



# A Review of The Four Cardinal Virtue in Thomas Aquinas' Disputed Questions on Virtue

Ani, Donpedro Nnachetam<sup>1</sup>, Okeke Cajetan Nwabueze<sup>2</sup> and Ugwuoke Ugochukwu<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Guidance and Counseling, Peaceland College of Education, Enugu, Enugu Nigeria. +2348035590456, [pedroani23@yahoo.com](mailto:pedroani23@yahoo.com).

<sup>2</sup>Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Nigeria +2348039497327, [cajetanokeke@gmail.com](mailto:cajetanokeke@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Department of Theology, Dominican University, Ibadan, Nigeria. +2348063367926, [pattydeguy@yahoo.com](mailto:pattydeguy@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** In his Disputed Questions on Virtue, St. Thomas Aquinas argued that temperateness, courage, justice, and practical wisdom are necessary for human flourishing. Just as there are four faculties which contribute to our moral acts, intellect, will, appetite of desire and appetite of aversion, so there must be four virtues to keep these faculties straight - prudence for the mind, justice for the will, temperance for the urge to what is pleasant, and fortitude for the instinct away from what is painful. Part of the human good is to live in society, but living in the society needs certain relations to other people that go beyond narrow considerations of our individual perfection. The will therefore needs to be perfected by virtue, by which individuals conform their own pursuit of the rationally apprehended good to the larger good of the community, whose well-being and institutional integrity provide the context in which they can pursue their own good.

**Keywords:** prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude

## Introduction

St. Thomas Aquinas' *Disputed questions on Virtue* is really the best way into his ethics. Hence, it is the cornerstone of his ethics. In *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 61, Aquinas identified four cardinal virtues. The cardinal virtues are the four principal moral virtues. The English word cardinal comes from the Latin word 'cardo', which means 'hinge'. All other virtues hinge on these four virtues. Just as there are four faculties which contribute to our moral acts, intellect, will, appetite of desire and appetite of aversion, so there must be four virtues to keep these faculties straight -- prudence for the mind, justice for the will, temperance for the urge to what is pleasant, and fortitude for the instinct away from what is painful.

This essay seeks to establish the four cardinal virtues as a vital component of Aquinas' moral theory. This will be achieved with an adequate exposition of the four cardinal virtues by Thomas Aquinas as discussed in *Summa Theologiae* I-II. Moreover, since the doctrines of natural law and virtue have been regarded as particularly remote from each other, I can best make my case for the systematic unity of Aquinas's moral theory, and illustrate the place of virtue within it, by beginning from the theory of natural law and showing how it leads inevitably to the discussion of virtue. In the section that follows, I will discuss on the four cardinal virtues according to Thomas Aquinas. I shall do this, as I think one should in philosophy, by making apparent the dialectic of the topic and then, I shall conclude.

**From Natural law to Virtue**

An adequate conception of the Thomist account of virtue hinges on an adequate conception of the Thomist account of nature. A virtue is a habit, and a habit is a permanent and lasting disposition of the soul. To call a disposition good or bad is merely to say that it fulfils or fails to fulfil the thing in question: it either makes an individual a good specimen of the human species, or fails to. But whether a quality makes an individual a good or bad specimen depends on nature. Virtues are thus deeply rooted in nature. Hence, one who wishes to describe the role of the virtues in Aquinas' moral theory must take as his point of departure the Thomist understanding of nature.

In his *Physics*, Aristotle distinguishes two different types of things –those that exist by nature and those that are artefacts. The items in the former set exist by nature because they, unlike the items in the latter, contain something intrinsic to themselves that causes them to be what they are. Aristotle thus offers a first definition of nature: “All the things mentioned present a feature in which they differ from things which are not constituted by nature. Each of them has within itself a principle of motion and of stationariness... which seems to indicate that nature is a source or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself and not in virtue of a concomitant attribute.”<sup>[1]</sup>

To truly understand what it is for something to have a “nature”, one must understand nature not only in terms of a thing's end, but in terms of nature's ability to direct things towards their ends. Hence, nature provides both the source of motion towards the end, and the end itself. To paraphrase Aquinas, that which can be disposed towards many different ways of acting needs habits in order to be directed towards a single manner of acting.<sup>[2]</sup> Consequently, habits are measured in terms of their ability to order man towards the fulfilment of his nature, and a habit is said to be good or bad insofar as it does or does not do so. Nature, therefore, is the rule of measure of habit.<sup>[3]</sup>

**The Four Cardinal Virtues: A Synopsis**

In *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q.61. , Aquinas started the article with the question: “Whether There Are Four Cardinal Virtues?” Aquinas considers the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. These are natural virtues, to which charity adds supernatural prudence and supernatural moral virtue. Prudence is the first cardinal virtue. It is the function

of prudence to, or practical reason to determine the means to achieve the ends of the moral virtues.<sup>[4]</sup> Prudence is an intellectual virtue but concerns practical not theoretical things.

Justice is the second cardinal virtue. Since justice as a special virtue concerns one's relations to others, it is evidently the most important moral virtue.<sup>[5]</sup> Aquinas, like Aristotle, understands right as the objective right order of social relations, not the subjective right of individuals.

Fortitude, or courage, is the third cardinal virtue. As a special virtue, fortitude guards the will against withdrawing from the good prescribed by reason, because of fear of the most grievous bodily harm; namely, mortal dangers. The virtue disposes the will to stand firm against the fear and counterattack it with moderated bold action.

Temperance is the fourth cardinal virtue. As a special virtue, temperance guards the will against choosing sense desires and pleasures contrary to the good of reason, and one sins against temperance when one chooses such things.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Prudence**

“Prudence is merely certain rectitude of discretion in any actions or matters whatever”<sup>[7]</sup> According to Aquinas, prudence is an intellectual virtue. Unlike theoretical intellectual virtues, which concern necessary things, practical intellectual virtues that concern making things- prudence concerns doing things; that is, the characteristically right disposition about what one should do or not do to achieve the proper ends of human action. Prudence applies knowledge to human action, and so a prudent person needs to know both universal principles and the individual things involved in action.

Prudence involves three acts of reason: deliberating well, judging rightly, and commanding what one should do or not do. Commanding what one should do or not do, since it is closer to the end of practical reason. Prudence regards both the private good of the individual and the common good of a community, and these goods constitute specifically different ends. Prudence belongs pre-eminently to rulers, but also to subjects insofar as they share in ruling by their rational decisions to obey their rulers.

Prudence has integral, subjective and potential parts. The integral parts are the constitutive parts of perfect acts of prudence. Five of these belong to prudence as cognitive: memory, understanding, disposition to learn, keenness, and reason. Three belongs to prudence as commanding: providence, circumspection and

caution. The subjective parts are the different species of prudence. One species is the prudence by which one governs oneself, and the other is the prudence by which one governs many people. Potential acts of prudence are good deliberation, judgment about things that happen regularly and higher judgment about things regarding which one sometimes needs to depart from the general law.

### **Justice**

"Every virtue that causes the good of right and due in operation, be called justice."<sup>[8]</sup> According to Aquinas, justice is a virtue, which he defines, as "the constant and perpetual will to render to each one that which is his right".<sup>[9]</sup> Together with prudence, fortitude and temperance, it is a primary or cardinal virtue.<sup>[10]</sup> Its subject is the will<sup>[11]</sup> and its proper object is right, the proper order of interrelationships established by divine or human reason. As such, it is paradigmatically expressed in exterior actions directed toward other persons.<sup>[12]</sup>

As a virtue of the will, justice is the only cardinal virtue which directly concerns the distinctively human capacity for rational desire. Moreover, it is the cardinal virtue directly concerned with external actions, and as such, it includes most of the norms of nonmaleficence and respect for others which are central to his moral theology.<sup>[13]</sup>

In the course of setting out his overall theory of virtue, Aquinas appropriates the traditional schema of four cardinal virtues, which provides him with an organizing framework for his subsequent analysis of the moral virtues.<sup>[14]</sup> In Ia-IIae, q. 61, a. 4, he asks, "whether the four cardinal virtues are different from one another?" He replies that the answer depends on one's interpretation of the cardinal virtues. In one sense, these virtues can be considered as "general conditions of the human soul, which are found in all virtues"; understood in this way, prudence is distinct from the other three virtues, but the latter are not distinct from one another. In another sense, the cardinal virtues can be considered as particular virtues, with their own distinctive spheres of operation, and, in this sense, all four are specifically distinct from one another.

The application of this schema to justice is more complex, however, because justice is said to be a general virtue in at least two senses. First, justice may be equated with rectitude or moral goodness, and in this sense it can be called a general virtue in the same fashion as fortitude and temperance, that is, as a general condition for any act of virtue.<sup>[15]</sup> However,

Aquinas also takes the view, which he draws from Aristotle, that there is a kind of general virtue that has the common good of the community as its object.

### **Fortitude**

"...by the passions withdrawing us from following the dictate of reason, for instance, through fear of danger or toil: and then man needs to be strengthened for that which reason dictates, lest he turn back; and to this end there is Fortitude"<sup>[16]</sup>

To label four of the many virtues with the term "cardinal" indicated their primary status in relation to other virtues. In claiming that fortitude is a *virtus generalis*, Aquinas affirms that the virtues interrelate. As a general virtue, fortitude qualifies the other virtues, which, inasmuch as they are specific virtues, have their own proper object. In other words, the general virtue of fortitude involves the strength or resilience that is one of the universal qualities of every virtue. The exercise of the other virtues involves consistency, truth and stability, which are necessary conditions for every virtue or act of virtue.

According to Aquinas, this first sense of fortitude, which applies in general to all virtues, involves "the power of resisting corruption"<sup>[17]</sup> "the principle of action as a *habitus* whereby someone acts well,"<sup>[18]</sup> the firmness of mind in face of assaults of all kinds and a disposition whereby the soul is strengthened for that which is in accord with reason, against any assaults of the emotions, or the toil involved by any operations.<sup>[19]</sup> It is the common formal principle, which strengthens the mind, or the firmness of the mind "required both in doing good and in enduring evil, especially with regard to goods or evils that are difficult."<sup>[20]</sup>

Fortitude's place in the hierarchy of virtues further illuminates Aquinas' conception of this specific virtue. Even though fortitude concerns difficulty, Aquinas emphasizes the ordering due to excellence and the good, rather than difficulty per se. He says "simply speaking, that virtue is more excellent, which has the more excellent object,"<sup>[21]</sup> and "virtue essentially regards the good rather than the difficult."<sup>[22]</sup> Thus, intellectual virtues are more excellent than moral virtues (I-II 63, 3); and among moral virtues, prudence and justice are more so than the other cardinal virtues, because they concern the perfection of reason itself and establishing this good of reason in human affairs.<sup>[23]</sup>

### **Temperance**

In naming temperance a virtue, Thomas identifies it as a habit concerned with choosing both to

act and to feel in accordance with the mean, located between the extremes of excess and deficiency, where the mean is defined with reference to the rule of practical wisdom.<sup>[24]</sup> In its infused form, temperance is a gratuitously granted habit concerned with choosing in accordance with the rule of divine wisdom (Ia-IIae, q.63, a. 4). Whether acquired or infused, temperance is a deliberately cultivated, stable disposition to respond well to certain objects of experience.

Temperance is about the way in which one is drawn toward certain objects that one apprehends as good and it is about the pleasure that attends this movement. Temperance is about the pleasure of anticipation as well as the pleasure of attaining the object of desire. Temperance is about the desires and pleasures that are elicited by objects of sense experience. In Thomas' scheme, the human appetite is divided into the intellective and sense appetites. The "intellective appetite" is the power by which one tends toward (or away from) and enjoys an object that one apprehends, via a judgment of reason, to be good (or bad). The sense appetite includes the concupiscible and irascible appetites. The "concupiscible appetite" is the power through the soul is simply inclined to seek what is suitable, according to the senses, and fly from what is hurtful. Temperance is the cardinal ordering principle of this power. Hence, Temperance is the disposition that orders desires and pleasures connected to the use of food, drink, and sexual relations. Following Aristotle, Thomas holds that pleasure is a feeling that accompanies the proper functioning of the human organism.

#### **Why we need virtue.**

Virtues are dispositions by which we appropriate our specific good effectively. The other animals do not need virtues because their desires direct them spontaneously to their specific perfection. But because our specific perfection involves reason, it can only be attained through rational choice, and our desires alone do not suffice for fully rational choice.

Our appetitive inclinations are not by themselves enough to enable us to attain our characteristic human good. The first concerned the sensory desire: since on its own it can come into conflict with reason, it requires the virtues of temperateness and courage if it is to be properly disposed to the human good as discerned by reason. The second concerned the rational desire: since the will is directed to the good of the individual, it requires the virtue of justice if it is to be properly disposed to

the good of others. There is a third reason, which concerns desire in general. Aquinas explains that animals "engage in a limited number of activities" and their good is fixed and unchanging. So they need only what he calls "natural judgement" a kind of recognition of what is good that does not involve intellectual discernment and a natural appetite for their fixed and unchanging good. Human beings, by contrast, "engage in many diverse activities." Their good comes in many varieties, and what is good for human beings comprises many different things. Therefore there could not be a natural appetite in human beings for a determinate good that suited all the conditions needed for something to be good for them. Nor is natural judgment adequate for our attainment of this varied and multifaceted human good. Human beings therefore need reason, "Which is capable of comparing different things, to discover and discern their own distinctive good, determined in the light of all relevant circumstances, as it should be sought at this time and in this place". The virtue that enables reason to do this easily and reliably is practical wisdom.

#### **Conclusion**

Thus far we have seen precisely why temperateness, courage, justice, and practical wisdom are necessary for human flourishing. The four cardinal virtues are necessary for the good of the human person; part of the human good is to live in society, but life in society requires certain relations to other people that go beyond narrow considerations of our individual perfection (even if they don't actually contravene our individual perfection). The will therefore needs to be perfected by virtue, by which individuals conform their own pursuit of the rationally apprehended good to the larger good of the community, whose well-being and institutional integrity provide the context in which they can pursue their own good.

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