

Picking Up the Pieces of a Shattered Culture: Abandoning Sartre for Aquinas

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I expect to die in my bed, my successor will die in prison, and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. Then his successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the Church has done so often in human history.

—Francis Cardinal George (2010)

Here I propose to present a feature of the ethics of Thomas Aquinas, his ethical doctrine of virtue, concentrating on the four cardinal virtues—justice, prudence or good practical judgment, courage, and temperance. Plato first selected them as the four premier virtues, but they go back at least to Homer, for whom wily Odysseus exemplified prudence, warlike Achilles courage, old Nestor justice, Penelope and Telemachus, Odysseus’ wife and son, temperance. And I offer them as central to living the morally good life required to “rebuild civilization” in an America that so fair and judicious a man as Cardinal George could call a “ruined society.” To see the need for Thomas’s solution, we must begin with the problem. Now, all societies depend upon the deep and fundamental ideas of the most important thinkers, prophets and sages, saints, and yes, even philosophers. Their ideas “trickle down” to influence regular folk, like you and me, those who whose hard work actually makes a society thrive, or die. And when those fundamental ideas change, the moral principles of those who embrace those ideas change, and consequently their actions change, and as a result the wider society in which they live changes, for better or worse. Such effects can now be felt across America

by all; but most of us are unaware of the primary intellectual agents of these changes, since they operate at the level of fundamental ideas, not politics or business or day-to-day life. And often their originators have died before the ideas reach full cultural force. So, ignorance of history makes it difficult to deal with present problems caused by those ideas.

My first conclusion will be that a major cause of the current coarsening of our culture is the group of ideas of the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, even though most Americans have never heard of him, and most of those who recognize his name have not read his works carefully enough to see the connection. Why Sartre? In the honors program at my university, I had a bright young lady of Muslim heritage who had gone to a *lycée*, one of France's elite classical secondary schools. "Did you read the classics?" "Yes." Expecting Montaigne or Pascal, I asked, "Who?" Her answer: "Sartre." So let us begin with the theory and practice of Sartre and his long-time lover Simone Beauvoir, whose book *The Second Sex* was an intellectual spark for the women's liberation movement. Then we turn to some real-life examples of Sartrean influence on ourselves and American culture. Finally, for the best remedy for non-Christian and Christian alike, I recommend Aquinas's doctrine of virtue, when taken in its full scope.

Sartre's Ethics of Absolute Freedom

In 1946, the year I was born, Sartre gave a lecture to a meeting of French librarians, which became his most popular book, *Existentialism is a Humanism*. There he laid out the core of his thought about God, humans, and their ethical behavior. Here I arrange his main ideas in an order that facilitates comparison with Aquinas, beginning with his view of human ontology and proceeding to its impact on the four cardinal virtues.

Human Ontology

Sartre turned his back on the traditional metaphysical view that every creature is an individual substance defined by a nature or essence it has in common with all other things of that type. In his "*first principle of existentialism*," Sartre skips over other animate things, plants and animals, and compares humans to inanimate objects:

Let us consider . . . a book or a paper-cutter: here is an object made by an artisan whose inspiration came from a concept. . . . One cannot postulate a man who *makes* a paper-cutter but does not *know* what it is used for. Therefore, let us say that, for the paper-cutter, *essence*

... *precedes existence*. . . . And when we conceive God as the Creator, . . . the concept of *man* in the mind of God is comparable to the concept of paper-cutter in the mind of the artisan.

But *atheistic existentialism*, which I represent, . . . states that, if God does *not* exist, there is at least one being in whom existence *precedes* essence, a being who exists *before* he can be defined by any concept, and this being is man. . . .

This means, first of all, that man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, *defines himself*, . . . [since] he himself will have made *what* he will be.

Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he *conceives himself* to be, but he is also only what he *wills* himself to be, after this thrust into existence.¹

If there is no God, however man might be “thrust into existence,” and Sartre is conveniently unconcerned with the cause of this “thrust,” then there is nothing to cause one man to have an essence in common with all others. So what is a man at first? A sort of “locus of freedom” to choose and act’ and in acting to create his own essence. This is an implausible but powerful idea that is still very much with us. Beauvoir, a better writer, put the same point more concretely: “One is *not* born, but rather becomes, a woman.”² She did not say “becomes *more* a woman,” but says simply “becomes a woman,” because she is *not* really a woman from birth, even though born with a female body.

This principle underlies many of the social changes that have come about over the seven decades since Sartre delivered his lecture. Let us now turn to its impact on his ethics, which is built on this ontology. I arrange it in terms of the four cardinal virtues, in order to facilitate comparison with Aquinas, though Sartre rejected those virtues.

Prudence

The traditional virtue of prudence is skill in applying general moral principles to perform morally good actions, principles that cover all humans, not just ourselves. When Sartre denied the existence of God, he also denied a common human nature. “So, in the bright realm of [moral] *values* we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are *alone*, with no

¹ Leonard Kennedy, “Jean Paul Sartre: The Human Person is Freedom,” in *Images of the Human: The Philosophy of the Human Person in a Religious Context*, ed. Hunter Brown and Leonard Kennedy (Chicago: Loyola, 1995), 512–13.

² Janine D. Langan, “Simone de Beauvoir, The Human Person as Co-Existent,” in Brown and Kennedy, *Images of the Human*, 537–59.

excuses. . . . This theory is the only one which gives man *dignity*, the only one which does not reduce him to an object," because dignity is based on our full freedom to act as we see fit. So, "the ultimate meaning of the acts of honest men is the quest for *freedom as such*," that is, absolute freedom from all external constraints.³

Immanuel Kant had faced the same problem: how do we ensure that our moral decisions are based on principles broader than our own selves, since morality involves an "ought" that goes beyond self-interest, and yet still remain free? To solve it Kant devised his "categorical imperative": to act well morally we must "universalize our [personal] moral maxim," treating it as though a universal law for how *any* good person should act in your situation. Here is Sartre's more radical version:

In *creating* the man we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he *ought* to be. . . . This helps us understand . . . *anguish*, *forlornness*, and *despair* [which are at the core of the human condition]. *Anguish* means the man . . . realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but is also a *lawmaker* who, at the same time, is choosing for *all mankind* as well as himself. . . . *Forlornness* means . . . there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given *human nature*.⁴

There is no common moral code coming from God or based on human nature to consult. So each of us must create our own moral laws; and in doing so, we must take God's place and legislate for the whole of humanity. There is no guarantee, however, that all will agree about the laws they have created; in fact, the opposite is true. So, how can conflict be avoided? Sartre's only answer is that our personal actions must be "authentic," that is, in accord with the moral law *we ourselves have created*. There is no other more objective basis for criticizing someone's actions than "Did he act in accord with his *own* principles?" Sartre's first ethical mistake, then was that each individual has to create his own moral rules, ones which also would cover all other humans.

But what about the actual effects of our actions on others? Here the dictatorial dynamic of Sartre's hyper-freedom came to the fore in his own life, with unhappy results in the areas covered by the other three cardinal virtues.

³ Kennedy, "Jean Paul Sartre," 516–20.

⁴ Kennedy, "Jean Paul Sartre," 514–16.

Temperance

Both Sartre and Beauvoir⁵ were intellectually precocious and rebellious children, raised by strongly religious mothers whose views they thoroughly rejected. Both raced through their schools with the highest marks and met in Paris in 1929, he being twenty-four and she twenty-one, while preparing for the French state exam called the *agrégation*, required for teachers. They virtually tied for first place, but the judges awarded it to Sartre, thus making Beauvoir herself *the second sex* in their personal relationship, a position that never changed. That same year, they initiated their sexual relationship, which their conception of freedom required must remain “open” to other lovers. Both taught for years in a series of lycées, which was surprisingly important. Sartre took many lovers, but only women; Beauvoir both men and women. In addition to those Sartre found for himself, Beauvoir supplied Sartre with a series of female students from the lycées where she taught, until 1943, leaving under threat of legal action from a girl’s parents. Their sexual lives, then, were intemperate and infertile, and would prove a model for deep social change in Europe and America. Its primary intellectual source is Sartre’s “first principle,” what might be called his “create your own essence kit.” Sartre’s conception of temperance for himself consisted not in controlling his own desires, its classic meaning, but in figuring ways to fulfill those desires without suffering any consequences, like Plato’s Gyges, whose magic ring hid him from suffering the consequences of his immoral actions.⁶

Courage

After World War II, Sartre was much applauded as a French resistance fighter against the Nazis, based on the superb trilogy of war novels he wrote from 1945–1949, *The Roads to Freedom*. Did he not have to experience combat in order to describe it so well? Well, no. He helped found a resistance group, Socialism and Liberty, a collection of Parisian intellectuals; but after lengthy discussions about taking up arms, they gave up the idea, since “none of us felt *qualified* to make bombs or hurl grenades.” So Sartre stayed in Paris, writing not fighting. In May of 1944, one month before D-Day, he even obtained permission from the Nazis to put on his play *No Exit*, one of many disparagements of Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, which offers a vision of life after death. The main characters are locked eternally in a room whose lesson is that “hell is other people.” Sartre’s intellectual courage, then,

⁵ On their lives, see Ronald Hayman, *Sartre: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Deidre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (New York: Touchstone, 1990).

⁶ Plato, *Republic* 2.359–61.

was more audacity in attack than seeking truth, and his moral courage was unreal in war and a carefully crafted illusion in peace. It would prove a model for left-wing academics and many others.

Justice

We have already seen an intimate form of injustice, when Beauvoir played Pandar in providing girls for Sartre. After the war, their extreme conception of democratic freedom at the personal level led them to espouse socialism at the political level, an incongruous but quite usual conjunction repeated over and over again by the heirs of Karl Marx, from Vladimir Lenin to our own “cancel culture.” In 1954, Sartre visited the Soviet Union, where he found “complete freedom”; in 1955 they were photographed with Mao Zedong attending a Chinese communist rally; and in 1960 they met with Castro’s butcher, “Che” Guevara. But they took care never to call themselves “communist,” only the more intellectually respectable “socialist” or “Marxist,” a distinction without a real difference in action.

American Scenarios

Let us now turn from Sartre and Beauvoir to some of the consequences of their ideas in contemporary American society, again arranged according to the four cardinal virtues.

Prudence

In 1964, upon learning I would enter the University of Texas honors program, my high-school civics teacher, a UT grad, warned me it was “filled with liberals.” My favorite memory of what “liberal” then meant was after an anti-war protest outside the Texas state capital building, when my first philosophy professor, John Silber, then dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and later president of Boston University, and my medieval history professor, a recent PhD from Cal Berkeley, walked the three miles from the capital to the UT campus in strenuous debate, followed by a couple hundred students, including myself, hanging on every word. The transformation of American liberalism from free exchange of conflicting ideas, with reason the ultimate judge, to silencing opposing views, is but a reflection of the journey Sartre and Beauvoir took, from seemingly the most open-minded principles to totalitarian political conclusions. Such changes verify Plato’s insight that extreme democrats and egalitarians inevitably embrace authoritarianism and

tyranny, where force prevails and reason fails and the false good of the ego wins out over the true good of the community.⁷

Courage

My first six school years were in Denver, Colorado, during the early 1950s. My grandmother sent me beautiful lead Civil War soldiers she bought in London on her trips there, and my best friend and I fought battles with them in my back yard. (Not one broke.) I commanded the Confederates and he the Yankees. In that post–World War II period, for us soldiers on both sides were brave Americans, though we understood the Civil War was, at least in part, about slavery, which was a bad thing. We celebrated the greatness of generals on both sides, the kind who inspired our fathers in World War II. This was quite the opposite of the recent riots of Antifa and Black Lives Matter, with wholesale toppling of statues of American warriors and statesmen, even including Abraham Lincoln, who emancipated the slaves, and the subsequent slaughter of policemen. We call this “cancel culture,” but it is not really “culture” at all; it is culture’s antithesis, where one faction tries to annihilate another, much as Sartre’s ethics tried to annihilate an ethical tradition that goes back as far as Socrates, Homer, and Moses.

Temperance

The most powerful and widespread result of Sartreanism is in the area of sexual morality. Here Sartre’s “first principle,” that existence precedes essence, is a fundamental but usually unrecognized source of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the mainstreaming of homosexuality in the 1990s, the endorsement of “gay marriage” by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015, the separation of psychological gender from physical sex, and the consequent idea of one changing one’s gender at will. Such are logical consequences of Sartre’s notion of the self-creation of the human essence.

In the last case, a person deemed to have “gender dysphoria,” a sad and sometimes real condition, *feels* the opposite “gender” from his (or her) inappropriate body. Such a person desires, and sometimes *chooses*, to change the birth body through surgery, rather than the alternatives: accommodating psychological feelings to the body we have been given, waiting for natural resolution which occurs in the majority of cases,⁸ or just living with the difference. Having surgery is based on a contradiction. It is at once a radical break with one’s natural body, yet at the same time an attempt to return to

⁷ Plato, *Republic* 8–9.

⁸ Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters* (New York: 2005), 277.

the complementarity of psychological gender and bodily sex. The body after such surgery, however, is only superficially complementary to the psyche, for it cannot perform its natural sexual function, truly reproductive acts. We might call sex change operations, then, "the revenge of nature." They are engendered by a quite understandable and natural desire to achieve the complementarity or identity of gender and sex; but one's own actions put that natural desire out of reach.

The most heinous form of this war against nature is when physicians perform such operations on children, following the decision of adults. For, here the one whose body is affected is not the person who makes the decision for surgery. This is a dictatorial decision, in reality a form of child abuse, one even worse than sexual molestation, where there is at least a hope of the child recovering. It exemplifies how Sartrean hyper-freedom *for oneself* inevitably engenders injustice toward others, and moral degradation to oneself, because the Sartrean principle, while professedly libertarian, is intrinsically despotic.

Justice

Even worse than deforming the body of a child is killing the innocent in the womb. As often happened in their relationship, Beauvoir's actions here were more personal and hazardous, Sartre's more self-serving and literary. In his novel *The Age of Reason* (1945), Sartre's main character pays for an abortion for his mistress. In 1971 Beauvoir signed the *Manifesto of the 343*, prominent French women who publicly admitted they had abortions, and called for its legalization. Almost certainly, the child she aborted had been hers and Sartre's, a direct consequence of their principles. Since existence precedes essence and the human essence is created by one's actions, according to them, while it is sad to terminate what *might have been* a human, still what was killed had not yet *acted* enough to attain a human essence.

The next year, this Sartrean inference provided a central but unacknowledged foundation for the reasoning of the American Supreme Court in the 1972 *Roe v. Wade* decision. The so-called "fetus" (a misuse of the Latin term when the nature of the thing is dropped, since the "fetal" pigs one dissected in biology were still pigs), while still in the womb, was thought not yet to have performed *actions* sufficient enough to constitute it a human essence worthy of legal protection. So when has it done enough?

At this point, the Court committed a logical blunder. That point is birth, the justices said. But, even on Sartrean principles, this conclusion is nonsense. For, the process of birth is *not* an *action* taken by the fetus. It is the mother who is acting, pushing the "fetus" out. The "fetus" is being acted upon, a *passion* in Aristotelean terms, the *opposite* of an action. So if a thing's

action is what creates its essence, and birth is not an action performed by the “fetus,” birth cannot possibly add something to make it human. It is simply being moved from one place to another, from inside to outside the mother, which results in its first cry, which is indeed its own action, but not its first. In their rush to judgment, then, the Court were not even logical Sartreans. Their desires got in the way of their own logic, a mistake typical of Sartre and Beauvoir, and their intellectual progeny.

Aquinas: Human Nature and Virtues

Unlike Sartre, Thomas Aquinas based his ethics on the essence or nature common to all existing humans. For how could humans be utterly unlike all other living and sentient creatures, which are individuals having natures in common with others of the same species or genus? All caterpillars have the same nature, as do all cottonwoods and collies, whether described generically or specifically. Human nature includes the ontological components a theory of virtue requires: a nature common to each individual human, who is a substance composed of two fundamental principles: matter (a complex organic body) and substantial form (an intellectual soul). The soul uses the body to perform practical *actions* employing its four natural powers: *intellect*, *will*, *emotion* or “irascible appetite,” and *desire* or “concupiscible appetite.”

Repeated actions affect not just others but also ourselves, forming skills in our soul’s powers technically called *habits*, because we still “have” (*habemus*) them far past the fleeting time of our actions, for good or bad. Aristotle used them to lay out a hierarchy of six “moral states,” three good and three bad. Those of us in the large mediocre middle lack developed habits, which makes good action a struggle, while the allure of pleasure makes bad action easy. Those with the moral strength to do good are “continent” (*egkrates*), superior to the weak “incontinent” (*akratos*) who act immorally. A few rise to develop habits of “virtue” (*arete*), which make them superior to the “continent” because they readily do good, while the many who develop habits of “vice” are worse than the “incontinent” in readily doing bad. Aristotle completed his picture with two moral extremes. Rare is the man of “superhuman virtue, heroic and divine,” like Homer’s Hector, “men who become divine by excess of virtue” and “do good *because of a god*”; and at the bottom of the moral scale is the utterly vicious man, who is like a “brute animal,” also rare and “found chiefly among barbarians.”⁹ In his short disputed question *De*

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.1.1145a15–32. See *Eudemian Ethics* 8.2.1248a24–b2, on god as source of “divine” virtues. At *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.5.1148b15–31, even

virtutibus cardinalis (*DVC*) and his huge *Summa theologiae* (*ST*), particularly in the *secunda pars*, which were written contemporaneously, Thomas elaborated Aristotle's hierarchy, with important emendations.¹⁰

In *DVC*, a. 1, Thomas asks, "Are prudence, justice, courage, and temperance four cardinal virtues?" Unlike Sartre, he began by explaining the "way of life" (*vita*) appropriate to human nature, by contrasting three levels of knowledge we can attain:

In a human we find, first, a *sensitive* nature in common with the brute animals; second, *practical reason* (*ratio practica*), which is proper to the human level of reality; and finally, *theoretical and intellectual* understanding (*intellectus speculativus*), which is not found as perfectly in a human as it is in angels, but according to a kind of participation.¹¹

Animals below us act based on sense experience of individual things in the world around them; humans abstract from experience universal concepts, especially "good" and "bad," to reason their way to actions; angels above, and God even more, understand not by discursive reasoning but through immediate, intuitive insight, which we also have, but to a much lesser degree.

Therefore, the way of life of intellectual contemplation [*vita contemplativa*] is not properly human, but superhuman, while the way of life of pleasure, confined to sensible goods, is not human but "bestial."¹² Consequently, the *properly* human way of life is the *active* life, which consists in living out the *moral virtues*. Therefore, these virtues are properly named *cardinal*, on which in a manner of speaking the whole of our moral life *turns*, and on which, like a set of principles for such a life, it is *founded*.¹³

Greeks can be "brutish," where Aristotle, following Plato, condemns "pederasty." In *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I-II, q. 68, aa. 1–2, Aquinas uses "divine" virtues to explain gifts of the Holy Spirit (see note 41 below).

¹⁰ On the importance of Aristotle in Aquinas's ethics, see Leonard Ferry, "Aristotle in Aquinas's Moral Theory: Reason, Virtue, and Emotion," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 87 (2013): 167–82. On virtues and gifts in Aquinas's moral theology, see Romanus Cessario O.P., *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

¹¹ Aquinas, *De virtutibus cardinalis* [*DVC*], a. 1, resp. Latin text is from the Marietti edition, as emended by five manuscripts, described and translated in R. E. Houser, *The Cardinal Virtues: Aquinas, Albert, and Philip the Chancellor* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004).

¹² See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.5.1095b20, on "the life of the cow."

¹³ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 1, resp.

Our moral life, then, is like a door, which “turns” on four “hinges” (*cardines*), which is why these virtues are called “cardinal.” They give us sure criteria for distinguishing good from bad actions, something impossible for Sartre and those caught unknowingly in the Sartrean morass, and the moral character readily to do the good and avoid the bad. The hedonistic “life of the cow” is below us, an angelic life is above us, and an active life based on the four cardinal virtues is “natural” to us, but does not come without effort.

The Twofold Character of the Cardinal Virtues

The very first “objection” in article 1 of *DVC* supports the rigorist moral views of classic thinkers from Plato to the Church Fathers, who said each good action requires *all four* cardinal virtues working together—a view which made virtue almost heroically difficult to achieve—over against Aristotle, who recognized the four cardinal virtues and many more besides and accepted the empirical truth that we *can* have one *moral* virtue without another. Thomas replies with a distinction that finds room for both senses of the cardinal virtues, using the differences between genus and species and between form and matter to explain them.

Thomas reinterpreted the classic thinkers to mean “these four terms signify the *generic* [*generales*] modes of the virtues,” which describe only the four “different *formal* aspects of virtue [*rationes formales virtutis*],” leaving off their “matter” or area of operation. So he gave them new, more universal names. Prudence becomes “directive knowledge” (*cognitio dirigens*); justice becomes “correctness [*rectitudo*] producing equity”; courage becomes “resoluteness [*firmitas*] of mind,” and temperance becomes “moderation [*moderatio*] restraining appetites.” Consequently, “without *all* these conditions dovetailing together [*concurrant*], one of them by itself is insufficient to produce the true character of virtue [*veram rationem virtutis*]” found in individual moral action; all must be present together.¹⁴

“But other thinkers, like Aristotle . . . speak about the four virtues under consideration in so far as they are specific [*speciales*] virtues,” that is, habits “limited to their *proper matter*.”¹⁵ Prudence rationally “applies practical precepts well” in individual moral actions. Through justice, we “act well in common with others for good.” Temperance moderates our actions in areas where “pleasure attracts our passions most strongly, those connected with touch.” And courage helps us face “the greatest danger, death.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 1, ad 1.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 1, ad 1.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 1, resp.

Thomas's distinction between generic and specific cardinal virtues allows him to embrace the strengths while avoiding the weaknesses of both Platonists and Aristotle, with important results.

First, the range of the cardinal virtues now extends as broadly as Plato's, but does not require a "vision of the Good" in the present life for us to understand and use them.

Second, Thomas offers a comprehensive explanation of the multitude of specific virtues and vices he knows from Aristotle and others, by structuring it using the generic cardinal virtues and three theological virtues, set out in *secunda pars* of the *ST*. In their *generic* sense, "the four virtues are understood to signify *general conditions* of virtue, so all the [great number of] *special* virtues are reduced to these four [virtues], as *species* are reduced to their *genera*,"¹⁷ on the model of an individual like Socrates being both *human* in species and *animal* in genus. This includes the four *special* cardinal virtues, to be sure, but also the vast number of other specific virtues.

Third, Thomas's approach gives us knowledge of vices as well as virtues. Since all truly human actions are done to attain a good end, the four "general conditions of virtue" lay down requirements or "formal aspects" (*rationes formales*) for any *action* to be good *generically*,¹⁸ that is, an action we think good. Meeting these conditions means an action will *attain its end*, which makes it *teleologically* good; but this does *not* guarantee it is *morally* good, since the end or the means to it can be bad. This is why Thomas says there can be a "good" or "prudent" robber in this generic sense, because his means may succeed in stealing, but his end is morally wrong.¹⁹ We can think Sartre good, but only in this minimal way.

Fourth, distinguishing the *generic* cardinal virtues from the *specific* cardinal virtues and the many other specific virtues allied with them explains how we can act morally in one specific area but not in another, the normal human condition. Special *prudence* exists in the intellect and "commands" our body to act morally; with special *justice* in the will, we act "under moral obligation" (*debito modo*) toward others; special *courage* helps us face morally our greatest fear, death; and with special *temperance* we can control morally our strongest natural desires, those "of the body," that is, for food and drink, which preserve ourselves, and sex, which preserves our species.²⁰ Exercising each of these three moral virtues requires prudence, but not the other two

¹⁷ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 1, ad 5.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 1, resp. Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 65, a. 1, resp.

¹⁹ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 47, a. 13, resp.

²⁰ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 1, resp. Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 61, a. 3, resp.

moral virtues. This is how we can be just but cowardly, courageous but intemperate, at the specific level of these virtues and vices.

In *ST* I-II and II-II, Thomas looks down from the “general” virtues in order to unfold under them the vast number of “special” virtues and vices. But in *DVC* he looks up, not down, and sets out his own version of Aristotle’s *hierarchy* of virtues, from lowest to highest, also inspired by St. Augustine who says: “We make a ladder for ourselves of our vices, if we trample those same vices underfoot.”

Climbing the Ladder of the Virtues

After distinguishing the general from the special cardinal virtues in article 1 of *DVC*, where the general ones produce *teleologically* good actions through the connection of all four virtues working together, in article 2 Thomas looks more closely at the *special* cardinal virtues, which generate *morally* good actions. As the first step in arranging them in a hierarchy, as rungs on Augustine’s ladder, Thomas asked if special cardinal virtues “are so connected that whoever has one virtue has them all,”²¹ as was true for the general cardinal virtues. His “response” begins with two crucial distinctions adopted from Aristotle.²²

Perfect virtues are connected to each other, while *imperfect* virtues are not necessarily connected. As evidence of this one should understand that since virtue is what renders a human good and his deed good, that virtue is *perfect* which renders a human deed perfectly good and so the human himself good. But that [virtue] is *imperfect* which renders a human and his deed good, not *absolutely* but only *in some particular way*. Now human actions are good *absolutely* when they attain a rule guiding human actions.²³

Here Thomas first distinguishes “perfect” or “perfected” (*perfecta*) virtues, so called because they are *habits* that facilitate moral actions, from “imperfect”

²¹ On development of virtue, see Craig S. Titus, “Moral Development and Making All Things New in Christ,” *The Thomist* 72 (2008): 233–58.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.13.1144b14–17. Aristotle’s “principal” virtues are moral habits, while his “natural” virtues are natural inclinations. Thomas calls them “perfect” vs. “imperfect” virtues. At 6.5.1140a25–28, Aristotle distinguishes a person prudent “for living a whole life *well*” from one prudent in some particular area, like “health or physical strength.” Thomas calls the first good “absolutely” (*simpliciter*), the second good “in some particular way”

²³ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp. Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 65, aa. 1–2.

virtues, which have not developed into habits. The connection of virtues he mentions here is not of one *moral* virtue with another, since one can be courageous but intemperate, but of a moral virtue with a “rule” (*regula*) which, speaking broadly, determines whether an end is good, and specifically determines the means to attain the end toward which the moral virtue inclines us. One rule is “right reason” (*recta ratio*) attained through the virtue of prudence; the other is the “primary measure, transcending all, and this is God,” whom “a human attains through charity.” Such “rules” are necessary to perform morally good actions, since we must use them to determine the *means* of achieving a good end.

The second distinction is between what Aristotle said is good “for living a whole life well,” which Thomas calls an action which is good “absolutely” (*simpliciter*), and what is good only in a “limited” (*determinatum*) or “particular” (*particulare*) area, like being “healthy or strong.”²⁴ Achieving moral goodness is a lifelong effort because virtues are persisting habits built on the powers of the soul we have by nature. A fully virtuous action, then, is one whose virtues are “perfect” because they are good habits, not “imperfect,” and they generate actions that are “good absolutely,” that is, for a whole life, not in some “particular” way.

Taken together, Thomas constructs his “ladder of virtues” using these two criteria: imperfect versus perfect virtue—that is, a natural capacity versus a formed moral habit—and particular versus absolute virtue, virtue in a particular and limited area versus virtue for the whole of life.

Altogether Imperfect or “Natural” Virtues

The first level of virtue, which *we* wouldn’t normally call virtues but they were for some Latin and Greek writers, are “altogether imperfect,” for two reasons. First, they are “imperfect” because not developed habits, only extraordinarily strong natural “inclinations.” Thomas’s example is Job, who said: “From infancy *compassion* grew with me, and came forth from the womb with me” (31:18; Vulgate; trans. mine). But compassion is a feeling that can go bad, not a habit. So Thomas adds a second example, from Pope Gregory the Great, of a naturally *fast* racehorse. If “blinded,” its speed would be “more destructive the faster it runs.” Second, such so-called virtues are not “absolute” or lifelong, but a “limited” feature of our lives. Consequently, they fall short of true moral virtue on both counts.²⁵

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.5.1140a25–30. Examples are Aristotle’s.

²⁵ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp.

Perfect but Not Absolutely: The Acquired Cardinal Virtues

At the second level are the cardinal virtues identified by the philosophers, which Thomas explains using the same two distinctions. Such virtues are “perfect,” since they are formed habits that remain and can grow in their subject powers in the soul, after we first have developed them: prudence in the intellect, justice in the will, courage in emotion or “irascible appetite,” and temperance in desire or “concupiscible appetite.” The three moral virtues fix our appetites on good ends, and prudential *rational* thought determines the means to that end. In the face of adversity, for example, a courageous person will want an ethical end, say, to defend himself, but he must use prudence to decide how to do so, and then engage his will to produce an action. Without prudence, one does not know *how* to act virtuously or do so readily; and without a moral virtue, one does not *want* the morally good end.²⁶ This is why prudence is the “rule” for making concrete moral judgments, working in combination with one of the three moral cardinal virtues or their many “parts.” Such virtues, then, are “perfect” (*perfectae*), because they are formed habits connected with each other.

Are the goods such virtues achieve also “absolute” (*simpliciter*), directed to the whole of our life? Aristotle thought so, since our lifetime ends with death; it is all we have. But Thomas said life extends beyond the grave, because of the immortality of the soul. The virtues of the philosophers, then, “are perfect in a way, in comparison with the *human* good, but they are not perfect absolutely [*simpliciter*], because they do not attain the *first* rule, which is the ultimate end of human life,” namely, beatitude “in our heavenly homeland [*in patria*].”²⁷ Virtues that seemed absolute to the philosophers, in reality are not; but in no way are they useless. Under them we can attain true moral goodness. “So it is clear that the *acquired* civic virtues, about which the philosophers spoke, are ordered *only* to perfection in [our present] civic life, since they are not ordered to attaining celestial glory.” “Perfect” because formed habits, they are downsized to our present life here and now, and so are “limited” (or “particular”) in extension.²⁸

The acquired cardinal virtues, however, do open up the *possibility* of progress to higher levels of virtue, though by themselves they cannot achieve them. Once we recognize both the majesty and poverty of the “civic” virtues, whose good is here and now, it becomes possible to move beyond the philosophers. “For in doing what is within *his* ability, a human prepares himself

²⁶ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp.

²⁷ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp.

²⁸ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

to receive charity from God.” Our actions do not *cause* charity in us, but can “dispose us” to receive charity from God. And then, “just as acquired virtues increase through the acts by which they are caused” *by us*, “so also the infused virtues increase through the action *of God*, by whom they are caused.”²⁹

Prudence, then, *can* open us to faith; justice *can* open us to charity; courage and temperance *can* open us to hope. So we are not yet finished with our climb.³⁰

Three Virtues Absolutely Perfect: The Theological Virtues

Moving higher, the third level consists in “*absolutely perfect virtues*, which are combined with charity, for these virtues make a human action *absolutely* good, reaching as it were all the way to our ultimate end.” Here we find “a second [and higher] *rule*, which is like a primary measure, transcending all; and this is God,” loved through charity, which Thomas defines as “friendship with God.”³¹ This rule provides the believing “wayfarer” (*in via*) with a higher end, beatitude in our “heavenly homeland” (*in patria*), which he desires through *charity*, present in the will. But love is impossible without knowing what is loved. And while some can know with certitude through reason that the human soul, for example, is immortal, or that God exists, knowing the contours of heavenly beatitude is beyond the reach of our reason. So charity is impossible without additional, divine aid, in the form of the two other virtues. *Faith*, which exists in the intellect, provides knowledge that God is our *final end* in this robust sense; and *hope* gives us the strength to surmount obstacles on the way to this higher end. Since God, the object of hope, is a spiritual being, hope cannot reside in the sensible appetites of emotion and desire, like temperance and courage do, but like charity it must exist in our “intellectual appetite,” the *will*, as faith must exist in the *intellect*.³²

Faith, hope, and charity, then, are “theological” virtues for two reasons. First, God is now understood and loved as our *ultimate end*, beyond earthly happiness. This is why the good the theological virtues enjoy is “absolute,”

²⁹ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp. See also *De caritate*, a. 11, resp.

³⁰ Defending the importance of the acquired virtues, see Brandon Dahm, “The Acquired Virtues are Real Virtues: A Reply to Stump,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 32 (2015): 453–70. As skeptical of acquired virtues, supporting the gifts over them, see Mark Jordan, “Democratic Moral Education and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44 (2016): 246–59.

³¹ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp.

³² Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp. See also *ST* II-II, q. 4, a. 7, resp.; q. 17, a. 6, resp.; q. 23, a. 6, resp.

for they cover both our present life and a higher life in union with a higher end. Second, God must be the *efficient cause* of these virtues, which are *completely* new habits, unlike “acquired” virtues, which are developed out of preexisting dispositions and experience. And as “infused” in us by God, they are “perfect” virtues, that is, habits present in the soul.³³

Four Virtues Absolutely Perfect: The Infused Cardinal Virtues

At this point, we can ask if the three theological virtues eclipse the need for the four cardinal virtues and all their many subdivisions. They do not, for there is a parallel between the theological virtues and the infused cardinal virtues. “Whoever possesses prudence must necessarily also possess the *moral* virtues; and *in a similar way*, whoever has charity must necessarily have *all the other virtues*, as well”³⁴ —not just some, but *all*. As prudence is to the moral virtues, so charity is to the *complete range* of virtues: “Therefore, it is necessary that along with charity are poured out forms that are habits readily generating actions toward whatever charity inclines us. But charity inclines us toward *all virtuous acts*, because, as it concerns the final end, it also includes *all* the acts of the virtues.”³⁵ The three theological virtues, then, are not the end, but merely the *beginning* of the life of faith.

To explain charity’s “rule” over the other virtues, Thomas here compares it to “military generalship, which governs” *all* military skills, as Aristotle had said.³⁶ Charity, then, envelops *all* the other virtues in acting for the sake of the ultimate end, found only in heavenly beatitude.

If so, are the “acquired” cardinal virtues annihilated and then replaced by *utterly new* “infused” cardinal virtues? By no means, since grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it. The ultimate end of the “civic” cardinal virtues, the common good of the political community, is not destroyed but perfected when God is seen as the higher and ultimate end of all men, indeed, of all creation. This was the fundamental principle guiding King St. Louis IX of France, whom Thomas knew personally, and who died (1270) on crusade at the same time Thomas was delivering *DVC* at the University of Paris. Louis made France into the first true nation-state, but a Christian nation whose political institutions would foster civic virtues that feed into and are perfected by the religious life of her subjects,³⁷ the model

³³ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp. See also *De caritate*, a. 3, resp; *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 8, resp.

³⁴ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp.

³⁵ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp.

³⁶ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 2, resp. See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1.1094a9–16.

³⁷ Andrew W. Jones, *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom St. Louis IX* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2017), esp.

for all later “integralists,” but quite contrary to Sartre’s conception of France. Consequently, charity, *even more than prudence*, leads us to act according to the cardinal virtues.

The “civic” cardinal virtues, then, are raised to become “infused,” no longer acquired virtues. Before the theological virtues are “infused,” they already can exist as “acquired” virtues, each with its own character (*ratio*). Through “infusion” they are not created but *transformed* by a new end, which correspondingly perfects them as habits in the soul. This is why Thomas’s last word on the subject draws an analogy between their *ends*, not their *beginnings*:

It is clear that the acquired civic virtues the philosophers described are *ordered* only to fulfilling humans in their civic lives, not as they are ordered to seek heavenly glory. . . . But the cardinal virtues, *as they are infused by grace* and as we now speak about them, fulfill a human in the present life *as ordered* to heavenly glory.³⁸

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

In the *ST*, for magisterial completeness in charting out the “wayfarer’s” road, Thomas connects to the theological virtues and infused cardinal virtues another mode of perfection, the “gifts” of the Holy Spirit,³⁹ which he explicitly interprets as correlative to the highest of Aristotle’s six moral states:

According to the philosophers [read Aristotle], *not* everyone who had the acquired moral virtues also had “*heroic or divine* virtues.” But in the ordering toward the *ultimate supernatural end*, to which our reason moves as it is *in a way* and *imperfectly* informed by the theological virtues, this movement of reason is not sufficient without some *instigation and motion* of the Holy Spirit coming from above. . . . Therefore, in order to seek this end, it is *necessary* for a human to have the *gift* of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

The theological virtues reveal the existence of this superlative end, and our intellect and will respond using the now infused cardinal virtues to adjust

ch. 8, “The Spiritual and the Temporal” (219–48), and ch. 15, “The Most Christian Kingdom” (449–54).

³⁸ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

³⁹ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68. The “beatitudes” (q. 69) and “fruits” (q. 70) are not “habits,” but “acts,” and so are omitted here.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 2, resp. See note 9 above.

our aims and desires to this higher end, but “imperfectly.” We need further divine aid, which comes in the form of the “gifts [*dona*] of the Holy Spirit.”

These are first enunciated by the prophet Isaiah (11:1–2) as attributes of *some* messiah who would save the Jewish people from the wrath of the Assyrians and usher in a time of peace where “the wolf will lie down with the lamb,” and Christians understood Isaiah to have prophesied *the Messiah*, Jesus of Nazareth, who had seven attributes the Holy Spirit then gifts to “wayfarers.”

And there shall come forth a stem from the root of Jesse, and there shall arise a flower from this root. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest over him: the spirit of *wisdom* and of *intelligence*; the spirit of *counsel* and *fortitude*; the spirit of *knowledge* and of *piety*. And the spirit of the *fear of the Lord* will fill him.⁴¹

Ever attentive to language, Thomas notes that they are not called “gift” here, but “spirit,” because they come “from divine inspiration” of the Holy Spirit, and they engender a new “spirit” in our actions.

The higher the mover, the more perfect must be the disposition in the subject of motion proportioned to it; as we can see that a student must be more perfectly disposed in order to learn a higher teaching from his master. . . . Therefore, there must be in a human higher *perfections* . . . whereby he is so disposed that he becomes readily [*prompte*] moved by divine inspiration.⁴²

The function of these gifts is to engender in us these “dispositions” to “readily” accept divine aid for attaining our ultimate end, a task beyond our own natural powers. This is why “the gifts *sometimes* are called virtues, following the *common* definition of virtue. But they have something that goes beyond the common definition of virtue, since they are a *kind of divine* virtue perfecting a human as moved by God.”⁴³

To explain the gifts, Thomas comes back repeatedly to an analogy between the rational level, where reason guides the moral virtues which in turn order our appetites correctly, and the revealed level, where the Holy Spirit infuses

⁴¹ Isa 11:1–3 in the Vulgate: Et egredietur virga de radice Iesse, Et flos de radice eius ascendet. Et requiescet super eum spiritus Domini: Spiritus *sapientiae* et *intellectus*, Spiritus *consilii* et *fortitudinis*, Spiritus *scientiae* et *pietatis*; Et replebit eum spiritus *timoris* Domini (trans. mine). The first five terms parallel Aristotle.

⁴² Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 1, resp.

⁴³ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 1, ad 1.

in us the gifts by which we “readily” follow the Spirit. The gifts, then, are “*a kind of habit* whereby a human is perfected for *readily* obeying the Holy Spirit,” analogous to the way “moral virtues are a kind of habit whereby our appetitive powers are disposed *readily* to obey reason.”⁴⁴ Compared to the lower virtues, “the gifts exceed the common perfections of the virtues, not in their kinds [*genus*] of operations, . . . but in their *mode* of operating, in which a human is moved by a higher principle,” namely the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵

In the Latin Vulgate Bible, the very names for the first five gifts are the same as Aristotelian virtues. So Thomas divides the gifts into those that perfect “reason” and those perfecting our “appetitive power,” taking care to “make clear that these gifts extend to all those things to which the virtues extend, intellectual as well as moral.” In the “speculative” employment of reason, we “apprehend truth” through the gift of “intellection” (*intellectus*), which gives us insight into principles, as Aristotle said, while we make “correct judgments about truth” through “wisdom” (*sapientia*), which draws conclusions derived from those principles. In using “practical” reason, we apprehend truth about particular actions as a result of “counsel” or deliberative reasoning’ while “practical reason is perfected through knowledge [*scientia*]” of the principles whose proven conclusions produce actions.⁴⁶

The other three gifts concern our appetites. “The appetitive power [*virtus*] about those things that concern another,” like the virtue of justice, “is perfected through *piety*,” which concerns our relation not just to God, but to men, as well. The other two gifts concern appetites directed *at ourselves*.

Against the fear of dangers our appetitive power is perfected through [the gift of] *fortitude*. And against disordered desire of pleasures, we are perfected through fear, as it says in *Proverbs* (15:27): “In the *fear of the Lord* let all turn away from evil,” and in Psalm 118, “In fear of you pierce my carnal desires, for I fear your judgments.”⁴⁷

Thomas then concludes his organization of the gifts: “In this way it is clear that these gifts extend to *all* things to which the virtues extend, both intellectual and moral virtues,”⁴⁸ whether acquired or infused.

Let me add that the “gifts” also can be organized in relation to the three theological virtues. “*Faith* is evidence of things unseen” (Heb 11:1) and is

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 3, resp.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 2, ad 1.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 4, resp.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q. 68, a. 4, resp.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 4, resp.

further perfected by four intellectual “gifts”; “science” deduces practical conclusions; “counsel” (*consilium*) applies them to practical actions; “intellection” (*intellectus*) applies them to speculative demonstrative principles; wisdom (*sapientia*) includes both speculative principles and demonstrated conclusions. These four gifts, then, perfect faith in a way analogous to how their namesakes perfect unaided human reason.⁴⁹

Charity is further perfected by the “gift” of *piety*. This is why charity is the “rule” governing a “wayfarer’s” life.⁵⁰ Hope reveals two further gifts, “courage” and “fear of the Lord.” The acquired virtue of “courage” opens the “wayfarer” to “hope” for an eternal reward, and hope leads to a higher, positive infused “courage” to pursue that mysterious “peace which passeth all understanding.”⁵¹

“Hope” also is perfected by “fear of the Lord,” not merely “awe”—which is an awful translation. Here Thomas does not shy away from logic by trying to turn fear (a negative) into hope (a positive). We hope for beatitude, but hope’s flip side is fear of God, since “there may come to us *from him* some evil, . . . the evil of *punishment* [*poenae*]. But this is not evil absolutely, only in a certain respect; and, absolutely speaking, it is good.” This is not a paradox. In doing evil, we lose sight of our ordination to the good, so punishment is designed to re-order us to that good. “So the evil of punishment is indeed an evil, as the privation of some *particular* good, yet absolutely speaking it is a good, in so far as it derives from our order to the *last end*,” God himself.⁵²

Here we see the profound effect of using philosophy in theology. Thomas treats three distinct kinds of virtues or formed moral habits: the four *acquired* cardinal virtues, which can open us to the three *infused* theological virtues, which transform the rational *cardinal* virtues into *infused cardinal* virtues. And these in turn, can open us to receive the seven *gifts* of the Holy Spirit, habits of a sort best understood as “perfections.” And Thomas adds the *beatitudes* and the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit, which are neither full virtues nor habitual perfections present in us, but are *acts we perform*. By couching his analysis of these religious ideas using the philosophical notions of virtue, habit, perfection, and act, Thomas managed to produce a theological explanation which is the best aid I know of for us, living in Cardinal George’s time of “ruin.”

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 8, aa.1–2 (intellection); q. 9, aa.1–2 (science); q. 52, aa. 1–3 (counsel).

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 45, aa. 1–3 (wisdom); q. 101, aa. 1–4 (piety).

⁵¹ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 139, a. 1, resp. (courage); q. 19, a.11, resp. (fear).

⁵² Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 19, a. 1, resp.

The Cardinal Virtues In Patria

With the last article of *DVC* (a. 4), we arrive at the ultimate end: "Will the cardinal virtues remain with us in our heavenly homeland [*patria*]?" Should they not "pass away," as do the theological virtues of faith and hope, with charity alone remaining? Thomas replies that the cardinal virtues are different, arguing from Aristotle's dictum that "virtue involves the ultimate end [*ultimum*] of a power."⁵³ The "ultimate end" of the "civic virtues" of the ancients was personal and civic happiness in this life, which is why Cicero reportedly said virtues would be useless in heaven.⁵⁴ By contrast, "the ultimate end of divine power is not understood in relation to lower things, but in relation to something higher, the infinitude of God's own power."⁵⁵ Lying between these two extremes is a different case, where "different ultimates fall within one *line of motion*." This is true of the "infused" cardinal virtues.

Thomas illustrates with an Aristotelian example, the art of "building construction [*ars aedificatoria*], where the ultimate result is the completed form of a house." The motions of "laying a foundation," "erecting columns," and "finishing" the roof are all different and have their own ultimate ends; but they all are parts of "skill in building construction [which] is *one* and the same skill," since the "ultimate end" of all three is the finished building. Here "some of the actions produced differ in species, but the virtue is the same."⁵⁶

Thomas then concludes his treatment of the cardinal virtues by comparing their three different levels, using this notion of differing ultimates operating in *one line of motion*. At the low end are the *acquired* cardinal virtues. "Where there is specifically the same ultimate, there will be the same species of virtue, which will produce *the same kind* of action," such as acquired "temperance in me and in you, which achieves the same ultimate result, moderating the pleasures of touch." At the high end are *God's* cardinal virtues, which are the exemplar causes of ours. Their "ultimate end . . . is not understood in relation to lower things," like human virtues, "but in relation to . . . the infinitude of divine power. . . . Therefore, divine *courage* is his unchanging character, *temperance* the divine mind's focus on itself, *prudence* is the divine mind itself; and the *justice* of God is his eternal law."⁵⁷ Consequently, "not only in the action the virtues produce, but in the virtues themselves," acquired and divine cardinal virtues "necessarily differ in species."⁵⁸

⁵³ Aristotle, *On the Heavens* 1.11.281a1015.

⁵⁴ As reported by Augustine, *De trinitate* 14.9.12, and cited by Thomas at the beginning of his "response."

⁵⁵ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

⁵⁶ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

⁵⁷ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

⁵⁸ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

The infused cardinal virtues lie in the middle. “Where the ultimate ends of virtue differ in species, but its motion *falls under one line*, so that from one we arrive at the other, then some of the actions differ in species, but the virtue is the same.”⁵⁹ Thomas then adds his own example. The acquired virtue of courage produces “one ultimate result *before* battle, . . . moving forward to battle, another *during* battle, . . . standing one’s ground, . . . and a third *in victory*, . . . rejoicing.”⁶⁰ Same virtue, but different acts of courage. “Therefore, if the ultimate result which the wayfarer’s virtue attains is ordered to the ultimate result virtue in heaven attains, it necessarily follows there is specifically the *same virtue*, though it produces different *actions*.”⁶¹ So Thomas concludes:

Therefore, it is necessary to reply: These cardinal virtues have the very same *habit* here and there, though their *actions* are different. For here they produce acts appropriate to those moving in the direction of their ultimate end, while there they will produce actions appropriate to those already resting in that ultimate end.⁶²

Thomas, however, does not describe those actions in heaven, but humbly contents himself with quoting Augustine:

Justice will consist in submitting to the *rule* of God, . . . and prudence is neither preferring nor even equating any *other good* with God, while courage will be to cling as *closely* as possible to God, and temperance will be to *enjoy* nothing hurtful at all.⁶³

Conclusion

For Sartre and gullible Sartreans everywhere, human life consists in climbing a ladder while you are still making it—something that is, well, quite impossible. Such a life, encased in one’s own ego, is doomed to failure, even in our relations to those we try to love most, like Sartre in his love for Beauvoir, a failing many of her female friends tried to get her to face, but she never would.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

⁶¹ Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

⁶² Aquinas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp.

⁶³ Thomas, *DVC*, a. 4, resp., quoting Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.9.12.

For Aquinas, the ladder is already built; it is enfolded in the human nature common to us all, if only we can find it and climb as well as we can. The ladder comes in two sections, the rational and the revealed. If we stop at the rational level, such a life is tragic but capable of real moral accomplishment, as the Greeks saw. But Thomas's ladder stretches beyond to faith, so with help we can climb the higher section as "wayfarers" equipped to deal with the Sartrean degradations around us, perhaps repeating the prayer written by Pope Leo XIII in the nineteenth century, when faced with the twin errors of overweening capitalism and revolutionary socialism, a prayer that has again become popular at the end of Mass: "St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle." Such a life is devoted to the best in human accomplishments, not the ones where, as Marx said, "the animal becomes human and the human becomes animal," so prevalent now among his socialist followers, here and elsewhere. Our current choice, then, is stark: Sartre or St. Thomas. N.V