of infused virtue. This seems implausible. It seems more reasonable to think of the new convert as having made only a first, tentative step in the life of grace. But it is not clear that the transformation view—at least as described above—can give an account of how that growth occurs. As I will argue in what follows, I think the solution lies in Aquinas's insistence that the new principles bestowed along with grace are not just higher, and not just more perfect, but also *imperfectly possessed*.

Imperfectly Possessed Principles

Aquinas is clear that the new principles received in grace make it possible for the Christian to perform acts ordered to supernatural beatitude. But he also makes it clear that those principles are possessed *imperfectly*. Although Aquinas mentions that imperfect possession in the context of asserting the need for additional help in the form of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it makes sense that that our natural principles

¹⁴ In this paper, I am assuming a particular interpretation of Aquinas, one which some scholars might take issue with. A discussion of those debates would be outside the scope of this article.

might be both transformed on the one hand and *imperfecgtly transformed* on the other. An example can help to make clear what I have in mind.

In his *Introduction to Christianity*, in the context of describing the inescapable nature of doubt, Ratzinger points to the example of St. Therese of Liseux. Even though her faith was so strong that it seemed to for whom faith had become “a self-evident presupposition,” had moments of darkness and doubt, moments in which she expressed doubt, not about one dogma or other, but about the entire edifice. The difference between Ratzinger’s remark and Aquinas’s is striking. Aquinas says faith gives us new first principles; Ratzinger describes even a life of highest perfection as one in which faith is *almost* but never entirely a first principle: even in a saint like St. Therese, faith is imperfectly possessed. I think we should consider the possibility that both Aquinas and Ratzinger are right. Perhaps the gifts of faith, hope and love *begin* the transformation of our natural principles, and perhaps the goal of growth in the Christian moral life is to work towards rendering that transformation increasingly, if never (at least in this life) perfectly complete. What would an imperfect transformation mean? It might mean, among other things, that the wayfarer, in spite of having received new first principles, might very often fail view the world in the eyes of faith and thus fail to produce the sorts of actions that befit them: having been given the capacity to see the world in the light of faith he might nonetheless still very often manage only to view it with the eyes of reason; having been made capable of loving God and neighbor in charity, he might often manage only to desire and pursue the good of reason.

If the “new” first principles given in grace are understood in this way, then one is not forced to “choose” between a view where the first principles given in grace occupy an entirely separate realm and one where grace completely transforms our natural principles. On my view, completely transformed principles are a goal but – at least in this life – never a reality.

Conclusion

In the preceding I argued that one can give an account of Aquinas’s ethical system that at the same time both fully accommodates Aristotle’s insights about nature and still characterizes true fulfillment as thoroughly supernatural. On the account I have been offering, Aristotle’s understanding of virtue as stemming from and perfective of our nature provides the blueprint for Aquinas even while he insists that man’s true fulfillment and true perfection is supernatural. I have argued that Aquinas continues to use Aristotle’s structure even as he maintains that those natural principles themselves are transformed. As I have argued here, though, the process of transformation does not occur all at once, but gradually, so that the new principles of faith gradually overtake and permeate the principles of reason. This account seems to me to be far superior to an account where Aristotelian nature remains alongside and

unclearly and uneasily related to separate, supernatural principles, and also superior to one in which our principles are completely transformed at the outset. At the same time, however, I do not think that I have proposed anything radical. To see this, we can compare the implications of my view against a representative of a more commonly held view.

In her essay, "Habits and Virtues," Bonnie Kent notes that Aquinas's infused and acquired virtues perfect us for different kinds of fulfillment and produce very different types of action, so much so that the virtues differ in kind. Why then, if the virtues that order us to supernatural beatitude are so different from Aristotelian virtue, are the Aristotelian virtues necessary at all? Kent speculates that the Christian ought to cultivate the natural virtues in order achieve the happiness of this life: The Christian needs to cultivate Aristotelian virtues because this life "is not some dreary waiting room" for the next; the Christian who lives in the world must do more than merely worry about how best to pursue salvation: he must deploy troops and pay mortgages and attend to all the other details of the present life. The infused virtues perfect us for the pursuit of salvation: and since the happiness of *this world* matters too, we need to cultivate the virtues that provide it.

The problem with an answer like this is that it does not seem plausible to me that any committed Christian, least of all Aquinas, would find it acceptable. Aquinas's repeated descriptions of the Christian as wayfarer indicate that he *did* see this world as a waiting room for the next; that he did think that the pursuit of supernatural beatitude was the sole worthwhile goal. If so, why would one ever take one's eyes off the goal in order to pursue the happiness of the present life? On my view, one would not, and ought not. The difficulty is rather one of *keeping* one's eyes on the goal. When we fail – as we frequently will – to perform acts ordered to supernatural beatitude, the result of our well-intentioned acts will most likely be something very like acts of Aristotelian natural virtue. Such acts, while never the goal, are often the best we manage to produce. And when they are the result of a genuine attempt to perform acts ordered to supernatural beatitude, then I think Aquinas would agree that they dispose towards growth in the Christian moral life.

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