

Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas's Transformation of the Virtue of Courage

Section 1. Christian Purposes—Christian Content? ‘Baptismal’ transformation in the *Summa Theologiae*

In Plato's *Republic*, the moral education necessary to live the just life requires a transformation of the learner, a transformation that is both moral and intellectual. The result of the transformation, ideally, is a new understanding of power—one that subverts conventional ideas about power and one that requires nearly a lifetime of moral education to cultivate. When the eye of the soul has been turned toward the Good, Socrates teaches, we see that political power alone is powerless to satisfy our deepest longings; our ambitions for political power are destined for frustration unless they are redirected by philosophical wisdom. Moreover, wisdom teaches that worldly power is just the *appearance* of power; *real* power lies in knowledge of truth.

St. Thomas Aquinas takes his readers on a remarkably similar pedagogical journey in the ethical part of the *Summa Theologiae*,¹ but there, the transformation required is even more radical, for the learner's goal is to attain not only philosophical wisdom, but Christlikeness.

Aquinas has been called the “baptizer” of Aristotle, given his extensive appropriation of Aristotle's ethics and metaphysics in his own philosophical work. Users of this description often assume that the *Summa Theologiae* supplements an Aristotelian system of philosophy with Aquinas's own Christian theology, while leaving the underlying philosophy largely intact.² In this paper, I want to challenge that view—

particularly with respect to the ethical part of the *S.T.*—by taking a renewed look at the difference it makes for his ethics that Aquinas is a Christian theologian. His purpose in writing what he did in this work was to fulfill a specific Christian vocation to preach and teach the truths of the faith;³ my contention is that this affects the ethical content in a deeper and more transformative way than the usual baptism view might lead us to expect.

In the end, however, this emphasis on Aquinas’s moral teaching as intentionally and thoroughly Christian does not demand a rejection of the ‘baptism’ metaphor so much as a better understanding of it. Baptism, correctly understood, is the beginning of a process of regeneration—the old self dying with Christ and rising to a new life in him—a radical personal transformation through the inner working of the Holy Spirit. For Aquinas, I will argue, the moral life is essentially about sanctification: our cooperation with the inner transformation of the person accomplished through grace.⁴ This places the infused moral virtues (those given by grace, not acquired by practice)⁵ and especially the theological virtue of charity, at the heart of his ethics—which is, not coincidentally, exactly where he placed it. The treatise on charity (*caritas*) is the conceptual and structural centerpiece of the entire extensive treatment of the virtues in particular (the first 170 questions of *S.T.* II-II). It is placed after the other two theological virtues which direct us toward it, but before practical wisdom (*prudentia*), as the source from which the rest of the moral life and its virtues spring. Aquinas says repeatedly that charity is the “root and mother,” *i.e.*, form and principle, of all the other virtues⁶ and that virtue in its true and perfect form is not possible without charity.⁷

Getting the baptism metaphor right—*i.e.*, understanding the moral life as involving a transformation of the self, or in the apostle Paul’s words “putting on Christ”

(Galatians 3:27⁸)—also makes room specifically for the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in effecting the re-formation of the soul. Christ’s role includes not only the Eucharistic sacrifice but also his function as a role model and perfect example of the virtues in the Gospel accounts. In the prologue to the *tertia pars*, Aquinas says of Christ, “our Savior the Lord Jesus Christ...showed unto us *in His own Person* the way of truth...”⁹ The Holy Spirit’s role includes bestowing various “gifts” (Isaiah 11:2-3) and “fruits” (Gal. 6:22-23) that are additional graces further disposing us to the work of God in us.¹⁰ The goal of the ethical life, on this reading of the *Summa*, is nothing short of being transformed by grace to become more and more like God himself, especially as he is made known in Christ (see I-II 62, 1; Gal. 2:20, 2 Pet.1:4). The question we will be concerned with in the present essay is *how much of the larger purpose and structure of the Summa Theologiae informs the more detailed discussions of particular virtues throughout the secunda pars.*

In the rest of this paper, therefore, I offer a case study: Aquinas’s treatise on courage,¹¹ one of the four cardinal virtues.¹² Courage, or *fortitudo*—so named from the Latin *fortis*, which means ‘strong’—is the virtue most directly concerned with power and vulnerability, strength and weakness. What is the view of strength that the example of Christ teaches? And how does Aquinas’s instruction on the virtue of courage draw on his example to transform our conception of what a courageous person will be like?

The answers to these questions will show that, as much as Aquinas relies on Aristotle’s work, his Christian commitments do not merely add theological frosting to an Aristotelian philosophical cake. As illustrated by this case (among others), it is more helpful to think of them as yeast worked through dough, or as Aquinas himself did, in

terms of Christ's first miracle: changing water into wine.¹³ I will argue that the type and striking degree of transformation that this virtue undergoes is best understood in light of Aquinas's Christian understanding of the moral life. Specifically, his choice to give the act of martyrdom precedence over the paradigm of military heroism as the exemplar act of courage reflects his commitment to taking Christ—especially in his act of sacrificial love on the cross—as the model of virtue, thereby departing radically from alternative ideals of courage found in both ancient Greek and contemporary culture.

In this paper, I will first consider the relationship of charity to courage, as well as Aquinas's choice of endurance, and particularly the endurance of the martyr, as the chief act of courage. Then I will consider two objections to making martyrdom the paradigmatic act of the virtue of courage: one that challenges its precedence over the paradigm of military heroism, and a second that challenges its status as an act of virtue altogether on account of its difficulty.

Section 2. *Caritas*, Courage, and Endurance: the end, the virtue, and the act

Charity. Aquinas's treatment of courage occurs in the *secunda secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*, where he discusses the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and then the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage (or fortitude), and temperance. As background for our examination of courage, we should note one main point about charity (the love the Apostle Paul sings of in 1 Corinthians 13) from the previous treatises. As a virtue, charity's basic act is to unite human beings in friendship with God.¹⁴ As the principal and most excellent¹⁵ theological virtue, charity is the grounding motive and *sine qua non* for all the cardinal virtues in their most perfect

expression.¹⁶ Charity's only source, and therefore the infused cardinal virtue's ultimate source, is the direct work of the Holy Spirit:

Now since charity surpasses the proportion of human nature, as stated above (art. 2) it depends, not on any natural virtue, but on the sole grace of the Holy Ghost who infuses charity. Wherefore the quantity of charity depends neither on the condition of nature nor on the capacity of natural virtue, but only on the will of the Holy Ghost Who 'divides' his gifts 'according as He will.' Hence the Apostle says, "To everyone of us is given grace according to the measure of the giving of Christ" (Eph. 4:7).¹⁷

Charity's role as source, end, and commanding virtue is essential for understanding the nature of courage. In a given action, the two work together this way: the cardinal virtue functions as the "eliciting" virtue, and as such is responsible for the proximate motive and end of the act, but charity functions as the "commanding" virtue, setting the ultimate motive and end of the action.¹⁸ Hence, courage may elicit an act of enduring death when reason requires this, but the action should be characterized primarily as aiming at some good which one's death safeguards, not as aiming at death, as if this were in itself a good end. To see courage as merely requiring facing death stalwartly would be to miss its main point. Aquinas writes, "endurance of death is not praiseworthy in itself, but only insofar as it is directed to some good consisting in an act of virtue, such as faith or the love of God, so that this act of virtue, being the end, is better."¹⁹ (His mention of faith and charity as virtues to which courage is directed here is, as we will see later, not accidental.) The goodness of courage consists in the "firmness itself, whereby we do not yield to the contraries that hinder us *from achieving [a given] good.*"²⁰ Thus in its most perfect form, courage points beyond itself both to charity as its source and to charity's end as its goal.

Courage. Now we turn to courage itself. On Aquinas's account, courage belongs to the category of virtues which "remov[e] obstacles to the establishment of [the] rectitude [of reason] in human affairs."²¹ Its function is to safeguard and protect the good, not directly to realize it. Specifically, its job is to remove obstacles in our passions (or emotions) that withdraw us from what reason commands "on account of some difficulty that presents itself."²² Hence Aquinas locates it in the irascible part of the sensitive appetite.²³

As a virtue,²⁴ courage is strength of the soul, not some kind of special bodily strength.²⁵ While not privileging bodily strength over strength of soul, Aristotle's notion of bravery seems to include the former, since he rules out death at sea as an occasion of courage on the grounds that "we act like brave people on occasions *when we can use our strength*, or when it is fine to be killed; and neither of these is true when we perish on the sea."²⁶ For Aquinas, on the other hand, even in cases where the source of the difficulty may be a bodily weakness, it is the strength of the soul in enduring or resisting evil that is essential to the virtue of courage.²⁷

Beyond the general description of courage as the soul's firmness or endurance against difficulty, what distinguishes it as a specific virtue with its own particular matter is its firmness in "those things wherein it is most difficult to be firm, namely in certain grave dangers."²⁸ Its specific target is the greatest danger, that of death.²⁹ Death is considered the greatest evil, since "it does away with all bodily goods", and love of our own lives is a natural passion,³⁰ so strong that we will avoid threats to our preservation more than we will seek pleasure.³¹ Fear, as a passion of our *sensitive* appetite and thus part of our *animal* nature, is a natural response to death, which is a threat to us precisely

as *embodied* rational animals. As such, being alive is a condition of our enjoying and attaining all other goods in this life; death is the greatest evil because it occasions the loss of every other earthly good. Thus death also causes the greatest fear.³²

Nevertheless, Aquinas points out, some fears need to be faced in order to hold to the good of reason, especially when fear prompts one to do something evil (*i.e.*, something contrary to the good toward which reason has directed us). Bodily harm cannot be the ultimate deterrent to carrying out a good end, nor an excuse to pursue a bad one, because the human good includes more than just bodily well-being:

Now we should hold firmly to the good of reason against every evil whatsoever, since no bodily good is equivalent to the good of reason. Hence courage of soul must be that which binds the will firmly to the good of reason in face of the greatest evils.³³

Some goods must never be acted against or sacrificed for the sake of bodily goods, regardless of the consequences to our own physical well being (*i.e.*, you should never choose to sin in order to avoid pain—perhaps a radical thought in our age!).³⁴

Courage's subject is the dangers of death, but not any sort of life-threatening situation will do: Aquinas limits its scope to cases where death is faced or risked *for the sake of* some good a person is pursuing or upholding. For example, he rules out “the dangers of death arising out of sickness, storms at sea, attacks from robbers, and the like, [because these] do not seem to come to one through one's pursuing some good.”³⁵ Braving a battle situation when this is necessary to defend the common good, on the other hand, is the paradigmatic context of courage's operation. He includes upholding the good by fighting in “general combat” *and also* in “private [or]...singular combat”, where an individual alone puts his or her life on the line.

Facing death in this way involves fear, but again, reference to the good end is essential, for, Aquinas explains, “fear is born of love.”³⁶ He is here drawing on his moral psychology in the treatise on the passions, where he argues that

There is no other passion of the soul that does not presuppose love of some kind. The reason is that every other passion of the soul implies either movement towards something or rest in something. Now every movement...arises from some connaturality or suitability to that thing; and in this does love consist.³⁷

Put simply, fear is a derivative emotion. Our love for something makes us fearful when it is threatened, lest we lose it. The loss and fear are greatest in cases involving a good that is loved naturally by everyone, as our own bodily life is.³⁸ But in addition, love for some good can motivate risking great loss, while also acknowledging the loss *as a loss*, even if of a lesser good. So while love of the lesser good of bodily life causes fear, love of a greater good helps us face it, and even overcome it.

Of the situations where we face death to protect a greater good, Aquinas identifies the act most fully embodying courage as *martyrdom*.³⁹ Martyrdom is a case of “singular combat”, as described above. Adding the case of “single combat” is a strategic move in transforming what would otherwise look like a very Aristotelian account of this virtue so far, for it includes martyrdom in the list of acts covered by the definition, *i.e.*, acts of standing firm in situations of life-threatening person-to-person confrontation (“battle”), whereas Aristotle meant the definition to cover acts of bravery in traditional military confrontations. By not specifying the good aimed at, but merely describing it as greater than bodily life, he also leaves open a further distinction between military courage and martyrdom on the basis of their ends. We will see more clearly why Aquinas chooses

martyrdom, why this strategic move is not merely *ad hoc*, and what its significance is in a moment.

Courage not only concerns fear, but also the passion of daring. Its task is to hold fear in check, so that it does not interfere with or prevent our pursuit of a worthy good, and to “moderate” daring, so that we are properly cautious with the good of our own life. *Timor* (fear) is the passion that needs moderating in the act of avoiding or bearing with a difficulty or danger; Aquinas calls this act “endurance”. *Audacia* (daring) is the passion that needs moderating in the act of the attacking of some evil or obstacle in one's path; this act is aptly named “aggression”. Fear moves us to withdraw from dangers, and daring prompts us to strike out against them; each passion can interfere with reason's command.

Courage, Aquinas says, is principally exemplified in the restraint of fear, and here he agrees with Aristotle that “courage is more concerned to allay fear than to moderate daring.”⁴⁰ Why? The danger faced, explains Aquinas, usually serves “by its very nature to check daring, but to increase fear.”⁴¹ But if fear is the main passion courage moderates, then endurance—bearing with difficulty and standing fast against danger—must be its chief act, for “to endure follows the repression of fear” and enables us to “stand immovable in the midst of dangers.”⁴²

Endurance also earns this status as courage's “principal” act on account of its greater difficulty. Aquinas typically singles out virtues on the basis of their concern with a ‘root’ emotion (e.g. *concupiscentia* or fear) because these often coincide with areas of special difficulty or temptation. So temperance is concerned with the desire for pleasure, but particularly the pleasure of touch (and taste) since the tactile senses are the most basic

to us (as a species of animal) and have the strongest pull, given their immediate relation to self- and species- preservation. Similarly, courage concerns fear: not just any fear, but the fear related to the greatest injury—death—which, as directly opposed to that strong basic inclination to self-preservation, thus occasions the greatest difficulties for steadfastness.⁴³

Aquinas offers three reasons to support his contention that endurance is more difficult. (We will return to these in more detail later.) First, he says, endurance implies an attack upon oneself by someone stronger, while aggression usually implies considering oneself the stronger, and “it is more difficult to contend with a stronger [opponent] than with a weaker [one].”⁴⁴

The second reason is that endurance faces a present danger, whereas aggression typically involves an anticipated, and therefore future, difficulty. And it is harder to stand against a real and present danger than to face a danger that has not yet come. The best of intentions falter in the difficulties of the moment. Acts of endurance require a deeper exertion and test of commitment as the burdens they contend with are already palpable and inescapable; the discouragement and pain faced there are real, not merely foreseen. Aquinas does not deny that anticipatory fear of the unknown can be difficult to handle as well, and a measure of daring to counterbalance it is necessary. But aggressive action has a natural confidence built into its attitude; it is forward-looking and anticipatory, still hopeful and pro-active.

Lastly, Aquinas reasons that endurance implies a longer stretch of time when danger must be faced than aggression, which often involves a quick strike, and concludes that “it is more difficult to remain unmoved for a long time, than to be moved suddenly to