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Moral Growth: A Thomistic Account

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Within an ethics of virtue, moral development is centrally a matter of becoming more virtuous. But what does it mean to become more virtuous? It is of course not merely a matter of performing more reliably acts that are characteristic of a virtuous agent. After all, one could conceivably do this through becoming less virtuous, for example, through giving up on seeking to be good and yet becoming more attuned to honors or the danger of punishment. The change is one in the agent, a change of the qualities of his soul, as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas have it. Aristotle takes it as “an incontrovertible fact” that virtue, like health and knowledge, admits of degrees (*Cat.* 11a1). The change of qualities that leads to our becoming more virtuous is a special change inasmuch as it is a change that leads to our becoming good qua human being, as it makes both the person and his acts good (NE 1106a15). The moral virtues are in this regard a very special set of qualities for human beings.

My interest here is to explore the metaphysical underpinnings of moral development or moral growth from an Aristotelian perspective; the question I am to answer may be put: what must be true of us, from a metaphysical perspective, in order for moral development or growth to be possible in the sense that is pertinent

for virtue ethics? In answering this question, Thomas Aquinas is especially of interest because he attempts to reconcile and elaborate on Aristotle's various remarks on the underlying nature of virtues as a specific sort of quality, a state (*hexis*) that Aquinas terms a '*habitus*.' I think there is much we have to learn from this tradition about the metaphysical underpinnings of virtue; a topic that contemporary virtue ethics tends to shy away from in favor of relinquishing the task of understanding the nature of virtue to empirical psychology. Yet, I think that it would be a philosophical error for virtue ethicists to rely on empirically derived conception of virtue: though I won't fully defend the claim here, I will suggest that no empirically derived conception of virtue could be what virtue must be in order for the kind of evaluation virtue ethics proposes to be possible. We need at least some Aristotelian metaphysics to have Aristotelian virtues, but we must also show the need for such virtues. I will attempt to do that by offering some defense of the metaphysical moral psychology that Aquinas sketches in the *Treatise on Habits*.

I. Qualities and Habits

Aristotle tells us in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that virtues are states, but he says little there about what a state is. In the *Categories* and Book Delta of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle tells us somewhat more about states; among other things, he defines states as a sort of quality. These brief and obscure texts serve as the basis of Aquinas' reflections on habits. Aquinas treats the question: what sort of quality is a habit? His answer is that it is the sort of quality that renders its subject suitable to

the nature of the thing in which the subject of the quality is (49, 2). So a habit of the passions renders those passions suitable to nature of the soul in which those passions occur. This species of quality will always be good or evil; it is unlike other species of quality, such as the sort of quality which specifies its subject in respect to a quantity. One can have large or small hands within a given range without it making them suitable or unsuitable to one's nature. Of course, if one's hands are small or big enough, they become unsuitable for one's nature, and Aquinas acknowledges that such features as shape or color could become qualities of the sort habit is, but he further along qualifies his conception of habit such that these qualities are clearly not habits, or count as habits only in some derivative sense.

These restrictions are introduced when he turns to considering which subjects can possess habits. Only certain sorts of subjects will be able to have qualities of this sort. Such qualities are to be found only in something that is perfectible or corruptible. Obviously, God, as a completely actualized and incorruptible being, lacks habits. Aquinas enumerates three more specific necessary conditions for possessing habits: first, one must be in a state of potentiality, second, one must have a form that is determinable in various ways and that can relate to various ends, and, third, the subject of the qualities must have adjustable parts (49, 4).

These conditions set some important restrictions on which qualities can be regarded as habits. For example, they belong to the body only in relation to the rational soul. At first glance, it might seem that the body on its own meets all the

conditions, such that health could be a quality of the sort in question; indeed, it is invoked through the Treatise on Habits as an example of a habit, as it also appears in Aristotle's Categories. But this is misleading, because, taken by itself, the body does not stand in potentiality to various ends. Health as a habit is a condition through which the body has been determined by its possessor to be more or less responsive to the will, which can have various ends. Likewise, an unhealthy goat may have bodily qualities that make it bad qua goat but these qualities are not habits because they are natural qualities that are not determinable to multiple ends.

At first glance, it seems that Aquinas misled us in his definition of the sort of quality that a habit is, since an unhealthy goat seems to have qualities that ill-suit it to goat-hood, and these seem to fit his definition of the sort of quality that makes for a habit. Indeed Aquinas seems drawn into a tension due to the range of things to which Aristotle is willing to apply to the term habit. Yet, Aquinas' conception of habit appears to be more restrictive than Aristotle's and the goat example usefully highlights the distinctiveness of Aquinas' conception of habit. The unhealthy goat doesn't have a set of qualities that suit it to ends contrary to its goat-hood, but rather has lost those qualities that render it suited goat-hood. A goat has one mode of operation open to it by nature, and has through disease or malnutrition lost the qualities that enable it to operate in that way. In a subject of habits there are various qualities that it can attain that enable it to operate in ways that are more or less suitable to its nature. As Aquinas puts it: "as to those operations which proceed from its nature, the body is not disposed by a habit: because the natural forces are

determined to one mode of operation, and... it is when the subject is in potentiality to many things that a habitual disposition is required" (50, 1). Habits, then, can be properly spoken of only in relation to rational powers, and health can be properly considered a habit only when there are bodily qualities that a rational animal possesses due to choices that render his body responsive to his will. Not just any perfection or corruption can be properly designated a habit, but rather only those caused by a rational power.

Proper habits are the domain of creatures like us that are rational and perfectible; angels too have habits, but non-rational animals can be only be trained to our ends; a trained animal does not have qualities that it can use or refrain from using to its own ends, and so again, the possession of rational power is a sine qua non for possessing a habit (50, 3). Such creatures can bring themselves into conditions that are better or worse for realizing their proper ends, and can adopt ends that are contrary to those.

One question that may surface rather immediately about this account is whether there really are any such properties of the soul as these qualities. Anthony Kenny evinces skepticism on this count in his introduction to the *Treatise on Habits*. Living in the shadow of Ryle, he worries that Aquinas is hypostasizing, and guilty of positing a *virtus dormativa*. Kenny holds that "any disposition is defined by its

exercise and individuated by its possessor.”¹ More specifically, he takes issue with Aquinas’ claim that without exercising moral virtue, the passions will get out of control. With regard to this Kenny asks “what *else* is the exercise of virtue but the controlling of the passions?” He regards it as a truism that without exercising moral virtue the passions will be out of control. Yet, the gap between Kenny’s moral psychology and Aquinas’s is notable here. Virtue is something other than its exercise, specifically, an accident that arises when parts of the subject of virtue are arranged properly. In this case, the passions are formed such that, for example, they do not impede acting from a deliberated decision. There are various ways in which this could happen, as say, anger, fear, hatred, and other passions could overwhelm us. We are in potentiality in those various respects, needing to be formed and actualized in them. Each of those respects points to a individual moral virtue, the possession of which gives us a power to pursue the good in accordance with choice. Is this a *virtus dormativa*? Well, perhaps there is nothing wrong with such *virtutes*. As Edward Feser has recently argued, it is not empty to say that opium has a dormative power, because we are thereby attributing a power to the opium, a quality that belongs to the nature of opium.² Likewise, here, we are attributing a certain power to a subject, or more precisely, a quality to a certain power. That quality is something more than its exercises; it explains what occurs when it is has its corresponding effect. We have reason affirm with Aquinas, against Kenny, then, that “virtue is a mean between passions, not by reason of its essence, but on account

¹ *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 22, trans. and ed. Anthony Kenny (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964) xxxiii.

² *Scholastic Metaphysics* (Heusenstamm: editiones scholasticae, 2014) 43-45.

of its effects" (59, 2, ad 2). Indeed, it is misleading to think the exercise of virtue involves the controlling of passions at all, since in person with complete virtue, the passions are already controlled. In willing, the control of passions is not at issue for one with complete virtue. But in a virtuous person who is inactive, Aquinas claims, the habit may weaken and disappear. The situation that Aquinas envisages is not unlike that of a skill: one can become 'rusty' in the speaking of a language or the playing of an instrument. Likewise someone who through withdrawal from life is not faced with situations provoking anger or lust may find himself rusty in the face of potential incitements of these passions. The explanation of this that Aquinas proposes is that the quality has lessened. However plausible, this is not a truism, but something that, if true, pertains to the nature of creatures like us. We can see further evidence for the existence of traits in the role that they play in the explanation of moral development.

II. The Growth of Qualities

As Aquinas points out, for the most part, habits cannot be said to literally increase or grow. Rather, in speaking this way, we employ an analogy with physical things that do exhibit literal increase. One does not become more virtuous by being virtuous and then adding to one's girth. But one can become more knowledgeable through learning additional facts or conclusions, and in this respect there is literal addition to one's virtue, at least with regard to intellectual virtues.

Still, in the realm of moral virtue, there is no literal increase, and this raises the question of how to understand becoming more virtuous in this domain. Someone who is less courageous than another may be able to perform the same actions as his more virtuous counterpart, but he will do them differently: in fact he will do them worse. Here the basic idea of understanding virtue as a quality of the soul is crucial. What happens in his soul is different, and not simply in a one-off way. When we deem someone more virtuous than another, we attribute to his soul a different principle, which is the habit that is the cause of his acting as he does in a broad sense that includes how he feels as he acts. As Aquinas puts the point, someone is more courageous than another to the degree he participates in courage; he possesses not a different sort of thing, but one thing more fully (52, 1). On Aquinas' view, courage is a formal quality of the passions of the courageous individual in that the amount of fear that he feels is appropriate to various situations he faces; the individual responses exhibit a form across those various situations, and the more fully courageous individual approximates that form more completely.

Clearly, Aquinas has an eye on the Doctrine of the Mean here, but he is giving us some insight into what must be the case about the soul if it is describable as attaining a mean. The change that occurs when one becomes more courageous is, he believes, one whereby the soul acquires different qualities. We might think of the change that occurs as one acquires courage as typically involving a global tamping down of the amount of fear one feels in various situations. The change that occurs in the soul may result in the fact that one's fear, in any given instance, is less than it

otherwise would have been. But even if that correctly describes what needs to happen in a given individual, it does not correctly describe the change that occurs in his soul if he acquires courage. The change that occurs results in the passion embodying a single measure that is established by reason, through which the soul reflects appropriate love. The quality of the soul that is courage consists in the passions of fear and daring being informed by that measure. The effect of possessing that measure as a principle of one's passion of fear is that one will exhibit an amount of fear that is proportionate to one's beliefs about perceived objects in a way that reflects an appropriate appreciation of the value of such things as one's life, one's community, and God. In a given individual, this may mean adjustments of fear in varying directions; as one may have an excessive fear of social embarrassment until one has sloughed it off repeatedly, reminding oneself of its negligible importance, but minimal fear of the physical dangers of battle until one is confronted with the gore of a slain compatriot, never having imagined the violence to which a human body may be subject.

The crucial point is that what is changing and developing is something distinct: it is neither the feeling itself nor the power that produces it, but a quality of that power that develops as it is oriented toward or away from various ends. Of course, this is where Aristotle directs us in Book II, Chapter 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Yet, in Aquinas we more explicitly see how this distinction is essential for describing moral change. It is something necessarily separate from individual exercises of will. For in that case, there would only be a matter of whether on any

given instance, I have willed rightly. I would be all power, without qualities, and such a view of the person, indeed, of the will itself, is implausible. After all, it matters for the will what one desires and how much. Someone's ability to act on her intentions can be undermined by her character, which, as Philippa Foot pointed out in her paper "Virtues and Vices" goes deeper than intentions, and is a matter also of "innermost desires." What Foot suggests there is that one can be rendered incapable of, for example, generous action, despite one's present sincere intention to act generously, because one lacks a deep desire for the good of others that characterizes true acts of generosity. Of course a non-virtuous agent may act virtuously in a sense: he may act in accordance with virtue, mimicking the behaviors of a generous agent, but such an agent cannot act from virtue, and so the non-virtuous agent isn't capable of acting as the virtuous agent acts simply by adopting a certain intention.

Indeed, because the virtues qualify our desires and affects, the world appears to the virtuous agent differently, as Aquinas points out in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* Book III, Chapter 5:

The appetites are inclined to an object in two ways: one, by reason of a passion of the soul, the other by reason of *habitus*. Under the impulse of passion it happens that a thing is judged good as it is at present. Thus to one who is afraid of drowning it appears good at the moment to throw his merchandise overboard; as fornication to one filled with lust. But the judgment by which a man accounts a thing good in itself and absolutely,

arises from the inclination of *habitus*... [Aristotle] therefore says that since a man in some measure is the cause of his own evil *habitus* by reason of his continual sinning... it follows that he himself is the cause of the imaginative reaction that follows such a *habitus*, i.e., of the appearance by which this thing seems to be good in itself.

Here we get significant statement about what it is that *habitus* allow us to do that we could not do without them: to act on something that seems to be good in itself. They do so precisely because the way things seem to us is an upshot of our commitments as enacted in prior choices. Without *habitus*, all such appearances are dictated to us by passions that are not regulated by active commitments on our part. In a virtuous agent and some vicious agents, these commitments are the upshot of practical reflection, specifically a structured approach to thinking about the relative value of various goals in one's life. In the case of courage, for example, one exhibits a commitment to facing down a perceived threat for the sake of something believed to be good in itself. Reflection on the relative value of goods is required for this to be the deliverance of something more than an ingrained cultural expectation. One must have reflectively realized the goodness in itself of something, such as one's family or community, which means realizing that its enduring and intrinsic importance gives it priority over avoiding the immediate discomfort of fear.

Hence, through moral growth, I go from acting from individual passionate responses that are not integrated with a considered idea of what is worthwhile, acting *kata*

pathos, from the impulse of passion, to acting from considered and deliberately chosen idea of what is worthwhile, acting *kata prohairesin*.³ Of course, it isn't that passion is displaced; rather, my individual passionate responses are exhibit unity because they are integrated into a measure determined by what I take to be worthwhile. If I am virtuous, then my actions thereafter instance or exhibit virtue, because they come from a principle that qualifies my will by making my passions reflect my considered judgments about what is worthwhile.

Aquinas's view also brings out how this process of moral is an essential aspect of human growth. As Foot memorably puts this point, explicating Aquinas, "while animals go for the good (thing) *that they see*, human beings go for *what they see as good*."⁴ It is an essential aspect of our nature as rational animals that we come to see things in terms of our conception of the good, which is, for Aquinas, centrally a matter of what we love. As we bring our appetites and thereby passions into accord with our reflective conception of what is to be loved, we transform our imaginative responses to the world until those responses, what we see, accurately tracks what we take to be good. In someone for whom this process has gone as it should, the qualities of their soul are such that they reflect the genuine value of things in terms of a well-lived human life, and this is an essential aspect of our complete development as rational animals: such a rational animal is in touch with practical

³ This formulation of Aristotelian moral development is owed to Gavin Lawrence, "Acquiring Character: Becoming Grown Up," in *Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*, ed. Michael Pakaluk and Giles Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 240.

⁴ *Natural Goodness*, p. 56.

reality. Having informed passions that are integrated in terms of a measure is therefore part of being fully and non-defectively human. To the extent that our passions participate in the virtues, adhering, *inter alia*, to the form that makes our responses to fear courageous, we are more fully as a human should be.

I have argued thus far that the habits, along that they are understood by Aquinas are crucial to understanding moral growth. We need to see ourselves as having qualities that may be changed and that are essentially involved in willing in order to see ourselves as capable of moral growth. Without these enduring yet changeable practical qualities of the soul we cannot see ourselves as engaged in any special process that would leave us more or less capable of acting well. We should readily be able to see how these qualities relate to the distinctive sort of ethical evaluation that virtue ethics encourages us to see as primary. An action is fully good on this view only if it is done by someone with the right qualities; for only in that case is the action rightly directed. In a virtuous agent engaged in virtuous action, everything goes as it should in a human agent. In virtuous action, one acts on the right reasons, and does so with ease, so that the virtuous agent is not reluctant or conflicted in so acting, at least, not due to his own condition (there are of course situations, dilemmas, in which the virtuous agent will be conflicted). In pointing out that a virtuous agent aims at the right things, our concern is not that it makes the realization of desired or good aims more likely. We also aren't praising the smoothness or ease with which the agent acts. It is certainly more pleasant for the agent, and

perhaps more sightly to others, to act with such ease, but that is not the point of praising virtue from the standpoint of virtue ethics. Rather, it is a matter of the excellence of the human agent qua human agent that is in question. For an Aristotelian, this is a matter of having correct aims and being fully committed to them, and that is what having good operative habits or virtues allows us to do.

At the outset of this paper I suggested that we can't have Aristotelian virtue ethics without some Aristotelian metaphysics. The good sort of quality, a virtue, is not a quality that we derive from observation: for if it is observable we must first determine the measure that our passions are to reach if they are to count as excellent. Although we can observe situation types, even taking account of how an agent classifies situations, and measure their behavioral responses to them, it is not obvious that we thereby get any empirical confirmation of the existence of these qualities. The reason is that the regularities are normative all the way down, and contained in a form that cannot be captured by an explicit rule. That is to say, if I am virtuous, the measure that my passionate responses express can at best be put in terms of a formal rule that contains value laden terms, something like: fear is excessive when it prevents me from taking a risk of physical harm in which the value of the potential gains times the probability of attaining those gains is greater than the disvalue of the potential losses times the probability of realizing those losses.⁵ Contemporary, post-situationist personality psychology, places great emphasis on individuals' construals of situations as a way of looking for stable

⁵ Derived from Howard Curzer's suggestion for the "Right Rule for Courage" in *Aristotle and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 34.

personality traits, and so, one might think it could give us insight into the existence of qualities, indexed to an individual's beliefs about the situations that they are in. Yet, given the way that Aristotelian habits are essentially tied to the agent's orientation to standing ends which are not in evidence in individual actions, indeed, may not be obvious to individual agents who may be unaware in various situations about how their responses relate to their higher order ends, even though their responses in fact reflect such valuations. In light of this, it seems doubtful to me that one can make very much headway in assessing an individuals' qualities by observing their behavioral responses to types of situations, even as they would classify them. Not only are we at a remove from the passions if we are examining behavior, but also, even if we begin to probe the passions, a given fear response may indicate any number of evaluations and different orientations to various ends. I may experience overwhelming fear at being rebuked by a work superior through excessive attachment to social status or fear of losing a livelihood to support my family, and may be quite unaware of which of these is at play when I experience the fear. Although these qualities might therefore seem discreditable folk psychology, I believe that they are an essential components of our set of practical concepts, that is, the concepts that we must use to see ourselves as agents, which seems an inescapable and irreducible mode of thought. Exploring such practical concepts is, I believe the right way to carry out the task Anscombe called for in "Modern Moral Philosophy" of developing an adequate philosophical psychology.