

FIRST PART OF THE SECOND PART, QUESTION 55

Of the Virtues, As to Their Essence (In Four Articles)

We come now to the consideration of habits specifically. And since habits, as we have said (q. 54, a. 3), are divided into good and bad, we must speak in the first place of good habits, which are virtues, and of other matters connected with them, namely the Gifts, Beatitudes and Fruits; in the second place, of bad habits, namely of vices and sins. Now five things must be considered about virtues: (1) the essence of virtue; (2) its subject; (3) the division of virtue; (4) the cause of virtue; (5) certain properties of virtue.

Under the first head, there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether human virtue is a habit?
- (2) Whether it is an operative habit?
- (3) Whether it is a good habit?
- (4) Of the definition of virtue.

Whether human virtue is a habit?

Ia IIae q. 55 a. 1

Objection 1. It would seem that human virtue is not a habit: For virtue is “the limit of power” (De Coelo i, text. 116). But the limit of anything is reducible to the genus of that of which it is the limit; as a point is reducible to the genus of line. Therefore virtue is reducible to the genus of power, and not to the genus of habit.

Objection 2. Further, Augustine says (De Lib. Arb. ii)* that “virtue is good use of free-will.” But use of free-will is an act. Therefore virtue is not a habit, but an act.

Objection 3. Further, we do not merit by our habits, but by our actions: otherwise a man would merit continually, even while asleep. But we do merit by our virtues. Therefore virtues are not habits, but acts.

Objection 4. Further, Augustine says (De Moribus Eccl. xv) that “virtue is the order of love,” and (QQ. lxxxiii, qu. 30) that “the ordering which is called virtue consists in enjoying what we ought to enjoy, and using what we ought to use.” Now order, or ordering, denominates either an action or a relation. Therefore virtue is not a habit, but an action or a relation.

Objection 5. Further, just as there are human virtues, so are there natural virtues. But natural virtues are not habits, but powers. Neither therefore are human virtues habits.

On the contrary, The Philosopher says (Categor. vi) that science and virtue are habits.

I answer that, Virtue denotes a certain perfection of a power. Now a thing’s perfection is considered chiefly in regard to its end. But the end of power is act. Wherefore power is said to be perfect, according as it is determinate to its act.

Now there are some powers which of themselves are determinate to their acts; for instance, the active natural powers. And therefore these natural powers are in themselves called virtues. But the rational powers, which are

proper to man, are not determinate to one particular action, but are inclined indifferently to many: and they are determinate to acts by means of habits, as is clear from what we have said above (q. 49, a. 4). Therefore human virtues are habits.

Reply to Objection 1. Sometimes we give the name of a virtue to that to which the virtue is directed, namely, either to its object, or to its act: for instance, we give the name Faith, to that which we believe, or to the act of believing, as also to the habit by which we believe. When therefore we say that “virtue is the limit of power,” virtue is taken for the object of virtue. For the furthest point to which a power can reach, is said to be its virtue; for instance, if a man can carry a hundredweight and not more, his virtue[†] is put at a hundredweight, and not at sixty. But the objection takes virtue as being essentially the limit of power.

Reply to Objection 2. Good use of free-will is said to be a virtue, in the same sense as above (ad 1); that is to say, because it is that to which virtue is directed as to its proper act. For the act of virtue is nothing else than the good use of free-will.

Reply to Objection 3. We are said to merit by something in two ways. First, as by merit itself, just as we are said to run by running; and thus we merit by acts. Secondly, we are said to merit by something as by the principle whereby we merit, as we are said to run by the motive power; and thus are we said to merit by virtues and habits.

Reply to Objection 4. When we say that virtue is the order or ordering of love, we refer to the end to which virtue is ordered: because in us love is set in order by virtue.

Reply to Objection 5. Natural powers are of themselves determinate to one act: not so the rational powers. And so there is no comparison, as we have said.

* Retract. ix; cf. De Lib. Arb. ii, 19 † In English we should say ‘strength,’ which is the original signification of the Latin ‘virtus’: thus we speak of an engine being so many horse-power, to indicate its ‘strength’

Objection 1. It would seem that it is not essential to human virtue to be an operative habit. For Tully says (*Tuscul. iv*) that as health and beauty belong to the body, so virtue belongs to the soul. But health and beauty are not operative habits. Therefore neither is virtue.

Objection 2. Further, in natural things we find virtue not only in reference to act, but also in reference to being: as is clear from the Philosopher (*De Coelo i*), since some have a virtue to be always, while some have a virtue to be not always, but at some definite time. Now as natural virtue is in natural things, so is human virtue in rational beings. Therefore also human virtue is referred not only to act, but also to being.

Objection 3. Further, the Philosopher says (*Phys. vii, text. 17*) that virtue “is the disposition of a perfect thing to that which is best.” Now the best thing to which man needs to be disposed by virtue is God Himself, as Augustine proves (*De Moribus Eccl. 3,6, 14*) to Whom the soul is disposed by being made like to Him. Therefore it seems that virtue is a quality of the soul in reference to God, likening it, as it were, to Him; and not in reference to operation. It is not, therefore, an operative habit.

On the contrary, The Philosopher (*Ethic. ii, 6*) says that “virtue of a thing is that which makes its work good.”

I answer that, Virtue, from the very nature of the word, implies some perfection of power, as we have said above (a. 1). Wherefore, since power* is of two kinds, namely, power in reference to being, and power in reference to act; the perfection of each of these is called virtue. But power in reference to being is on the part of matter, which is potential being, whereas power in reference to act, is on the part of the form, which is the principle of action, since everything acts in so far as it

is in act.

Now man is so constituted that the body holds the place of matter, the soul that of form. The body, indeed, man has in common with other animals; and the same is to be said of the forces which are common to the soul and body: and only those forces which are proper to the soul, namely, the rational forces, belong to man alone. And therefore, human virtue, of which we are speaking now, cannot belong to the body, but belongs only to that which is proper to the soul. Wherefore human virtue does not imply reference to being, but rather to act. Consequently it is essential to human virtue to be an operative habit.

Reply to Objection 1. Mode of action follows on the disposition of the agent: for such as a thing is, such is its act. And therefore, since virtue is the principle of some kind of operation, there must needs pre-exist in the operator in respect of virtue some corresponding disposition. Now virtue causes an ordered operation. Therefore virtue itself is an ordered disposition of the soul, in so far as, to wit, the powers of the soul are in some way ordered to one another, and to that which is outside. Hence virtue, inasmuch as it is a suitable disposition of the soul, is like health and beauty, which are suitable dispositions of the body. But this does not hinder virtue from being a principle of operation.

Reply to Objection 2. Virtue which is referred to being is not proper to man; but only that virtue which is referred to works of reason, which are proper to man.

Reply to Objection 3. As God’s substance is His act, the highest likeness of man to God is in respect of some operation. Wherefore, as we have said above (q. 3, a. 2), happiness or bliss by which man is made most perfectly conformed to God, and which is the end of human life, consists in an operation.

Objection 1. It would seem that it is not essential to virtue that it should be a good habit. For sin is always taken in a bad sense. But there is a virtue even of sin; according to 1 Cor. 15:56: “The virtue [Douay: ‘strength’] of sin is the Law.” Therefore virtue is not always a good habit.

Objection 2. Further, Virtue corresponds to power. But power is not only referred to good, but also to evil: according to Is. 5: “Woe to you that are mighty to drink wine, and stout men at drunkenness.” Therefore virtue also is referred to good and evil.

Objection 3. Further, according to the Apostle (2 Cor. 12:9): “Virtue [Douay: ‘power’] is made perfect in infirmity.” But infirmity is an evil. Therefore virtue is referred not only to good, but also to evil.

On the contrary, Augustine says (*De Moribus Eccl. vi*): “No one can doubt that virtue makes the soul exceeding good”: and the Philosopher says (*Ethic. ii, 6*): “Virtue is that which makes its possessor good, and his work good likewise.”

I answer that, As we have said above (a. 1), virtue implies a perfection of power: wherefore the virtue of a thing is fixed by the limit of its power (*De Coelo i*). Now the limit of any power must needs be good: for all evil implies defect; wherefore Dionysius says (*Div. Hom. ii*) that every evil is a weakness. And for this reason the virtue of a thing must be regarded in reference to good. Therefore human virtue which is an operative habit, is a good habit, productive of good works.

Reply to Objection 1. Just as bad things are said

* The one Latin word ‘potentia’ is rendered ‘potentiality’ in the first case, and ‘power’ in the second

metaphorically to be perfect, so are they said to be good: for we speak of a perfect thief or robber; and of a good thief or robber, as the Philosopher explains (Metaph. v, text. 21). In this way therefore virtue is applied to evil things: so that the “virtue” of sin is said to be law, in so far as occasionally sin is aggravated through the law, so as to attain to the limit of its possibility.

Reply to Objection 2. The evil of drunkenness and excessive drink, consists in a falling away from the order of reason. Now it happens that, together with this falling away from reason, some lower power is perfect in reference to that which belongs to its own kind, even

in direct opposition to reason, or with some falling away therefrom. But the perfection of that power, since it is compatible with a falling away from reason, cannot be called a human virtue.

Reply to Objection 3. Reason is shown to be so much the more perfect, according as it is able to overcome or endure more easily the weakness of the body and of the lower powers. And therefore human virtue, which is attributed to reason, is said to be “made perfect in infirmity;” not of the reason indeed, but of the body and of the lower powers.

Whether virtue is suitably defined?

Ia IIae q. 55 a. 4

Objection 1. It would seem that the definition, usually given, of virtue, is not suitable, to wit: “Virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us.” For virtue is man’s goodness, since virtue it is that makes its subject good. But goodness does not seem to be good, as neither is whiteness white. It is therefore unsuitable to describe virtue as a “good quality.”

Objection 2. Further, no difference is more common than its genus; since it is that which divides the genus. But good is more common than quality, since it is convertible with being. Therefore “good” should not be put in the definition of virtue, as a difference of quality.

Objection 3. Further, as Augustine says (De Trin. xii, 3): “When we come across anything that is not common to us and the beasts of the field, it is something appertaining to the mind.” But there are virtues even of the irrational parts; as the Philosopher says (Ethic. iii, 10). Every virtue, therefore, is not a good quality “of the mind.”

Objection 4. Further, righteousness seems to belong to justice; whence the righteous are called just. But justice is a species of virtue. It is therefore unsuitable to put “righteous” in the definition of virtue, when we say that virtue is that “by which we live righteously.”

Objection 5. Further, whoever is proud of a thing, makes bad use of it. But many are proud of virtue, for Augustine says in his Rule, that “pride lies in wait for good works in order to slay them.” It is untrue, therefore, “that no one can make bad use of virtue.”

Objection 6. Further, man is justified by virtue. But Augustine commenting on Jn. 15:11: “He shall do greater things than these,” says*: “He who created thee without thee, will not justify thee without thee.” It is therefore unsuitable to say that “God works virtue in us, without us.”

On the contrary, We have the authority of Augustine from whose words this definition is gathered, and principally in De Libero Arbitrio ii, 19.

I answer that, This definition comprises perfectly the whole essential notion of virtue. For the perfect essential notion of anything is gathered from all its causes. Now the above definition comprises all the causes of virtue. For the formal cause of virtue, as of everything, is gathered from its genus and difference, when it is defined as “a good quality”: for “quality” is the genus of virtue, and the difference, “good.” But the definition would be more suitable if for “quality” we substitute “habit,” which is the proximate genus.

Now virtue has no matter “out of which” it is formed, as neither has any other accident; but it has matter “about which” it is concerned, and matter “in which” it exists, namely, the subject. The matter about which virtue is concerned is its object, and this could not be included in the above definition, because the object fixes the virtue to a certain species, and here we are giving the definition of virtue in general. And so for material cause we have the subject, which is mentioned when we say that virtue is a good quality “of the mind.”

The end of virtue, since it is an operative habit, is operation. But it must be observed that some operative habits are always referred to evil, as vicious habits: others are sometimes referred to good, sometimes to evil; for instance, opinion is referred both to the true and to the untrue: whereas virtue is a habit which is always referred to good: and so the distinction of virtue from those habits which are always referred to evil, is expressed in the words “by which we live righteously”: and its distinction from those habits which are sometimes directed unto good, sometimes unto evil, in the words, “of which no one makes bad use.”

Lastly, God is the efficient cause of infused virtue, to which this definition applies; and this is expressed in the words “which God works in us without us.” If we omit this phrase, the remainder of the definition will apply to all virtues in general, whether acquired or infused.

Reply to Objection 1. That which is first seized by the intellect is being: wherefore everything that we apprehend we consider as being, and consequently as gone, and as good, which are convertible with being.

* Tract. xxvii in Joan.: Serm. xv de Verb. Ap. 11

Wherefore we say that essence is being and is one and is good; and that oneness is being and one and good: and in like manner goodness. But this is not the case with specific forms, as whiteness and health; for everything that we apprehend, is not apprehended with the notion of white and healthy. We must, however, observe that, as accidents and non-subsistent forms are called beings, not as if they themselves had being, but because things are by them; so also are they called good or one, not by some distinct goodness or oneness, but because by them something is good or one. So also is virtue called good, because by it something is good.

Reply to Objection 2. Good, which is put in the definition of virtue, is not good in general which is convertible with being, and which extends further than quality, but the good as fixed by reason, with regard to which Dionysius says (Div. Nom. iv) “that the good of the soul is to be in accord with reason.”

Reply to Objection 3. Virtue cannot be in the irrational part of the soul, except in so far as this participates in the reason (Ethic. i, 13). And therefore reason,

or the mind, is the proper subject of virtue.

Reply to Objection 4. Justice has a righteousness of its own by which it puts those outward things right which come into human use, and are the proper matter of justice, as we shall show further on (q. 60, a. 2; *Ila Ilae*, q. 58, a. 8). But the righteousness which denotes order to a due end and to the Divine law, which is the rule of the human will, as stated above (q. 19, a. 4), is common to all virtues.

Reply to Objection 5. One can make bad use of a virtue objectively, for instance by having evil thoughts about a virtue, e.g. by hating it, or by being proud of it: but one cannot make bad use of virtue as principle of action, so that an act of virtue be evil.

Reply to Objection 6. Infused virtue is caused in us by God without any action on our part, but not without our consent. This is the sense of the words, “which God works in us without us.” As to those things which are done by us, God causes them in us, yet not without action on our part, for He works in every will and in every nature.