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Critical Summary

In *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 57 a. 5, St. Thomas describes the mutual dependence and connection of prudence and the moral virtues. He says that good deeds require right choice, and “rectitude of choice requires two things: namely, the due end, and something suitably ordained to that due end.”¹ Since the object of the appetitive part is the good and the end, it is the moral virtues which incline man to his due end. Further, since the ordering of means to the end belongs to reason, it is prudence which disposes man to that which is suitably ordained to that end. Prudence, then, is essentially rational and the other moral virtues are rational by participation.² St. Thomas describes this mutual role of good inclination and ordination to the end as intrinsically united, such that the moral virtues will not exist without prudence (*ST* I-II, q. 58, a. 4) nor will prudence exist without the moral virtues (*ST* I-II, q. 58, a. 5). The moral virtues depend on prudence, precisely because man is characterized by his rational nature. Unlike other natures devoid of reason and thus choice, which are moved simply by their natural inclinations to their ends, a man who is inclined to his end by good moral virtues must still deliberate, judge, and, most importantly, command aright that his actions be perfect.³ On the other hand, moral virtues are necessary for prudence, lest the universal principles be “destroyed in a particular case by passion.”⁴ The moral virtues rightly dispose man with regard to the particular principles of action (i.e. the ends) so that it becomes “connatural” for him to judge aright about the means by

¹ *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 5, translation taken from PHIL 769 Handout, “Aquinas *ST* on the Connection of the Virtues,” trans. Tobias Hoffmann.

² St. Thomas Aquinas, OP. *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, OP (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), p. 399, 1269.

³ *ST* I-II, q. 58, a. 4, ad. 1.

⁴ *ST* Ibid., a. 5, c.

prudence. In this summary, I will examine the interdependent connection of the virtues as described in *ST I-II*, q. 65, a. 1.

Granting the mutual dependence of prudence and the moral virtues, some questions naturally arise. Does this mean that these virtues must arise simultaneously? Is it possible to have one moral virtue in order to gain prudence, or must one rather have most or even *all* of the moral virtues in order to have prudence? But then, St. Thomas insists that you must also have prudence in order to have *any* of the moral virtues? In a similar vein of reasoning, Tobias Hoffmann asks, “How is this interdependence not viciously circular?”⁵

St. Thomas, incorporating and elaborating upon Aristotle’s solution to this question, makes a distinction between doing virtuous acts simply and doing them *virtuously*. For Aristotle, this meant acting with knowledge of what one is doing, choosing an action for its own sake, and acting from a firm character.⁶ St. Thomas adopts Aristotle’s own language, at times, but also describes actions done virtuously as prompt and pleasurable.⁷ As Hoffmann points out, the relation is circular, but not viciously circular, since for St. Thomas, man’s repetition of virtuous acts increasingly disposes him, not only to do such act simply, but to do so *virtuously*, namely, promptly and with pleasure.⁸

To explain this relation, St. Thomas makes a distinction between “perfect” and “imperfect” virtue. According to this distinction, imperfect virtue is simply an inclination (*inclinatio*) that is found in man by nature (*natura*) or by custom (*assuetudine*).⁹ They are imperfect since they are had by natural temperament (*naturali complexione*) or by custom

⁵ Tobias Hoffmann, “Aquinas on Moral Progress.” *Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Jeffrey Hause, forthcoming, 6.

⁶ NE 2.4.1105a17-34

⁷ See Hoffmann, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *ST I-II*, q. 65, a. 1, c.

(*consuetudine*). On the other hand, perfect virtues are habits (*habitus*) that are also inclinations, but those which incline man to do good deeds well (*inclinans in bonum opus bene*). This distinction is by no means trivial since it penetrates to what is essential to virtue, namely, that they prompt *human acts*, which are defined by intellect's understanding of the good and the will's promptly and joyfully choosing it. But to act from custom or from nature, indicates a lower degree of action that, although it is indeed performed by a man, it is not a completely *human act* since neither custom's nor nature's acts incorporate reason and will in knowingly, willingly, and firmly choosing this particular action. For St. Thomas, a man may have several imperfect virtues, which "exist and increase separately from one another."¹⁰ Hoffmann says that the distinction is not that these imperfect virtues are not really habits (*habitus*), but rather that, lacking prudence, they are thus unable to order means to the end well.¹¹

This unity of the moral virtues and prudence is based upon the unity of things to be done. Because all moral operations arise from certain passions, namely, love and hatred, and end in others, namely, pleasure and sorrow, all of the moral virtues are related to one another, and thus, guided by the same rule, prudence.¹² Right reason about things to be done, namely, prudence, requires not just a partial grasp, but a complete grounding in the principles of right action, namely, the moral virtues. Deficiency in any "department of things to be done, would result in a deficiency affecting other things to be done" since the operation of man comprises a unity.¹³ In trying to establish the unity of the virtues here, I wonder why St. Thomas does not discuss the relation of the "ends" of the moral virtues to the ultimate end (perhaps supernatural beatitude, but

¹⁰ Hoffmann, 6.

¹¹ Ibid. See also ST I-II, q. 65, a. 1, ad. 1 where St. Thomas says that these imperfect virtues enable man to "exercise himself by good deeds in regard to one matter, but not in regard to another." By doing so, "he will indeed acquire a certain habit (*habitus*) . . . but this habit will lack the nature of virtue, *through the absence of prudence.*"

¹² ST I-II, q. 65, a. 1, ad. 3.

¹³ Ibid., ad. 4.

even just natural beatitude)? A further related question: are the *ends* of the moral virtues intermediate ends distinct from the *ultimate end* of man or are they incorporated into it? It seems to me that in either case, to point out the relation of all the virtues to the ultimate end would be an effective way of demonstrating their vital unity. Perhaps this is what he meant by showing their relation to pleasure and sorrow, but it seems that these passions are clearly not the end, but indicators of approaching it or straying from it.

Another question which I have been pondering, since it seems that one must first have the imperfect virtues first and then acquire (perhaps all at once) the full perfect set of virtues together: is there an order which is most natural in the acquisition of the imperfect virtues? For example, do human beings normally begin by gaining the imperfect virtue of temperance since these are the most basic urges, then move on to gain the imperfect virtue of fortitude which are similarly basic, but more difficult, then to the imperfect virtue of justice, before finally acquiring the imperfect virtue of prudence? But perhaps since men have these imperfect virtues by custom or by nature, the order of their acquisition would vary depending upon their natural disposition and their cultural education.

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