

Aquinas, Thomas. *Treatise on the Virtues*. Translated by John A. Oesterle. Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1966

Any study of the history of philosophy will no doubt encounter St. Thomas Aquinas. In *Treatise on the Virtues* Aquinas takes up the following questions regarding ethics: Where do virtues come from? What are virtues? Are there different kinds of virtues? The purpose of this paper is to summarize the main points in the book, evaluate some of the thoughts and structure, and finally offer some commentary on the benefit of this book for contemporary Christians.

### **Summary**

*Treatise on the Virtues* is a portion of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and contains Questions 49-67 of Part I-II (xvi) of the larger work. In particular it covers his discussion on habits and more specifically human habits called virtues. This book is divided up by into sections which answer specific questions. Each of these questions has multiple articles or sub-questions designed to help answer the main section question. Aquinas then tackles each article with a specific style. First, he poses the article's question and provides an answer that may be popular or at least plausible to answer. He then proceeds to give support for that answer in the form of numbered points, normally three but ranging up to six of them. In these points he quotes scripture, Aristotle, Augustine, and other prominent philosophers to justify the answer that was postulated. These justifying points sometimes come across in a syllogistic manor having two points and a conclusion. Then after these points that reinforce the original answer Aquinas give

a section called “on the contrary” in which he give his answer to the question. This is followed by a “response” where he expounds on that answer to answer the original question. He relies on Scripture, previous questions answered, other philosophers as well as his own thoughts to give his response. He then continues to the last part of the article by responding to each of the reinforcing points given for the original answer discussing why they are wrong or how they should be interpreted.

This book moves through the *Summa*'s Questions 49-67. Questions 49-54 deal with Habits. In particular he discusses what habits are, the subject of habits, the cause of habits, increase and diminishing of habits, and distinction of habits (vii-viii). Questions 55-67 deal with virtues and what virtues are, their subject, classifications (Moral and Intellect), relation to passions, cardinal and theological virtues, the cause and mean of virtues, how virtues relate to each other, and the duration of virtues (vii-xii).

Regarding habits Aquinas comes to the conclusion that they are qualities and they are difficult to change unlike dispositions that change more easily (2, 4). He goes on to argue that virtues are habits (50). Referring to Aristotle, Aquinas says “the virtue of anything is determined by the maximum of which its power is capable. Now the maximum of any power must be what is good, for all evil implies a defect” to show that they are not only habits but good habits (53-54).

To explain what the subject of a habit is Aquinas appeals again to Aristotle and says that the subject of the virtues is the soul or will (57). To further divide and explain virtues he goes on to explain that virtue is of two different kinds: moral and intellectual (84). While these categories are distinct they do rely upon each other in some ways. All intellectual virtues can exist without moral virtues except prudence (87). So that there is

no confusion about moral virtues Aquinas goes on to explain the relation of moral virtues and passions to conclude that moral virtues are not passions although they are not mutually exclusive (89, 91).

The cardinal values are moral virtues and there are four of them (108-111). Aquinas identifies these cardinal virtues as prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude<sup>1</sup> (110). After discussing the mean, connection, and equality of the virtues Aquinas finishes with the duration of virtues after death and that they do continue after death (160).

### **Critical Evaluation**

This book is different than most contemporary books because it is an excerpt from a larger work. That leaves the reader without some important background information or a clear overall thesis of the project.<sup>2</sup> If this book were structured in any other way it would be difficult to understand. However, the very structured systematic approach to this book makes it possible but not always easy to be followed. Each question acts as its own sub-thesis to the overall work and each one of those sub-thesis are answered and explained.

To add to the difficulty of reading there were several times that Aquinas referenced things that he already discussed but without the helpful footnotes of the translator the meaning can be lost. An example of this difficulty is found in Question 49

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<sup>1</sup> These differ slightly from lecture which listed justice, courage, wisdom, and temperance although the meaning and intent are the same.

<sup>2</sup> The translator does offer good commentary of the structure of the over all *Summa*; however, his explanation of Aquinas' thesis of the larger work is weak. Thus, the reader of this portion is left without a clear understanding of Aquinas' overall thesis.

Article 2. Aquinas asks “Is habit a distinct species of quality” (3)? He then goes on to reference four different species of qualities that without footnotes make this section difficult to understand. To make this easier to read it would have been better for Aquinas to add in better descriptions of what the four species are.

After reading this book the reader is left not with a sense that they have digested a deep theological book as the name of the greater work implies but with the sense of a strict philosophical work. Aquinas seems to approach this topic with more interest in the philosophical aspects of virtues and less of an emphasis on theological ones. These no doubt come from his place and setting in history as well as his interests and studies. This sense of philosophy and not theology come from several places. First Aquinas places scripture on the same authoritative level as other philosophical works, of which some of the authors were not Christian. Second, when dealing with scripture it is not done in an exegetical way that explains the full meaning of the area. This leads to the possibility of scripture being used out of context but more importantly the scriptures not being used as ground for an argument while pointing to the gospel. It is important to note that Aquinas did not do this in every question but enough that it is dangerous.

While this book is concerned with reason and trying to systematically think through virtues, it does use more scripture references than Augustine’s *On Freedom of the Will*.<sup>3</sup> Aquinas does a try to use scripture as a reference and defense of virtues. The main concern comes from how scripture is used. Aquinas uses scripture to explain things with the same authority of the writings of Aristotle, Augustine, and others. One

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<sup>3</sup> Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *On Free Choice of the Will* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993).

example of this is in Question 56 Article 4 (“Is justice the principle moral virtue?”) in which Aquinas quotes James 1:4 and concludes that “patience is greater than justice” (154). But then he quotes Aristotle (“The Philosopher” in the text) as saying “justice is the greatest of virtues” and counts this as authoritative (154). While it is not convincing that James 1:4 answers the question about justice being the principle moral virtues this is not the best way to treat scripture from the standpoint of a Christian. The scripture now is seen to be trumped by Aristotle undergirding its authority.

His response section to the James 1:4 defense is based on reason and not sound examining of scripture. It would have better from a theological standpoint to emphasize that others may be misusing scripture up front and then explaining James 1:4 in light of faith. His response and explanation of James 1:4 is lacking in explanation of the Biblical text, it only uses reason (155-156). All these things point to Aquinas’ giving the impression that Scripture and other writings hold the same weight. Practices like these, while they may be unintentional, do not promote the gospel. Christians in all fields of study should strive to promote the gospel in their work, and I am afraid that in this particular book Aquinas does not do that although he may have had that intention.

Another example of these two major problems occur in Question 58 Article 2 after the question and answer, in the first defense of the answer Aquinas quotes Romans 14:23 and Ephesians 2:8 then concludes “Therefore no virtue can be acquired in us by our actins being habituated” (126). In his “On the Contrary” remarks he quotes Dionysius implying that it is more important and authoritative than the Scriptures. He does go on to say in his “Reply” of the first defense to say that the original argument is good but only in regards to divine law’s ordering of man to good (127). This is not

helpful for the Christian. This example once again implies that Scripture is not authoritative even though he says in his reply that it is sound in some way. It would be much better for the text to be dealt with and not just used as a philosophical tool.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion this book and its larger work has shown to be an important work in philosophical study and in particular the study of ethics. However, I do not think that it is a book that is important for all Christians to read. It does have some worth for seminary students who are lead through a class with a wise professor who understands the history of philosophy and how it relates to contemporary church life. In the wrong hands this book could teach some very detrimental teachings because of the implied unauthoritative nature of scripture and the non-exegetical explanations of scripture. On top of that it is a difficult book to read and follow and most Christians may not persevere. Other books and Bible studies would be more beneficial Christian study.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo. *On Free Choice of the Will*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993.