

**Thomas M. Osborne, Jr., *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022, pp. 246, £ 75.00, ISBN 9781316511749**

Marco Vorcelli

Università degli Studi di Padova

After the general exposition of Thomas Aquinas's moral thought contained in the brief essay *Aquinas's Ethics*, Thomas M. Osborne, Jr. has devoted a whole monograph specifically to Aquinas's understanding of virtue. *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue* aims to place the great Dominican's treatment of this notion "in its historical, chronological, philosophical, and theological contexts" (p. 1). Following the section of the *Summa theologiae* on virtue in general (I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, qq. 56-67), but constantly drawing on other parallel texts from Thomas's voluminous output too, Osborne seeks to guide the reader through the multifarious concepts and distinctions that feature in the Angelic Doctor's analysis of virtue, also attempting to evaluate whether the accounts of different works are consistent with one another.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first is dedicated to Thomas's general definition of virtue as "a good operative habit", which is specific to no kind of virtue, but holds for any. Whereas most contemporary theories claim that habits virtually consist in unthinking reflexes to external stimuli, Thomas conceives of habits as firm dispositions rooted in the powers of the soul which allow their possessor to act "pleasurably, readily, and easily" (p. 26). When directed to goodness, habits become virtues. In contrast to the Stoic static depiction of the

moral life, such virtues can be possessed in various degrees and, at least in the case of acquired virtues, can be augmented similarly to technical skills, that is, through regular practice in a certain act. This conception of virtue is unmistakably Aristotelian, however, as Osborne notes, it is a form of “enhanced Aristotelianism”, which develops the ideas of the *Nicomachean Ethics* “more systematically and convincingly”, going “beyond what Aristotle himself was able to articulate” (p. 43). Moreover, in the wake of Philip the Chancellor and Albert the Great, Thomas is keen to show how the Aristotelian definition of virtue can be reconciled with that of Peter Lombard, whose definition is Augustinian and theologically oriented, according to which virtue is a good quality of the mind endowed by God.

The second chapter deals with the distinction between intellectual and moral virtue, focusing especially on the former. For Thomas, intellectual virtues should not be regarded as mere collections of theoretical propositions or practical commands, but rather, once again, as habits, that is, abilities to gain knowledge and ponder over action. A first group of intellectual virtues comprises the speculative habits of understanding (*intellectus*), science (*scientia*), and wisdom (*sapientia*). These virtues do make us good, however, unlike moral virtue and prudence, only with respect to a definite ambit and need to be assisted by the moral virtues to be used ethically. The other intellectual virtues are technical skill (*ars*) and prudence (*prudentia*). Although they both consist in applying universal rules to particular cases, technical skill pertains to transitive acts that result in specific exterior products, while prudence is primarily concerned with immanent acts of deliberation about the whole good life. Faithful to Aristotle, Thomas states that prudence deliberates on the means to the ends desired by the moral virtues, but he enriches this picture by introducing the theological notion of *synderesis*, i.e., the

capacity to intuitively grasp the first practical principles, which prudence also has to consider. Furthermore, in a particularly significant paragraph (pp. 48-55), Osborne addresses the question of whether, for Thomas, the will needs a habit to perform its actions, pointing out the inconsistencies between different texts and reporting the attempts of famous Thomists to harmonise them.

Having treated the intellectual virtues, the third chapter turns to the moral ones, first examining Thomas's thought on the relationship between moral virtue and the passions. Drawing mainly on Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, IX, 4 and XIV, 8, but, according to Osborne, surpassing him for the clarity of argumentation, Thomas presents the diatribe between the Stoics, who defended the extirpation of the passions, and the Peripatetics, who upheld their moderation, objecting to the view of the former and embracing that of the latter. Osborne then goes on to analyse how Thomas divides the genus of moral virtue. The fundamental separation is between justice and the virtues connected to it, which inhere in the will and produce first and foremost operations, and all the other moral virtues, which belong to the sense appetites and principally regulate the passions. Finally, the last part of the chapter investigates Thomas's usage of two organizational criteria for the moral virtues: the individuation of the traditional quartet of the cardinal virtues and the Neoplatonic scheme of the levels of virtue.

With the fourth chapter we witness the transition from natural to supernatural ethics. Indeed, for Thomas, human beings are "ordered to an ultimate end that exceeds the requirements and abilities of human nature, namely the beatific vision of God in the next life" (p. 126). Despite being non-natural, such an ordering is not unnatural, since, in keeping with Thomas's axiom that grace does not remove nature, but fulfils it, it does not "violate human nature", but is "thoroughly compatible

with” it (p. 127). The three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are essentially supernatural. In discussing them, Thomas carefully distinguishes their order of generation – which is logical and not chronological – from their order of perfection, according to which charity is “the principal virtue that makes an agent and his acts good” (p. 138) in the non-natural domain. The second crucial theme that concerns supernatural morality is the distinction between acquired and infused moral virtue. As Osborne remarks, Thomas was among the first to clearly draw this division, standing out as a pioneering thinker in this regard. Whereas acquired virtues are progressively gained through repeated voluntary actions and are gradually lost due to contrary acts, infused virtues *must* be bestowed by God and are both formed and destroyed immediately. Notwithstanding their different origins and orientations, acquired and infused virtues can coexist and cooperate in the same moral agent, since, in conformity with the aforementioned axiom on the relationship between nature and grace, the act of infused habits has the power to encompass that of acquired ones.

The fifth chapter explores the last four questions of the *Summa theologiae*’s general analysis of virtue (I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, qq. 64-67), where Thomas inquires into some of its properties. The first is related to the intrinsic nature of virtue, namely, its being a mean. Interestingly, not only does Thomas flesh out the *Nicomachean Ethics*’s account of moral virtue as a mean state between excess and deficiency, but, developing Aristotle’s idea, he also extends it to the intellectual and theological virtues. The following two questions investigate the relationships between the virtues. Relying on book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Thomas argues for the connection of the acquired moral virtues through the intellectual virtue of prudence, in that, albeit specifically distinct habits, all the moral virtues are simultaneously possessed by the truly prudent person.

Similarly, the infused moral virtues are conjoined through the theological virtue of charity. For Thomas, however, the connection of the virtues does not amount to their unity: contrary to the Stoic opinion, the virtues are subject to an order of diversity and inequality. In particular, the cardinal virtues are unequal both in themselves – their succession according to nobility being prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance – and with respect to the agent, since different persons possess them in different degrees. Moreover, in the supernatural realm, charity is the pre-eminent theological virtue. The final question raises the problem of whether and how the virtues of the earthly life will still be present in the heavenly one. Regarding the acquired virtues, both moral and intellectual, Thomas believes that, in the absence of the *materia* on which they operate in this life, they will function only formally in the next, retaining their specific capacities, but exercising them on new objects. As for the theological virtues, while the uncertainty of faith and the expectation of hope will end, the love of charity will not and will even be intensified along with our increased knowledge of God. Thus, concludes Osborne, charity is “not only the pre-eminent theological virtue”, but “also the most enduring” (p. 189).

After the reconstruction of the doctrines of *Summa theologiae*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, qq. 56-67, the sixth and last chapter sketches a comparison between Thomas’s theory of virtue and two contemporary philosophical approaches: virtue ethics and naturalism. Virtue ethics is historically indebted to Thomas’s moral philosophy. However, Osborne seems particularly eager to mark the differences between them so as to demonstrate the superiority of the Dominican’s thought: not only does virtue ethics tend to prioritise habits over actions, thus departing from Thomas’s insistence on the primacy of acts, but, unlike him, is also “imprecise or unclear about the relationship between

virtue and happiness” (p. 197). According to Osborne, this imprecision results from a “disconnected concept of ‘morality’”, i.e., the artificial “separation of the moral good [virtue] from the human good [happiness]” (p. 198), which is typical of contemporary ethical reflection, but alien to Thomas’s. With reference to naturalism, its reliance on the assumptions and methods of modern science is evidently at odds with the framework of the *Summa theologiae*. After all, it should be borne in mind that, however philosophically stimulating Thomas’s *magnum opus* may be, it remains a work of theology. Accordingly, as Osborne reminds us, all the philosophy that one may find in it is “at the service of and perhaps even absorbed by” (p. 211) theological preoccupations.

*Thomas Aquinas on Virtue* is, generally speaking, a good book. The text is not devoid of problems: the exposition is not always so tightly organised and the writing sometimes fails to do justice to Thomas’s crisp thought and style, not to mention the occasional slips in translation (a striking example, on p. 35, is the rendering of the Latin “*libra*”, the ancient unit of weight, with “book”, in Latin “*liber*”, with the somewhat bizarre effect that follows). In spite of this, the volume undoubtedly has its virtues: the reconstructions it offers are correct and useful, constantly comparing the *Summa theologiae* with the rest of Thomas’s output and extensively citing or referring to a vast array of pertinent works, including the commentaries of renowned Thomists. In light of this, anyone interested in the Angelic Doctor’s moral theory, its sources, and its legacy can certainly benefit from reading Osborne’s book.

## **Bibliography**

Thomas M. Osborne, Jr., *Aquinas’s Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020

### **Useful links**

<https://www.cambridge.org/it/academic/subjects/philosophy/medieval-philosophy/thomas-aquinas-virtue?format=HB>