

**‘St. Thomas Aquinas’s Theory of Pagan Virtues: A Pilgrimage Toward the  
Infused Cardinal Virtues’**

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## ST. THOMAS AQUINAS'S THEORY OF PAGAN VIRTUES: A PILGRIMAGE TOWARDS THE INFUSED CARDINAL VIRTUES<sup>1</sup>

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Virtue is the pivotal concept in both Aristotle's and St. Thomas Aquinas's ethical systems. St. Thomas's conception of virtue more or less presents complexity in substantial difference to Aristotle's through the intervention of the Christian message, particularly his virtue theory related to the divinely infused virtues.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, when St. Thomas elaborates his own theory of virtue, the Aristotelian four cardinal virtues (*prudentia, fortitudo, temperantia, justitia*) along with the three Christian theological virtues (*fides, spes, caritas*) altogether forge the backbone by which the true perfection and ultimate end of human life are sought. Furthermore, the complementarity and integration of theological virtues to the cardinal virtues that heals the imperfection and ambiguity of the human natural virtues by Christian grace are usually considered as one of the major innovative Theophilosophical contributions of St. Thomas. On the other hand, however, the distinction between "the intellectual and moral virtues" which can be subsumed under the category of cardinal virtues, and the theological virtues is remarkable in St. Thomas's theory. The former set of virtues are called pagan virtues (*virtutes*

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is the excerpt of the thesis (Ph.L.), Pontifical Gregorian University, 2013 entitled "Reflection on Pagan Virtues: A Philosophical Study on St. Thomas Aquinas's Virtue Theory". For the Chinese version, see: 王濤, 〈反思異教德性: 聖多瑪斯·阿奎那德性理論研究〉, 《漢語基督教學術論評》(Sino-Christian Studies: An International Journal of Bible, Theology & Philosophy, Vol. 19 (2015), pp. 105-140. Here I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Henk J.M. Schoot and Fr. David P. Doran for their efforts of proofreading.

<sup>2</sup> J. Hause, "Aquinas on the Function of Moral Virtue", in *American Catholic Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (2007), p. 1.

*gentilibus*) proportionate to human nature apart from divine assistance or specifically without the infusion of Christian sanctifying grace. Here the famous claim goes that “all the virtues of pagan Rome were merely splendid vices”. As we know, from the Augustinian tradition, a concept such as “virtuous pagan” is self-contradictory. No charity, no moral virtues! All excellence or perfection qualified to be virtues should be informed by charity and point to the ultimate happiness in afterlife rather than this earthly life and its ostensible happiness. Based on this radical understanding, the distinction negates the human natural capacity to perform virtuous acts and the agent himself being virtuous, and completely separates natural eudemonia and supernatural beatitude.

In recent years, the overlapping part of Aristotle’s and St. Thomas’s articulation of moral virtues, that is, pagan virtues or more courteously put, non-Christian virtues is under ardent debate within English-speaking academic circles.<sup>3</sup> The controversial issue in particular on which the scholars attempt to take sides is “whether Aquinas believed that the pagan could acquire genuine virtues”,<sup>4</sup> in other words, whether and to what extent a pagan can act genuinely virtuously according to St. Thomas’s virtue theory. St. Thomas’s proposition “the pagan can possess true but imperfect virtues (*vera virtus, sed imperfecta*)” and the correlative issues have been engaged by great amount of the academic discourses.

In this contribution, we intend to investigate the way St. Thomas articulates the theory of pagan virtues in the philosophical perspective by some scholarly discussions. Firstly, pagan virtues as a set of virtues in question will be lucidly located in St. Thomas’s

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<sup>3</sup> Knobel underscores that two terms “pagan virtue” and “Christian virtue” should be well-clarified in the first instance. She suggests the common usages of both, that is, “pagan virtue refers to the kind of virtue that can be possessed apart from habitual grace, while Christian virtue refers to the kind of virtue that cannot be possessed apart from habitual grace”. See: A. Knobel, “Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues”, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2011/Sep.), p. 339, footnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> A. Knobel, “Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues”, p. 339.

categorization of varieties of virtues and be justified as true virtue. Secondly, we will explain in what sense “pagan virtues are true but imperfect” according to St. Thomas with the help of recent scholarship. Lastly, the interaction between pagan acquired virtues and infused virtues will be subject to further scrutiny in order to discover the inner orientation of the pagan virtues towards divinity, namely their being good preparation for the transformation and unification by infused virtues.

### **Pagan Virtues apart from the Infusion of Grace**

Mattison III sums up three categorizations of virtues in St. Thomas's whole system of virtues, each of them are dualities: cardinal virtues/theological virtues categorized based on the object of the virtues; natural virtues or political virtues/supernatural virtues categorized based on the ultimate end of the virtues; and acquired virtues/infused virtues categorized based on the cause of the virtues.<sup>5</sup>

We can easily observe the dualistic tension between the cardinal virtues and the theological virtues at first glance in St. Thomas's magnum opus *Summa Theologiae*. The four cardinal virtues prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice are taken to be those on which the moral life hinges or depends “because we enter through the door of human life”. They are the principle of this life.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the four cardinal virtues embrace all the sub-virtues and even quasi-virtues as the root of them. The cardinal virtues cover the full range of human capacity of rationality, which are sometimes called “the intellectual and moral virtues” in general. In contrast to Aristotle, St. Thomas “has already moved rather far from

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<sup>5</sup> See: W.C. Mattison III, “Thomas's Categorizations of Virtue: Historical Background and Contemporary Significance,” in *The Thomist*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (2010), pp.189-235; W.C. Mattison III, “Can Christians Possess the Acquired Cardinal Virtues?” *Theological Studies*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (2011), pp. 558-585.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, a. 1, in *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*.

Aristotle who does not treat these four virtues as a group elevated above the other virtues he discusses” in the sense that St. Thomas considers the cardinal virtues as the perfect state of virtues that subsumes a wide scope of “secondary virtues”.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, his cardinal virtues continue the understanding of the Church tradition that, the cardinal virtues are the virtues, according to St. Jerome, -- “by which one lives well in this mortal state and afterwards is led to eternal life”.<sup>8</sup> The cardinal virtues not only concern the earthly life within human natural capacity, they also have an orientation toward the more supreme and transcendent domain, namely the afterlife.

The remarkable contribution of St. Thomas’s virtue theory to that of Aristotle is the introduction of the theological virtues. “The theological virtues are above man... Hence they should properly be called not human, but ‘super-human’ or godlike virtues.”<sup>9</sup> They are the supernatural virtues of man as sharing in the grace of God.<sup>10</sup> The object of the theological virtues is God the last end of all who surpasses the knowledge of human reason, however, the cardinal virtues, however, composed of intellectual and moral virtues are comprehensible to human reason.<sup>11</sup> St. Thomas illustrates these double sets of virtues by the twofold happiness that man possibly enjoys. For him, the eudemonia proportionate to human nature can be obtained by human natural principles, accessible by unaided human effort; while beatitude, surpassing man’s natural capacity can be possessed through the assistance of God’s grace alone, i.e. by the participation of the Godhead. The latter happiness is the highest and ultimate end and thus out of the reach of human natural principles so that some additional principles are required to direct man to this kind of supernatural happiness. These principles are called “the theological virtues”. Their object or end is God Himself;

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<sup>7</sup> B. Kent, “Disposition and Moral Fallibility: The Unaristotelian Aquinas”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2012), p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 14. 9. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 61, a. 1, ad. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 58, a. 3, ad. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 62, a. 2.

they are infused into us without us by God, which are not known by human reason but by divine revelation.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to Mattison III's another two kinds of categorization of virtues: natural virtues/supernatural virtues, and acquired virtues/infused virtues. The former distinction is very explicit as the names imply; while in the latter acquired virtues and infused virtues are both scholastic terms. Generally, they are respectively considered as equivalent to "natural virtues" that are acquired naturally and "supernatural virtues" that are infused by God's grace into the nature of the human agent. Apparently, both of them are present within human nature, but the nature by acquiring is generally disposed to every human being as his essence, while the nature by being infused is informed by God's supernatural gift through the explicit religious conviction of the agent. St. Thomas indicates that acquired virtues are obtained by habituation, namely by the repetitive acts, and they direct man to good by the rule of reason. Infused virtues are by no means caused by human acts, but instead, lead man to the good by another rule, i.e. rule by Divine Law in favor with God's grace.<sup>13</sup>

The distinctions of natural virtues/supernatural virtues and acquired virtues/infused virtues can be conflated, while cardinal virtues and theological virtues may not be grafted neatly onto the duality in St. Thomas's virtue theory because the cardinal virtues can be both acquired and infused. St. Thomas indicates: "The theological virtues direct us sufficiently to our supernatural end, inchoatively: i.e. to God Himself immediately. But the soul needs further to be perfected by infused virtues in regard to other things, yet in relation to God."<sup>14</sup> The infused cardinal virtues exist and serve for the sake of one's supernatural end as well.<sup>15</sup> In St. Thomas's own words,

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<sup>12</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 62, a. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 63, a. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 63, a. 3, ad. 2.

<sup>15</sup> W.C. Mattison III, "Thomas's Categorizations of Virtue", p. 224ff. The famous example by St. Thomas of the difference between the acquired cardinal virtues and the infused cardinal virtues lies in *STh*, I-II, q. 63, a. 4

“those infused moral virtues, whereby men behave well in respect of there being ‘fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God’, differ from the acquired virtues, whereby man behaves well in respect of human affairs.”<sup>16</sup> After the above conflation, Mattison III concludes that St. Thomas presents a tripartite distinction of varieties of virtues by a synthesis of the scholarship of his predecessors: acquired (natural) cardinal virtues, infused (supernatural) theological virtues and infused (supernatural) cardinal virtues.<sup>17</sup> Other opinions also support this categorization. It holds that the infused virtues are not only theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, “but also the divinely infused intellectual virtue of prudence, and the divinely infused moral virtues: temperance, courage, and justice”.<sup>18</sup>

If pagan virtues were justified they can be located in the first set of acquired (natural) cardinal virtues proper to human nature without the infused assistance of grace from without whilst being oriented to the third kind, namely the infused (supernatural) cardinal virtues becoming the preparation for the higher virtues and happiness proportionate to those virtues.

Therefore are there pagan virtues or is the pagan virtuous? If pagan virtues are justified, we can proclaim that man can possess virtues and act virtuously on his own, or in other words, without any assistance or intervention from outside of our nature. The answer may be found in the way St. Thomas defines virtue.

In Aristotle’s ethics, virtue is both *aretē* “goodness” or “excellence” of human qualities that can be achieved by *meson* in moral conducts, and *hexis* that signifies habit. *Hexis* is usually translated

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when he exemplifies the different styles of temperate eating of the person under the acquired habituation and of the person in abstinence under the religious divine law and concludes that infused and acquired cardinal virtues differ in species.

<sup>16</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 63, a. 4.

<sup>17</sup> W.C. Mattison III, “Thomas’s Categorizations of Virtue”, p. 228.

<sup>18</sup> J. Hause, “Aquinas on the Function of Moral Virtue”, p. 2.

as “habits of mind” or “character”. In the context of Aristotle, *hexis* has three basic meanings: first, a particular kind of state or disposition; second, a metaphysical middle ground between potency and actualization or activity; third, having something. In regard to the first meaning, it is better translated into “state of mind”, while the third one can best be translated as “habit”. Both translations fall short of the complete signification of the original word. “State” is much too general, whereas “habit” is too specific; and “disposition” also has drawbacks. Kent reminds us that the second meaning in which *hexis* in its more metaphysical signification refers to active causal power rather than passive natural capacity should be paid more attention to.<sup>19</sup> She says, “A *hexis* or *habitus*, in contrast, is a durable characteristic of the agent inclining to certain kinds of actions and emotional reactions, not the actions and reactions themselves.”<sup>20</sup>

In this sense, St. Thomas properly calls habit “the second human nature”. If things are repeatedly inclined or disposed towards one determinate direction, their inclination or disposition in that direction becomes determinate and reinforced. “In this way, they acquire a tendency towards it, like a sort of form, similar to a natural one, which tends in a single direction. Because of this, we speak of habit as ‘second nature’.”<sup>21</sup> Habit is a power that acts and is acted upon: “These capacities are fulfilled for activity through the help of something extra; that, however, is in them in the manner not of passive experience, but of a *form* that rests and remains in its possessor.”<sup>22</sup> St. Thomas indicates that once the habit of virtue has been formed, the actions conforming to the habit are performed with inherent pleasure because “a habit exists as a sort of nature, and that is pleasurable which agrees with a thing according to

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<sup>19</sup> B. Kent, “Disposition and Moral Fallibility”, pp. 144-145.

<sup>20</sup> B. Kent, “Habits and Virtues (Ia IIae, qq. 49-70)”, in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. by S. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De virtutibus in communi*, a. 9, in *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*.

<sup>22</sup> *De virtutibus in communi*, a. 1.



nature.”<sup>23</sup> Habit becomes nature, so to speak. Good habits inform the virtues; while bad ones shape the vices.

Aristotle himself believes that virtue as habit arises in us neither by human nature nor by something contrary to human nature; “Rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.”<sup>24</sup> St. Thomas agrees with Aristotle in that point, he thinks that moral virtues are in us by reason:

We do have a natural aptitude to acquire them (moral virtues) inasmuch as the appetitive potency is naturally adapted to obey reason. But we are perfected in these virtues by use, for when we act repeatedly according to reason, a modification is impressed in the appetite by the power of reason. This impression is nothing else but moral virtue.<sup>25</sup>

Virtues are not prior to action unlike the things nature endows us with, i.e. potency previous to operation. We don’t have virtues unless we actively act according to them. The habit of acting informs the virtue. We acquire moral virtues through intentional habituation or repetitive action that conforms to nature and leads to perfection or excellence.

The fact that we don’t have virtues in nature is well shown in St. Thomas’s explanation of the Latin word “*habitus*”. *Habitus* as derivation from *habere* (to have or possess) or *se habet* (way or relation that is disposed in between the thing itself and something else), is substantially different from our daily usage of the English word “habit”. If *habitus* means to have or possess, then virtue is a quality or capacity of human nature. St. Thomas suggests that he speaks of habit in the latter sense, namely virtue as habit is a disposition by which something is disposed well in regard to itself

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 265.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II-1, 1103a23-25.

<sup>25</sup> *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 249.

or another.<sup>26</sup> Virtue is the disposition to perfection in accordance with its very nature to the best.<sup>27</sup> Hence virtue is the perfection of a power and the habit orderly determined to act.<sup>28</sup> St. Thomas then borrows Aristotle's definition of virtue to define human moral virtue generally: A human virtue is that "which renders a human act and man himself good."<sup>29</sup> In this sense, moral virtue contains both qualities of the so-called second human nature, namely the permanent good habit and the virtuous act performed according to that habit.

Habit exists potentially as the essential nature of a human being. It appears as an inclination or receptivity to the virtues predisposed in both the nature of the species and of the individual.<sup>30</sup> Virtues are acquired by habituation proportionate to human nature as the second nature and are manifested in human acts making them completely virtuous under the guidance of human reason. They remain active within the domain of human natural life although they are not acquired by human nature *per se*. Human nature alone, however, has the suitability and inclination to possess virtues and has the natural drive to cultivate them. Ontologically, the pagan who has other supernatural spiritual orientations apart from Christian faith, or even the infidel who has no religious faith at all has the potential to obtain virtues accordingly.

Nevertheless, the ontology Christianity furnishes makes the question complicated. Although human nature is created good, mortal sin destroys its original goodness so that virtues are corrupted into vices. The devastating force caused by original sin has left pagan virtues in doubt. St. Thomas recognizes the good of nature by which good acts can be made by a pagan in mortal sin,

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<sup>26</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 49, a. 1.

<sup>27</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 49, a. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 55, a. 1.

<sup>29</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 58, a. 3. In Aristotle's own words, "the virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well." *NE*, II-6, 1106a21-23.

<sup>30</sup> *De virtutibus in communi*, a. 8.

Mortal sin takes away sanctifying grace, but does not wholly corrupt the good of nature. Since therefore, unbelief is a mortal sin, unbelievers are without grace indeed, yet some good of nature remains in them. Consequently it is evident that unbelievers cannot do those good works which proceed from grace, viz. meritorious works; yet they can, to a certain extent, do those good works for which the good of nature suffices. Hence it does not follow that they sin in everything they do; but whenever they do anything out of their unbelief, then they sin. For even as one who has the faith, can commit an actual sin, venial or even mortal, which he does not refer to the end of faith, so too, an unbeliever can do a good deed in a matter which he does not refer to the end of his unbelief.<sup>31</sup>

A pagan who has no assistance of sanctifying grace can perform virtuous acts because he also has his human nature to be perfected and to be able to dispose all the human capacities towards the perfection of both the agent and his acts. In this sense, these virtuous acts can be called self-fulfillment because they fulfill the nature of the agent. St. Thomas divides the good of human nature in a threefold manner. The first aspect is the constitutive principles and the properties of human nature, e.g. the powers of the soul. This good of nature as the basis of God's creating good is neither destroyed nor diminished by sin. The second aspect is man's natural suitability and inclination to virtue. St. Thomas suggests that it is simply diminished by original sin. What is entirely destroyed by our ancestral sin is the third aspect of the good of human nature, namely the gift of original justice that is "conferred on the whole of human nature in the person of the first man". St. Thomas continues,

Because human acts produce an inclination to like acts...  
Now from the very fact that a thing becomes inclined to

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<sup>31</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 10, a. 4

one of two contraries, its inclination to the other contrary must needs be diminished. Wherefore as sin is opposed to virtue, from the very fact that a man sins, there results a diminution of that good of nature, which is the inclination to virtue.<sup>32</sup>

It is St. Thomas's unambiguous position that actual mortal sin may not impede a pagan's way to acquire his virtues, and original sin which ontologically pre-determines human's connatural deficiencies diminishes in a limited sense, rather than totally destroys, the human inclination to virtue. The principle left intact after the devastation of original sin is the aforementioned first aspect of the good of human nature, namely the constitutive principle called the first principle of thought and action to the natural good, i.e. *synderesis*.

The English word "conscience" finds its counterparts in Greek *synderesis* and in Latin *conscientia* which have inherent differences in meaning. In some European languages such as Italian, the word that signifies "conscience" usually has a double signification. The Italian word *coscienza* also signifies "consciousness" besides "conscience". *Synderesis* can signify moral judgment or non-moral awareness. Therefore, the double implication both in the moral and the intellectual realm are contained in *synderesis*. St. Jerome in his Commentary on Ezekiel defines *synderesis* as the leading power of the soul over the other three (reason, irascible appetite and concupiscent appetite) by his own anthropological articulation of the human soul. It is "the spark of conscience which was not quenched even in the heart of Cain, when he was driven of paradise... it is distinct from the other three elements and corrects them when they err".<sup>33</sup> *Synderesis* is the general principle of moral judgment of good and evil by right reason.

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<sup>32</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 85, a.1.

<sup>33</sup> Jerome, *Commentarium in Ezechielem*, I-1, quoted from Eric D'Arcy, *Conscience and Its Right to Freedom* (London/New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), pp. 16-17.

St. Thomas underlines that *synderesis* is not a power but a habit always inclining to good only.<sup>34</sup> It's "the habit of first principle"<sup>35</sup> and "the universal principles of the natural law",<sup>36</sup> which "pertains to the eternal norms of conduct",<sup>37</sup> being "a kind of prelude to the act of virtue".<sup>38</sup>

Therefore we must have, bestowed on us by nature, not only speculative principles, but also practical principles. Now the first speculative principles bestowed on us by nature do not belong to a special power, but to a special habit, which is called "the understanding of principles"... Wherefore the first practical principles, bestowed on us by nature, do not belong to a special power, but to a special natural habit, which we call "*synderesis*." Whence "*synderesis*" is said to incite to good, and to murmur at evil, inasmuch as through first principles we proceed to discover, and judge of what we have discovered. It is therefore clear that "*synderesis*" is not a power, but a natural habit.<sup>39</sup>

As the first practical principle bestowed on us by nature, *synderesis* disposes human acts towards good and conserves<sup>40</sup> the good of human nature. Therefore it must be permanent and immutable so as to be the very foundation of all the virtues disposed to goodness and perfection by its constant moral criterion of good and evil. It guarantees pagan virtues ontologically.

In all its activities nature intends what is good and the conservation of the things which are produced through the

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<sup>34</sup> *STh*, I, q. 79, a. 12.

<sup>35</sup> *STh*, I, q. 79, a. 13, ad. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 16, a. 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Questiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 16, a. 1, ad. 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Questiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 16, a. 2, ad. 5.

<sup>39</sup> *STh*, I, q. 79, a. 12.

<sup>40</sup> *Synderesis* in Greek literally means "conservation". See: J. De Finance S.J., *An Ethical Inquiry* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), p. 436.

activity of nature. Therefore, in all the works of nature, the principles are always permanent and unchangeable and preservative of right order...As a result, for probity to be possible in human actions, there must be some permanent principle which has unwavering integrity, in reference to which all human works are examined, so that that permanent principle will resist all evil and assent to all good. This is *synderesis*, whose task it is to warn against evil and incline to good. Therefore, we agree that there can be no error in it.<sup>41</sup>

Thus a pagan, without the infusion or intervention of external assistance of a superior power, can perform virtuous acts because he possesses *synderesis* the first principle to dispose him to virtue on the one hand, on the other hand, however, "the pagan will not be able to act in conformity with right reason all of the time, and those failures will prevent him from ever achieving the fullness of acquired virtue."<sup>42</sup> The imperfection of the virtues simply by human inborn power is discovered accordingly.

### **Pagan Virtues versus Infused Virtues: *vera virtus, sed imperfecta***

St. Thomas argues that pagan virtues are "true but imperfect" referring to the final perfect good which goes beyond the natural good of human being.<sup>43</sup> This argument becomes the key proposition of St. Thomas's central position on pagan virtues from which most of the scholars develop their own theories.

As Knobel indicates, although most of the scholars involved in the debate agree that St. Thomas's pagan can possess "true but imperfect" virtues, "how such virtues should be further

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<sup>41</sup> *Questiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 16, a. 2.

<sup>42</sup> A. Knobel, "Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues", p. 343.

<sup>43</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 23, a. 7.

characterized is a matter of dispute”.<sup>44</sup> In the Christian viewpoint, for a virtue to be perfectly true means that it should be ordered to the supernatural beatitude. Pagan virtues are thus true (in essence) but imperfect (in degree) inasmuch as they are simply ordered to the natural happiness (eudemonia) rather than supernatural blessedness (beatitudo).

Shanley unpacks the theoretical adjustment of St. Thomas from Ia-IIae to IIa-IIae of the *Summa Theologiae* from the dichotomy as *virtus simpliciter/virtus secundum quid* to the trichotomy as *virtus vera simpliciter/vera virtus sed imperfecta/falsa similitudo virtutis*. This shift of distinction of virtues seemingly highlights St. Thomas’s intentional justification of pagan virtue as *vera virtus sed imperfecta*, apart from *falsa similitudo virtutis*, which is not virtue at all. In this sense, Shanley believes that it is how St. Thomas differs from St. Augustine, “Where Augustine could only see the dichotomy of perfect virtue and sham virtue, Aquinas recognizes a third of virtue—true but imperfect.”<sup>45</sup>

St. Thomas lists three levels of virtues. The first level is a set of virtues which are wholly imperfect (*omnino imperfectae*) that exist without practical wisdom. This set of virtues is called inclination rather than virtue, for it can be misused even in a harmful way without discernment of prudence. “Such inclinations, when they lack practical wisdom, do not possess the character of a virtue in a perfect way”.<sup>46</sup> This set of virtues is also called sham or false virtues (*falsa similitudo virtutis*), which are directed toward false goods that are incompatible with the ultimate end of life.<sup>47</sup>

St. Thomas continues to define the second level of virtue as “qualifiedly perfect virtues” (*aliquaqualiter perfectae*), which “consist

<sup>44</sup> A. Knobel, “Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues”, p. 340.

<sup>45</sup> B.J. Shanley O.P., “Aquinas on Pagan Virtue”, in *The Thomist*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (1999), p. 563.

<sup>46</sup> *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, a. 2.

<sup>47</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 23, a. 7.

in virtues that achieve right reason, but do not reach God himself through charity". This level of virtues is our subject matter in this article, this is pagan virtues are justified. He argues these virtues "are perfect in one way, in relation to human good, but not unqualifiedly perfect, because they do not attain the first standard, which is our ultimate end", and they "fall short of the true character of a virtue, just as moral inclinations without practical wisdom fall short of the true character of a virtue."<sup>48</sup> "The good which it takes for an end, is not the common end of all human life, but of some particular affair", which is what we call proximate good or particular good, such as to be a prudent student (not a prudent MAN!). St. Thomas suggests that even though the moral virtues by their nature like science and art simply do not relate to the ultimate good but to the particular good of human life, they can still make man good or as we say, virtuous.<sup>49</sup> Attention should be paid in his expression "fall short of the true character of a virtue"; here "true" must refer to *vera simpliciter*, true in absolute or unqualified sense. These virtues likewise are named as *virtus secundum quid* which order man to the last end in some genus.<sup>50</sup> Here the Latin word "*simpliciter*" (simply) means "absolutely, unqualifiedly or strictly", while "*secundum quid*" has nearly the opposite signification to *simpliciter*: "as such, relative, restricted, qualified". This second level of virtues is well known as "true but imperfect virtues" (*vera virtus sed imperfecta*) which can direct the act toward a particular true good without the helping hand of charity.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, this set of virtues is perfectible "because it retains an openness to being ordered by charity".<sup>52</sup>

The last level is composed of those that are unqualifiedly perfect (*simpliciter perfectae*) combined with charity that "make a human action unqualifiedly good, in that it is something that attains our

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<sup>48</sup> *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, a. 2.

<sup>49</sup> See: *STh*, II-II, q. 23, a. 7, ad. 3.

<sup>50</sup> *STh*, I-II q. 65, a. 2.

<sup>51</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 23, a. 7.

<sup>52</sup> B.J. Shanley O.P., "Aquinas on Pagan Virtue", p. 563.



ultimate end (the end *simpliciter*)”.<sup>53</sup> These virtues are what we have categorized as the infused supernatural (cardinal) virtues. This level is given the title of “unqualified true virtues” (*virtus vera simpliciter*) in St. Thomas’s *Summa*.<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, pagan virtues are the true virtues *per se* despite the fact that they are not true *simpliciter* without the infusion of charity. St. Thomas also defines these two levels of human good based on their relation to human nature: “what corresponds with our own nature; what exceeds the abilities of our own nature”.<sup>55</sup> For the first level, pagan virtues suffice for the human natural end very well. St. Thomas concedes, “Acquired virtues do not constitute the greatest good in an absolute sense, but the greatest in the class of human goods. Infused virtues constitute the greatest good in an absolute sense, in that they order us towards the supreme good, which is God.”<sup>56</sup> The Christian message stretches the earthly temporality to the eternity in afterlife by bestowing the new life principle, and uplifts the end of human natural life to the supernatural height, and promises the highest beatific vision overriding the eudemonia of human natural life. It is natural prudence directed by human reason that leads to the happiness of present life and the perfection commensurate with human nature; while supernatural prudence guided by God’s supernatural charity leads to the blessedness of otherworldly happiness that is the highest. The two orders work respectively on their own right and the inferior is not necessarily denied or replaced by the superior. Kent indicates that in disagreeing with Augustinianism, St. Thomas concedes the pagan virtues in the sense that he does not think all moral virtues must be related to an ultimate supernatural end; and he holds the double ends which are natural and supernatural, corresponding to the double kinds of happiness and double related virtues.<sup>57</sup> Through

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<sup>53</sup> *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, a. 2.

<sup>54</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 23, a. 7.

<sup>55</sup> *De virtutibus in communi*, a. 10.

<sup>56</sup> *De virtutibus in communi*, a. 9, ad. 7.

<sup>57</sup> B. Kent, “Moral Provincialism”, in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 30 (1994), p. 281.

lack of charity, a pagan as a sinful unbeliever can commit evil acts following the false prudence as we mentioned above. Meanwhile, he can also act virtuously and be orderable to the good commensurate with his own nature. Pagan virtues are generically true virtues but not true virtues *simpliciter*.<sup>58</sup>

Pagan virtues can be true virtues in the sense that they are the perfection of human nature by its own unaided effort of reason, namely proportionate to its natural resources. Nevertheless, in contrast with the perfect virtues that their infused counterparts are, pagan virtues are imperfect in degree. Then we need to turn to another important issue: to what extent are pagan virtues imperfect? Knobel summarizes two understandings of pagan virtues as true but imperfect. On the one hand, the invariable sinful actions leave the agent failing to act in conformity with his natural virtues so that “he will never fully possess even the virtues that are ordered to his natural good”; on the other hand, virtues lacking supernatural orientation “will be more like dispositions than virtues” or they will not be connected with each other as an integrity.<sup>59</sup> For the former, we have discussed above that human sin will hamper the exertion of acquired prudence in the application of *synderesis* to the concrete circumstances so that the virtue will present its imperfection as a result.

Knobel points out that some neo-Thomists like Jacques Maritain and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange hold that those virtues claimed to be the true virtues that pagans can acquire are “unstable and closer to dispositions than to virtues” and those virtues will not be well-connected with each other in the sense that some may be lacking while others are present due to the absence of prudence.<sup>60</sup> Thus the pagan virtues are just unstable dispositions rather than a well-interconnected solidarity of virtues characterized by *habitus*.

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<sup>58</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 23, a. 7, ad.1.

<sup>59</sup> A. Knobel, “Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues”, p. 340.

<sup>60</sup> A. Knobel, “Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues”, pp. 344-5.

Firstly, we have to focus on the difference between habit and disposition by which virtue is defined. In his early works, St. Thomas himself minimizes the difference between those two concepts; and he even asserts that they are not specifically diverse.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, in the more mature *Summa Theologiae*, he does make a sharp division between habit and disposition. In one instance, disposition can be taken as the genus of habit which is included in the definition of habit. He points out that disposition is a general term which “implies an order of that which has parts...either as to place, or as to power, or as to species”; it contains “all those dispositions which are in course of formation and not yet arrived at perfect usefulness” and “perfect dispositions, which are called habits”.<sup>62</sup> As the general name, disposition can be used to signify all kinds of habits. In this sense, habit is disposition.

In another instance, disposition can be a particular term along with habit, both acting as diverse species of the one subaltern genus. St. Thomas emphasizes the instances in which disposition can be divided against habit. Disposition is how our natural capacity in potentiality is disposed to its possible actuality; while habit is the disposition at the command of reason.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, “disposition” as a particular term is used to signify the imperfect that can easily lose its character as virtue. When St. Thomas talks about the first level of virtues that is wholly imperfect, he explicitly distinguishes virtue from disposition or inclination in the sense that virtue is disposed in a good way towards perfection or goodness, while inclination could be misused in a harmful way when devoid of prudence.

The inclinations that some people have even from when they are born to act in a way characteristic of a certain virtue... Inclinations of this sort are not found all together in everyone; rather some people have an inclination of one

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<sup>61</sup> A. Knobel, “Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues”, p. 346, footnote 27.

<sup>62</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 49, a.1, ad. 3.

<sup>63</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 50, a. 3.

sort, others of another. These inclinations do not possess the character of a virtue, because no one can misuse a virtue... Someone can, though, misuse this sort of inclination even in a harmful way, if one uses it without discernment... That is why such inclinations, when they lack practical wisdom, do not possess the character of a virtue in a perfect way.<sup>64</sup>

Within the same subaltern genus as diverse species against disposition, habit signifies the perfect one that is not easily lost. In this sense, habit is the mature and perfect disposition. St. Thomas believes that Aristotle's idiomatic Greek usage of "habit" regards habit as the outcome in which an easily changeable quality becomes hardly changeable by accident. Certainly, disposition is the opposite.<sup>65</sup> Etymologically, habit (*habitus*) is having or possessing; disposition (*dispositio*) means something disposed. Disposing is not as steady and fixed as having is. St. Thomas believes that *magis consonum intentioni Aristotelis*, two concepts are two different species of one type of quality, which are distinct from each other based on their causes. Habit derives from *causae immobiles*, that is, the sciences and the virtues; while disposition arises from *causae transmutabiles*, that is, the bodily constitution of human being. Habit is difficult to change and therefore implies a certain longevity, while disposition is not so by reason of its nature. "From this it is clear that the word 'habit' implies a certain lastingness: while the word 'disposition' does not."<sup>66</sup> Habit can be considered as the concrete (*difficile mobilis*) and therefore the perfect version of disposition *facile mobilis*. In this sense, disposition does not become habit.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, a. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Aristotle uses *hexis* to signify a virtue or skill, while uses *diathesis* for a state or condition like being hot or ill. These two Greek words respectively correspond to Latin terms *habitus* and *dipositio*. See: V. Boland O.P., "Aquinas and Simplicius on Dispositions—A Question in Fundamental Moral Theory", in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 82, Issue 968 (2001), p. 468.

<sup>66</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 49, a. 2, ad. 3.

<sup>67</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 49, a. 2, ad. 3.

Human acquired prudence, as we have discussed, is somewhat weakened by original sin so as to imperfectly dispose the agent and his acts to their perfection. It may lead to evil by using the disposition in a harmful way and have nothing to do with virtue. That's false or sham prudence as we call it. As far as the true but imperfect prudence is concerned, virtues that dispose the moral agent towards the proximate or particular good instead of final good of life undoubtedly can be called virtues, nonetheless, this virtue should not be a steady one because they have to be vacillated according to the shift of various particular goods. For the second source of its imperfection, even the constant final end of life is well oriented; the imperfect prudence always fails to effectively command the agent towards that end. The virtues disposed well to it must be pendulous and mutable now and then. We have no reason to call these virtues "dispositions" in St. Thomas's negative sense of the word. Nevertheless, they are the virtues in an imperfect sense because of the deficiency of both immutable unambiguous final cause and efficient cause that charity can endow to human life from without. In the tradition of Thomist commentaries, pagan habit as an imperfect one is usually described as "in a state of disposition" (*in statu dispositionis*). Even though those commentators acknowledge St. Thomas's claim that the pagan has true but imperfect virtues, they don't actually believe that the pagan can have genuine good habits. The pagan can have virtues that are "like dispositions" or "like habit" at best.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, pagan virtues are imperfect in the sense that all the virtues, intellectual and moral, are not well-interconnected to each other by acquired prudence so that they sometimes function separately and fail to form a powerful solidarity of virtues directed to the final end.<sup>69</sup> Firstly, prudence as the intellectual virtue should

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<sup>68</sup> A. Knobel, "Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues", p. 348.

<sup>69</sup> Knobel has a different opinion on this issue. She insists that once one performs an act of prudence for the specific end, he will necessarily perform acts of moral virtues that are ordered to that same end, whether

be connected with the rest of the cardinal virtues that subsume all the rest of sub-virtues. If not so, as we know, without the operation of practical wisdom in human acts, nothing can be appropriately called virtue that disposes things to their goodness and perfection. With regards the interconnection among the moral virtues to their imperfection St. Thomas argues,

...The perfect virtues are interconnected, but the imperfect virtues are not necessarily interconnected. To show this we need to know that since virtue is something that makes a person and what he does good, perfect virtue is something that makes a person and what he does perfectly good. Imperfect virtue, though, makes a person and what he does good not unqualifiedly, but in some respect. Good is found unqualifiedly in human activities when they match up to one of the standards that govern human activities: one of those corresponds strictly to human nature, and this is right reason; the other, though, is the first measure, which transcends us, so to speak, and this is God. It is through practical wisdom that we attain right reason, because it is, precisely, right reason in doing things... It is through charity, though, that we attain God....<sup>70</sup>

St. Thomas believes that an imperfect virtue is merely “an inclination in us to do some kind of good deed, whether such inclination be in us by nature or by habituation” in the sense that they are not connected. St. Thomas illustrates the first instance by

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the virtues are genuine or false. Therefore, “‘Connection’ is not some mysterious property possessed only by those virtues ordered to supernatural beatitude but a feature of human action itself.”<sup>69</sup> See: A. Knobel, “Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues”, p. 354. Knobel demystifies the supernatural grace as an external power that heals the ambiguity in human moral performance that mere human nature induces by connecting the “separate virtues” as solid virtue *simpliciter*. For her, virtues are necessarily well-connected with each other for consistency in human action. We will not endorse this opinion based on our daily experience.

<sup>70</sup> *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, a. 2.

the deed of liberality that is not necessarily at the same time the deed of chastity. He continues, however, “The perfect moral virtue is a habit that inclines us to do a good deed well” to the extent it should be connected with other virtues.<sup>71</sup> Here we find again the wording of “inclination” and “habit”. “A virtue cannot be perfect as a virtue if isolated from the others”.

Responding to the objection that “it is possible to have one moral virtue without another because man can exercise himself in the acts of single virtue without at the same time exercising himself in another”, St. Thomas mentions that some moral virtues perfect man regarding his general state, namely “those things which have to be done in every kind of human life”. He suggests that if man wants to exercise himself by virtuous acts in all such matters, he acquire all the habits of all the moral virtues at the same time.<sup>72</sup> Here “moral virtues perfecting man regarding his general state” signify what we have mentioned as “perfect ideas of human virtues” which “cover the full range of human capacity” and concern the human life as a whole, even potentially oriented towards the more supreme and transcendent life-span as the very foundation of all the other virtues. They are cardinal virtues, intellectual and moral: prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice. As St. Thomas indicates in *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, “if we take the four cardinal virtues as implying certain general criteria for virtues, they are interconnected in that one of these criteria alone is not enough for any virtuous action: all need to be present.”<sup>73</sup>

Disconnection of virtues as the manifestation of the imperfect pagan virtues could be considered as the further representation of disposition or habit *in statu dispositionis* that pagan virtues characterize. The good interconnection of virtues presents the well-balanced, rightly-ordered and all-round human natural qualities under the direction of perfect prudence towards the genuine final

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<sup>71</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 65, a. 1.

<sup>72</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 65, a. 1, ad. 1.

<sup>73</sup> *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, a. 2.

end in a perfectly resolute manner. That state of mind is simply what the perfect virtues *simpliciter* can achieve. The imperfect virtue makes an agent and his acts good not unqualifiedly but in some respect, namely good "*secundum quid*". Two powers, however, can lead all the human virtues towards unqualified good, one is right reason attained through prudence corresponding strictly to human nature, the other is the first measure that transcends us, i.e. God.<sup>74</sup> While the former is imperfect as we discussed previously. St. Thomas suggests that the latter whose charity is infused into us can guide us to unqualified good, "If, then, we take the virtues as unqualifiedly perfect, they are connected because of charity, because no virtue can be of this sort without charity, and once you possess charity you possess all the virtues."<sup>75</sup> Anyone who possesses charity ought also to possess all the other virtues because the infused charity can command all the virtues interconnected altogether towards the ultimate end by forging a solid integrity of virtues that are the infused cardinal virtues, as we will discuss later.

Keenan criticizes St. Thomas in his way of articulating the inter-connection of the cardinal virtues under the rule of reason. For St. Thomas and other virtue ethics philosophers, the rightly-ordered or well-integrated state of mind (usually ultimately guaranteed by the supernatural power) is always the criterion of the morally good and the function of moral virtues. It seems that St. Thomas does not work out a distinction between goodness and rightness.<sup>76</sup> Right (connection with charity or with prudence and inter-connection among all the virtues) is the good all the time. The intrinsic moral goodness cannot earn merit on its own right, such as benevolence. "Benevolence could provide a non-theological description of moral goodness. He states that benevolence differs from charity solely by the fact that the latter enjoys union with God. But he does not

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<sup>74</sup> *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, a. 2.

<sup>75</sup> *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, a. 2.

<sup>76</sup> J.F. Keenan S.J., "Distinguishing Charity as Goodness and Prudence as Rightness: A Key to Thomas's *Secunda Pars*", *The Thomist*, Vol. 56 (1992), pp. 423-424.



develop his thoughts on benevolence as he does with charity.”<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the meritorious moral goodness of pagan virtues may remind us that benevolence, self-givingness or self-sacrifice as its radical modality, should be reconsidered as a possibility commensurate with human natural capacity in morality apart from the assistance of supernatural grace from without.

### **Pagan Virtues towards the Infused Virtues: A Pilgrimage**

What is the supreme form of pagan virtues by which the autonomous achievement of human morality can be realized? The answer may lie in the joint or the boundary between the virtues proportionate to human nature and a higher form of virtue that is superadded on human life from without, namely the infused virtues.

Undoubtedly, the ultimate end or *telos* of human life determines the achievement or the apex of the moral virtues. For St. Thomas, “neither the life of civic virtues lived out in the *polis* nor the contemplation of what is eternal which *theoria* affords is other than imperfect happiness”<sup>78</sup> It is the beatific vision that offers the ultimate *telos*, namely, the highest happiness to man.

Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence...Consequently, for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which alone man’s happiness consists.<sup>79</sup>

St. Thomas differentiates four kinds of virtue following Plotinus: social or political virtues (*virtutes politicae*), perfecting virtues or

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<sup>77</sup> J.F. Keenan S.J., “Distinguishing Charity as Goodness and Prudence as Rightness”, p. 424.

<sup>78</sup> A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, pp. 192-193.

<sup>79</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 3, a. 8.

purgative virtues (*virtutes purgatoriae*) which literally mean “cleansing virtues”, perfect virtues or virtues of the cleansed soul (*virtutes purgati animi*) and exemplar virtues (*virtutes exemplares*). Exemplar virtues are the virtues existing originating in God as the exemplar of human virtues. Social or political virtues are in man “according to the condition of his nature” as a social-political animal. “Man behaves himself well in the conduct of human affairs” according to these virtues. St. Thomas particularly points out that the political virtues “behoove(s) a man to do his utmost to strive onward even to divine things”. Accordingly, he proposes a group of virtues called “perfecting virtues or purgative virtues” to stand between the political virtues and divine exemplar virtues “so that some are virtues of men who are on their way and tending towards the Divine similitude”. The remaining set of virtues named “perfect virtues” or “virtues of the cleansed soul” refers to those that have already attained to that similitude.<sup>80</sup> We could easily discover that a number of groups of virtues are directed towards the Blessed and His exemplar virtues. This quartet of virtues could be deemed the pilgrimage of human virtues towards the Divine. The social or political virtues that belong are purely proportionate to human nature and lie in the lowest position of the ascending ladder, although they also are orientated towards the Godhead.

Shanley upholds the pagan virtues apart from supernatural grace or without divine assistance. He believes that *bonum civis* is precisely the ultimate end of pagan virtues proportionate to human nature in the virtue ethics of St. Thomas. “The *bonum civis* is a due end (*debitum finem*) of man, truly perfective of his nature and commensurate with his natural inclination... as the optimal good achievable by human beings apart from grace”<sup>81</sup> In his *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas, instead, uses “human virtues” or “natural virtues” to indicate virtues accessible to the unaided human capacities for the natural end of human life such as “political

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<sup>80</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 61, a. 5.

<sup>81</sup> B.J. Shanley O.P., “Aquinas on Pagan Virtue”, p. 574, 555.

virtues”; he implies that they pertain to the earthly happiness of humanity proportionate to human nature.<sup>82</sup>

When St. Thomas discusses that human will needs a virtuous disposition to aim at a good which surpasses the level of its own capacity, he mentions two ways in which a good can exceed the level of the will. The one situation happens “when the will is raised to aim at a good that exceeds the boundaries of human good”. Here St. Thomas means by “human” that which human nature can achieve by its own powers. The higher good is obviously divine good that can be led to by charity. The other happens “when someone seeks a good that belongs to someone else without the will’s being drawn beyond the boundaries of human good”, namely for the good of others, in this case “justice is needed to complete the will, along with all the virtues that are directed at other people”.<sup>83</sup> St. Thomas insists that the natural good God bestows on us in His creating grace becomes the foundation of natural love that “loves God above all things and more than himself”. Ontologically, “each part naturally loves the common good of the whole more than its own particular good”. The human individual inclines to the good of the human community. Accordingly, St. Thomas then justifies the civil good, “It may also be seen in civic virtues whereby sometimes the citizens suffer damage even to their own property and persons for the sake of the common good”.<sup>84</sup>

The achievement in the life of pagan political virtues, in the pursuit of the *bonum commune*, as Shanley says, “should not be understood as a moral order independent of the economy of grace, but rather as the preparation for grace that is itself already under the influence of grace”.<sup>85</sup> To propose the pagan virtues apart from supernatural

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<sup>82</sup> W.C. Mattison III, “Thomas's Categorizations of Virtue”, p. 221. For St. Thomas, civil good is the synonym of natural good. See: W.C. Mattison III, “Can Christians Possess the Acquired Cardinal Virtues?” p. 563, footnote 17.

<sup>83</sup> *De virtutibus in communi*, a. 5.

<sup>84</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 26, a. 3.

<sup>85</sup> B.J. Shanley O.P., “Aquinas on Pagan Virtue”, p. 555.

grace and providence, for Shanley, is by no means to confirm the autonomy of the pagan virtues dictated by human "right" reason, but to uncover the theological significance of them "as a preparation for or openness to grace". Although a kind of this-worldly pagan morality involves genuine or true virtues, the social or political life which "lies within the range of human achievement" as a second best kind of life apart from the perfect sanctifying life, should aim at "something beyond the city"<sup>86</sup> Shanley continues,

It (*bonum civis*) involves a subordination of self to the good of the community. The other-regarding (*ad alterum*) that is constitutive of justice opens the agent to appreciate a good transcending himself that imposes order on his pursuit of all other goods. The achievement of political virtue is an ordering to a self-transcending *debitum finem* that is in principle available to every moral agent as a fundamental option because it is a good in accord with human nature and inclination.<sup>87</sup>

Once we locate St. Thomas's pagan virtue in human life as political life, it's not difficult to figure out its supreme form. When we discuss political or social welfare, we have to refer to the common good which goes beyond one's own natural conservation and perfection in the basic sense, in other words, to seek the good outside oneself. The supreme form of virtues in the pursuit of the common good is nothing but altruism according to which a man's own natural fulfillment or perfection can be sacrificed for the sake of the welfare of other members in the community. Altruism can even reach its radical form: self-givingness or self-sacrifice. In the act of self-givingness, man can give up his own natural conservation for seeking for a more supreme perfection. Nevertheless, this moral elevation or achievement needs to be oriented and justified by supernatural resources. In this sense, political virtues can reach this elevation at their best without the helping hand from without or the immediate infusion of grace. They

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<sup>86</sup> B.J. Shanley O.P., "Aquinas on Pagan Virtue", p. 567.

<sup>87</sup> B.J. Shanley O.P., "Aquinas on Pagan Virtue", p. 574.

are the virtues proportionate to human nature and unaided human efforts. Once a man performs the political virtues for the common good over his own natural good, he can be regarded as a man in his pilgrimage to the Divinity. Therefore, pagan virtues have in themselves the orientation to the Divine, particularly as the phenomenon of the purgative virtues or perfecting virtues impressively presents. To show the state of perfecting inclination to the higher perfection, purgative virtues can be described as *in via* towards the Divine similitude but still in perfecting of their imperfection when one decides to seek more supreme perfection by striving for other's good at the price of his natural one. Thus there should be some continuity between acquired virtues commensurate with nature and the virtues infused by God's grace, especially within the life of a Christian.

For St. Thomas, the acquired virtues and the infused virtues should not be separate things for the perfect moral life because the infused virtues are necessarily required when he declares that charity is the form of all the moral virtues. He rightly says, "Charity is the mother and the root of all the virtues, inasmuch as it is the form of them all," it "directs the acts of all other virtues to the last end", and "gives the form to all other acts of virtue",<sup>88</sup> it becomes the efficient cause of all the virtues.<sup>89</sup> Thus the acquired virtues and the infused virtues are not parallel routes to the same end. The former should be transformed and elevated to the higher level by the latter to enter the supernatural order of life. The acquired virtues at their best can be the transitive phase towards a further direction, the spiritually higher state, namely *virtutes perfectae simpliciter* in God's grace, which can only be the infused virtues. Accordingly, the infused virtues are the perfect form of the imperfect acquired virtues that the pagan has. The acquired moral virtues as human efforts can only be the preparation towards being strengthened and transformed by the infused virtues of God's sanctifying grace.

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<sup>88</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 62, a. 4; II-II, q. 23, a. 8.

<sup>89</sup> *STh*, II-II, q. 23, a. 8, ad. 1.

A *habitus*, as Mirkes who holds to the above position writes, not only determines or perfects “a power of soul to perform a certain operation with ease, promptness, steadfastness and enjoyment”, but also shows itself “a passive power or agent, that is, capable of receiving further perfection from a superior habit”.<sup>90</sup> The acquired moral virtues unfold themselves as disposed towards more superior infused counterparts. Then Mirkes develops a hierarchical understanding of virtues by the Aristotelian matter-form relationship in which the natural disposition, the acquired virtues and the infused virtues inform a hierarchical series so that the “imperfect” acquired moral virtues serving as the material preparation of the perfect infused virtues are justified.

Just as the natural dispositions or “seed of virtue” are the perfecting principles of the inferior power of their respective faculties, so is it reasonable to argue that acquired moral virtue is the perfecting principle of the natural dispositions which are subordinate to it. Just as natural dispositions are the perfectible or material principles of the more perfect principles of the acquired intellectual and moral virtues, so is it reasonable to argue that acquired moral virtue is the perfectible or material principle of infused virtue which is superior to it.<sup>91</sup>

For Mirkes, the acquired moral virtues are the perfectible or material principle of the infused virtues that are superior and perfect. The moral virtue of a Christian or as we call Christian moral virtue as a whole is an indivisible composite virtue, a single entity that is absolutely perfect moral virtue (*virtus simpliciter*); it is formally an infused virtue and materially an acquired virtue. Mirkes

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<sup>90</sup> R. Mirkes, “Aquinas on the Unity of Perfect Moral Virtue”, in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (1997), p. 594.

<sup>91</sup> R. Mirkes, “Aquinas on the Unity of Perfect Moral Virtue”, p. 596.

believes that this interpretation is true to St. Thomas's view when he says that charity is the form of the virtues.<sup>92</sup>

In the Christian who also possesses the acquired virtues, moral virtue is a composite, ordered reality. It consists of an acquired virtue or material component and an infused virtue or formal component that together enable the justified to perform moral acts that are directed to one material object under two different but ordered formalities.<sup>93</sup>

We could say, therefore, that the infused virtues are built upon the acquired virtues in the sense that they are the preparation and thus receptive of the latter. This is not to say that the acquired virtues are proportionate to God's supernatural beatitude. On the contrary, the acquired virtues being perfect are the outcome of the perfect encounter of the habituated moral cultivation or purification with God's gratuitous healing charity and the realization of union with it through transformation.

Mirkes says, "Besides acts of faith, hope and charity, Christians can posit supernatural acts of fortitude, temperance, justice, and prudence and their allied virtues, acts that are the means to attaining their supernatural end or happiness."<sup>94</sup> This viewpoint implies the blessed acquired virtues that exist within the Christian are the transformed and thus perfecting ones. The transformed acquired virtues by infused virtues can be accurately called "infused cardinal virtues", as we have mentioned in the first chapter, one of the three sets of virtues according to the categorization of St. Thomas's virtue theory.

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<sup>92</sup> R. Mirkes, "Aquinas's Doctrine of Moral Virtue and Its Significance for Theories of Facility", *The Thomist*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1997), p. 196, esp. footnote 20.

<sup>93</sup> R. Mirkes, "Aquinas's Doctrine of Moral Virtue and Its Significance for Theories of Facility", p. 212.

<sup>94</sup> R. Mirkes, "Aquinas on the Unity of Perfect Moral Virtue", p. 598.

Is there any contradiction between the different ends respectively that the acquired cardinal virtues and the infused cardinal virtues dispose to? St. Thomas exemplifies this by looking at diverse forms of temperance on food: diet (for natural health) and abstinence (for the subjection to God).

Now it is evident that the mean that is appointed in such like concupiscences according to the rule of human reason, is seen under a different aspect from the mean which is fixed according to Divine rule. For instance, in the consumption of food, the mean fixed by human reason, is that food should not harm the health of the body, nor hinder the use of reason: whereas, according to the Divine rule, it behooves man to "chastise his body, and bring it into subjection", by abstinence in food, drink and the like.<sup>95</sup>

Although St. Thomas successively indicates that the infused virtues and their acquired counterparts differ in species, he shows that the motive and end of the acquired moral virtues are included within those of the infused moral virtues so that both the proximate and final end, or natural and supernatural end are achieved simultaneously without contradiction, as Mirkes underscores.<sup>96</sup> As St. Thomas says, "acts produced by an infused habit, do not cause a habit, but strengthen the already existing habit; just as the remedies of medicine given to a man who is naturally healthy, do not cause a kind of health, but give new strength to the health he had before."<sup>97</sup>

Apparently, acquired abstinence serves the civil good; while infused abstinence serves the final good. Yet the latter can and often should complete the former. "Abstaining from food in order to keep one's head clear out of love for God should also serve bodily health. The higher end directs the work of the acquired virtue and

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<sup>95</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 63, a. 4.

<sup>96</sup> R. Mirkes, "Aquinas on the Unity of Perfect Moral Virtue", pp. 599-600.

<sup>97</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 51, a. 4, ad. 3.



transforms its final cause.”<sup>98</sup> Notwithstanding that the ends of the infused and acquired moral virtues are diverse, the ultimate good perfectly subsumes or satisfies the proximate good. Being the final good, it should never deviate from the proximate good that nourishes the nature but exalts it to a higher plane in which the instability and ambiguity of the proximate good will be overcome. The imperfection of pagan acquired virtues will be healed towards the perfection and trueness *simpliciter* accordingly. In this way, we say “grace brings nature to fulfillment”.

The aforesaid theory underlines the trans-formative power of supernatural grace in moral acts on the one hand, and also pinpoints the vital human and active moral efforts prepared for the infusion of grace into nature. As Mirkes concludes,

The sublimation of human virtue into divine is a direct testimony to the dispositive character of human nature and the divine potential of human moral effort. For Aquinas, then, nature is dynamic in character and includes an inner drive toward its existential fulfillment. Grace builds not on the ruins of nature but on its foundation.<sup>99</sup>

Thus the good cultivation of pagan acquired (cardinal) virtues can be the good preparation of the reception of being infused by God’s grace. Ontologically speaking, the human person as an *imago Dei* is open to and fit for grace so that “formation by grace implies the perfection of what is human”.<sup>100</sup> We need to pay attention here, however, since the preparation by no means the cooperation of human natural facility with divine grace. Humanity is impotent to acquire grace, and for this reason the infused virtues will never be ascribed to the acquired ones. The acquired moral virtues as human

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<sup>98</sup> J. Inglis, “Aquinas’s Replication of the Acquired Moral Virtues: Rethinking the Standard Philosophical Interpretation of Moral Virtue in Aquinas”, in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1999), p. 21.

<sup>99</sup> R. Mirkes, “Aquinas on the Unity of Perfect Moral Virtue”, p. 604.

<sup>100</sup> R. Mirkes, “Aquinas on the Unity of Perfect Moral Virtue”, pp. 604-605.

efforts can only be the preparation of the latter through being strengthened and transformed by them.

Christians should not praise the acquired virtues only for their own sake, but chiefly in order to prepare themselves and others for the reception and retention of a panoply of infused moral virtues. While Aquinas held that human beings can cooperate in the acquisition of the acquired virtues...he regarded true virtue as a gift for which one can prepare but in which one cannot cooperate.<sup>101</sup>

The preparation can be understood as the material preparation for a newborn solidarity of virtues of the Christian, the solidarity composed of the acquired cardinal virtues as its material and the infused virtues as its form according to Mirkes's unification theory.

As far as the interaction between acquired virtues and infused virtues within a Christian is concerned, the unification theory that Mirkes suggests holds that the acquired virtues and the infused virtues must complement each other because neither sides can be the cause of the other. The imperfect acquired virtues need to be perfected by the infused virtues through being disposed toward the ultimate good; while the infused virtues, however, require the material component to help the individual to make decisions not only regarding supernatural life, but also concerning the human affairs in present life.<sup>102</sup>

The acquired virtue and its facility constitute the material component of Christian moral virtue; this comprises the visible or observable facility. This facility allows for the easy performance of virtuous acts due to the moderation of passions and the destruction of contrary vices that can only come as a result of the repetition of acts of virtue over time in varying circumstances. The infused moral

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<sup>101</sup> J. Inglis, "Aquinas's Replication of the Acquired Moral Virtues", p. 22.

<sup>102</sup> R. Mirkes, "Aquinas's Doctrine of Moral Virtue and Its Significance for Theories of Facility", pp. 204-205.

virtue and its facility comprise the formal component of Christian moral virtue since the infused moral virtue enables the faculty and its natural virtue to adhere firmly to the good of virtue and, through charity, to be ordered to the supernatural end. The incomplete nature of each type of facility implies their complementarity.<sup>103</sup>

St. Thomas also asks the question whether charity can be without moral virtue. In response to the point that those who have charity find it difficult to do works of virtue, he admits that it is not the truth for those who possess acquired moral virtues because the repeated habituated acts remove the contrary dispositions and facilitate the life of infused virtue.<sup>104</sup> Even a Christian who already possesses God's sanctifying grace can merely act virtuously at times due to the lack of facility to tackle the presence of contrary dispositions. Consequently, he may fail to act virtuously in certain areas of his life that are not directly concerning salvation.<sup>105</sup> The correlative facility needs to be substantiated and nourished by the acquired habituation. For example, a Christian who was used to eating temperately before converting to Christian faith can easily observe abstinence because the contrary dispositions of him such as gluttony have already been overcome orderly.

On the other hand, the theological virtues such as charity are not observable since we cannot discern the elicited or specific acts of charity due to their hidden motivation. Nevertheless, the cardinal virtues are the observable complement for the moral judgments.<sup>106</sup> DeYoung also endorses this point of view. She argues that the cardinal virtues will never be replaced by theological virtues but be

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<sup>103</sup> R. Mirkes, "Aquinas's Doctrine of Moral Virtue and Its Significance for Theories of Facility", p. 218.

<sup>104</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 65, a. 3, ad. 2.

<sup>105</sup> W.C. Mattison III, "Can Christians Possess the Acquired Cardinal Virtues?" p. 585.

<sup>106</sup> J.F. Keenan S.J., "Distinguishing Charity as Goodness and Prudence as Rightness: A Key to Thomas's *Secunda Pars*", in *The Thomist*, Vol. 56 (1992), p. 425.

offered “a new range of operation”, they are “instruments and implementers of the theological virtues in the matter of concrete acts, but these acts are now done with the ultimate end in view.”<sup>107</sup> Human moral effort becomes a constitutive element after being transformed by the supernatural power and “forms an operational unity with grace and the infused virtues”.<sup>108</sup>

As a result, the acquired moral virtues become the proper preparation for the infused virtues. Mirkes concludes the vision of perfect unification of the acquired moral virtue and its infused counterparts within a Christian,

Acquired and infused moral virtue together form a unity, a single, indivisible virtue that is supernatural in character. The moral virtue infused by charity rewards the human act with a perfection that far exceeds its finite scope... The Christian person existentially has a single nature consisting of human and divine causes, and this nature is a divinized one. God, who is perfect unity and perfect activity, not only shows human persons who they are, but also unifies and activates them in ways they are not able to be or do on their own.<sup>109</sup>

In this new solid integrity of virtues we categorize as that of the infused cardinal virtues, being perfect *simpliciter*, has the acquired cardinal virtues that a pagan exclusively possesses as its material cause, and the infused virtues as its formal cause, efficient cause and final cause as well.

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<sup>107</sup> R. Konyndyk DeYoung, Colleen McCluskey, and Christina Van Dyke, *Aquinas's Ethics: Metaphysical Foundations, Moral Theory, and Theological Context* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), p. 142.

<sup>108</sup> R. Mirkes, “Aquinas's Doctrine of Moral Virtue and Its Significance for Theories of Facility”, p. 218.

<sup>109</sup> R. Mirkes, “Aquinas on the Unity of Perfect Moral Virtue”, p. 605.

### Conclusion

St. Thomas's virtue theory, especially his theory of pagan virtues not only discovers the feasible and necessary infusion of supernatural beatitude for man's ultimate good and perfection, but also unfolds the potential capacity, or more accurately put, suitability and inclination to other sublime forms of perfection. The openness of pagan virtues ensure the human autonomous natural facility to perform both the acquired cardinal virtues proportionate to his inborn nature, and oriented to the infused supernatural cardinal virtues that God bestows on us by His gratuitous sanctifying grace.

A pagan can be genuinely virtuous so that "all the virtues of pagan Rome were virtues on their own right". Kent suggests that the idea that "only those with the 'correct' theological commitments can have true moral virtues while others cannot" commits moral provincialism. In opposition to moral provincialism, "moral cosmopolitanism" embraces the common capacity for virtue of human being in general.<sup>110</sup> She believes that St. Thomas is also strongly influenced by a moral cosmopolitanism tradition.<sup>111</sup> St. Thomas justifies the pagan virtues and points out their limitation, he says,

It is possible by means of human works to acquire moral virtues, in so far as they produce good works that are directed to an end not surpassing the natural power of man: and when they are acquired thus, they can be without charity, even as they were in many of the Gentiles. But in so far as they produce good works in proportion to a supernatural last end, thus they have the character of

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<sup>110</sup> B. Kent, "Moral Provincialism", pp. 269-285. Another possibility is that a kind of Christian inclusivism can claim itself moral cosmopolitanism by its latent exclusivist agenda called "everybody being an anonymous Christian".

<sup>111</sup> B. Kent, "Moral Provincialism", p. 276.

virtue, truly and perfectly; and cannot be acquired by human acts, but are infused by God. Such like moral virtues cannot be without charity.<sup>112</sup>

St. Thomas's claim that "pagan virtues are true, but imperfect" posits the limitation or possibility for a pagan to be perfected *simpliciter* beyond his own efforts, namely under another formal cause (efficient cause, final cause) that is initiated by God and His saving grace.

Pagan virtues obtain their supreme form in social or political virtues when concerning the common good. They can be purgative virtues in a perfecting dynamic towards the godhead. Nevertheless, due to the imperfection of pagan virtues manifested in both unsteady habit *in statu dispositionis* and disconnection of each virtues, intellectual and moral, the pilgrimage to where the true perfection *simpliciter* lies has to be carried out by the supernatural assistance from outside of the human natural facilities. Through the transformation of pagan acquired cardinal virtues by the infused virtues, in the perfect unification of both parties, the infused cardinal virtues come into being as a solid integrity of virtues which has the pagan virtues as its observable concrete matter and the infused virtues as its form. In this sense, pagan virtues act as a proper and good preparation and complement of the perfect virtues *simpliciter* within the Christian. The ultimate union of human *eros* for self-fulfillment and God's gratuitous self-giving agape shapes the perfect form of human virtue, i.e. Charity.

For St. Thomas, pagan virtues should not be considered merely as being purely instrumental to the salvation for the afterlife. Human good itself is also a true good proportionate to human nature towards which an earthly life is led. In this approach, the justification of pagan virtues can't be charged with Pelagianism theologically. Virtues in the natural level have nothing to do with salvation. They are just the proper preparation for the next stage of perfection beyond human natural good. We are by no means to

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<sup>112</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 65, a. 2.

suggest that pagan virtues could be the criterion of being worth to receive saving grace. Thus the proclamation that the pagan has virtues apart from the assistance of supernatural grace cannot be charged of Pelagianism which alleges that pagans possess the unaided ability to lead themselves to the path of salvation.

On the question of pagan virtues from the philosophical perspective, a strong theological understanding like O'Meara's should be evaded, which suggests that all that can be called "virtues" are grace-infused, "Not only faith, hope, and charity are infused along with grace but also those habits called 'cardinal virtues' and their sub-virtues."<sup>113</sup> To give a credible account of a philosophical investigation of St. Thomas's virtue theory it is necessary not to over-generalize through theology which can lead us away from the complexity of the interrelationship between the natural and theological virtues. In a similar way, the theological proposition like "all pagans are potentially Christian or anonymous Christian", along with the latent evangelical agenda behind it, is not our original intention to justify pagan virtues. On the contrary, we articulate this subject matter for further academic perusal: the investigation of pagan virtues in the other modalities of human ethics, especially Oriental religiosity such as Chinese Confucianism and Buddhism, which emphasizes that the perfection of human being is not from divine alterity through blessedness but by awakening of the potential supernatural power inside human nature, or rather by liberating from the natural imperfection through the mysterious moral-spiritual practices, seemingly a kind of active cultivation of the acquired virtues.

For this purpose, we would rather prefer the ontological presupposition of *homo religiosus* to justify pagan virtues. Osborne locates religious obligations in the moral instead of theological virtues because he indicates that religious virtues such as benevolence (sacrifices as the extreme form) and devotions are

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<sup>113</sup> T.F. O'Meara, "Virtues in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas", in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (1997), p. 265.

merely the means to God as the ultimate end as the moral virtues are. Religious obligation “is based not on a special divine command, but rather on the natural inclination of all humans...like Augustine, Thomas thinks that the virtue of religion is a necessary condition for a good life.”<sup>114</sup> Herein human as *homo religiosus* becomes Osborne’s basic ontological foundation. Religiosity (rather than specific religious faith!) is not infused grace but the connatural nature in human ontological structure. As St. Thomas says, “man, by his natural powers alone, can love God more than himself and above all things.”<sup>115</sup>

Based on this ontology, virtue ethics can be transcended and steps taken towards duty ethics, namely leaps from “to be good by being right (order or disposition)” to “to be good by being good *per se* (through fulfilling duty as imperative)”. *Homo religiosus* will justify and facilitate duty ethics by providing an ontological foundation on which deontology is established. Once this step has been established, good as the moral imperative will be awarded its intrinsic good. In this sense, therefore, to say a pagan is virtuous and meritorious if his dispositional acts are virtuous, even without being justified before God, is not problematic.

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<sup>114</sup> T.M. Osborne Jr., “The Augustinianism of Thomas Aquinas’s Moral Theory”, in *The Thomist*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (2003), p. 288.

<sup>115</sup> *STh*, I-II, q. 109, a. 3.