

St. Thomas' Distinction Between Perfect and Imperfect Virtues and its Relation to his *Triplex Gradus Virtutum*

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Many contributions to the on-going revival of virtue ethics include an analysis of St. Thomas' doctrine on the virtues. In this article I will discuss two categories into which St. Thomas uses to classify the virtues: first, the perfect and the imperfect virtues, and second, the three-fold grade of virtues (*triplex gradus virtutum*), which is a further specification of the former. These distinctions are important to understand his views on virtues as a whole, and more concretely, the question of the connection of the virtues.¹ At the same time (especially for those who are not familiar with the Thomistic studies written in Latin during the first half of this century), this paper can serve as an introduction to an important work by Fridolinus Utz, entitled *De connexionione virtutum moralium inter se secundum doctrinam S. Thomæ Aquinatis*,² from which several points included in this essay were taken.

¹ As Cayetan says, "if one errs here [the distinction between perfect and imperfect virtues], he could badly deal with the connection of the virtues" (in *II-II* q.65, a.1, n.1). The connection of the virtues, however, will not be tackled directly in this essay.

² Albertus-Magnus Verlag der Dominikaner, Vechta in Oldenburg 1937. An excerpt has been published as "De connexionione virtutum moralium ratione," in *Angelicum* 14 (1937), 560-574. English translations of these and other cited texts are my own, except for those of the *Summa theologiæ* (abbrev. S.Th.), which are taken from the Blackfriars edition, London 1984. Other cited works of St. Thomas are: *Scriptum super Sententias Magistri Petri Lombardi*, vol III, (abbrev. III Sent.) and *Quæstio disputata de virtutibus cardinalibus* (Virt. Card.).

I. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PERFECT AND IMPERFECT VIRTUES

St. Thomas enumerates four bases for the distinction between 'perfect' and 'imperfect' virtues: 1) the difference between *dispositiones* and *habitus*; 2) the role of prudence; 3) the way a person tends towards the end; and 4) the way the person and the person's acts are made good.³

*Dispositiones and Habitus*⁴

The distinction between perfect and imperfect virtues is already present in one of St. Thomas' earliest works, the Third Book of his *Commentary to the Sentences of Peter Lombard (III Sent)*. Here he discusses Aristotle's doctrine on the connection of the virtues as found in *Ethics* Book VI. First, virtue may be taken as something imperfect, according to which the seeds of virtue are present in us naturally.⁵ In this case it is said to be a virtue only in its roots (*in radice, seminalis ratio virtutis*); that is, it is a natural *dispositio* or

³ Some notes regarding the terms "perfect" and "imperfect" virtues. The Latin "*virtus perfecta*" may also be rendered in English as "complete," "full" or "finished" virtue, while "*virtus imperfecta*" may be rendered as "incomplete," "partial" or "unfinished" virtues. In the present pages the more literal "perfect" and "imperfect" virtues are preferred (and, for the sake of uniformity, they will replace the other equivalent terms used in the Blackfriar's translation of the *Summa theologiæ*).

⁴ The use of the English term "habit" should be clarified *vis-à-vis* the Latin "habitus." The Blackfriar's translation of the *Summa theologiæ* renders the Latin "habitus" as "disposition" and the Latin "dispositio" as "state," explaining in the introduction that this corresponds better to the current usage of the English language. R. Cessario, in *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana 1991), after citing an author who gives reasons for translating the Latin "habitus" as "disposition," states that "it seems preferable simply to accept the original Latin term habitus as serviceable for English usage" (p. 167, footnote 4). The translator of S. Pinckærs' *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1995) likewise notes that "the English word habit [...] unfortunately carries the connotations of automatic and repetitious behavior" (p. 225, footnote 3), and uses the Latin form "habitus" instead. In the present pages the Latin *habitus* and *dispositio* (in italics) are retained to lessen the chances for confusion and to make reference to the original Latin easier.

⁵ *III Sent. d. 36, a. 1*: "secundum esse ipsius imperfectum, secundum quod seminaria virtutum insunt nobis a natura, et sic virtus dicitur quædam naturalis inclinatio ad virtutis actum."

inclination towards an act of virtue.⁶ Secondly, virtue may be understood as something perfect, which is acquired by a habituation (*assuefactione*); in this case it receives the name of political virtue.⁷ It is more than a simply natural inclination, for it inclines a person to a good work by a habituation.

This distinction is also found in St. Thomas' general treatment of habitus and virtues in the *Summa Theologiae* (*S. Th.*) I-II q. 49, a. 2 (*Utrum habitus sit determinata species qualitatis*). In the response to the third objection, he says that a *dispositio* differs from a *habitus* because the former is easily movable (*facile mobilis*), while the latter is not easily movable (*difficile mobilis*).

Dispositio and habitus are two specific terms which classify the entities to which a single generic term applies. Those qualities of the first type, such as sickness and health, which are intrinsically likely to be easily lost, because they arise from changeable causes, are called *dispositiones*; those qualities, such as knowledge and virtue, which are intrinsically unlikely to be easily lost, because they arise from unchangeable causes, are called *habitus*. [...]

In order to prove this distinction he [Aristotle] refers to Greek usage. According to a Greek idiom, qualities which were intrinsically impermanent (*facile mobile*) were called by the noun corresponding to *habitus* if through some accidental circumstances they became quasi-permanent. The converse held of qualities which were intrinsically quasi-permanent: a man who possessed knowledge incompletely, so as to be in danger of losing it, was said not to have knowledge but 'to be in a state close to knowledge' [*disponi ad scientiam*]. And so the word which corresponds to *habitus* connoted permanence, but not the word which corresponds to *dispositio*.⁸

⁶ Cf. F. Utz, *De connexione virtutum moralium inter se secundum doctrinam S. Thomæ Aquinatis*, 97.

⁷ *III Sent. d. 36, a. 1*: "Secundum esse perfectum quod ex assuefactione recipit, et sic accipit nomen politicæ virtutis."

⁸ *S. Th. I-II q. 49, a.2, ad 3*: "Possunt distingui sicut diversæ species unius generis subalterni: ut dicantur dispositiones illæ qualitates primæ speciei, quibus convenit secundum propriam rationem ut de facili amittantur, quia habent causas transmutabiles, ut ægritudo et sanitas; habitus vero dicuntur illæ qualitates quæ secundum suam rationem habent quod non de facili transmutentur, quia habent causas

We must, however, take into account that while a *dispositio* is always an imperfect virtue, a *habitus* is not always a perfect virtue. For a virtue to be perfect, the perfection should be present both in the virtue's own essence (that is, the virtue should include everything its definition requires), and in its *actual condition in the subject* possessing the virtue (that is, it should exist in the person as a true *habitus*); otherwise, it is an imperfect virtue.⁹ An example of imperfection in the virtue's essence is the case of a person who is temperate with wine, but not with cocaine. This person's temperance does not extend to all objects. An example of imperfection in the virtue's *actual condition in the subject* is the case of a person who usually treats others only as their merits deserve, but only occasionally makes extraordinary acts of generosity. The nature of the person's virtue of liberality is complete insofar as he or she gives beyond the required measure, but the person has no firm hold on this virtue, given that the pattern is ephemeral and episodic.¹⁰

immobiles, sicut scientiæ et virtutes. [...] "Ad huius distinctionis probationem inducit [Aristoteles] (*Categ.* c.6 n.4; BK 8b27) communem loquendi consuetudinem, secundum quam qualitates quæ secundum rationem suam sunt facile mobiles, si ex aliquo accidenti difficile mobiles reddantur, habitus dicuntur: et e converso est de qualitatibus quæ secundum suam rationem sunt difficile mobiles; nam si aliquis imperfecte habeat scientiam, ut de facili possit ipsam amittere, magis dicitur disponi ad scientiam quam scientiam habere. Ex quo patet quod nomen habitus diuturnitatem quandam importat; non autem nomen dispositionis."

The Blackfriars' translation renders "facile" and "difficile mobile" as "impermanent" and "quasi-permanent." In this study the equivalent terms "easily" and "not easily movable" are preferred.

⁹ Cf. R. Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 141-143. He adds in footnote 31: "Aquinas proposed two different standards to measure virtue: extension and intensity. Extension refers to the breadth or scope of the virtue's control, viz., what kind of goods the virtue promotes or evils it restrains; according to extension, then, 'a virtue's being greater or less is based on the things which it encompasses' (*Ia-IIæ* q. 66, a.1 [*Utrum virtus possit esse maior vel minor*]). Intensity, on the other hand, refers to the grasp a particular individual has on virtue. Of course, one distinguishes *habitus* from a disposition on the basis that the former is firmly rooted in the one who possesses it, but this does not exclude that even a fully formed virtue can be more or less established in different people."

¹⁰ These examples are taken from R. Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 142-143. For the distinction between *habitus* and *dispositiones*, see especially the article of J. Ramírez, "Doctrina S. Thomæ Aquinatis de distinctione inter habitum et dispositionem," in *Studia Anselmiana* VII-VIII (1938): 121-142.

Regulation by Prudence

A second basis for the distinction between imperfect and perfect virtue is the regulation which the virtue of prudence exercises over the latter. According to St. Thomas, *imperfect virtue* is a natural inclination towards that which is virtuous, while *perfect virtue* is an inclination towards the same through the regulation of prudence.¹¹

Likewise, he considers natural inclination to be merely the beginning (*inchoatio*) of virtue, and not yet a perfect virtue:

The natural inclination to the good of virtue is a kind of beginning of virtue, but is not perfect virtue. In fact, the stronger the inclination is, the more perilous can it prove to be, unless it be joined by right reason, which corrects the choice of fitting means towards the due end — just as, if a running horse be blind, the faster it runs more heavily will it fall, and the more grievously be hurt. Consequently, although moral virtue is not right reason in the way Socrates held it was (*Ethics* VI, 13. 1144b19), yet not only is it *according to right reason*, as giving man a bent to that which is according to right reason, as the Platonics maintained, but it also needs to be *joined with right reason*, as Aristotle declares (*Ethics* VI, 13. 1144b21).¹²

He presents the same idea in *S. Th.* I-II q. 65, a. 1, c., this time in relation to the connection of the virtues among themselves:

An imperfect moral virtue, temperance or courage for instance, is no more than a leaning by nature or by habituation towards

¹¹ *III Sent.* d. 26, a. 1, c.: "Inclinatio naturalis ad ea, quæ virtutis sunt, quanto major est, tanto est magis noxia, nisi rationis discretio adhibeatur; sicut cæcus quanto fortius currit, tanto magis offenditur. Et ideo ad hoc quod virtus moralis perficiatur, oportet quod a prudentia dirigatur. Unde prudentia in definitione moralis virtutis ponitur."

¹² *S. Th.* I-II q. 58, a. 4, ad 3: "Naturalis inclinatio ad bonum virtutis est quædam inchoatio virtutis, non autem virtus perfecta. Huiusmodi enim inclinatio quanto est fortior, tanto potest esse periculosior, nisi recta ratio adiungatur, per quam fiat recta electio eorum, quæ conveniunt ad debitam finem, sicut equus currens, si sit cæcus, tanto fortius impingit et læditur, quanto fortius currit. Et ideo, etsi virtus moralis non sit ratio recta, ut Socrates dicebat, non tamen solum est secundum rationem rectam, ut Platonici posuerunt, sed etiam oportet, quod sit cum ratione recta, ut Aristoteles dicit in VI Eth."

a type of acting that is in fact good. Moral virtues taken in this way are not connected, since we find men who by natural temperament or by some sort of routine are prompt in doing deeds of liberality, but not of chastity.¹³

St. Thomas defines moral virtue as an "elective *habitus*, that is, the *habitus* which makes a good choice."¹⁴ It is prudence which makes a virtue a moral virtue, for prudence the virtue makes "the right election of that which leads to the correct end."¹⁵ Prudence is included in the essence of moral virtue, and for this reason, "there can be no moral virtue without prudence."¹⁶ F. Utz explains this clearly: "Prudence, which gives formal constitution (*constitutivum formale*) to the moral virtue, is essentially conceived (*essentialiter imbibitur*) in it. And therefore imperfect virtue, which is said to lack prudence, is understood by St. Thomas as lacking the essential reason of moral virtue."¹⁷

The Way One Tends Towards the Good

A third distinction between perfect and imperfect virtue can be found in *S. Th.* I-II q. 65, a. 1 (*Utrum virtutes morales sint ad invicem connexæ*). In the body of the article, St. Thomas affirms that an imperfect virtue tends towards the good by nature or by habituation (*a natura sive ex assuetudine*), while a perfect virtue tends towards the good in a good way (*bene*).

¹³ "Imperfecta quidem moralis virtus, ut temperantia vel fortitudo, nihil aliud est quam aliqua inclinatio in nobis existens ad opus aliquod de genere bonorum faciendum, sive talis inclinatio sit in nobis a natura sive ex assuetudine. Et hoc modo accipiendo, virtutes morales non sunt connexæ: videmus enim aliquem ex naturali complexione, vel ex aliqua consuetudine esse promptum ad opera liberalitatis, qui tamen non est promptus ad opera castitatis".

¹⁴ *S. Th.* I-II q. 58, a. 4, c.: "Habitus electivus, id est faciens bonam electionem."

¹⁵ *S. Th.* I-II q. 58, a. 4, ad 3: "Recta electio eorum, quæ conveniunt ad debitum finem."

¹⁶ *S. Th.* I-II q. 58, a. 4: "Virtus moralis sine prudentia esse non potest."

¹⁷ F. Utz, *De connexione virtutum moralium inter se*, 105: "Unde prudentia, tribuens virtuti morali constitutivum formale, essentialiter imbibitur in ipsa. Et ideo virtus imperfecta, quæ dicitur prudentia carere, a St. Thoma accipitur ut deficiens in essentiali ratione virtutis moralis".

An imperfect moral virtue, temperance or courage for instance, is no more than a leaning by nature or by habituation towards a type of acting that is in fact good. [...] A perfect moral virtue, however, is a habit tending towards a good deed well done.¹⁸

Thus, the tendency towards a good *a natura sive ex assuetudine* corresponds to the tendency towards that good without the regulation of prudence. On the other hand, the tendency towards a good *bene* corresponds to the tendency towards that good through prudence.¹⁹ Since prudence, as already mentioned, is included in the essence of perfect moral virtue, it also follows that *bene* indicates not only the state of the moral virtue, but also its essential difference from natural inclination. In fact, a natural inclination does not always tend towards the good in a good way, since it can also be converted into an evil through a strong opposition of forces, "as in the case of a blind man: the faster he runs, the more he will injure himself."²⁰ A perfect moral virtue, on the other hand, cannot be put to bad use.²¹

Furthermore, in *S. Th.* I-II, q. 65, a. 4 (*Utrum fides et spes possint esse sine caritate*), St. Thomas defends the position that a good work which is not done well is not a work of perfect virtue, since it is not according to right choice. The reason is because it lacks prudence: "But it will not be the work of perfect virtue unless he do it well, that is by choosing rightly, which is accomplished through prudence."²²

¹⁸ "Imperfecta quidem moralis virtus, ut temperantia vel fortitudo, nihil aliud est quam aliqua inclinatio in nobis existens ad opus aliquod de genere onorum faciendum, sive talis inclinatio sit in nobis a natura sive ex assuetudine. ... Perfecta autem virtus moralis est habitus inclinans in bonum opus bene agendum".

¹⁹ See especially *S. Th.* I-II q. 65, a. 1, ad 1.

²⁰ *III Sent.* d. 36, a. 1: "Sicut cæcus quando fortius currit, tanto magis offenditur."

²¹ Cf. *S. Th.* I-II q. 55, a. 4, where St. Thomas explains St. Augustin's definition of virtue: "Virtus est bona qualitas mentis, qua recte vivitur, qua nullus male utitur, quam Deus in nobis sine nobis operatur."

²² *S. Th.* I-II q. 65, a. 4, c.: "... non erit opus perfectæ virtutis, nisi hoc bene faciat, idest, secundum electionem rectam, quod est per prudentiam. Et ideo iustitia sine prudentia non potest esse virtus perfecta."

An objection arises in this same question: faith without charity tends towards the good but not in a good way, in the same way that moral virtue without prudence tends towards good but not in a good way; however, St. Thomas considers faith without charity as a true virtue in other parts of his writings. Is there a contradiction here?

Therefore, to tend towards the good *bene*, which is proper of perfect virtue, is the same as tending towards it according to prudence, which is a prerequisite for moral virtue.

The Way of Becoming "Good"

The fourth basis for St. Thomas' distinction between perfect and imperfect virtue considered in this article is found in *Virt. Card.* a. 2.²³ Although this fourth basis is related to the first three, here he highlights a new aspect by examining how virtues make a person good and render a person's work good.²⁴ "It is perfect virtue which in a perfect way renders a man's work good, and makes man himself good. On the other hand, it is imperfect virtue which renders a man and his work good not *simpliciter*, but according to something."²⁵ St. Thomas gives no further explanation for this here. He focuses instead on the further division of perfect virtues, as will be seen next section of our article.²⁶

II. THE THREE-FOLD GRADE OF VIRTUES

St. Thomas says that there are two measures (*regulæ*) by which human acts reach the good *simpliciter*: right reason (proper to human

No, because he does not consider these two relationships (that is, between moral virtue and prudence on the one hand, and between faith and charity on the other) in the same way. He states that in both cases the virtue is weakened by a defect in a higher principle (prudence and charity, respectively), but they do not belong to the same order.

²³ He begins his response to the objections by saying that, "we can talk about virtues in two ways: as perfect virtues and as imperfect virtues."

²⁴ Cf. *De virt. card.* a. 2, c.: "Ad cuius evidentiam sciendum est, quod cum virtus sit quæ hominem bonum facit, et opus eius bonum reddit, [...]."

²⁵ Cf. *De virt. card.* a. 2, c.: "Illa est virtus perfecta quæ perfecte opus hominis bonum reddit, et ipsum bonum facit; illa autem est imperfecta, quæ hominem et opus eius reddit bonum non simpliciter, sed quantum ad aliquid."

²⁶ St. Thomas' discussion on how virtues make their possessor as well as his or her work good is also found in the corpus of *S. Th.* I-II q. 56, a. 3 (*Utrum intellectus possit esse subiectum virtutis*) and of II-II q. 47, a. 4 (*Utrum prudentia sit virtus*). He takes this concept from Aristotle, *Ethics* Book 2 n. 2 (BK 1106a15), who gives as an analogy the fact that the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its function good (since it is through the excellence of the eye that we see well).

nature), and God himself (the transcendent measure).²⁷ To attain these measures, the person needs prudence and charity, respectively.²⁸ This leads St. Thomas to come up with a three-fold grade of virtues: totally imperfect, *aliquaqualiter* (that is, in a certain way) perfect, and *simpliciter* perfect.

Therefore there is a threefold grade of virtues:

There are certain virtues which are totally imperfect, which exist without prudence, not being concerned with right reason, like inclinations towards some work of virtue which some persons have from birth.

The second grade of virtues is of those which are concerned with right reason, but which do not reach God himself through charity. These are in a certain way perfect when compared with the human good. But they are not perfect *simpliciter*, because they do not reach the first measure, which is the last end. [...] Thus, they also lack the true reason of virtue, in the same way that moral inclinations without prudence lack the true reason of virtue.

The third grade is that of virtues which are *simpliciter* perfect, which exist together with charity. These virtues make the act of man good *simpliciter*, reaching as it were the last end.²⁹

²⁷ *De virt. card.* a. 2, c.: "Bonum autem simpliciter in actibus humanis invenitur per hoc quod pertingitur ad regulam humanorum actuum; quæ quidem est una quasi homogenea et propria homini, scilicet ratio recta, alia autem est sicut prima mensura transcendens, quod est Deus."

²⁸ *De virt. card.* a. 2, c.: "Ad rationem autem rectam attingit homo per prudentiam, quæ est recta ratio agibilium, [...]. Ad Deum autem attingit homo per caritatem..."

²⁹ *De virt. card.* a. 2, c.: "Sic igitur est triplex gradus virtutum.

"Sunt enim quædam virtutes omnino imperfectæ, quæ sine prudentia existunt, non attingentes rationem rectam, sicut sunt inclinationes quas aliqui habent ad aliqua virtutum opera etiam ab ipsa nativitate.

"Secundus autem gradus virtutum est illarum quæ attingunt rationem rectam, non tamen attingunt ad ipsum Deum per caritatem. Hæ quidem aliquaqualiter sunt perfectæ per comparisonem ad bonum humanum, non tamen sunt simpliciter perfectæ, quia non attingunt ad primam regulam, quæ est ultimus finis. [...] Unde et deficiunt a vera ratione virtutis; sicut et morales inclinationes absque prudentia deficiunt a vera ratione virtutis.

"Tertius gradus est virtutum simpliciter perfectarum, quæ sunt simul cum caritate; hæ enim virtutes faciunt actum hominis simpliciter bonum, quasi attingentem usque ad ultimum finem."

How does this three-fold grade of virtues correspond to the earlier division into perfect and imperfect virtues? It is easy enough to see that totally imperfect virtues according to this three-fold classification correspond exactly to the imperfect virtues discussed above. Since they are bereft of prudence, they are not true virtues.³⁰

Perfect virtues on the other hand may either be *aliqua-liter* perfect or *simpliciter* perfect. *Aliqua-liter* perfect virtues are perfect in the sense that they exist with prudence, and therefore they can attain a correct end, which in this case is a human good.³¹ But still they are "imperfect" since they cannot reach the ultimate end, who is God himself. Only the *simpliciter* perfect virtues can do so, but through Charity.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning of our study, a working knowledge of the different types of virtues in St. Thomas' writings is important to understand his views on virtues as a whole. A concrete question where such knowledge is vital is that of the connection of the virtues. Since this question needs an extensive examination (which cannot be done now), it will suffice to mention that for St. Thomas, imperfect virtues are not connected among themselves, *aliqua-liter* perfect virtues are connected through the virtue of Prudence, and *simpliciter* perfect virtues, through Prudence and Charity. □

³⁰ Cf. *S. Th.* I-II q. 58, a. 4: "Virtus moralis sine prudentia esse non potest."

³¹ Cf. *S. Th.* I-II q. 58, a. 4, ad 3: "Recta electio eorum, quæ conveniunt ad debitum finem."