

St. Thomas Aquinas and the Virtuousness of Penance: On the Importance of Aristotle for Catholic Theology

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Introduction

THE TOPIC OF PENANCE (Greek: *metameleia*, *metanoia*; Latin: *paenitentia*) is of course central to the Judeo-Christian faith.¹ Both Old and New Testaments contain numerous calls for a return to God: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Is 55:7). John the Baptist is described as having appeared in the wilderness, “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1:4) and Christ himself starts his preaching with the words: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). Christ tells his disciples: “if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (Lk 17:3) because “unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk 13:5).² Particularly insightful are the nine homilies

¹ This is the revised version of a lecture given at the Center for Scriptural Exegesis, Philosophy, and Doctrine at Dayton University in January 2013. I would like to thank Matthew Levering for his invitation and his comments.

² See the still valuable entries in G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1942) and in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité: Ascétique et mystique. Doctrine et histoire*, vol. 10 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980).

John Chrysostom preached in Antioch in the years 386–87. In the second sermon, John explains why God forgave Ahab for having murdered a man whose property he wished to possess (1 Kgs 20). John paraphrases God's train of thought: "Do not think,' He said, 'that I forgave him without any reason (*haplôs sunekhôrêsa autôi*). He reformed his manner of living (*tropon*), and I changed my wrath and dissolved it. . . . If he had not changed his character, he would have suffered the consequences of the decision."³ Forgiveness is not granted unconditionally, or on the basis of a mere emotion but must be accompanied by a reform of one's nature, a change of heart.

Following the work of Servais Pinckaers, O.P., Maria C. Morrow has argued for the need to reconnect the virtues and the sacraments, in both the field of Catholic moral and sacramental theology as well as in the life of the members of the Catholic Church. In doing so, she correctly emphasized the unity that exists between the sacramental and the moral life in the case of penance, being both a virtue and a sacrament in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁴

My aim in this article is to explore the historical context in which St. Thomas accounts for the virtuousness of penance. I argue that the importance of this exploration lies in the fact that St. Thomas has a unique and insightful approach to pagan philosophy, exemplified by Aristotle. This approach, far from introducing an alien system of thought into the articulation of the faith, illumines that faith and illustrates the fruitfulness of St. Thomas's "hellenization" of the Christian faith.⁵ In order to do so, I first

³ John Chrysostom, "Homily 2.3.20," in *On Repentance and Almsgiving*, trans. Gus Christo (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 24.

⁴ Maria C. Morrow, "Reconnecting Sacrament and Virtue: Penance in Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*," *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010): 304–20.

⁵ The call for a "de-hellenisation," a return to the message of the Gospel that lies hidden under the accretions of "scholastic" speculations, is the central theme addressed in the famous Regensburg lecture by Benedict XVI. For a historical account of the notion of Hellenization, introduced by the Catholic Humanist Guillaume Budé (*De transitu Hellenismi ad Christianismum*, 1535), see Alois Grillmeier, "Hellenisierung—Judaisierung des Christentums als Deutepinzipien der Geschichte des kirchlichen Dogmas," *Scholastik* 33 (1958): 321–55, 528–58, revised in *Mit ihm und in ihm: Christologische Forschungen und Perspektiven* (Freiburg: Herder, 1975) 423–88; Leo Scheffczyk, *Tendenzen und Brennpunkte der neueren Problematik um die Hellenisierung des Christentums* (Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1982); more recently, Christoph Marksches, "Does It Make Sense to Speak about a 'Hellenization of Christianity' in Antiquity?" *Church History and Religious Culture* 92 (2012): 5–34; expanded in *Hellenisierung des Christentums*:

need to outline the idea of penance in classical antiquity and the reaction of some early Christian apologetics.

Penance among the Greek and Roman Philosophers

A different picture than the one sketched in the introduction on the importance of penance emerges from the writings of the Greek and Roman philosophers. There is, for instance, the saying of the Presocratic philosopher Democritus: “Penance (*metameleia*) over shameful deeds is one’s own salvation in life (*biou soterie*).”⁶ What Democritus is saying here, however, is merely that the emotion, the pathos of *metameleia*, is not without significance for the moral life: it prevents a person from exhibiting a moral apathy regarding his past and from making the same mistakes in the future. The value of retrospective shame at one’s misdeeds lies merely in the fact that it is a prerequisite for progress.⁷ It resembles what Seneca says, when commenting on the *adagium* he ascribes to Epicurus—*Initium est salutis notitia peccati* “the knowledge of sin is the beginning of salvation”—“he who does not know that he has sinned does not desire correction; you must discover yourself in the wrong before you can reform yourself.”⁸ The Greek Neoplatonic philosopher Hierocles of Alexandria (fl. 430 AD) will even claim that *metanoia* is “the beginning of philosophy (*philosophias arche*): the flight from both senseless (*anoeton*) deeds and words and the first preparation for a life that is without regret.”⁹ But these and other statements do never occur in a systematic context and in the end *metameleia* or *metanoia*

Sinn und Unsinn einer historischen Deutungskategorie (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012).

⁶ Herman Diels, Wilhelm Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1903; Walther Kranz, ed., 6th ed., Berlin: Weidmann, 1952), 55A43. Hereafter DK.

⁷ See DK 55A84.

⁸ Letter 28, 9, quoted from *Philosophische Schriften*, vol. 3 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999), 240: “Tempus est desinere, sed si prius portorium solvero. ‘Initium est salutis notitia peccati.’ Egregie mihi hoc dixisse videtur Epicurus; nam qui peccare se nescit corrigi non vult; deprehendas te oportet antequam emendes. Quidam vitiis gloriatur: tu existimas aliquid de remedio cogitare qui mala sua virtutum loco numerant? Ideo quantum potes te ipse coargue, inquire in te; accusatoris primum partibus fungere, deinde iudicis, novissime deprecatoris; aliquando te offende. Vale.”

⁹ *In carmen Pythagorae aureum commentarium* 14, 10, ed. Friedrich W. Köhler (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1974), 66.

remain merely an emotion that stands in the way of a morally good life or at least something that has to be overcome.

Plato never sees *metameleia* as a virtue or a commendable quality. On the contrary, in one of the rare occasions in which he uses this word, he writes that the soul that is full of “remorse” (*metameleias*) is not capable of doing what she desires. Such a soul is enslaved under a tyrant of an emotion.¹⁰

The position of Aristotle seems, at first, to be somewhat more complicated. In writing about the self-indulgent person in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 7, he says that such a person is “of necessity without regrets” (*metameletikon*)¹¹ and because a person without regrets cannot be cured, such a self-indulgent person is incurable. The reason that a self-indulgent person is without regrets is that he “stands by his choice,” he is convinced that his is the sort of man to pursue pleasures, that are excessive and contrary to reason. In this he differs from an incontinent person, who is apt to pursue the same excessive pleasures but not on conviction; he does not have the conviction that he ought to pursue such pleasures without reserve. An incontinent person therefore acts contrary to choice; he is carried away by passions, whereas a self-indulgent person acts in accordance with choice.¹² In this respect, at least, an incontinent person is better off and his incontinence cannot be called a vice in the same unqualified sense as the vice of self-indulgence. *Metameleia* clearly signifies in this context simply regret over what one has done unwittingly, and not guilty compunction.

In Book 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, in dealing with the characteristics of friendship as something that proceeds from a man’s relations to himself, Aristotle writes that a good man lives in harmony with himself, that “he desires the same things with all his soul.” Such a man therefore wishes for himself what is good; he “wishes to live with

¹⁰ *Republic* IX, 577e.

¹¹ *Ethica Nicomachea* (EN) VII, ch. 7 (1150a21–22): “ἀκόλαστος: ἀνάγκη γὰρ τοῦτον μὴ εἶναι μεταμελητικόν, ὥστ’ ἀνίατος: ὁ γὰρ ἀμεταμέλητος ἀνίατος.”

¹² EN VII, ch. 8 (1150b29–30): “ἔστι δ’ ὁ μὲν ἀκόλαστος, ὥσπερ ἐλέχθη, οὐ μεταμελητικός: ἐμμένει γὰρ τῇ προαιρέσει: ὁ δ’ ἀκρατὴς μεταμελητικὸς πᾶς”; see also *Magna Moralia* (MM) 2111a40: “At all events the incontinent man, when he has done something to which pleasure prompts, not long afterwards repents and reviles himself. It is the same with the bad man in other vices. For he is always fighting with and opposing himself”

himself” because he has delightful memories of the past and pleasant hopes for the future. But such a man also grieves and rejoices with himself “for the same thing is always painful, and the same thing always pleasant, and not one thing at one time and another at another; he has, so to speak, nothing to regret” (*ametameletos*).¹³

The contradiction between these two passages is only apparent. The emotion of regret, felt by the incontinent person, is not an active cause but merely a condition, necessary in order to verify an improvement. In Aristotle’s “perfectionist ethical scheme,”¹⁴ which emphasizes the character of the man of perfect virtue, there is no place for retrospective shame because such a shame would imply a disposition to do wrong¹⁵; hence *metameleia* is characteristic not of the man of perfect virtue but of he who struggles and often fails to be good. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Book 7, he writes: “the good man never finds fault with himself like the incontinent, nor the later with the earlier man, like the penitent, nor the earlier with the later, like the liar.”¹⁶ In sum, *metameleia* is viewed in a similar vein as shame (*aidos*)¹⁷: it cannot be a virtue because it is more like a passion than a habit.

The philosophical current with the strongest reservations against the usefulness of penance is the Stoa. Whereas one could say that Aristotle was not able to integrate *metameleia* into his moral philosophy, the Stoa was explicitly directed against any *pathos* that could disturb their ideal of *ataraxia* or mental tranquility. The Stoic Andronikos defines *metameleia*¹⁸ as a pain, a grief (*lupè*) about faults in the past, in so far

¹³ EN IX, ch. 3 (1166a1–29), here 26–29: ἀμεταμέλητος γὰρ ὡς εἰπεῖν. Aquinas comments that this is so because such a person always acts according to reason and does not readily have regrets. Thus he is at peace with himself. Note that Aquinas paraphrases Aristotle’s text *impenitentibus enim ut dicere* as follows: *non de facili paenitet* (*Sent. Eth.* IX, lec. 4; Leonine ed., vol. 47.2, p. 514, ll. 164–65; Marietti ed, no. 1809).

¹⁴ Charles L. Griswold, “Plato and Forgiveness,” *Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2007): 269–87, here 282.

¹⁵ See EN V, ch. 9 (1128b10–35): the sense of disgrace is not characteristic of a good man because it is consequent upon bad actions.

¹⁶ *Ethica Eudemica* (EE) VII, ch. 6 (1240b21–24): “ὁ δ’ ἀγαθὸς οὐθ’ ἅμα λοιδορεῖται ἑαυτῷ, ὥσπερ ὁ ἀκρατής, οὔτε ὁ ὕστερος τῷ πρότερον, ὥσπερ ὁ μεταμελητικός, οὔτε ὁ ἔμπροσθεν τῷ ὕστερον, ὥσπερ ὁ ψεύστης.” See also MM II, 1211a40–b2.

¹⁷ EN V, ch. 9 (1128b10–11): “περὶ δὲ αἰδοῦς ὡς τινος ἀρετῆς οὐ προσήκει λέγειν: πάθει γὰρ μᾶλλον ἔοικεν ἢ ἔξει.”

¹⁸ *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, ed. Hans von Arnim, 1905–24 (reprint, Stuttgart:

as they have occurred by one's own doing. Another Stoic, Stobaeus describes *metameleia* as an irrational passion of the soul.¹⁹ In his treatise *On Benefits*, Seneca writes:

The wise man never changes his plans while the conditions under which he formed them remain the same; therefore, he never feels regret (*paenitentia*), because at the time nothing better than what he did could have been done, nor could any better decision have been arrived at than that which was made; yet he begins everything with the saving clause, "If nothing shall occur to the contrary." This is the reason why we say that all goes well with him, and that nothing happens contrary to his expectation, because he bears in mind the possibility of something happening to prevent the realization of his projects. It is an imprudent confidence to trust that fortune will be on our side. The wise man considers both sides: he knows how great is the power of errors, how uncertain human affairs are, how many obstacles there are to the success of plans. Without committing himself, he awaits the doubtful and capricious issue of events, and weighs certainty of purpose against uncertainty of result. Here also, however, he is protected by that saving clause, without which he decides upon nothing, and begins nothing.²⁰

Ultimately for the Stoa, to repent is a foolish act and all folly is its own

Teubner, 1968), III, fr. 414. Hereafter SVF.

¹⁹ SVF III, fr. 563.

²⁰ *De beneficiis* IV, 34 (SVF III, 565): "Non mutat sapiens consilium omnibus liis manentibus, quae erant, cum sumeret. ideo nunquam illum poenitentia subit, quia nihil melius illo tempore fieri potuit, quam quod factum est, nihil melius constitui, quam quod constitutum est. ceterum ad omnia cum exceptione venit: si nihil inciderit, quod impediatur. ideo omnia illi succedere dicimus et nihil contra opinionem accidere, quia praesumit animo posse aliquid intervenire, quod destinata prohibeat." Emperor Julianus the Apostate (d. 363) also expresses the negativity of remorse in his *Oration for Emperor Constantius*. He writes that generals should not resent the insolence of kings but should endure their censure with self-control and serenely, "so that their whole life may not be filled with remorse" (*metameleias*). *Oratio* II, 50C: W. C. Wright, *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1913/1980) 134.

burden.²¹ The Stoic sage presents the culmination of the Greco-Roman mind-set. Against the background of its cosmic determinism and its pantheistic monism, the moral ideal of *ataraxia* leaves the Stoic sage with no escape. There is no Other to go to, there is no past or future to contemplate because, as the Stoic Chrysippus writes, all is governed by fate (*heimarmenè*), by that cosmic logos “whereby things that have been, were: the things that now are, have a present existence: and the things that are to be, shall be.”²² In such a worldview—a worldview that now and then resurfaces in history—any conversion is metaphysically impossible.

Even Philo of Alexandria, cognizant as he was of Greek thought and devoting a section of his *On virtues* (§§175–86) to *metanoia*, assigns a secondary status to *metanoia* as a virtue, because it depends on a prior error; just as health is the greatest good for the body, and recovery the next best thing, so too is repentance.²³

Christian Apologetics

Unsurprisingly, then, the early Christian apologetic Fathers felt the need to distinguish Christian *paenitentia* from the views of their pagan contemporaries and predecessors. This is precisely what Tertullian (160–225) does in the first chapter of his treatise *On Repentance*, titled “Of Heathen Repentance.” True *paenitentia* is about a change of heart that causes us to search for forgiveness for sins. The sins for which we seek forgiveness are not emotions but offenses against an externally existing moral obligation. What motivates a true penitent is therefore the awareness that the sin is an offense, offending above all against God. It is this penance that, according to Tertullian, we sinners should embrace “as a shipwrecked man the protection of some plank.”²⁴ The penitent is

²¹ Seneca, *Letter* 9, 22: *omnis stultitia laborat fastidio sui* “all folly is afflicted with a disdain of itself,” quoted from *Philosophische Schriften*, vol. 3 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999), 63.

²² SVF II, fr. 913.

²³ See Philo of Alexandria, *On Virtues*, trans. Walter T. Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 79–82.

²⁴ *De paenitentia*, ch. 4: *Ut naufragus alicuius tabulae fidem*. The “second plank after shipwreck” (*secunda tabula post naufragium*) is a popular expression in patristic and scholastic theology to indicate the importance of penance, after baptism as the first plank. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST) III, q. 84, a. 6. On the history of this expression, see p. 149n54 in the English translation *Treatises on Penance: On Penitence and on Purity*, trans. William P. Le Saint (New York: Newman Press, 1959).

essentially looking outward, he is foremost concerned about the impact on others or an Other of the harm his actions have done. But the pagan penitent is essentially focused upon himself, and he regrets that his sense of self has been damaged; that is, he feels distress at his shortcomings and he no longer wants to see himself in this way. Robert A. Kaster has insightfully noted that “it is this difference of orientation that makes ‘self-regret’ a perfectly transparent notion at the same time that it makes the idea of ‘self-remorse’ unintelligible; it is the reason why remorse is essentially a moral emotion, while regret is not.”²⁵ Whereas remorse can be expressed as “look what I’ve done to *you*,” self-regret expresses itself by saying, “look at me, what have *I* done.”²⁶ Tertullian illustrates this by saying that the pagans even experience *paenitentia* in respect of their good deeds: “they feel *paenitentia* for good faith, love, simple-heartedness, generosity, patience, and pity, in so far any of these meets with ingratitude, and they curse themselves for having done good.”²⁷ And, indeed, in his *On Benefits*, Seneca touches several times upon this sort of *paenitentia*.²⁸

Another example is Lactantius (c. 240 to c. 320). In book VI, chapter 24 of his *The Divine Institutes*, he comforts those who are in despair because they have left the way of righteousness. He quotes Cicero, who discredits penance because for him penance is the result of a rash, inconsiderate and unfounded opinion and that is precisely what a wise man should never have. This resembles Seneca’s position, that a wise man never changes his plans and he never feels regret because at the time of his decision nothing better than what he did could have been done, nor could any better decision have been arrived at than that which was made. In his reply, Lactantius does not directly address this opinion but offers the following example as a kind of counterposition: “if we think that our children are corrected when we perceive that they repent of their faults, and though we have disinherited and cast them off, we again receive, cherish, and embrace them, why should we despair that

²⁵ Robert A. Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁷ *De paenitentia*, ch. 1.

²⁸ Especially *De beneficiis* VII, 26.

the mercy of God our Father may again be appeased by repentance?”²⁹ Lactantius here presents the image of a God, unknown to the pagans: a God who is a Father even for the sinner. In fact, *paenitentia* is a gift of God: “God, knowing our weakness, of His compassion has opened a harbor of refuge for man (*aperuit homini portam salutis*),³⁰ that the medicine of repentance might aid this necessity to which our frailty is liable. Therefore, if anyone has erred, let him retrace his step, and as soon as possible recover and reform himself.”³¹ Such a *metanoia* is indeed possible, he says, because “as the uprightness of his past life is of no avail to him who lives badly, because the subsequent wickedness has destroyed his works of righteousness, so former sins do not stand in the way of him who has amended his life, because the subsequent righteousness has effaced the stain of his former life.”³²

St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas stands in the tradition of Peter Lombard, who in book IV, d. 14 introduces for the first time, so it seems, the idea that *paenitentia* is said of both the sacrament (the “exterior sacrament”) and the “virtue of the mind” (*virtus mentis*; the “interior sacrament”). He defines the virtue of penance as follows: “Penance is a virtue by which we bewail and hate, with purpose of amendment, the evils we have committed, and we will not commit again the things we have bewailed. And so true penance is to sorrow in one’s soul and to hate vices.”³³

The idea of penance as a separate virtue was not readily admitted by the scholastic theologians. William of Auxerre for instance in his *Summa Aurea* will explicitly oppose this idea.³⁴ Albertus Magnus will make a clear distinction. A virtue in the proper sense of the word—and

²⁹ Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* VI, ch. 24.

³⁰ This is reminiscent of Tertullian’s expression “as a shipwrecked man the protection of some plank.” See note 24 above.

³¹ Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* VI, ch. 24.

³² Ibid. For a recent study on this theme focusing on Eastern Christianity, see Alexis C. Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity: Eastern Asceticism and the Framing of the Christian Life c. 400–650 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³³ Translation taken from Giulio Silano, trans., *The Sentences—Book 4: On the Doctrine of Signs* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2010).

³⁴ See his *Summa aurea*, lib. 4, tr. 8, c. 3 (ed. J. Ribaillier, Rome: Collegium S. Bonaventurae), 201–6.

that means for him according to Aristotle—is a habit that directs to an intellectual or moral good. In that proper sense of the word, penance is not a virtue. The theologian, however, uses a broad definition of virtue, namely, everything that contributes to a right way of living. In doing so, the theologian names a virtue what in the *Nicomachean Ethics* properly speaking is named a passion such as fear, joy, hope, etc. Therefore *secundum dicta Sanctorum* penance can be called a virtue.³⁵ Bonaventure explicitly opposes the idea that penance is merely a virtue in a broad sense of the word but without giving, so it seems, a fully satisfying account.³⁶

But if penance is a virtue, why didn't the ancient philosophers—and this includes foremost Aristotle—examine this virtue? Already in his *Sentences* commentary, where he explicitly raises this question, Aquinas provides an answer by saying that the philosophers did not mention this virtue because the remission of sins pertains to God's providence regarding human actions in that God is offended by fault and appeased by penance. But the philosophers did not consider the virtues that lead human actions as directed toward God's providence, but as directed toward the human good. As Aquinas underlines, however, it remains possible to draw similarities between the human and the divine and therefore to use the insights of the philosophers as an *ancilla theologiae*,

³⁵ Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.* d. 14, art. 3 (ed. Borgnet, vol. 29, 408b–409a): “Dicendum mihi videtur, quod virtus sumitur proprie, et communiter: proprie quidem a Philosopho in Ethicis, et secundum hoc est habitus ordinans in bonum intellectualis vel moralis . . . Sic ergo propriissime loquendo de virtute, bene concedo, quod poenitentia non est virtus. Aliter sumitur virtus qua recte vivitur, et extenso nomine: et hoc praecipue a Theologo qui multa quae in genere passionum ab Ethico ponuntur, virtutes dicit: ut timorem dicit Gregorius virtutem, sicut et generaliter septem dona: et gaudium dicit Ambrosius virtutem, sicut et generaliter duodecim fructus enumeratos in epistola ad Galatas. Et spem dicit virtutem theologicam omnis theologus: et similiter charitatem, et alia quae secundum ipsum nomen passionem sonare videntur: et secundum hoc virtus erit generalius diffinita: scilicet quod quicumque habitus perficit animam rationalem secundum actum ordinantem in bonum vel a malo, quod ille virtus dicatur: et sic poenitentia est virtus, et timor, et gaudium, et huiusmodi, secundum dicta Sanctorum.”

³⁶ See Bonaventure, *In IV Sent.* d. 14, pars 1, a. 1, q. 1, resp. (ed. Quaracchi, vol. 4, 319): “Tertia positio est, quod poenitentia est virtus, sed non est virtus nisi extenso nomine virtutis. Nam virtus proprie est in dirigendo ad bonum—virtus enim est qualitas mentis, qua recte vivitur—sed poenitentia revocat a malo—Sed haec non videtur adhuc sufficiens, quia poenitentia non facit tantum dolere de culpa perpetrata, sed etiam facit emendare; unde eius est subiectum punire et Deo reconciliare; et hoc patet ex definitione et ita est virtus proprie.”

as it were.³⁷ Such a distinction between different spheres of inquiry is common in St. Thomas's reading of Aristotle and enables him to place the philosophical validity of Aristotle's thought within precise limits and at the same time to supplement Aristotle's thought in the light of the Christian faith.³⁸

But this is a merely extrinsic justification of the virtuousness of penance. Is it possible to give an intrinsic justification of the virtuousness of penance, a justification that proceeds on the basis of principles of Aristotle's ethics? This is the topic of question 85 of the *Tertia Pars* and more in particular article 1, where it is asked, *Utrum paenitentia sit virtus?*³⁹

Two of the three objections are based on Aristotle. In objection 2 it is said that Aristotle clearly states that virtues are not passions⁴⁰ and are about something perfect.⁴¹ Aristotle himself gives the example of shame in *EN* IV, ch. 9 (1128b10): shame cannot be a virtue because it is a certain kind of fear, a passion that entails a bodily change and is concerned with an evil act. Likewise, penance entails a bodily change (for example tears) and is about evil deeds.⁴²

In objection 3 it is said that, according to Aristotle in *EN* IV, 3 (1123b3–4), a virtuous person never acts foolishly but according to

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sent.* d. 14, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 3, ad 4 (ed. F. M. Moos, p. 588, no. 61): "Tamen philosophi de hac virtute ideo mentionem non fecerunt, quia remissio peccati, sive expiatio, pertinet ad providentiam Dei de humanis actibus, in quantum culpa offenditur, et poenitentia placatur. Philosophi autem non consideraverunt virtutes dirigentes in actibus humanis prout ordinantur ad Dei providentiam, sed prout ordinantur ad bonum humanum; et ideo de poenitentia mentionem non fecerunt; sed ex similitudine aliarum quas determinaverunt, possumus nos istam accipere. Sicut enim est alicujus virtutis, ut homo placet eum quem peccando offendit; ita etiam est alicujus virtutis, ut homo Deum placet, quem peccando offendit."

³⁸ See, for instance, the distinction Aquinas makes, on the basis of suggestions and hints of Aristotle himself ("happy as men") between imperfect and perfect happiness, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*; Aristotle only deals with imperfect happiness reached in this life. See *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 6, ad 1; I-II, q. 3, a. 2, ad 4; *Sent. Eth.* I, lec. 16 (Leonine ed., vol. 47.1, p. 60, ll. 215–36; Marietti ed., no. 201).

³⁹ The incomplete treatise on penance in *ST* (qq. 84–90) has nineteen explicit references to Aristotle, eight of them occur in q. 85.

⁴⁰ See *Sent. Eth.* II, lec. 5 (Leonine ed., vol. 47.1, pp. 91–92, ll. 138–85; Marietti ed., no. 299).

⁴¹ See Aristotle, *Phys.* VII, ch. 3 (246b23), and Thomas Aquinas, *Sent. Phys.* VII, lec. 6 (Marietti ed., no. 920).

⁴² *ST* III, q. 85, a. 1, obj. 2.

right reason.⁴³ But it seems foolish to deplore what has been done in the past, because it cannot be otherwise. But this is what is understood by penance.⁴⁴ Here Aquinas is implicitly echoing the objection of the Stoa.

Aquinas's answer proceeds in three steps. First, he concedes that penance means to deplore something one has done but immediately notes that sorrow can pertain to two different things. (1) It can denote a passion of the sensitive appetite and as such penance is not a virtue. (2) But it also can denote an act of the will and as such it implies choice. If this is so, penance will necessarily be a virtue. At this point Aquinas introduces Aristotle's definition of a virtue from *EN* II, ch. 6 (1106b36) as his principal argument: "Virtue then is a habit that chooses the mean in regard to us, as that mean is determined by reason and understood by a wise man." In the words of Aquinas: "virtue is a habit of choosing according to right reason." In his earlier *Commentary on the Sentences*, St. Thomas had used a similar reasoning to refute Albert's position that penance was merely a virtue in the broad sense of the word, a reasoning that is philosophically more convincing than that of Bonaventure.⁴⁵ If the determining fact in a moral virtue is indeed, as Aristotle says, the habit of choosing, then every habit making the right choice can properly be called a virtue.⁴⁶

In a second step, he establishes what it means to choose according to right reason regarding the act of penance. He says "it belongs to right reason that one should grieve for a proper object of grief as one ought to grieve, and for an end for which one ought to grieve."

Finally, he applies these two steps to the act of penance. In the act of

⁴³ See *Sent. Ethic.* IV, lec. 8 (Leonine ed., vol. 47.2, p. 226, ll. 35–45; Marietti ed., no. 737).

⁴⁴ *ST* III, q. 85, a. 1, obj. 3.

⁴⁵ See note 37 above.

⁴⁶ *In IV Sent.* d. 14, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 2 resp.: "aliqui dixerunt, quod ex parte ista poenitentia est virtus; sed non proprie loquendo, sed communiter, prout omnia laudabilia virtutes dicuntur, etiam si sint passionēs. Sed hoc non potest esse; quia cum actus virtutum non sint in dormiente, dormiens non posset dici poenitens; quod falsum est: et ideo aliqui dixerunt, quod ex parte ista poenitentia est virtus; sed non proprie loquendo, sed communiter, prout omnia laudabilia virtutes dicuntur, etiam si sint passionēs. Sed hoc non est verum; quia secundum philosophum in 6 *Ethic.* principale in virtute morali est electio; unde omnis habitus qui facit rectam electionem, potest dici proprie loquendo virtus."

penance, the penitent has a moderate, that is, according to right reason, grief over his past sins, with the intention of removing them.

The distinction between an emotional state and a voluntary decision, whereby only the latter can be part of a virtuous action—a distinction entirely in agreement with Aristotle—enables Aquinas to respond to the objections. First, penance is only a virtue if it includes a right choice on the part of the will. Clearly this is not the case with shame. Aquinas also notes another important distinction. Both penance and shame have to do with evil deeds but shame regards an evil deed as present, whereas penance regards an evil deed as past. This distinction has an important consequence. Remember that Aristotle said that a virtue has to be about something perfect. An evil deed as actually present obviously cannot be the object of a virtue. However, an evil deed as past can indeed be the object of a virtue, or, better, it should be the object of a virtue. It is entirely fitting to repent an evil deed of the past “for that is what belongs to “becoming virtuous”: one passes over from one state “being wicked” into the state of “being virtuous.”⁴⁷

Second, Aquinas vigorously rejects the objection that it is foolish to deplore what has been done in the past, because it cannot be otherwise. Such an objection reflects a fatalistic and pessimistic view of the world and the place of man therein, a view reminiscent of that of the Stoa. Moreover, the penitent is not trying to undo what has been done; this would be foolish also for Aquinas. Rather, the penitent has the intention—this is part of his choice—of removing the result of his past deed and this is not foolish. Penance is not about cancelling what one has done, but about freely and actively accepting what one has done and all its consequences and being willing to make amends.

St. Thomas continues investigating the nature of this virtue in article 2. In his treatise of general ethics, he had established that habits are distinguished according to the species of their acts. This means here that an act, which has a special reason for being praiseworthy, must have a corresponding special habit. Now what distinguishes penance from any other virtue is that it aims at undoing the result of a past sin, considered as an offense against God. Penance is therefore a distinct and special virtue. Moreover, penance does not merely have a general

⁴⁷ *ST* III, q. 85, a. 1, ad 2.

object in that it regards all sins but penance has to do with all sins inasmuch as these sins “can be remedied by an act of man in co-operating with God for his justification.”⁴⁸

If penance is a specific virtue, it must somehow have its place within the overall system of virtues. Now what distinguishes penance is not merely the sorrow felt for evil done but the voluntary choice to amend the offense committed against God. This amendment necessarily involves some kind of compensation and this places penance in the realm of justice (art. 3). This seems to be both impossible and harsh. Is it possible for a sinner to ever really amend for his sins? Can a sinner ever fully compensate for his debt owed to God? Aquinas draws upon Aristotle’s distinction in *EN* V, ch. 6 between civil justice, that is, justice between equals and relative justice. Penance is an example of relative justice because a man is subject to God as is a son to his father. It is because of God’s excellence that indeed a perfect equality between God and man cannot be established, as even Aristotle recognizes in *EN* VIII, ch. 7.⁴⁹ But in such cases, when one falls short of the other, Aquinas advises, one should do whatever one can and because God will accept it, it becomes sufficient.

Aquinas’s language of justice, compensation, amendment, and the like might sound harsh nowadays. Aquinas seems to acknowledge this. In one of the objections he quotes a gloss on Lk 6:21 (“Blessed are you that weep now”) that says that “it is prudence that teaches us the unhappiness of earthly things and the happiness of heavenly things.” This would seem to suggest that penance is a species of prudence rather than of justice. In his reply, Aquinas both confirms his position that penance is directly a species of justice, but also that in a certain way (*quodammodo*), penance comprises things pertaining to all the virtues.⁵⁰ Penance as justice toward God shares in the theological virtues. It comprises faith in Christ’s passion, hope for pardon, and hatred for vice, which is a result of

⁴⁸ *ST* III, q. 85, a. 2, ad 2: “inquantum sunt emendabilia per actum hominis cooperantis Deo ad suam iustificationem.”

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *EN* VIII, 7, 1158b35: “And this is most manifest in the case of the gods; for they surpass us most decisively in all good things.” For Aquinas’s commentary, see *Sent. Eth.* VIII, lec. 7, no. 1634–35. Aristotle’s idea that the distance between friends might risk that friendship to disappear is a major element of influence in Aquinas’s reasoning that Christ left his bodily presence in the Eucharist so that a union of friendship with Christ remains possible for us. See *ST* III, q. 75, a. 1.

⁵⁰ This is Aquinas’s reply to William of Auxerre’s position.

love. As a moral virtue, penance shares in prudence, which directs all the moral virtues and shows the penitent how he should accomplish an act of penance moderately (temperance) and with discipline (fortitude).⁵¹

Aquinas again underlines the importance of the will when he considers the subject of penance in article 4.⁵² The subject of penance as a virtue is properly speaking the will and its proper act is the purpose of amending what was committed against God. Penance as a virtue requires more than the passion of sorrow (*tristitia*), located in the concupiscible part, and more than a mere reflection (*memoria*) on past deeds, located in the memory, but requires a conscious choice on the part of the penitent in order to make that choice virtuous.

There seems to be a tension between the virtuousness of penance and Aquinas's view that penance originates from fear (*timor*). Here, however, the distinction between servile fear and filial fear is of crucial importance. Whereas servile fear makes a person withdrawn from sin through fear of punishment, filial fear moves a person to make amends of his own accord (*voluntarie*) to God through fear of Him. Servile fear is usually the first thing that moves a person, but the immediate and proper principle from which penance results, is filial fear.⁵³ This filial fear is ultimately grounded in "the love of charity by which God becomes our Father," according to Romans 8:15: "You have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry: Abba [Father]."⁵⁴

The importance of penance as a virtue is further underlined when Aquinas deals with the relation between penance and the other virtues in article 6. He defines penance as the "door to the other virtues"⁵⁵ because penance expels sins, and in doing so grace infuses the other virtues in us. The priority of penance is not a priority in the order of nature

⁵¹ See *ST* III, q. 85, a. 3, ad 4.

⁵² It seems to me that in the corresponding passage of his *Scriptum* (*In IV Sent.* d. 14, q. 1, a. 3, qa 1, ed. Moos, pp. 603–4, nos. 153–54), Thomas is somewhat more reluctant in affirming the role of the will.

⁵³ See *ST* III, q. 85, a. 4 co: "Sic igitur patet quod actus poenitentiae a timore servili procedit sicut a primo motu affectus ad hoc ordinante, a timore autem filiali sicut ab immediato et proximo principio."

⁵⁴ See *ST* II-II, q. 19, a. 2, ad 3: "per caritatis amorem Deus pater noster efficitur, secundum illud Rom. VIII, accepistis spiritum adoptionis filiorum, in quo clamamus, abba, pater."

⁵⁵ *ST* III, q. 85, a. 6, ad 3.

because what is necessary precedes what is accidental. The virtues of faith, hope, and charity are necessary for man's justification, while penance is only necessary after one has sinned. This means that in the order of nature the movement of the free will toward God in his fatherly love, which is an act of faith quickened by charity, precedes the movement of the free will toward sin, which is the act of penance. It is through love of God (*ex amore Dei*) that the act of the virtue of penance is directed against sin. However, in the order of time and after one has sinned, penance becomes the first step toward justification.

Conclusion

We have seen St. Thomas trying to describe penance in a positive way. He has done this not by simply rejecting the pagan philosophers as Tertullian had done or by simply presenting a biblical view as an alternative position as Lactantius had done. On the contrary, Thomas applies some key insights of Aristotle and most importantly Aristotle's idea that virtue is a habit of choosing according to right reason. In doing so, Thomas shows himself to be aware of the enormous potential hidden in Aristotle's ethical principles in order to philosophically illumine the virtuousness of penance as put forward by the Christian faith. **N&V**