FOR THE GREATER GLORY:
COURAGE, DEATH AND VIRTUE IN AQUINAS
AND HIS PHILOSOPHICAL INHERITANCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Patrick Mahaney Clark

__________________________
Jean Porter, Director

Graduate Program in Theology
Notre Dame, Indiana
July 2009
Abstract

by

Patrick Mahaney Clark

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that most deaths are contemptible and offer no opportunity for the exercise of virtue. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, considers the publicly shameful death of the martyr to be not only the highest exemplification of the virtue of courage, but also the greatest proof of moral perfection more generally. What accounts for this substantial divergence from Aristotle on the possibilities of virtuous action in death? This dissertation inquires into this question by examining and contrasting the noble death tradition of classical antiquity with Thomas Aquinas’ account of courage and its exemplary act of martyrdom. It investigates the theologically informed metaphysical and anthropological framework within which Aquinas situates his claims, and then explores the implications of these claims for his broader ethical appropriation of Aristotelian virtue theory. This project ultimately intends to show the extent to which Aquinas’ conception of virtue depends upon a theological, and specifically Christological, understanding of the relation between death and human perfection.
CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..........................................................................................................................................................vi

PART ONE

COURAGE, VIRTUE AND NOBLE DEATH IN THOMAS AQUINAS’S ANCIENT SOURCES......................................................................................................................................................1

CHAPTER ONE

ACHILLES AND SOCRATES: INITIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE WARRIOR HERO PARADIGM OF NOBLE DEATH......................................................................................................................................................3

1.1 Achilles, the Homeric Warrior Hero.................................................................................................................................3
1.1.1 The Homeric Warrior Ethic................................................................................................................................................4
1.1.2 Achilles’ Confrontation with the Warrior Ethic.................................................................................................................12
1.1.3 Breaching the Question of Happiness.................................................................................................................................25

1.2 Socrates, the New Achilles..................................................................................................................................................30
1.2.1 The Rise of the Polis and Athenian Civic Heroism: Pericles’ Funeral Oration.........................................................................................................................31
1.2.2 The Interrogation of Athens: Socrates’ Apology.......................................................................................................................36
1.2.3 Socrates contra Athens.......................................................................................................................................................48

CHAPTER TWO

SOCRATES AND ARISTOTLE: ANCIENT ATTEMPTS TO INTEGRATE VIRTUE, DEATH AND HUMAN PERFECTION......................................................................................................................................................54

2.1 Felix Socrates: Happiness and Virtue in and after Death........................................................................................................54
2.1.1 Toward a Conception of Human Happiness Independent of the Polis.................................................................................................................................................................................................54
2.1.2 Socrates on the Good Life and Beyond.............................................................................................................................63
2.1.3 Socrates on Wisdom, Fortune and Happiness.......................................................................................................................70
2.1.4 Death as the Fulfillment of the Philosophical Life...............................................................................................................80

2.2 Achilles or Socrates? Heroism, Philosophy and Noble Death in Aristotle..................................................................................84
2.2.1 Aristotle, the Polis, and the Diverse Species of Human Excellence........................................................................................85
2.2.2 Aristotle on Virtue’s Relationship to Pleasure.......................................................................................................................96
2.2.3 Aristotelian Courage.........................................................................................................................................................100
2.2.4 Is Socrates’ Death Virtuous according to Aristotle?........................................................................................................106
PART TWO

PRACTICAL REASON, PERFECTION AND FINITUDE IN THE THOUGHT OF THOMAS AQUINAS.................................115

CHAPTER THREE
THE PERFECTION OF HUMAN NATURE IN AQUINAS......................... 118
3.1 The Metaphysical Framework of Human Perfection..........................118
  3.1.1 Divine and Human Intelligibilities...........................................119
  3.1.2 Measured Freedom......................................................................122
  3.1.3 Participated Perfectibility, Rational and Nonrational..................125
  3.1.4 Eternal Law, Natural Law, and Human Self-perfection...............131
3.2 Human Perfection and the Moral Virtues....................................134
  3.2.1 Aquinas’ Effort to Define Virtue as Such.................................136
  3.2.2 The Connection of the Virtues................................................138
  3.2.3 Human Goodness and Complete Virtue....................................140
3.3 Human Perfection in Broader Context.......................................144
  3.3.1 Human Perfection and the Perfection of the Universe...............145
  3.3.2 Human Perfectibility and Divine Likeness..............................150
  3.3.3 The Fragility of Human Perfection and the Stoic Alternative......157

CHAPTER FOUR
DEATH AND HUMAN PERFECTION IN AQUINAS......................................166
4.1 The Paradox of Human Mortality..................................................166
  4.1.1 Returning to Aristotle on the Relation of Fortune and Perfection..169
  4.1.2 Aquinas’ *Via Negativa* toward the Final Object of Human Happiness...175
  4.1.3 Aquinas on Natural and Supernatural Virtue...............................181
  4.1.4 The Roadblock of Death..........................................................189
4.2 The Self-surpassing Teleology of Human Perfection.......................192
  4.2.1 Human Nature as Self-surpassing...........................................193
  4.2.2 Acting for Ends beyond Our Nature..........................................198
  4.2.3 Supernatural Virtue..................................................................205
4.3 Aquinas’ Theological Reformulation of Death’s Relation to Human Perfection...............................................208
  4.3.1 Prelapsarian Virtue and Human Perfection..................................211
  4.3.2 Original Justice and The Non-Inevitability of Death..................215
PART THREE

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON COURAGE, DEATH AND MARTYRDOM.............220

CHAPTER FIVE
THE ROLE OF COURAGE IN AQUINAS’S ACCOUNT OF HUMAN PERFECATION........................................................................................................223
5.1 Difficulty, Danger and the Imperfect Sovereignty of Reason..............323
  5.1.1 The Difficult Good........................................................................224
  5.1.2 Reason and the Passions I: the Aristotelian Analogy of the Principatus Politicus et Regalis.................................................................230
  5.1.3 Reason and the Passions II: the Pauline Analogy of the Lex Peccati...238
5.2 Preserving the Viability of the Human Pursuit of Perfection.............247
  5.2.1 Courage and the Passions.................................................................248
  5.2.2 Endurance versus Aggression: Rival Paradigms of Courage..........257
  5.2.3 Courage as the Ordered Conflict between Reason and the Passions...261

CHAPTER SIX
AQUINAS ON COURAGE, MARTYRDOM AND THE COMMON GOOD........269
6.1 The Natural Roots of Self-Sacrifice.........................................................271
  6.1.1 Courage and the Primary Inclinations.............................................272
  6.1.2 Courage and the Natural Love of God over Self............................279
  6.2.1 Courage, Original Justice and Providence.....................................292
  6.2.2 The Martyr’s Exemplification of Courage.......................................303
  6.2.3 Aquinas versus the Stoics on Suffering and Invulnerability..........315

CHAPTER SEVEN
RECONCILING ALL THINGS THROUGH HIS BLOOD: THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CORE OF AQUINAS’S CONCEPTION OF COURAGE..........................322
7.1 The Redeemer of Human Nature..........................................................323
7.2 The Courage of the New Creature........................................................329
7.3 Suffering Love in a Suffering World......................................................336
7.4 The Way, the Truth and the Life...........................................................344

BIBLIOGRAPHY..........................................................................................351
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the *Summa Theologiae* (II-II.106.6ad2) Thomas Aquinas wrote that “it is not unreasonable if the obligation of gratitude has no limit.” There seem to me to be few lines that bear more frequent recollection, especially when one is considering what one owes to the assistance and support of others. Since St. Thomas himself writes this line with specific reference to charity, “which the more it is paid the more it is due,” it seems appropriate first and foremost to acknowledge my infinite gratitude to the source and fulfillment of all blessings, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As with all our feeble attempts to glorify Him, this study would not have been possible without “the copious assistance of His grace.” Above all else, I pray that it may serve His greater glory.

I also owe an unlimited debt of gratitude to my teachers and advisors here at the University of Notre Dame, most especially to my director Jean Porter, whose scholarship, example and personal guidance have been invaluable to my intellectual development and to this study in particular. I extend my sincere thanks as well to the other members of my dissertation committee, Gerald McKenny, Jennifer Herdt and John Cavadini, who have been formative scholarly influences and extraordinary examples of how to live out the theological vocation. In addition, I would like to take this occasion to thank a few of the many other mentors and teachers whose expertise and generosity have been critical to my scholarly growth; to Edward P. Mahoney †, Stanley Hauerwas, Stephen F. Brown,
Matthew Lamb, Romanus Cessario, David Burrell, John O’Callaghan, Michael Baxter and Maura Ryan: I extend to you most sincere thanks.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my deep gratitude to my family: to my father and mother Douglas and Ann Clark, who gave me the gift of life and life in Christ; to my brother Andrew, my oldest and dearest friend; and most of all to my beloved wife Jennifer, whose steadfast love, support and encouragement have been my lifeblood throughout the course of my doctoral studies. She has been to me a true model of courage, grace and patience, and a source of unending joy. To her and to our four children—Anastasia, Symeon, Elizabeth and M.—I dedicate the following study, in union with the Immaculate Heart of Mary, our Hope, Seat of Wisdom.
But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, 
and no torment will ever touch them. 
In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, 
and their departure was thought to be a disaster, 
and their going from us to be their destruction; 
but they are at peace. 
For though in the sight of others they were punished, 
their hope is full of immortality. 
Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, 
because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; 
like gold in the furnace he tried them, 
and like a sacrificial burnt-offering he accepted them. 
In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, 
and will run like sparks through the stubble. 
They will govern nations and rule over peoples, 
and the Lord will reign over them for ever. 
Those who trust in him will understand truth, 
and the faithful will abide with him in love, 
because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, 
and he watches over his elect.

(Wisdom 3:1—9)
This first part of the dissertation outlines in two chapters critical points in the development of the paradigm of noble death in the ancient Greek literary and philosophical tradition. The particular figures we will study in these chapters present accounts of courage, virtue and noble death that deeply influence the early Christian conception of martyrdom, and eventually come to serve as the backdrop of Thomas Aquinas’ own theological synthesis of Christian martyrology and Aristotelian virtue theory. Taken in a broad sense, the inquiries of these chapters revolve around the death of two emblematic figures in antiquity as considered in the light of three classical Greek authors. The two figures are Achilles and Socrates, and the authors are Homer, Plato and Aristotle. The first chapter begins by providing a reading of Homer’s Achilles and an analysis of the warrior-hero ethos which his character epitomizes. Of particular interest is the crisis of motivation that Achilles experiences in Homer’s narrative, and the critical questions this crisis poses to the ethical presumptions of heroic society. In contrast to this reading, we then turn to Plato’s presentation of Socrates’ death in the Apology and the way it attempts to answer some of the conceptual difficulties raised by the Achillean warrior paradigm. With these contrasting figures in place, the second chapter expands
upon Plato’s alternative philosophical vision of human perfection and noble death, and then brings it into dialogue with Aristotle’s theory of happiness and virtue. While Aristotle follows Plato by emphasizing the preeminence of philosophical virtue over heroic prowess, he nevertheless attempts to retain the motivating power of the hero’s quest for excellence and honor as an appropriate response to human mortality. I hope to show that although Aristotle advances the Socratic vision of the philosophical life in important ways, his socially-dependent theory of human virtue reopens some of the same questions surrounding the limitations of human perfection that Plato attempts to answer through Socrates’ “proto-martyrdom.”
CHAPTER ONE

ACHILLES AND SOCRATES: INITIAL TRANSFORMATIONS
IN THE WARRIOR HERO PARADIGM OF NOBLE DEATH

1.1 Achilles, the Homeric Warrior Hero

Although on the surface, Achilles’ death appears devoid of the least resemblance to Christian martyrdom, the latter owes much of its development to the former. The figure of Achilles comes to represent in the ancient Mediterranean world the first major exemplification of noble death.¹ The nobility of Achilles’ death may be viewed from various angles. Most obviously, it represents an unsurpassed display of courage and fighting skill; less obviously but perhaps more remarkably, it is something he deliberately chooses as the price of undying glory. Although the exemplification of Achilles is already well established by the time of the composition and performance of the Iliad, Homer’s portrayal manages to deeply complexify his character while at the same time

¹ In much recent scholarship, the term “noble death” refers specifically to the conventional notion of a praiseworthy or venerable death as developed within the classical Greco-Roman context. In the present investigation, however, I purposefully use the term more broadly so as to soften the boundary between its designation as an ethical category in pagan antiquity and the corresponding idiom of martyrdom in early Christianity, which happens to bear many of the same conceptual markings. For more on the general correspondence between Greco-Roman noble death and Christian martyrdom, see chapters 1—3 of Jan Willem van Henten & Friedrich Avemarie’s Martyrdom and Noble Death (New York: Routledge, 2002), Carole Straw’s “‘A Very Special Death’: Christian Martyrdom in Its Classical Context” in Sacrificing the Self (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), chapters 2—5 of Lacey Baldwin Smith’s Fools, Martyrs, Traitors (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), chapters 2, 5 & 6 of Arthur J. Droge & James D. Tabor’s A Noble Death (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) and chapters 5—6 of David Seeley’s The Noble Death (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).
irrevocably establishing his iconic status as the quintessential warrior-hero. For Homer, Achilles exemplifies not only the highest form of martial bravery but also the tragedy and self-contradiction experienced by the hero in his struggle against mortality. In order to get a sense of this complexity, let us first set out the basic premises of the warrior-hero ethos in the ancient Greek world.

1.1.1 The Homeric Warrior Ethic

King Agamemnon’s confiscation of Achilles’ wife Briseis serves as the initial setting of the Iliad, and the first occasion of the “wrath” that will serve as one of the central themes of the poem. Both Briseis and another young woman named Chryseis are taken captive and awarded as war prizes to Achilles and Agamemnon respectively. They were considered géra: coveted battle trophies taken from the spoil of a vanquished enemy, awarded either for political reasons—as in the case of Agamemnon—or for martial valor—as in the case of Achilles. Agamemnon’s prize happens to be the daughter of an Apollonian priest, who comes to the Greek camp and offers Agamemnon an abundant ransom for her release. When Agamemnon refuses, the priest appeals to Apollo himself, who then sends a plague upon the Greek forces and compels Agamemnon to consent. This development places Agamemnon in a precarious position, since the loss of his géra entails a proportionate loss of honor and esteem among his peers.

---

1 Some commentators in fact take Achilles’ wrath to be the primary unifying theme of the poem. Its mention in the very first line of the poems indicates its significance. While I do not want to make any strong categorical claims about the significance of the first line of the Iliad or of epics generally, it stands to reason that the tradition of oral performance from which the Iliad took its form reserved some privilege for the first line, if only for pneumatic reasons, which one can only suppose derived from or developed into some thematic priority. See also Simone Weil’s famous “The Iliad: Poem of Might” in Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) pp24—55.
Honor in this social context possesses a very concrete, almost quantifiable significance. “Status in this society must be personally asserted, proved by action, and made manifest in the goods one wins,” remarks Andrew Ford. The primary meaning of the Greek word for honor—timé—is actually something near to “value” or “cost” in an economic sense. In this society, social standing hinges upon attributions of honor and shame. Tangible privileges such as fine food, possessions and tributes unequivocally indicate one’s social rank. Hence the moral code of the Homeric warrior-hero sees little meaningful distinction between the merit of honorable acts and the concrete benefits that are their due. The warrior seeks honor so as to attain its reward, and seeks reward in order to validate and confirm his honor. Sarpedon’s speech to Glaucus in Book 12 of the Iliad clearly articulates this reciprocal arrangement:

Glaucus, why have we two been honored so with meat at table and with brimming cups? All those in Lycia look on us as gods, and we’ve been given lands beside the Xanthus good for a vineyard or a field of grain. So we must be the first among the Lycians to stand up to the blazing fire of battle until some heavily armored Lycian says: ‘These are not common folk who rule in Lycia: these kings of ours, they feed upon fat sheep and drink wine sweet as honey, for they’re noble and fight among the foremost men of Lycia’ (12.310—321)


4 I use the masculine pronoun in an impersonal sense here and elsewhere only as it aids the coherence of my descriptions of historical social categories—such as the ancient Greek warrior-hero—which overwhelmingly if not universally restricted themselves to men. I mean thereby only to avoid anachronism.

5 Unless otherwise noted, all citations from the Iliad are taken from Denison Bingham Hull’s 1982 translation (Scottsdale, AZ), and are included in the text.
While the privileges these men enjoy bind them to expectations of leadership and valor in combat, such actions also serve to justify and reinforce their claim to those privileges. “The warrior’s privileges are a kind of reward granted in advance,” James Redfield writes. “The community accumulates a debt which it collects from the warrior on the battlefield.”

In turn, the polis esteems the warrior because in times of greatest danger it depends for its survival upon his willingness and competency to fight. This arrangement inevitably creates a certain asymmetry between the warrior and the polis: the privileged social rank the warrior class enjoys from the polis and the many benefits that come with it bestow a positive value on the virtues of war which is independent of the occasions that call for the actual exercise of those virtues. Thus, as Redfield observes, even “if his own community is not at war, the warrior will seek out combat elsewhere. Hence we find Glaucus and Sarpedon far from home, ‘fighting not on behalf of their community but on behalf of their own status within it.’”

Homeric society perceives making war as the preeminent occasion for displaying the sort of human excellence (arête) it values mostly highly; and the reason warcraft is valued so highly is because the very existence of each community continually depends upon its cultivation. War affords a relatively open opportunity to display this type of excellence and is thus the means for gaining honor in the form of social privilege and lasting glory (kleos) in the communal consciousness. In addition to the ordinary desire

7 Redfield, p100.
8 Cf. ibid., p99, where Redfield elaborates upon this claim: “A Homeric community consists, in effect, of those who are ready to die for one another; the perimeter of each community is a potential battlefield. Under these social conditions, war is perceived as the most important human activity because the community’s ability to wage defensive war is perceived as the precondition of all other communal values.”
for social ascendancy, such a prospect also appeals to a deeper longing to grant lasting
meaning to one’s limited existence. Seth Schein remarks that in the world of the *Iliad*,
war is the central “medium of human existence and achievement; bravery and excellence
in battle win honor and glory and thus endow life with meaning.”\(^9\) The perceived need to
proactively supply one’s life with meaning in this way parallels the pervasive sense of
life’s brevity within the Homeric worldview.

Mortality is the decisive condition that distinguishes humans from the gods; it is
what provides the final limit to human aspirations and accomplishments. From the
Homeric view, death circumscribes human endeavors in a way that gives them an acute
momentousness that they would not otherwise have. The second half of Sarpedon’s
speech to Glaucus gives voice to this tragic, yet exhilarating existential stance:

Friends, if we two could just escape this war
And live forever ageless and immortal,
I’d never be a leader in a battle,
Nor send you in to fight for honor’s sake.
But now ten thousand shapes of death surround us
Which no man can escape from, or avoid.
Come, let us give someone glory—or attain it (12.322—328).

Death is the final and universal reward for every human enterprise no matter how petty or
how grand. Establishing an enduring legacy of superiority to other mortals is the last best
hope of human greatness; and the optimal way to do so is to perform glorious deeds in
battle for all to see. Thus, as Andrew Ford puts it, the warrior-hero’s “craving for
recognition is ultimately an attempt to find compensation for mortality. The only terms
on which life is worth living is by venturing it in the struggle for honor and, if need be,

exchanging it in a glorious death that becomes a subject of song.”

For the ancient Greeks, mortals have no reason to hope for immortality in any transcendent afterlife, but nonetheless, the warrior-hero may hope to live on in everlasting fame “on the lips of living poets” who immortalize their glorious exploits within the imaginations of future generations.

This model of hope underlies the very origins of the term “hero” as Homer employs it. The noun heros originally denoted the title given to ancestors who became objects of ritual veneration in local religious cults which were quite prevalent at the time of the composition of the Iliad. According to the classic definition of L.R. Farnell, a Greek hero was “a person whose virtue, influence or personality was so powerful in his lifetime or through the peculiar circumstances of his death that his spirit after death is regarded as a supernormal power, claiming to be reverenced and propitiated.” The most explicit mention of these ancient hero cults in extant Greek literature is Sophocles’ account of Oedipus’ death in Oedipus at Colonus, which suggests that the benefits of one’s veneration were thought to be imparted only in the regional vicinity of the hero’s tomb, called the hêrôa. The importance of proximity to a unique site understandably meant that each hero cult became associated with the specific locale in which it could be

---


12 Cf. Schein, p48: “There is no immortality after death for Achilles or any other Homeric hero, except through being immortalized for his achievements in epic verse.”


practiced. Heroes were therefore a source of regional or tribal identity. *The Iliad*, on the other hand, makes no mention whatsoever of hero *cults* per se, but consistently uses the term *heros* to refer to living warriors. The scholarly consensus seems to be that Homer does this intentionally in order to emphasize a more Panhellenic Olympian view of the gods, which many see to be a part of the general trend toward Panhellenization in eighth century Greece.\(^{15}\) Instead of the decidedly unexciting prospect of becoming a posthumous object of local worship, Homer describes the hero’s quest for immortality rather in terms of their attempt to leave behind a lasting legacy and an enduring standard for excellence across all of Greek culture.

That one forges this heroic legacy by contending valorously in the face of mortality is a pervasive theme of the *Iliad* as a whole, but it is a specific trademark of Achilles most of all. In his famous speech to Odysseus in Book 9, Achilles recounts his unflinching commitment to pursue glory even if it means a foreshortened life:

> My mother, silver-footed Thetis, says
> I bear a double destiny of death:
> If I stay fighting by the Trojans’ city,
> I won’t get back home, but I’ll be famous always;
> but if I get back to my native land,
> I won’t be famous, but I’ll live for ages,
> And death at last won’t overtake me quickly (9.410—416).

His mother’s divine foreknowledge of the paths that lie before him allows Achilles the explicit choice between a lengthy but anonymous life of peace and a short but glorious

\(^{15}\) Gregory Nagy summarizes this view nicely in *Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1979) p7: “Such institutions as the Olympic Games and the Delphic Oracle, both stemming from the eighth century, are of course monumental feats of intersocial organization and also of intercultural synthesis. Significantly, the same can be said of Homeric *Epos* itself. From the internal evidence of its contents, we see that this poetic tradition synthesizes the diverse local traditions of each major city-state into a unified Panhellenic model that suits most city-states but corresponds exactly to none; the best example is the Homeric concept of the Olympian gods, which incorporates, yet goes beyond, the localized religious traditions of each city-state.” Cf. Schein, p49 and E. Rohde’s seminal claim in *Psyche: the cult of souls and belief in immortality among the Greeks* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925) pp25—27.
life of battle. Of course, Achilles opts for the abbreviated life, and in doing so reaffirms the superiority of displaying preeminence on the battlefield even over the ability to claim and enjoy the benefits of such preeminence.

At the same time, however, the ethos of the Homeric warrior-hero does not view courage in battle in isolation from other virtues. There are other virtues of a noble life that also express themselves in the midst of wartime. The battlefield only provides a prominent arena for the agon that demonstrates the hero’s superiority in victory and valor in defeat. Accordingly Homer takes pains to describe Achilles as possessing more than just the qualities that make him an unrivalled fighter. In seemingly every respect Achilles embodies superlative excellence, not only in his speed and physical beauty, but also in music, verse, medicine and love. His father’s famous parting counsel to him is given in sweeping, general terms: “be the best (aristeuein) and… excel all others.” Even in his own eyes he seems to have already achieved this status, declaring indignantly to Agamemnon that he will regret dishonoring “the best (aristos) of the Achaeans” (1.240—244). At the same time, however, his sheer superiority is attended by all the splendor of youth, which places his superlative attributes and achievements against a horizon of even greater things yet to be realized. Already the epitome of human

---

16 For a fuller account of Achilles’ description as aristos in the Iliad, see Katherine Callen King’s Achilles: Paradigms of the War Hero from Homer to the Middle Ages (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1987) pp2—13. Achilles’ most commonly cited excellence is of course his speed, but his beauty is also noted in book 2 (2.671—5). He is also the only person in the Iliad depicted as singing individually, and by himself (9.186—91). His knowledge of medicine may be presumed from the fact that he received healing drugs from the mythic healer Cheiron “the most righteous of centaurs” (4.218—9, 11.830—2), as well as his dispatch of Patroklos to care for the wounds of Machaon and Euryyplos as he views the battle from the prow of his ship (11.583—832). His exemplary love for Patroklos is perhaps his most significant non-martial virtue, one that acts as the occasion for both the ecstatic experience of most intense affection as well as the perpetration of the darkest and most inhuman cruelty.

greatness, his best years are yet to come, which means that he of all men has the most to lose by meeting death on the battlefield, and so his decision to do so is all the more heroic. In his famous reply to Odysseus in Book 9, Achilles himself reflects on the greatness of the cost he pays for glory:

My life is worth more than the things they say were won for Ilion’s well-placed citadel in peacetime long before the Achaeans came… For oxen and fat sheep are carried off, and tripods, even chestnut horses taken; but a man’s life, when taken, won’t come back when it has passed the barrier of his teeth (9.401—3, 406—9).

The enormity of the loss he is willing to accept for the sake of honor confirms the greatness of his deeds, and the sublime degree of excellence they represent. Achilles’ nobility consists not merely in risking his life as other warriors do, but in consciously surrendering it. Achilles excels others above all in this respect: having the most to lose, he nevertheless chooses to go to battle without any hope of survival. He knows what the extent of his sacrifice will be, and yet he still believes it a worthy exchange. His certain knowledge of his inability to enjoy the future benefits of his own virtuous deeds does not dissuade him from performing those deeds. In the figure of Achilles, then, Homer re-affirms the common view that human life is made most meaningful by the performance of extraordinary deeds in war, and that an abbreviated life marked by such deeds is preferable to anonymous longevity.
1.1.2 Achilles’ Confrontation with the Warrior Ethic

In carrying the warrior ethic to its extreme embodiment in the figure of Achilles, Homer also brings into clear relief the internal tensions present within that ethic. Achilles’ constant awareness of his choice of glory over longevity remains an ever-present cause of both motivation and torment for him. Two incidents in particular cause him to question certain fundamental conditions of the warrior-hero ethic without which his reasons to fight and thereby sacrifice his life become unintelligible. The first incident is the loss of his wife Briseis at the hands of Agamemnon, which brings him to question the reliability of the social economy of honor to bestow and pass on the full measure of the glory that is due him. Secondly, by the end of the *Iliad*, the grief he experiences for Patroklos brings him to question war’s paradoxical tendency to hasten the destruction of the interpersonal bonds the preservation of which ostensibly motivates society’s exaltation of the warrior. In both cases, Achilles’ initial consternation eventually gives way to raging hysteria. Even after his wrath finds satisfaction in violence, these incidents continue to disturb and frustrate Achilles not only because they wound his pride by depriving him of tangible rewards of honor, but more importantly because they represent real threats to the conditions under which he has set out to win the everlasting glory of the warrior-hero. His anger therefore points not only to a desire for simple revenge, but also to the struggle to grant meaning to a life limited by death—a limitation that seemingly both incites and threatens his quest for everlasting glory. Thus his “wrath,” which opens and thematizes the poem as a whole, is not entirely blind; it is at its core a rage against human fragility: the fragility of life itself and the fragility of the social bonds
that make its enduring meaning possible. Thus the specific character of Achilles’ wrath reflects (1) disillusionment with his society’s ability to hand on the glory it promises to bestow in exchange for death in battle, and (2) disillusionment with the preeminence of war as the chosen arena for displaying acts of the enduring excellence. In this way, his wrath confronts not only the specific obstacles to his self-glorification, but also the very warrior-hero ethos that makes his tragic fate possible.

Before progressing any further, we should give a fuller account of the unique character of Achilles’ wrath. It is not the normal sort of anger one would associate with internecine power struggles. The word Homer uses for Achilles’ anger toward Agamemnon suggests something more. “The goddess is asked to sing not just any wrath but divine wrath:” the term is mēnis, which designates an emotion normally attributed only to other-worldly beings, and one that among mortals Homer attributes only to Achilles. There are many possible interpretations of the meaning of this unique attribution of the term to Achilles. Certainly on the surface it makes reference to the fact that he is a demigod and so possesses unique emotional capacities, but together with Achilles’ pervasive awareness of his inevitable mortality it demands a more complex, more paradoxical understanding. In the narrative, the mēnis of Zeus and Apollo arises in response to some injustice directed to them, the perception of being cheated out of something due them. Such is also the case with Achilles’ anger at the beginning, where

---

18 One may regard these two sorts of fragility as part and parcel of contingent existence in general. As James V. Schall remarks, “The frailty of polities is, in some real sense, only slightly less obvious that that prospective passingness that greets each individual human being at birth” (Death and Political Philosophy, Gregorianum 71:1 (1990) p123).

19 King, p31 (my emphasis); cf. her citations in fn109 on p248.

20 For just a small sampling of such interpretations, see Schein pp138—163, King pp31—37 and Redfield p105.
Homer describes it as *mênis*. Although word *mênis* is not used to describe the anger that fuels the bloody rampage that follows Patroklos’ death, Homer clearly communicates through metaphorical devices the super-human quality of Achilles’ anger in the brutality of the killings he recounts. As several scholars have observed, Achilles’ vengeful fury strips him of his very humanity, such that he becomes capable of the kind of heedless violence common only to gods and animals. Both after the seizure of Briseis and the killing of Patroklos, Achilles’ wrath renders him incapable of identifying with the humanity of others. He is deaf to the Myrmidons’ pleas for solidarity (*philotes*), and to the supplications of the vanquished Lykaon. In both cases, Achilles’ wrath alienates him from the fundamental bonds that link him to his human community, signaling a

---

21 For more on the un-human character of Achilles’ anger against Hektor, both in the sense of it being both divine and subhuman or animalistic, see Schein pp89—163, King 13—28 and Simone Weil’s “The Iliad: Poem of Might” in *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) pp24—55.

22 Perhaps it is this image of the unrestrained Achilles that inspires Aristotle’s portrait of the apolitical man in *Politics* II.2: “Any one who by his nature and not simply by ill-luck has no state is either too bad or too good, either subhuman or superhuman—he is like the war-mad man condemned in Homer’s words as ‘having no family, no law, no home’; for he who is such by nature is mad on war: he is a non-cooperator like an isolated piece in a game of draughts....” The mention of Homer is very suggestive. We will return to this association later in our study (pp51—2). Whether or not he has Achilles in mind, the pertinent point here is that Aristotle claims that when the skills associated with warcraft come unhinged from the virtue of justice, they do not serve the distinctively social ends of human nature. As such, they are more characteristic to animals or gods, who do not require a *polis*. Hence Aristotle concludes, “The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature, and yet he who first founded the state was the greatest of benefactors. For man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all; since armed injustice is the more dangerous, and he is equipped at birth with arms, meant to be used by intelligence and virtue, which he may use for the worst ends” (Paul. Halsall, trans., from *Ancient History Sourcebook*, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/Aristotle-politics-polis.html).

23 cf. Schein, p97—99, who even argues that “the *Iliad* is as much about the *philotes* of Achilles as it is about his *mênis*” (97). Regarding his killing of Lykaon, Schein writes: “He does not speak sarcastically when he addresses Lykaon as ‘friend’ (*philos*, 21.106). Rather, he invites the Trojan youth to join him in the only solidarity and shared humanity that mean anything to him, the solidarity of their shared mortality, the solidarity of death.... For all its brutality, the scene with Lykaon serves to remind us of the hero’s humanity and tenderness, so that we realize not only what he has lost with the gentle Patroklos but also how much further into alienation and death he enters when he slays Hektor and, with him, himself” (pp148, 149).
reaction beyond the ordinary range of human emotion. His un-humanizing anger thus points to a potential point of contradiction in the Homeric ideal of the warrior-hero, insofar as it which the presumptive motivation for the hero’s pursuit of glory above all else. Both the character of Achilles in particular and *The Iliad* as a whole dramatically depict the hero’s glory as entailing both the radical destabilization of the human community and the horrifying de-humanization of the self.

The first of these crises is more explicit, and more widely acknowledged. After Agamemnon despoils Achilles of Briseis, two options are open to him: he can either retaliate violently and kill Agamemnon (I.191), or he can obey the counsel of Athena, hold back his *thumós*, and isolate himself from the rest of the group. He of course chooses the latter option, and becomes increasingly isolated from human community until his final reconciliation with Priam at the end of the poem. In response to Agamemnon’s flagrant violation of the commonly understood economy of honor, Achilles rebels against Agamemnon’s authority, and so is forced to abandon the community. Homer’s articulation of Achilles’ estrangement from the Greek community comes to full maturity in Book 9, when Agamemnon sends Odysseus to regain Achilles’ services on the battlefield by offering him a price of seven women, one of whom is Briseis. Agamemnon does not retract or apologize for his original action, but only offers what he believes to be a fitting price for the return of Achilles’ loyalty. Thus he does not offer what Achilles really wants—the return of his honor, and so Achilles refuses the offer. In doing so, he

---


attempts to extract himself from the very warrior-logic whose violation initially sparked the quarrel. Remarkably, he says to Odysseus:

I know that Agamemnon won’t persuade me, nor other Danaans, since they’re not grateful for endless fighting with your enemies. 
_Fate is the same for skulkers and hard fighters, honor (timé) is one for coward and for hero; he dies who has accomplished much, or nothing_ (9.315—320, my emphasis).

As Adam Parry has pointed out, Achilles’ choice of the word _timé_ in line 319 is nothing less than an oxymoronic misuse of the term that in its context can only amount to incoherence. But in the absence of any alternative meaning of honor, Homer can only express Achilles’ disillusionment by having him misuse the very term whose meaning he thereby calls into question.\(^{26}\) By using the word in a way that cannot convey any known meaning, Homer is able to express the concept’s significatory emptiness for Achilles.

If Parry is correct, then Homer is in fact bending Achilles’ language so as to gesture toward an unprecedented critical confrontation with the inherited warrior-hero _ethos_. His awareness of the inconsistency of Agamemnon’s original reason for going to war with his subsequent kidnapping of Briseis is meant to challenge Agamemnon’s claim to authority on grounds other than sheer power. For as King puts it, “if the leader of the Achaians is merely a rapist like Paris, there remains not even a principle to fight for.”\(^{27}\) But could Achilles actually be looking for a _principle_, some theoretical justification for foreshortening his life in order to make war? As Schein sees it, “we see [here] an expression of Achilles’ tragedy: although he can ask why the Greeks should be fighting

\(^{26}\) Parry, pp6—7.

\(^{27}\) King, p34. Achilles’ speech also entails a surprising claim of equality between Helen, the wife of a king, and Briseis, a slave taken as a war prize. Such a radical revaluation further signals Achilles’ abandonment of the traditional system of honor clearly differentiating the conquerors from the conquered.
with the Trojans, he has nothing to put in place of the only answer there is in the world of
the poem: honor and glory—an answer he has become unable to accept.”

Since Agamemnon is himself dishonorable, his community’s honor means nothing. Achilles
can no longer place his trust in the capacity of that community to bestow and pass on the
lasting glory promised to him by the gods. There remains then no coherent basis for
giving his life in battle, and so he withdraws, expressing his intention to return home to
Phthia. According to the interpretation of Parry and others, Achilles’ disenchantment
effectively paralyzes him, since he is left without any grounds upon which he can
proceed with an intelligible course of action.

A deeper tension in the Homeric warrior ethic reveals itself in the grief and
destruction that follow upon Patroklos’ death. One recalls that in Book 16 of the Iliad,
Achilles found himself torn between Patroklos’ appeal to relieve the grief (áchos) of the
Achaians (16.22) and his own áchos over the honor which Agamemnon unjustly deprived
him of (16.52,55). The force of his grief here pulls him in opposing directions. Unable
to see a way forward, he prays to the gods for the complete annihilation of the whole
world of warfare that surrounds him, with only he and Patroklos remaining:

O Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo,
Don’t let a single Trojan flee from death,
Or any Argive save ourselves be spared:
We two could break Troy’s holy crown of towers (16.97—100).


29 Cf. Redfield, p103.

30 cf. Parry, pp6—7, Schein, pp71, 105—109. King proposes that for this reason Achilles
effectively paves the way for a more individualistic, interior-based ethic that appeals only to the self and to
one’s personal relation with friends and the gods (pp34—36). Perhaps the text gives room to ask questions
that lead in this direction, but it would be anachronistic to believe that Homer himself would frame the
questions in these terms.

31 Cf. King, p35.
The vision of glory he wishes for here apparently does not require a display of martial excellence relative to a worthy foe or to one’s peers. His friend alone would be a worthy audience for this triumph, and a sufficient community in which the glory of his deeds could live on after death. In this way Achilles narrows the social context of the warrior code from the wider polis to the more immediate context of personal friendship. When even this most elemental of communities is destroyed, Achilles is then left without any societal structure whatsoever with which he can associate himself and to which he can entrust his deeds. The solidarity, or philotes that had been steadily waning throughout the narrative at this point shrivels to nothing, and eventually strips Achilles of his very humanity.

The most well-known articulation of this “alienationist” interpretation of Achilles is to be found in Simone Weil’s essay “The Iliad: Poem of Force,” which she wrote shortly after the Nazi occupation of France. Her basic thesis is that

The true hero, the real subject, the core of the Iliad, is might (force in the French)…. Might is that which makes a thing of anyone who comes under its sway. When exercised to the full, it makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him a corpse. She argues that the poem employs a peculiarly Greek “moral geometry” that symmetrically transfers the warrior’s de-humanization of others into his own de-humanization.

32 King, p34. In contrast with King’s view, however, I do not perceive this contraction to be tenable in itself, but only as an elemental constituent of the social unity that the polis achieves on a wider scale.

For violence so crushes whomever it touches that it appears at last external no less to him who dispenses it than to him who endures it. So the idea was born of a destiny beneath which the aggressors and their victims are equally innocent, the victors and the vanquished brothers in the same misfortune. 

Achilles’ simultaneously divine and animalistic rampage presents the perfect image of this symmetry between the perpetrator and victim of violence. Left without anyone or anything to fight for, the force that claimed Patroklos now draws Achilles into its heedless objectifying current. After idealizing the glory it offers, the warrior comes to realize that the logic of war entails his own annihilation. Self-identity then begins to erode, and with it any intelligible motive for action beyond the immediate promptings of combat.

Such is the sort of self-abdicating despair we see in Achilles who, utterly alienated by war, can find no language with which to express his sorrow except that of violence:

In the middle of them godlike Achilles armed. There was a grinding of his teeth, his two eyes Shone like the glare of fire, and into his heart There entered unbearable grief (19.364—367).

“This is the final secret of war,” Weil proclaims, “that the despair which thrusts toward death is the same one that impels toward killing.” For her, heedlessness of life is the prerequisite of courage in war. In order to be able to systematically produce the corpses of war, the warrior must first become one in his own mind. For the constant proximity of

34 Ibid. p39.
35 As translated and quoted by King, p23.
36 Weil, p45.
37 Ibid. p43.
death leaves no room for any prospect of future happiness; one’s death is always an imminent reality only momentarily suspended. “That soul daily suffers violence which every morning must mutilate its aspirations because the mind cannot move about in time without passing through death. In this way,” she concludes, “war wipes out every conception of a goal, even all thoughts concerning the goals of war.\textsuperscript{38}

While compelling on its terms, Weil’s interpretation nevertheless takes insufficient account of the ancient Greeks’ own self-understanding of mortality. Despite passages in the \textit{Iliad} that would certainly support her view, one must assume that on the whole the prospect of immanent death would not decimate the warrior’s motivation to the extent she describes. Taking the Homeric view on its own terms, one must suppose that the prospect of everlasting glory was indeed sufficient motivation—indeed the highest possible—for pursuing daring acts of valor in war. At the same time, however, Weil’s analysis remains insightful with regard to the timeless paradox of the warrior’s eager immersion in the very destruction and dissolution he wishes to spare others. James Redfield explains the paradox this way:

The community is secured by combat, which is the negation of community; this generates a contradiction in the warrior’s role. His community sustains him and sends him to his destruction. On behalf of the community he must leave community and enter a realm of force. The warrior can protect the human world against force only because he himself is willing to use and suffer force.’\textsuperscript{39}

In other words, the same phenomenon on which the community depends and according to which it bestows social privilege destroys by its nature the bonds of fellowship that connect the warrior with the community. The intelligibility of the warrior \textit{ethos} is rooted in communal structures that its constitutive activity destroys. Thus for the Homeric

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. p41.
\textsuperscript{39} Redfield, p101.
warrior-hero, “the price of individual self-assertion and self-fulfillment is social annihilation.”

Twice the Iliad recounts Achilles’ break from and eventual return to the ethical expectations of his community. Achilles disaffiliates himself from Agamemnon and the Greek alliance by refusing to fight, but then Patroklos’ death drives him to rejoin the battle against Troy. In response, Achilles’ inhuman display of cruelty to Lykaon and vicious desecration of Hektor’s corpse once again places his actions outside the bounds of the warrior code. Only when Priam’s entreaty stirs his compassion does Achilles revert to a recognizable mode of behavior. But as Adam Parry and others have pointed out, there is really no other option for him in the end. The universally accepted ways of experiencing and expressing reality within the heroic worldview are too deeply etched into his modes of thought and language to offer Homer any other path of resolution. It is a testament to the poem’s greatness that Homer nevertheless left the world he described otherwise than he found it, and particularly so in the case of Achilles.

Homer’s Achilles is a portrait of a superlatively glorious, yet superlatively tragic hero. His excellence raises him above the level of his peers, and yet in the end his motivation to pursue preeminence at the cost of his life turns out to be dependent upon the very community he seeks to transcend, a community with which he can thus no longer fully identify himself. “Achilles’ tragedy, his final isolation,” writes Parry, “is that he can in no sense… leave the society which has become alien to him.” Despite having attained a critical distance from it, Achilles cannot opt out of the communally defined ethos that gives his actions their intelligibility. In the end he must choose

---

40 Schein, p82.
41 Parry, p7.
between two self-contradictory paths: either he continues to pursue a socially-dependent legacy built upon the destruction of sociality, or else he must accept without any consolation death’s ultimate annihilation of his identity and accomplishments. It is not certain which one he ultimately chooses. On the one hand, he returns Hektor’s body, heeds his mother’s advice to “remember food and bed,” and eventually re-enters the basic patterns of social life. On the other hand, he speaks of himself at the end as if he has already joined the community of the dead. Homer thus depicts the culmination of Achilles’ heroism as the courage to simply go on living in the face of the overwhelming trauma of war, which humankind’s common contention with mortality has inspired. In this sense, Achilles’ haunting awareness of his own mortality becomes through the course of the *Iliad* not simply what motivates the hero, but what defines his very essence.

Achilles’ acknowledgement of his own mortality is therefore at the heart of both the glorious and tragic nature of his life, and of the heroic vision of human greatness that he represents. In her book *The Therapy of Desire, Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Martha Nussbaum argues that the awareness of finitude is an essential condition for the human virtues conveyed by Homer and the Greek literary tradition as a whole. Courage, for instance, means little without the possibility of death since courage names that quality of character which impels one to pursue a good even at the risk of ultimate loss. The depth of this risk illuminates the correlative value of the goods for which it is

---

42 *Iliad* 24.128—132.
43 King, pp37—45.
44 See *Iliad* 24.627—648, where Achilles’ eats once more with Priam and then prepares for the sleep he has refused since Patroklos’ death, as well as 24.675—676 where Homer brings the poem to a close by reuniting Achilles with Briseis in the marriage bed.
accepted; in Achilles’ case, the good is that of lasting glory and friendship. In contrast to the frivolous and superficial exploits of the gods who, without any sense of finitude to constrain or impel them, seem confined to a capricious and almost insouciant existence, Achilles’ deeds are heroic precisely because they entail the risk of loss. “In heaven there is, in two senses, no Achilles,” Nussbaum remarks, “no warrior risking everything he is and has, and no loving friend whose love is such that he risks everything on account of his friend. Friendship so differently constituted will not be the same thing, or have the same value.” For Nussbaum mortality is a fundamental condition of the intelligibility of the ancient Greek ethos; as we noted before, it is what distinguishes gods from human beings, and what gives human actions such urgency and importance. Yet the figure of Achilles should also remind us that mortality is not only a limitation, but also a challenge to the enduring validity and meaning of any human life.

While the acceptance of death renders Achilles’ avenging of Patroklos an especially courageous and noteworthy act, it is at the same time the cause of his own tragic end. From a cultural or literary perspective, Achilles may win everlasting fame for his acts of awe-inspiring greatness and aggression, but from his own personal point of view, it seems as if these very same qualities undermine the social bonds by which his fame might assume any real value for him. In other words, the motivational structure of Achilles’ actions turns out to be in a sense self-defeating: while at first death seems a price worth paying for undying glory and then—when that prospect is placed in doubt—worth the honor of a dead friend, at the end of the story we find Achilles is left with nothing more to die for, and therefore nothing more to live for. There remains nothing

---

from which to draw motivation to act, and so he speaks as if he has already joined the
community of the dead. Having arrived at this destination, does he regard his life with
satisfaction? Does he believe he has lived a happy life?

Although Homer does not answer such questions directly, he provides us with a
less than consoling portrait of the dead Achilles. Book 11 of the Odyssey depicts
Odysseus in the underworld, encountering Achilles among the shades of the dead. In
greeting his old rival, Achilles asks Odysseus what has brought him to “the House of
Death—where the senseless, burnt-out wraiths make their home.”\footnote{The Odyssey. Robert Fagles, trans. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1994) XI.539—540, p265.} This rather deflated
description is not lost on cunning Odysseus, who attempts to console Achilles by
contrasting the latter’s lasting fame in death with his own continuing hardships in life:

My life is endless trouble.
But you, Achilles,
there’s not a man in the world more blest than you—
there never has been, never will be one.
Time was, when you were alive, we Argives
honored you as a god, and now down here, I see,
you lord it over the dead in all your power.
So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles.\footnote{Ibid. XI.541—554, p265.}

Achilles will have none of it:

No winning words about death to \textit{me}, shining Odysseus!
By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
than rule down here over all the breathless dead.\footnote{Ibid. XI.543—546, p265.}

Even here Homer’s Achilles does not buy into the ethical presumptions of heroic society,
although Odysseus’ reference to Achilles’ hegemony among the dead might suggest that
even here he cannot escape its influence. One cannot but conclude that, now knowing
fully what death entails, he may have done things differently in his days above ground, perhaps following through with the intention he expressed to Odysseus in *Iliad* 9 to pack up his ship and return home to Phthia. In this way, as Katherine King notes, “Achilles’ martial heroism and death provide a foil to Odysseus’s new heroism of survival.”50 But in any case, by articulating such an account of death through the mouthpiece of no less than the emblematic hero of the ancient Greek world, Homer issues a forceful challenge to the heroic *ethos*, inasmuch as his understanding of what death really is seems to threaten the standard motivation sustaining that *ethos*—the enjoyment of honor in life and glory in death. In fact, Plato believes the passage to be sufficiently subversive to “men who are fighters” that he lists it first among the sayings in the Greek literary canon he proposes to expunge.51

1.1.3 Breaching the Question of Happiness

Homer of course does not construct a philosophy of happiness as such, but his epics do reflect a value system of socially dependent goods that imply shared judgments regarding the nature of human excellence. In the world of the *Iliad*, these goods display themselves in outward skills or crafts that contribute to the preservation and flourishing of the *polis*, skills such as medicine, music, rhetoric, athletics or war. In his classic work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the common public transparency of ancient ethical reasoning is one essential characteristic that differentiates it from modern modes of morality. In heroic society, he writes,

---

50 King, p47.
51 *Republic* III, 386c.
To judge a man is… to judge his actions. By performing actions of a particular kind in a particular situation a man gives warrant for judgment upon his virtues and vices; for the virtues just are those qualities which sustain a free man in his role and which manifest themselves in those actions which his role requires…. Morality and social structure are in fact one and the same in heroic society.\(^\text{52}\)

Homeric virtue thus derives its value from public approbation of the capacities and skills necessary for continued participation in the forms of cooperative rivalry (agôn) that continually sustain and perfect the polis. In this sense, then, the polis itself is nothing more than an ordered constellation of these self-perpetuating activities, or “practices” as MacIntyre terms them. The principal source of motivation for participating in these practices is the prospect of honor and social membership alongside the correlative disincentives of shame and ostracism. Honor is bestowed by one’s community for excelling in forms of competitive activity upon which the polis depends, whose form and merits are already predetermined.

One aspect of these social practices that MacIntyre does not mention is the role of human mortality in the relation of individual aims to the aims of the polis. MacIntyre continually argues that in heroic society, notions of virtue and are inseparable from broader social practices. Hence he contends that conceptions of happiness are entirely bound up with the awareness of one’s fixed role within the community: their existential attitude according to him is simply “I have until my death to do what I have to do.”\(^\text{53}\)

Thus the quality of one’s life and death are dictated by one’s social role, such that “to be virtuous is not to avoid vulnerability and death, but rather to accord them their due.”\(^\text{54}\)

Yet a similar point may be made in the opposite direction: the fact of human mortality

\textit{After Virtue}. (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p122.

\textit{After Virtue}, p126.

Ibid. p129.
may serve not only as the initial motivation for individuals to form *poleis* in the first place, but also as the continuing motivation for individuals to participate in their constitutive practices. The individual dies, but the city lives on; and the individual has the opportunity to live on in the memory of their city. As James Colaiaco observes, in this society “only honor and fame can soften the blow of death; without honor and fame, life for Homer’s warriors is not worth living.”55 Whatever else contributes to the conception of happiness in heroic culture, this one conviction is unassailable: it is better to be dead that to live in shame. We see this entrenched principle in Sarpedon’s speech to Glaucus, in Achilles’ decision to fight Hektor, and in Ajax’s eventual suicide. And yet if my portrayal of Achilles is accurate, then it is precisely this axiom of the warrior *ethos* that Homer calls into question.

In the figure of Achilles, Homer seems to challenge any blithe acceptance of death in virtue of one’s social role. “Death in Homer is an unmixed evil,”56 writes Colaiaco, and it is Achilles who is able to see it as such. For Homer, the best that the dead may hope for is an opportunity to be grieved properly and hallowed in memory. Achilles’ disillusionment at the failure of the warrior code sows substantial doubt with regard these hopes, and thereby increases the risk death poses for the hero’s actions. Achilles deliberates not simply on how to give death its due, but how death can give him *his* due: “Not of equal value to my life are all the possessions held in Troy,” he tells Odysseus in Book 9. Staying back from battle in protest, he not only bargains with Agamemnon to regain his rightful honor, but in a deeper sense he is negotiating with

56 Ibid. p127.
death itself, in hopes of maximizing the glory (kleos) it may render him in exchange for his life. The terms of this exchange are by no means fixed ahead of time; he places upon himself the responsibility of securing a death worthy of his life, a responsibility that eventually leads him to crisis.

Achilles’ crisis revolves around his ongoing struggle with mortality. When it comes to a head and he enters battle in order to kill Hektor and thereby accept his own death, Homer portrays him as taking on the characteristics of the both gods and animals. Whatever he is at this critical moment, it is not human; in going out to meet his preordained death, he in a sense loses his human nature. Achilles finally goes to battle not so much because he has finally found a satisfactory motive and occasion for his death, but rather because his own consciousness of mortality—that factor which has hitherto differentiated him from both the gods and animals—has disappeared. In refusing Lykaon’s supplication on the battlefield, his reasoning is not so much a deliberative judgment as a despairing and dismissive excuse:

So, friend, you’ll die. Why all this fuss about it? Patroklos was a better man than you. Do you not see how fine and great I am with a great father and immortal mother? Yet even I’ll meet destiny and doom… (21.107—110).

Death here appears more as an equalizer of human worth than a means for its differentiation. It is as if Achilles is saying, “We all have to die, Lykaon. Why not now? What difference does it make, after all?” Such a sentiment signals the abandonment of his previous task of meticulously discriminating the terms of his death, bargaining for its maximal glory.
What motivates Achilles to meet his fate in the end is not the result of any sense of duty (however unconscious) to fulfill his role in the community or any cost-benefit analysis of life versus glory, but rather the expression of the inhuman *menis*, which thematizes his character as a whole, as well the entire epic itself. It is the climactic revelation of the hero’s ultimately futile rage against mortality—a rage that, ironically, only hastens the inevitable. As MacIntyre puts it, the heroes “who pursue that course which entitles them to the happiness that is represented by orchards and cornfields, by life with Andromachea or Penelope, pursue a course whose characteristic end is death.”

In the process of pursuing this course, Achilles becomes unable to make his own death intelligible, and is thus rendered virtually dead by the end of the *Iliad*, and miserably so in the *Odyssey*. According to Katherine King, Achilles’ final recognition of the tragedy of his life in Book 24 signifies “not loss, but essence: …the essence of humanity [being] mortality—and the grief which is inherent in [it].”

It is a commonplace in Homeric scholarship to contrast the *Iliad* with the *Odyssey* in these terms, pointing to the opposing triumph of survival, domestic life and peaceful existence in the latter. That Odysseus became an established hero in his own right, representing new—or at least contrasting—virtues is no doubt true and enormously significant, but their exposition lies beyond the scope of current study. However, despite the considerable ethical importance of Odysseus’ peculiar form of heroism, the fundamental challenge to the motivational structure of the heroic warrior code issued by the tragedy of Achilles remains unanswered. (Odysseus, after all, had to contend with his death at some point.) As MacIntyre rightly comments, “the *Iliad* puts in question what

---

57 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p127.
58 King, p40.
neither Achilles nor Hektor [themselves] can put in question.” Homer is thus able to invite his audience to inquire into whether the weight of a hero’s glory is in fact greater than the weight of death. His timeless epic bids its readers to engage such vital questions as “whether it can remain true that a human life as a whole can be envisaged as a victory or a defeat and what winning and losing really amount to.”\textsuperscript{59} Such inquiries eventually come to comprise the province of a new form of cooperative practice peculiar to the Greek \textit{polis}, that of philosophy, and alongside it develops a new, alternative paradigm of heroism with a entirely new understanding of the nature of courage and the meaning of death.

1.2 Socrates, the New Achilles

Having already highlighted the unique significance of Achilles for ancient Greek ethics, our investigation may now turn its focus to the figure that plays by far the most pivotal role in the development of the classical noble death tradition, a tradition from which the early Christian conception of martyrdom then draws much of its inspiration. “If Jesus represented a new Moses,” writes James Colaiaco, “Socrates represented a new Achilles.”\textsuperscript{60} This section will devote itself to exploring the meaning of the latter part of this claim, although with an eye to the claim made in subsequent chapters that Jesus’ representation as a new \textit{Socrates} plays a decisive role in the early development of the notion of martyrdom in early Christianity. The death of Socrates is the arena of classical philosophy with which traditional theological explanations of Christian martyrdom—and perhaps early Christian ethics in general—feel most at home. The poet Shelley’s

\textsuperscript{59} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 128, 130.  
\textsuperscript{60} Colaiaco, \textit{Socrates Against Athens}, p139.
reference to Socrates as “the Jesus Christ of Greece,” made famous by Voltaire’s subsequent reference to Jesus as “the Socrates of Palestine,” offers a glimpse of the perennial pairing of the two by thinkers from Origen to Erasmus to Ficino to Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Derrida and beyond. Many scholars even contend that the figure of Socrates exerts a determinative influence on the New Testament itself, particularly with regard to the portrayal of Jesus’ teaching and death in *Luke-Acts*. Indeed, Plato’s accounts of Socrates’ trial and death anticipate the gospels in offering a compelling portrait in defense of those who would accept persecution and execution rather than denounce their convictions. While the treatment of these accounts below should help clarify how this comparison may be so applied, its principal point of comparison remains the heroism of Achilles. After making the case that Plato presents Socrates’ practice of philosophy as representing a new paradigm of heroism and Socrates himself as the “new Achilles,” the third chapter will then inquire into whether Socrates, in critiquing the heroic conceptions of virtue and happiness, provides a contrasting motivational framework that can justify his own preference for virtue—and not glory—even above life itself.

1.2.1 The Rise of the *Polis* and Athenian Civic Heroism: Pericles’ Funeral Oration

However, before engaging Socrates’ confrontation with Athens, which serves as the backdrop of the trial and death that comprise his “philosophical heroism,” we must briefly acknowledge the new role of the organized *polis* in the general understanding of

---

61 For a learned and enjoyable summary of the appropriation of Socrates in the Christian context by these and other major theological thinkers, see chapter 5 of Emily Wilson’s book *The Death of Socrates* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007) pp141—169.
heroism and human excellence in his time. While it is of course beyond the scope of this essay to fully chronicle the social and cultural developments that differentiate “dark age” Homeric society from the Greek poleis of the 7th—5th centuries BCE, it will nevertheless prove helpful to review some basic cultural and ethical characteristics of social life in the wake of the collective political reforms of lawgivers such as Lycurgus and Solon. Such reforms, though certainly diverse in their particular proposals, shared the common trait of collectivizing and subordinating the activities of individuals and households in service to the state. Public service of this sort was not thought of as an optional privilege, but as a strict duty that conditioned the citizen’s ability to claim membership in the community. For both Solon and Lycurgus, the well-being of the community took precedence over the well-being of any individual or isolated group within it. At the root of Solon’s concept of social order was the concept of diké, the divine principle of justice governing the arrangement and function of the elements of the cosmos in harmonious concert with one another; he believed diké should likewise inform the arrangement and function of individuals in relation to the social whole. Just as the proper function of a single cell is determined in relation to the proper function of the body in which it dwells, so should the well-being of citizens be measured by their service to the corporate polis. “With Solon,” Colaiaco writes, “we see a mover to engender a sense of collective responsibility, subordinating the interests of individuals and classes to the good of the polis.”62 One prime example of this subordination is the heightened military organization of the time, and in particular the development of the hoplite phalanx. Each Athenian citizen was responsible for obtaining his own armor, shield and spear with which to fight alongside their compatriots. The tight, disciplined formation of the phalanx demanded a higher

---

62 Colaiaco, p95—96.
degree of organization, greater training and a new, more coordinated battlefield
strategy.\textsuperscript{63} Whether or not it was ever an historical reality, the Homeric portrait of the
lone individual displaying his dominance through singular acts of prowess was by this
time a relic of the past.

As a result, the preeminence of an Achilles became transferred to the level of the
\textit{polis} as a whole, and was no longer a valid aspiration for any individual citizen. In his
\textit{Politics}, Aristotle plainly describes this primacy of the \textit{polis} in terms that disclose the
great distance between ancient and modern notions of democracy: “the state is by nature
clearly prior to the family and to the individual,” he writes, “since the whole is of
necessity prior to the part.”\textsuperscript{64} Discussing of the education of the young, he states even
more explicitly that we must not “suppose that any one of the citizens belongs to himself,
for they all belong to the state, and are each of them a part of the state… the care of each
part is inseparable from the care of the whole.”\textsuperscript{65} For Greeks of this time, the pre-
eminence of the \textit{polis} completely overshadowed any individual ambition for heroic
acclaim. As Jacob Burckhardt remarks, “it was the city, not Miltiades or Themistocles,
that was victorious at Marathon and Salamis.”\textsuperscript{66} The city as a whole also assumed the
task hitherto reserved for the warrior class or the bards, that of bestowing honor and glory
to citizens and thereby determining their relative social standing.

The centralization of the \textit{polis} in this time period by no means translated into less
frequent armed conflict; quite the opposite. So the honor to be won in battle was just as

\textsuperscript{63} Cf. Sarah B. Pomeroy, Stanley M. Burstein, Walter Donlan and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts,  

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Politics} I.2,1253a18.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. VIII.1,1337a11—33.

\textsuperscript{66} Burckhardt, \textit{Greeks and Greek Civilization}, p56.
real and in a sense just as attractive as it was in the Homeric context. The major
difference was that the veneration of the warrior-hero in Socrates’ Athens was the
veneration of the warrior-hero specifically as a representation of the virtues of Athens.
He set himself apart in the display of those virtues that were characteristically and
primarily attributed to the city itself. Thus the excellence of the hero was more explicitly
and systematically regulated by the political self-understanding of the community he
represented on the battlefield. It was this representation that the polis celebrated and
reinforced by honoring the victorious or fallen warrior.

The chronicle of Pericles’ *Funeral Oration* in Thucydides’ *History of the
Peloponnesian War* offers perhaps the best glimpse into this shift in the ancient Greek
“economy of honor,” which has been called by some the “democratization of heroism.”
Admitting from the start his own inadequacy to describe the honor of the fallen Athenian
warriors, Pericles begins his eulogy by recounting the particular virtues for which their
ancestors are known and which have distinguished Athens from other poleis. He
summarizes the unique merits of their form of government, the beauty of their art and
architecture, the delight of their wealth and recreation, the might and sophistication of
their military and the magnanimity and beneficence of their foreign relations. “I say that
Athens is the school of Hellas,” declares Pericles, “and that the individual Athenian in his
own person seems to have the power of adapting himself to the most varied forms of
action with the utmost versatility and grace.”\(^{67}\) He then makes the more provocative
claim that Athenians no longer require

the praises of Homer or of any other panegyrist whose poetry may please for the
moment, although his representations of the facts will not bear the light of day.
For we have compelled every land and every sea to open a path for our valor, and

\(^{67}\) Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, II.41 (trans. Benjamin Jowett, 1881)
have everywhere planted eternal memorials of our friendship and of our enmity. Such is the city for whose sake these men nobly fought and died.…

Athens fights for a greater end than other cities, because the virtues of her citizens are so much greater. Pericles seems to make no differentiation between the virtues Athenian citizens cumulatively contribute to their city and the virtues that the city confers upon them in virtue of their citizenship. “For in magnifying the city I have magnified them,” he says, “and men like them whose virtues made her glorious.” This undifferentiated conflation of civic and individual virtue introduces a new dimension to the perception of the heroic deeds of the warrior.

For the Homeric hero, death can only manifest the virtues one displays in life; although the relation the hero bears toward his peers and to those who will later recount his deeds is always an implicit condition of his lasting glory, the first and final reference of that glory was always themselves. But for the Periclean hero, it is the service one’s actions renders to the polis that becomes the object of lasting memory, and this service is able to override or even atone for an otherwise unexceptional or vicious life. Speaking of those who gave their lives for the polis on the battlefield, Pericles proclaims:

I believe that a death such as theirs [reveals] the true measure of a man’s worth; it may be the first revelation of his virtues, but is at any rate their final seal. For even those who come short in other ways may justly plead the valor with which they have fought for their country; they have blotted out the evil with the good, and have benefited the state more by their public services than they have injured her by their private actions.

Such a reckoning of honor, in which past defects may be outweighed by sacrifice on behalf of the polis, would simply not make sense in the Homeric context. Although

---

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid. II.42.
70 Ibid. II.42.
Pericles does emphasize that in the end, each warriors’ decision to stand and fight was independent and fully voluntary, the value of the course of action they chose derives from the benefit it confers upon the polis. “Such was the end of these men; they were worthy of Athens,” he says, “and the living need not desire to have a more heroic spirit, although they may pray for a less fatal issue.” As for the proper object of their motivation, Pericles leaves little room for doubt:

Anyone can discourse to you forever about the advantages of a brave defense, which you know already. But instead of listening to him I would have you day by day fix your eyes upon the greatness of Athens, until you become filled with the love of her; and when you are impressed by the spectacle of her glory, reflect that this empire has been acquired by men who knew their duty and had the courage to do it, who in the hour of conflict had the fear of dishonor always present to them, and who, if ever they failed in an enterprise, would not allow their virtues to be lost to the country, but freely gave their lives to her as the fairest offering which they could present at her feast.

Thus although the basic framework of the warrior ethos—the rendering of honor in response to acts of martial virtue—remains fully operative in fifth century Athens, a new understanding of the superordinate nature of the social good now dictates that the polis be the primary referent of such honor, and that the individual warrior-hero be given lasting glory only in conjunction with the polis, as acknowledgement for their contribution to the preeminence of the community as a whole.

1.2.2 The Interrogation of Athens: Socrates’ Apology

The stage is now set for our encounter with what is surely the centerpiece of the classical noble death tradition, Socrates’ Apology. The Apology is of central importance to the development of the concept of Christian martyrdom in that it is the

---

71 Ibid. II.43, my emphasis.
72 Ibid. my emphasis
quintessential—if not also the first—literary depiction of a publicly imposed judgment and execution as an occasion for the exemplification of human excellence. Moreover, the excellence there exemplified is especially consonant with in Christian faith and faith in general insofar as Socrates’ death displays a preeminent love of wisdom and truth above all else. Leaving this connection to one side for the moment, however, this section will restrict itself to examining how Socrates presents himself in the *Apology* as the archetypal representative of a new model of heroism based upon a new understanding of what constitutes human excellence and the happiness it engenders.73

Nothing perhaps gives more credence to this claim than the audacious comparison Socrates here makes between his own courage and that of Achilles, a claim whose impudence would surely not have been lost on his Athenian jurors. In so doing he moves beyond both Achilles’ externally oriented motives of vengeance and individual acclaim as well as the publicly oriented motives of sacrificial service voiced by Pericles’ oration. Like Homer and Pericles, Socrates maintains the fundamental idea that one should pursue what is good and honorable even at the cost of one’s life; but unlike them, he insists that these aims remain unqualified by any social approbation of one’s actions. What makes actions good for him is simply their conformity to justice itself (*dikaiosune*). Yet this relation to justice emerges not from any solitary soul-searching,74 but from the practice of ___________________

73 This present investigation does not attempt to distinguish the claims and intentions of the historical Socrates as opposed to his representation in the dialogues of Plato. However, it does distinguish the thoughts, methods and views of Socrates the literary figure, which emerge in the more dramatic dialogues—namely the *Apology, Crito* and *Phaedo*—which focus directly on him as a character, from Plato’s more constructive philosophical project as it comes to be expressed in the *Republic* and what are generally believed to be later dialogues. This distinction proceeds from my basic claim that in the earlier dialogues, Plato presents Socrates as an authoritative, even heroic figure who represents the legitimacy of the philosophical discipline itself. That being said, I nevertheless recognize and attempt to properly integrate the fact of Platonic authorship.
philosophy, which continually pursues the true nature and demands of the good. Instead of warfare, Socrates commends to Athens the art of philosophy—the love and pursuit of wisdom—as a new and higher form of heroism. Thus Socrates attempts to replace not only the traditional model and motives of the Greek heroic ethic, but also the characteristic activity in which heroic excellence may be cultivated and displayed. I contend that Plato’s crafting of the Apology establishes Socrates as the definitive standard of this form of excellence.

Before we fully unpack the significance of the link between Socrates and Achilles in the Apology, we should briefly review what leads up to it. Socrates’ most immediate goal is to acquit himself of the charge of sophistry. From almost the very first line, he firmly insists that mere persuasiveness does not always indicate possession of truth. Referring to his accusers he wryly retorts, “I was almost carried away by them—their arguments were so convincing. On the other hand, scarcely a word of what they said was true.” Socrates then gives a brief summary of the origin and goals of his life’s work, emphasizing the fundamental role played by the Delphic oracle’s declaration of his preeminent wisdom, which of course directly conflicted with his consistent insistence upon his own ignorance. “I want you to think of my adventures as a sort of pilgrimage,” he says, “undertaken to establish the truth of the oracle once for all.” The truth he claims to have uncovered in his attempt to understand the oracle is, “that real wisdom is

---

74 We will have to try to make some sense of the meaning of the “inner voice” Socrates hears, however.
76 Ibid. 22a, p8. This mention of “pilgrimage” surely gestures toward an association with Odysseus, or even perhaps with Heracles, as Thomas West has suggested in his 1979 Plato’s Apology of Socrates, where he translates “ponous tinas ponountos” as “performing certain labors.” Indeed, Henry North Fowler must have found the Heraclean connotation of this phrase so strong that his 1914 translation of this passage in the Loeb Library edition reads “So I must relate to you my wandering as I performed my Herculean labours, so to speak…” (p85, my emphasis).
the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little
or no value." His mission is thus to dispossess the Athenians of their presumption of
wisdom, and so to draw them into a renewed pursuit of it through philosophical practice.

After addressing the general charge of sophistry, which Socrates insists is the real
root of his prosecution, he attempts to address the official charges against him, namely
the corruption of youth and impiety. In his initial cross-examination of Meletus, he asks
his accuser who he believes most contributes to the edification of Athenian youth. It is
telling that Plato has Meletus first reply, “the laws,” in that it emphasizes the general
significance of the polis’ collective agency as opposed to the influence of any particular
individual or set of individuals. The very structure of the city is what primarily ensures
the moral and spiritual well-being of the young. The laws of the polis direct the functions
of the citizenry according to a natural, self-perpetuating order in accordance with a static
natural order (dikê). Thus the laws of the polis are in a sense self-contained in that they
need appeal to no other standard but internal consistency to establish their authority.

Socrates, however, considers it his divinely ordained mission to challenge and disrupt this
complacent satisfaction with predetermined conventional norms. But Socrates recognizes
that his interrogation of the citizenry is by itself not enough to overcome this prevailing
unreflective allegiance to convention.

The basic pattern of his dialogues with others, he reports, is that he would
successfully dismantle the preconceptions of those who considered themselves wise only
to incur their deep resentment as a result. “The effect of these investigations of mine,” he
says, “has been to arouse against me a great deal of hostility, and hostility of a

77 Ibid. 23a, p9.
particularly bitter and persistent kind.” Faced with defeat in the arena of reasoned debate, those defending the *status quo* have now made recourse to their final option for eliciting Socrates’ compliance: prosecution, punishment and the threat of death. For Socrates’ audience in the *Apology*, the condemnation and punishment of a citizen by his city was generally assumed to be a definitive sign of moral deprivation and human failure, which is why we hear Socrates preemptively pose the question to himself, “But perhaps some will say, do you feel no compunction, Socrates, at having followed a line of action which puts you in danger of the death penalty?” If the resentment and hostility of Socrates’ interlocutors was not enough to disabuse him of his aims, surely the specter of the city’s wrath should remove from him any doubt as to the fruitlessness of his actions.

It is in reply to this hypothetical question that Socrates sees fit to make the bold comparison between himself and the great hero, Achilles. “You are mistaken, my friend,” he says, “if you think that a man who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and death.” Rather “he has only one thing to consider in performing any action—that is, whether he is acting rightly or wrongly, like a good man or a bad one.” Then comes the comparison itself:

On your view the heroes who died at Troy would be poor creatures, especially the son of Thetis [Achilles]. He, if you remember, made light of danger in comparison with incurring dishonor when his goddess mother warned him, eager as he was to kill Hektor…. When he heard this warning, he made light of his death and danger, being much more afraid of an ignoble life and of failing to avenge his friends. ‘Let me die forthwith,’ said he, ‘when I have requited the villain, rather than remain here by the beaked ships to be mocked, a burden on the ground.’ Do you suppose that he gave a thought to death and danger?

78 Ibid. 22d—23a, p9. As Jean Porter has noted in personal correspondence, Socrates seems to generate the same kind of inner turmoil in the *polis* as Achilles experienced in own person.

79 Ibid. 28b, p14.
The truth of the matter is this, gentlemen. Where a man has once taken up his stand, wither because it seems best to him or in obedience to his orders, there I believe he is bound to remain and face the danger, taking no account of death or anything else before dishonor."  

Like the Homeric heroes of old, Socrates defines the extraordinary character of his actions against the immanent backdrop of death. Here Socrates reveals a deep irony in the accepted Athenian conception of courage, which while it appealed to Achilles’ willingness to defy death in order to perform great deeds, ultimately depended for its proper civic implementation upon the citizens’ fear of death at the hands of the city. Socrates proposes wisdom, and not simply physical supremacy or civic loyalty, as the essential characteristic of his own understanding of courage.

However, his appeal to Achilles reveals the enduring power of the hero’s confrontation with death as exemplifying those virtues the performance of which people generally consider worthy of sacrificing their own self-preservation. That is why of all the things Socrates claims he does not know, it is his ignorance of death that most powerfully demonstrates his unique wisdom:

This, I take it, gentlemen, is the degree, and this the nature of my advantage over the rest of mankind, and if I were to claim to be wiser than my neighbor in any respect, it would be in this—that not possessing any real knowledge of what comes after death, I am also conscious that I do not possess it.  

This peculiar “advantage over the rest of mankind” becomes the basis of a new, higher form of heroism that Plato proposes by means of Socrates’ example. But surely such agnosticism toward death cannot by itself counteract the fear of death and inspire heroic courage. Rather, it is Socrates’ ignorance of the outcome of his particular death that suggests a new understanding of the heroic at work. Socrates never questions the

---

80 Ibid. 28b—d, pp14—15.
81 Ibid. 29b, p15.
common presumption that an honorable death is better than a dishonorable life; it is the fear of a dishonorable death that must be overcome. Thus Socrates’ ignorance harbors quite radical implications: the dishonorable death of public execution may actually be a greater good than a dishonorable life otherwise defined: either as disobedience to the gods or as unexamined conformity to accepted social norms. Socrates thereby points to a source of honor higher than the polis, and higher than any socially constructed criterion. He appeals to the authority of an “audience” whose judgment matters more definitively than any particular community, and for Socrates, the daimon who speaks to him is the mouthpiece of this new, independent audience. It is this inner voice that creates the possibility of a conflict of obedience between the laws and customs of the polis and higher directives. If the heroism of Homer’s Achilles depended upon the approval of worthy peers and adversaries, and the heroism of the Athenian hoplite depended upon the approval of the corporate polis, then the new heroism of Socrates depends upon the approval an inner authority that stands apart from any concrete social relation. While he does not know whether or not death by public execution is to be feared, he is certain “that to wrong and to disobey my superior, whether God or man, is wicked and dishonorable.”

More important that the actual identity of Socrates’ inner voice is the divinely ordained vocation to philosophy that it represents; for it is his practice of interrogation—and not necessarily the daimon itself—that comes into conflict with Athenian public sentiment. Anticipating a possible ultimatum of an acquittal in exchange for the promise to desist practicing philosophy, Socrates maintains “I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop

---

82 Ibid. 29b, p15.
practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet.”

Here Socrates shifts his defense strategy, proactively exhorting the Athenian people to seek the good of their souls rather than social or material goods. He describes them all as being intellectually and morally asleep, overtaken by the lethargy and inertia of unreflective custom, and he, just as a biting fly rouses a sleeping horse, has been sent to them as a gift from God to rouse them into self-awareness by means of intellectual reflection.

Thus he says to them, “I assure you that if I am what I claim to be, and you put me to death, you will harm yourselves more than me… because I do not believe that the law of God permits a better man to be harmed by a worse.”

Socrates here suggests that human well-being lies first and foremost in following the dictates of virtue, which ultimately derive their intelligibility from a source independent of collective opinion. When common practice and conviction stray sufficiently from the dictates of this source, they appear foreign and threatening if anyone should reintroduce them.

Annoying insects of this sort are most often met with a lethal slap from the animal on whom it does its work., Socrates has learned from his political and philosophical career that in democratic societies such as Athens, such prophetic voices are inevitably silenced through violence: “No man on earth,” he says, “who conscientiously opposes with you or

---

83 Ibid. 28b, p15.
84 Ibid. 30c—d, p16
85 In this sense, the independence of the source to which Socrates appeals is not contradictory in principle to the independence of the cosmic diké in accordance with which Solon justified his organization of the city. The main difference between the two modes of ethical justification (as I suggested earlier) is that while the Socratic model prescribes constant philosophical examination and dispute of any provisional conclusions that are reached, the Solonic model closes off any dialectic challenge once such conclusions are reached, and thus views any disruption of the static arrangement as a threat to the order that has been achieved. Here, as at so many other points in his thought, Socrates’ methodological presumption of ignorance proves pivotal.
any other organized democracy, and flatly prevents a great many wrongs and illegalities from taking place in the state to which he belongs, can possible escape with his life.”

Here we see the paradox of the mortal hero at work in the philosophical hero as well: like the warrior-hero, the philosopher-prophet seeks to confer upon his limited existence the honor stemming from acts of virtue: the same acts of virtue that tend to make his existence even more limited than it already is. In the Apology, Plato presents Socrates as the first representative of an alternative model of heroism and human excellence centered upon the virtues of the philosophical life. By explicitly associating his steadfastness in the face of death to that of Achilles, Socrates presents himself as an alternative to the traditional notion of heroism that Achilles represented. By thus connecting Socrates with Achilles, Plato issues a bold challenge to the canonical authority of Homer in the Greek-speaking world of his time.

While Plato’s challenge to Homer’s cultural influence becomes explicit in The Republic, it is only in the dialogues of Socrates’ trial and death that he offers a concrete exemplar of the alternative ideal of the philosophical life. These are the only dialogues whose main subject is Socrates himself, and the form of human excellence that his life represents. In them Plato makes of Socrates an emblematic icon of the specific form and content of the philosophical art. It is almost as if Plato employs these preliminary dialogues for a pedagogical purpose. They remind the reader that before one engages in the actual practice of intellectual dialogue, one should know and appreciate the ends and standards of the philosophical life as a whole. It is not enough simply to know how to think quickly or argue persuasively; one must know how the discipline informs the entire

86 Apology 31e, p17.
course of a life, and the ultimate worth its pursuit confers upon our limited existence. In this sense, Socrates serves as both guide and model for those seeking to enter upon the new form of life that Plato proposes, and which as Socrates’ final days attest, is nothing less than the best and fullest way of being human.

Just before his sentencing, Socrates attempts to explain why he cannot simply repent, plead for mercy of the court and live out the rest of his life minding own business. “This is the hardest thing of all to make some of you understand,” he says. His reasoning can only appear unintelligible to his audience, for they cannot seriously entertain the idea that “to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living.”

Socrates’ initial attempt to conduct his defense in the dialectic form that typifies this way of life has by this point completely broken down. He prefaced his attempt to employ his method with an unusual request that he not be interrupted, but after a brief period of cooperation Meletus eventually stops responding at all. Eventually Plato has Socrates pleading for the chance to speak over storms of angry protest. Philosophical discourse is unable to function in this context, and so Socrates’ only option is exhortation to a deeper form of engagement. The scene is reminiscent of the end of the Gorgias, where Callicles simply aborts the discussion out of annoyance and indifference:

SOCRATES: So to be disciplined is better for the soul that indiscipline, which you preferred just now.
CALlicles: I do not know what you are talking about, Socrates; ask someone else.

87 Ibid. 37e, p22.
88 Ibid. 38a, p23.
Socrates: This fellow will not put up with being improved and experiencing the very treatment now under discussion, the process of discipline.

Callicles: No, for I have not the slightest interest in what you are saying. I answered only to gratify Gorgias.

Socrates: Well, what shall we do then? Break off our discussion in the middle?

Callicles: You may decide for yourself.89

Socrates goes on, of course, and Callicles continues to respond with phrases like “certainly,” “yes” or “so be it,” but these may all be taken to be roughly equivalent to the colloquial “whatever…” Callicles has checked out of the conversation; he has quit Socrates’ philosophical game, and all that is left for Socrates is to baldly plead that the good is more than merely the satisfaction of desires. Conversion has replaced persuasion as Socrates’ goal. “The two men cannot agree enough to be able to argue,” comments W.D. Woodhead. “They are too far apart. In the end, [Socrates] is not reasoning with him, he is exhorting him, preaching to him.”90 So it is with Meletus and the rest of Socrates’ accusers in the Apology. They reach an impasse. Socrates eventually abandons his designs to secure an acquittal and makes the occasion of his trial an opportunity for exhorting the continued pursuit of the philosophical life. In the face of Athens’ rejection of him, he pleads to a wider audience for his acquittal in future generations. He leaves his own example of virtue behind as a monument for the continued pursuit of wisdom through philosophical investigation.91

89 Gorgias, 505b—c, p288.


91 One may here detect a certain dialectic at work in the formation of heroic paradigms in general. Could there possibly be a connection between the crisis of motivation that Achilles experiences as a result of the breakdown in the economy of honor in his context quite and the more centralized organization of social codes instituted by the sweeping legal reforms of the later poleis? Likewise, could there be a connection between the crisis of self-understanding that Socrates brings to the attention of the Athenian citizenry and the systematic organization of the philosophical academy, which marks the beginning of the Western tradition of academic scholarship as a whole? Might the conceptual and social tensions
Thus Socrates’ self-identification with Achilles not only attempts to replace the accepted ideal of heroic prowess with a new vision of philosophical virtue, but also indicates Plato’s intention—to be made explicit in the Republic—of expelling Homer in favor of a new preeminent cultural authority. In his introductory essay on The Republic, Allan Bloom explains the critical role superceding Achilles plays in this scheme:

The figure of Achilles, more than any teaching or law, compels the souls of Greeks and all men who pursue glory. He is the hero of heroes. Admired and imitated by all. And this is what Socrates wishes to combat when he teaches that if Achilles is the model, men will not pursue philosophy, that what he stands for is inimical to the founding of the best city and the practice of the best way of life. Socrates is engaging in a contest with Homer for the title of teacher of the Greeks—or of mankind. One of his principal goals is to put himself in place of Achilles as the authentic representation of the best human type.

Like Pericles’ employment of the heroic ideal in order to articulate the nobility of dying for the polis, the figure of Achilles comes to represent a vehicle for expressing and reinterpreting those reasons for which it is deemed worthy and honorable to give up one’s life. In the Apology it is Socrates’ attempt at cultural revision, as much as Socrates himself, that is really on trial.

Athens threatens banishment or execution in order to silence and disqualify the philosopher’s challenge to its accepted ideals of virtue. As we have seen in the case of Achilles in both The Iliad and The Odyssey, the prospect of death is itself the pervasive condition and initial occasion of reflective investigation into the relative worth of human life and action. As James Schall remarks, “the reasons men give for which they die are the reasons that limit the state from completely defining their own lives.” The practice of philosophy therefore appears as a potential source of subversion to a polity whose

surrounding the deaths of these heroes act as a catalyst for a new paradigm? If such questions are answerable at all, they of course lie beyond the scope of the present study.

justifications for its governance seek merely internal consistency with its own static self-understanding. Schall surmises that “if the polity remembers no philosopher, if the greatest deeds and words are only those spoken in the polity about its own continuance in life, then the education of the youth must ever keep out those disturbing questions that death proposes about what life is about in all its dimensions.” Yet because the fact of death perpetually confronts human existence as a question whose answer is not yet fully revealed, the existential investigation human mortality engenders can only be fully repressed with a complete repression of the awareness of death as a real phenomenon. The death of the philosopher can in this way serve as an especially powerful vehicle for the continued exhortation to seek the truth about human existence. For by their inability to completely define the philosopher’s death on their own terms, those in the community who wish to silence him only manage to call greater attention to what is perhaps the most powerful impetus to embark upon the philosophical quest: the riddle of human mortality.

1.2.3 Socrates contra Athens

Before exploring the conceptions of happiness and virtue that underlie the Socratic view of death, let us first consider more closely the reasoning that eventually compels the Athenian tribunal (albeit by a narrow vote) to put Socrates to death. A glimpse of it may be seen early on in the Apology, where Socrates makes what appears on first glance to be an unremarkable argument. He leads Meletus to the absurd conclusion that Socrates is unique in his corrosive effect on the youth of Athens, and that all others exert a positive influence. Then using the example of horse trainers, Socrates makes the

93 Schall, “Death and Political Philosophy, p135
94 Apology 25a, p11.
case that in most worthwhile skills, the majority are not to be trusted, but only those handful of experts who possess the proper knowledge and experience. Just as the average person should not be entrusted with the cultivation of horses, so also one should not assume the average person to be competent in instructing and perfecting the youth. The argument suggests that if there were teachers of the young with the expertise to truly educate and improve them, they would necessarily be as few as the recognized experts of any other human skill or trade.

Socrates also touches upon this idea in the *Crito* when he asserts that “one must not value all the opinions of men, but some and not others, nor the opinions of all men, but those of some and not others.” Here the analogy is not horse training, but the physical training of athletes, where likewise authority is given to a superior to direct and evaluate the actions of the one being trained. To disobey the physical trainer is thus to harm one’s self in that respect in which he enjoys his authority, namely that of improving the body. Such reasoning should apply, Socrates concludes, “as a general rule, and above all to the sort of actions which we are trying to decide about, just and unjust, honorable and dishonorable, good and bad.” “What we ought to consider,” he concludes, “is not so much what people in general will say about us but how we stand with the expert in right and wrong, the one authority, who represents the actual truth,” which we should not expect to be the determination of popular opinion or social consensus. While such an assertion may sound like little more than a cliché in our setting, it conveyed a much more a radical message in Socrates’. It was seen to overtly threaten the political stability and

---

95 *Crito*, 47a.
96 Ibid. 47c—d, p32.
97 Ibid. 48a, p33.
social cohesion of the city-state, the fragility of which was a fact never overlooked by its leaders. We need only read what Socrates says immediately after the last quotation to get a sense of his own awareness of the serious implications of his position: “Of course, one might object, All the same, the people have the power to put us to death.” All the same, Socrates maintains that he must obey the trustworthy authority alone and disregard the judgment of the common consensus, even if it should cost him his life.

From the Athenian viewpoint, the dissemination of Socrates’ de-centralizing, subversive attitude clearly justified execution or at least banishment. As noted earlier, the individual held a much different place in Athenian democracy compared with modern democracies. The individual enjoyed no immunity from the state, no capacity to resist its authority outside the established avenues of participation in the council. While the deliberative function of the Athenian councils hinged on the mutual expectation of parrhesia, or frank speech, the polis tightly regulated public dialogue according to specific practices of accountability which sought to root out views that undermined the established social structures of democratic polity. There was no sharp distinction between the citizenry and the polis, since the latter claimed to be little more than the structured cooperation of the former aiming toward ordered governance through organized public debate and deliberation. Yet Athenian self-rule was strictly regulated by mutual expectations of participation that included not only the presumption of parrhesia but also specific “rules of engagement” that determined the success or failure

---

98 Ibid.
99 Two of these in particular were dokimasia, which was a preliminary investigation or accusation regarding oligarchic sentiments, and euthunai, a final accounting before a jury of peers to determine the legitimacy of the initial claims of the dokimasia. For more on these the place of these mechanisms in fifth century Athenian political life, see J. Peter Euben’s Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture and Political Theory (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997) chapter 4, pp91—108.
of propositions in terms of common support. Thus, we find that in his *Athenian Constitution*, Aristotle relates the tradition established by Solon, which decreed that if a significant issue divided the citizenry into factions, those who took up arms with neither side would lose their citizenship.\textsuperscript{100} It is hard to conceive in our modern context what a mandatory democracy of this sort would look like, but it makes perfect sense in a general climate in which the individual is not assumed to be the primary political entity. The Athenian citizen was “free” in the sense that they were allowed the opportunity (that they were all but mandated to take) to attempt to persuade others of their opinion. Should their attempt fail, however, they were not free to dissent against the prevailing judgment. In this sense, as the historian Victor Ehrenberg remarks, freedom for the citizen was neither “the complete self-surrender of man to the Polis [nor] simply the breeding of the free individual.”\textsuperscript{101}

To be an Athenian citizen was thus to be a fully active, participating member of a society whose judgments and interests were ultimately inseparable from one’s own. To step out of this seamless social fabric was for them not “freedom” at all, but a form of suicide. The loss of the recognition of and identification with one’s *polis* amounted to a kind of death, or at least to the loss of an essential defining characteristic of what made one human. Homer’s depiction of Achilles’ defection from his community illustrates this point nicely: withdrawn into a private sphere of existence, he emerges as half-god, half-animal and wholly un-human. In Socrates’ society, such a man would be considered an *idiotes*, or one incapable of reasoning in a properly public way. The word is of course the origin of the modern word “idiot,” but it takes its meaning from the adjective *idios*,

\textsuperscript{100} *Athenian Constitution*, VIII.5
meaning “one’s own.” Preference of this sort for one’s own judgment and interests to that of the social whole was nothing less than a failure in the development of one’s nature as a human being. In the political sphere, it signaled an deficiency of rationality. Privacy in this sense was *privation*. As Hannah Arendt once explained, the term *privatio* in the ancient context “meant literally a state of being deprived of something, and even of the highest and most human of man’s capacities.” Defection from public consensus signaled a lack of full rationality, a lack of proper participation in the process of political deliberation and judgment that defined humans as humans.

As such, the apolitical man was to be feared as a source of chaos and violence.

No one expressed this more clearly than Aristotle himself:

> It follows that the state belongs to the class of objects which exists by nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. Any one who by his nature and not simply by ill-luck has no state is either too bad or too good, either subhuman or superhuman—he is like the war-mad man condemned in Homer’s words as ‘having no family, no law, no home’; for he who is such by nature is mad on war: he is a non-cooperator like an isolated piece in a game of draughts.

It is true that, as we know from the *Crito*, Socrates never disavowed Athens entirely; but from the state’s own point of view, Socrates was put to death precisely because of the social corruption that his apolitical views represented in the eyes of the city. His impiety was not so much a doctrinal heresy as a general disregard for the settled convictions and customs of the *polis*. Athens tolerated Socrates’ idiosyncrasy until it became clear that his

---

102 Liddell-Scott-Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*. It is interesting that Nietzsche uses the modern word *Idiot* in its ancient sense to describe Jesus in *The Antichrist* §29: “To make a hero of Jesus! And even more, what a misunderstanding is the word "genius"! Our whole concept, our cultural concept, of "spirit" has no meaning whatever in the world in which Jesus lives. Spoken with the precision of a physiologist, even an entirely different word would be yet more fitting here—the word idiot.”


104 *Politics* 1253a1—7.
public speech held the potential to undermine the established political structures which made such speech possible. At that point, from Athens’ perspective, Socrates trangressed the boundaries that defined what it meant to be Athenian, and thus abdicated his citizenship. Such alienation was not the result of ill-luck; it was a sign of an unsound mind, of madness: a madness, as Aristotle reminds us, not unlike the Homeric description of the lawless war-mad “non-cooperator” that happens to bear striking resemblance to the wrathful Achilles.
CHAPTER TWO

SOCRATES AND ARISTOTLE: ANCIENT ATTEMPTS TO INTEGRATE VIRTUE, DEATH AND HUMAN PERFECTION

2.1 Felix Socrates: Happiness and Virtue in and after Death

Having traced out the general contours of the differing ethical dynamics operative in the traditional warrior-heroism found in Homer and Pericles and the alternative philosophical paradigm of nobility offered in the Apology, we may now elaborate upon the theory of happiness and virtue which informs the latter view, in hopes of articulating the motives that ground the philosopher-hero’s ability to face death with such equanimity and hope. In other words, we now must turn briefly to Plato’s reconstruction and synthesis of Socrates’ thought on the relation of virtue to happiness in order to begin to understand what Socrates could possibly have meant by saying that “nothing can harm a good man in life or after death, and [that] his fortunes are not a matter of indifference to the gods.”

2.1.1 Toward a Conception of Human Happiness Independent of the Polis

Let us start from where we left our analysis of Socrates’ trial and execution. The argument was that Socrates was condemned as an anti-social, apolitical “man without a

\footnote{Apology 41c—d, p26.}
state,” an *idiotes* whose teaching corroded the moral foundations of the Athenian community. Yet it was also pointed out that Socrates did not see himself in this light; he never claimed his own private judgments to be superior to those of the *polis*, nor did he ever appeal to any notion of “conscience” or “reason” in defense of his practices. Yet he did maintain the pre-eminence of an external authority over the general opinion of the masses. And although he casts his public dissent in terms of obedience to his *daemon*, he does not try to deny that his philosophical interrogations issue a challenge to his city. To that extent, then, he has taken on a posture of opposition to the city, just as a biting fly opposes the sleeping horse’s inclination to remain asleep. According to Socrates own analogy, then, Socrates stands *apart from* and *outside* the city, in a theater of action whose moral horizon is greater than the city itself. Socrates thus deliberates upon the goodness of his actions in reference to a milieu beyond the *polis*, of which the *polis* is only one (though a highly significant) part.

Before exploring this enlargement of perspective in more depth, let us briefly review its warrants in the Platonic text. Socrates claims in *Apology* 30d that God does not permit a better man to be harmed by a worse man. What does this mean? Socrates explains that his death or banishment is a far better fate than to have killed an innocent man, especially if that innocent man has been carrying out a divinely ordained vocation. Socrates thereby draws the gods into the drama of his trial. By killing him the Athenians harm themselves more than they harm him, he claims, because they will have deprived themselves of the goad that the gods had sent them for their own benefit. The benefit and harm at stake of course does not apply to goods such as health, wealth and power, but to

---

2 I use the term “moral” here in its more etymologically literal form referring to *mores*, or codes of behavior based upon custom and common consensus.
goods of the soul—the highest part of the self, which is able to discern the good and just.

He prefaces his argument about the worse harming the better by appealing to his primary concern for the condition of others’ souls:

I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls, proclaiming as I go, Wealth does not bring goodness, but goodness brings wealth and every other blessing, both to the individual and to the state.3

If what we have been calling the warrior ethos is still operative within the society to which Socrates is speaking, the “wealth and every other blessing” mentioned here holds roughly the same sort of social significance as the perks and privileges Sarpedon describes of the successful warrior in Book 12 of The Iliad. These concrete tokens of honor measure not only social rank and expectation, but the excellence of a human life as a whole. For an Achilles, happiness is a function of acquiring such outward signs of superiority through displays of preeminence in the most exalted of human arts, that of warfare. For Socrates, however, happiness is rather a function of acquiring knowledge of what is true and good through an even more exalted human art: that of philosophical investigation. By mastering this art, one comes to discover that the excellence of a human action and a human life as a whole is not a function of social recognition and social benefits, but rather one’s correspondence to a standard of goodness that transcends all socially generated criteria. Philosophy thereby grants the pupil who is initially immersed in the disorientation and illusion of transient conventions to incrementally grow in the knowledge of what is universal and immutable. Thus Socrates’ appeal to a moral authority beyond the polis, which may come into conflict with its established

3 Ibid. 30b, p16.
economy of honor and public acclaim, constitutes nothing less than a revolutionary challenge to the available modes of moral thought of that time.

How does this supposed substitution of a transcendent authority for the socio-cultural consensus that had hitherto been the conceptual terminus of human morality make itself apparent in the dialogues surrounding Socrates’ death? It might appear at first as if Socrates does nothing more than add one significant member to the “audience” determining the worth of his actions. On this view, Socrates’ moral reasoning in the Apology does not actually transcend the social realm at all, but only alters it by an appeal to a member of the moral community with amplified power whose judgment ensures the eventual vindication of his actions. “You are going to earn,” Socrates warns, “the reputation—and the blame…of having put Socrates to death.”

Of whom or what should the Athenian jury be afraid? The actual references to the daemon do not indicate that Socrates expects it to play a direct role in his vindication; it merely prevents him from pursuing acts that will bring about evil. So what exactly is this daimon and what is its place in the philosophical heroism Socrates exemplifies?

Some scholars have contended that Socrates presents in the daimon a prototype of what we now refer to as “conscience.” Others interpreters have claimed that Plato presents it as a straightforwardly preternatural entity whose promptings Socrates literally “hears.” The most reasonable and persuasive views fall somewhere between these extremes. If Socrates is not the rationalistic demythologizer that many Enlightenment

---

4 Apology 38c.

thinkers have made him out to be, then neither is he merely one divinely possessed
demagogue among others. It is important to remember that his interaction with the divine
is initially confrontational; he simply does not believe that he is the wisest of all men.
Moreover, it remains interactive: he concludes that the oracle was truthful only to the
extent that he is uniquely aware of his own ignorance; the daemon gives Socrates no
privileged knowledge or revelation, but merely directs him away from danger. Thus the
endorsement and continual promptings of the daemon are the basis not for a particular set
of positive teachings, but rather directives for an elenctic method of inquiry and
philosophical ascent.

How does this conception of philosophy influence Socrates’ understanding of
death and its significance? Earlier in the Apology when Socrates questions himself about
the prudence of his actions given that they are leading him toward a greater likelihood of
a violent death, his response expresses not so much a comparative judgment of benefit
and harm as a selective determination of what should and should not enter into his
practical deliberation. “You are mistaken, my friend,” he says “if you think that a man
who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and
death. He has only one thing to consider in performing any action—that is, whether he is
acting rightly or wrongly, like a good man or a bad one.” Gregory Vlastos is careful to
point out the precise connotation of the operative verb in this passage, hypologizdesthai,
which he translates as “weighing up” or “giving countervailing weight to” since, as he
reasons, the verb conveys not subtraction, but “meeting from an opposite direction.”
That linguistic point is significant because it suggests that somehow the effects of an

---

6 28b, p14.
action on one’s own physical well-being are of an entirely different order of significance than the moral qualities of the act considered in itself. Translating the passage this way suggests that the agent “who is worth anything” should be able to prescind from considerations of personal harm in the evaluations of an action and the motivation to perform it. An initial impression of the actions of Achilles leads one to believe that the Homeric warrior hero similarly disregards such considerations in their resolution to act, but as I argued above, Achilles is constantly mindful of the possibility of personal harm and death, and only accepts such a cost if the benefits of acting seem sufficient to outweigh it. Unlike Achilles, Socrates on this view considers only the intrinsic justice or injustice of the prospective action. He thus would not do any exchanging or weighing at all, but would simply be narrowing the scope of his deliberation so as to privilege one dimension of the act over others.

Such a contrast between the moral reasoning of Socrates and Achilles seems reasonable until one considers what Socrates says immediately after the passage in question: he makes a direct association of his own disregard for death to that of Achilles’. Several perplexing difficulties arise from this comparison. To the rhetorical question, “Do you suppose [Achilles] gave any thought to danger and death?” Socrates responds un-equivocally: death should be of “no account” to those who stand and fight either for “what seems best to him” (in the case of Achilles) or “in obedience to orders” (in the case of the Athenian soldier). Both consider the loss of honor first and foremost. Does Socrates thus mean to say that Achilles, like any man “worth anything at all,” allows absolutely no countervailing weight to the loss of his life? Surely such a reading is too

---

8 Apology 28d, p14.

9 Ibid. 28d, p15.
strong, if not blatantly incorrect. Achilles did consider the drawbacks of death “countervailing weight” to his decision to fight; he clearly deliberated over how to make his death count. Achilles’ portrayal in Homer just does not fit Socrates’ purposes here. Moreover, how is it that Socrates first compares Achilles’ virtue to his own then goes on to make the stunning claim only a few moments later that a better man cannot be harmed by a worse? Did he not realize that Achilles’ universally known fate at the hands of Paris (who is certainly an inferior to Achilles) blatantly contradicts this claim? One must keep in mind the irony—or outright silliness—of the comparison Socrates is trying to make. This scrawny, goggle-eyed street agitator is comparing himself to the most exalted of epic heroes. The first reaction of his audience would not have been puzzlement at the logical implications of the comparison to his overall argument, but simply laughter, ridicule and contempt. In the epilogue to his Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher, Gregory Vlastos sizes up the contrast between Socrates and Achilles this way:

Socrates is a plebian, Achilles noblest of the heroes, darling of the aristocracy. Socrates is the voice of reason, Achilles a man of passion rampant over reason. Socrates abjures retaliation, while Achilles, glutting his anger on Hektor’s corpse, gives the most terrible example of vengeance in the Iliad. What can Socrates and this savagely violent young nobleman have in common? Only this: absolute ordination of everything each values to one superlatively precious thing: honour for Achilles, virtue for Socrates.10

Socrates’ irony here is in service to his larger attempt to offer a final public statement of a new model of heroism built upon a new understanding of virtue. His reference to Achilles aims to establish a point of both cultural and conceptual continuity with the tradition of heroism whose legacy he hopes to transform and inherit.

10 Vlastos, p233—234.
Before moving on, let us briefly sum up the narrative thus far: The warrior heroism of Homer’s Achilles is ultimately self-destructive, since it subordinates social integration to a good that is itself dependant upon it. The assimilation of the Achillean heroic model to the *polis* eventually transposes the values of honor and friendship found in that model onto the civic landscape, yielding the ideal of the fallen soldier found in Pericles’ *Funeral Oration*. The city thereby redeems the tragedy of Achilles by construing his sacrifice in terms of civic loyalty (rather than loyalty to an individual) and incorporating it into the city’s ongoing task of cultivating the highest forms of human excellence. For Socrates, on the other hand, the philosopher-hero displays his heroism in the internal arena of self-knowledge, wherein the good itself assumes proper authority independent of any individual or corporate ambition, which usually obscures rather than designates the highest possible human good.

The Socratic turn from socially-derived standards of virtue corresponds to the broader Platonic prioritization of goodness over the beings that participate in it. The fourth century neo-Platonist Sallustius expresses this view in its matured form and offers as evidence for it the noble death of the philosopher-hero:

> If all beings are being only by virtue of goodness, and if they participate in the Good, then the first must necessarily be a good which transcends being. Here is an eminent proof of this: souls of value despise Being for the sake of the Good, whenever they voluntarily place themselves in danger, for their country, their loved ones, or for virtue.\(^1\)

In the *Phaedo*, a dialogue whose central focus is the death of Socrates, Plato characterizes the discipline of philosophy itself as a “training for death,” inasmuch as philosophers become immersed in the life of the soul and increasingly estranged from the desires and

---

demands of the body. Thus they do not fear the destruction of the body, since they have spent their life detaching themselves from its concerns and devoting themselves to what is immaterial and enduring.\textsuperscript{12} They give up what is by nature incomplete for the possession of what is sufficient in itself. This training “liberates” the soul from its immersion in the disorderly flux of corporeality and the chaotic desires that attend such imperfection. Thus, as Pierre Hadot describes it, the Platonic philosopher learns “to die to one’s individuality and passions, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity….”\textsuperscript{13}

As I will explain further below, this rather anachronistic reading of the Platonic ethical project as a whole is overly simplistic at best. Yet in one sense it captures the contrast of the competing moral paradigms that Socrates’ death puts before us. Socrates’ disavowal of wisdom rules out any firm or permanent grasp on the universal, objective point of view, as if he himself somehow stood outside his limited perspective. Nevertheless, Socrates’ is able to make appeal to an arena of interaction that extends beyond the evaluation of the social community with which he identifies himself. To be sure, as his gadfly analogy in the Apology and his grateful elegy to Athens in the Crito remind us, he does not view the excellence of his actions in complete isolation from his worldly citizenship; but as we see with equal clarity in the Phaedo, neither do his civic obligations hold ultimate authority in his ethical deliberation. He is able to appeal to something other, something higher than his limited perspective, which promises a fuller form of happiness impervious to the uncertainties of political flux and fortune.

\textsuperscript{12} Phaedo 64a, 67e, 80e.
\textsuperscript{13} Hadot, p96, 95.
2.1.2 Socrates on the Good Life and Beyond

The *Phaedo* is Plato’s attempt to flesh out this higher, fuller orientation of Socrates’ virtue. The narrative of Socrates’ last day begins with what I take to be two highly significant details, which both appear at the beginning and the end of the dialogue and thus act as “dual bookends.” The first pair of details concern Socrates’ feet. At the beginning of the dialogue, the commissioners take off Socrates’ fetters, which provides him the occasion to remark on how the experiences pleasure and pain seem bound to follow closely upon one another; “they are like two bodies attached to the same head,” he comments. “I had a pain in my leg from the fetter, and now I feel the pleasure coming that follows it.” Bodily pleasure and pain are of central importance to Socrates’ subsequent reflections on death. It is in light of their unreliable reflection of reality that wisdom is given exclusive epistemic privilege and death is thus portrayed as a liberating culmination rather than annihilation. Similarly at the very end of the dialogue, after Socrates has drunk the hemlock, it is interesting to note that the only actual sensations described by Phaedo are in Socrates’ legs: heaviness and eventual numbness. It is as if a glimpse of what Socrates believes to be the body’s true nature is revealed here, even in the physical experience of death: the flesh weighs down and eventually surrenders, prompting Socrates’ famous declaration of his healing: “Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Aesclepius. See to it, and don’t forget it.” The second pair of details deals with

---

14 *Phaedo* 60b—c

15 Ibid. 118. In their 2004 book *Plato and the Trial of Socrates*, Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith insist that Socrates’ dying request refers not primarily to his conclusion that life is a sickness, but rather to a religious custom of that time practiced by older Athenians of annually sacrificing to Aesclepius in thanksgiving for surviving the great plague of 430 BCE. In memory of Aesclepius’ intervention, along with the assistance of his father Apollo, Athenians reinstituted the quinquennial religious pilgrimage to the island of Delos, where the priests performed extensive rituals on behalf of the community. The citizens’ individual sacrifices occurred upon the priests’ return. Socrates’ trial apparently took place during the
Socrates’ over-emotional companions. At the beginning of the dialogue Xanthippe’s weeping receives a harsh rebuke from Socrates. “Socrates looked at Crito. ‘Crito,’ he said, ‘someone had better take her home.’” A similar sequence occurs at the end when, after Socrates has drunk the poison, Crito, Phaedo and Apollodorus themselves break down in tears and also receive a strong rebuke from their dying master. “Really, my friends, what a way to behave!... Calm yourselves and try to behave.” The reproach of emotions plays an important part in theory of death that Socrates puts forth in the dialogue. The philosopher does not grieve death, but looks upon it with the same dispassionate acceptance as any other aspect of human life. Thus the dialogue begins and ends with a renunciation of both physical and emotional sensation as trustworthy windows on reality, and particularly the reality of death.

What initially steers the conversation toward death, however, is neither Socrates’ pithy adage about pleasure or his dismissal of Xanthippe, but rather his final message to the poet Evenus “to follow me as quickly as he can.” Yet he makes it clear that although he wishes Evenus to join him in death, he does not mean for Evenus to commit suicide, since suicide “is not legitimate” for those “grounded in philosophy.” The point

mission itself, when all public executions were stayed, which explains why there was a delay between Socrates’ sentencing and death, and why the return of the boat from Delos (Phaedo 59d—e) coincides with the day of Socrates’ death. Since Socrates must pay his debt to Athens upon the boat’s return, he has no opportunity to pay his debt to Aesclepius, and hence he asks Crito to pay it on his behalf. This interpretation of his dying words is very compelling, and allows for a more straightforward reading of the passage. However, in light of the actual views toward death expressed in the dialogue itself, one cannot entirely rule out the figurative significance of the phrase, especially within the context of its literary construction. Thus it makes the most sense to attribute a fruitful multivalence to the passage that would befit the richness of Plato’s technique.

16 Phaedo. 60a.

17 Ibid. 117d—e.

18 Ibid. 61b.

19 Ibid. 61c—d.
is crucial. Like in the *Apology*, Socrates appeals to the analogy of the soldier placed on guard duty, who must not abandon his post or release himself at any cost. And like in the *Apology*, we see that Socrates’ confidence in the face of death stems not from firm control over or certain knowledge of his ultimate fate, but from his trust in a higher authority to whom he is bound. Socrates’ death is the direct result of a way of life mandated by this divine authority, and so it must be accepted with equal compliance. To Cebes’ question whether such an acceptance of death isn’t itself a kind of self-abandonment, he can only reply with the insistent assurance that he believes he shall find in death “divine masters who are supremely good.”^20 It is for this reason that Socrates meets his death with hope in a better existence beyond the grave.

At this point in the dialogue, before Socrates begins to expound in more detail about the asceticism of the philosophical life and the exact nature of the body-soul relation, there is a slight break in which Crito passes on the request of the prison guard that Socrates not talk so much, since it makes him “heated” and may inhibit the potency of the poison. The break seems fitting because it allows one to take note of the way that Socrates’ serene disposition—even in the face of the most urgent circumstantial distractions—makes the philosophical inquiry in which he is about to engage possible. Plato does not have Socrates obtain by means of a process of discursive reasoning the confidence and hope that he attempts to explain throughout the *Phaedo*. It is rather his firm assurance of the benignity of the divine authority whose will he obeys that provides the occasion for the inquiry into what justifies his unwavering joy even and especially in the face of death.

---

^20 Ibid. 63c.
This claim may sound rather controversial, but I contend it that it renders a much more straightforward reading of Socrates’ thoughts, actions and disposition during his final days. How are we to read, for instance, his parting words in the *Apology*: “Now it is time that we were going, I to die and you to live, but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God”?\(^{21}\) Could he possibly be sincere here? He has already vigorously defended his innocence, and defiantly argued that, even should they kill him, they cannot harm him insofar as “the law of God” does not allow the vicious to harm the virtuous. Moreover, he has exerted himself to make the case that his death is not something to be feared, since it is “one of two things” which both appear preferable to his present existence. One could deny his sincerity by reasoning that his “law of God” comment was meant to be incendiary or ironic and that his “one of two things” argument is just flagrantly fallacious and merely an invitation to other philosophers to continue their discourse and inquiry by deconstructing his argument.\(^{22}\) Both positions seem to me intratextually strained and open to many more dilemmas than those they claim to resolve. To be sure, one must appreciate the challenging, provocative tone of Socrates’ last words to the jury; they leave behind a final haunting question for his accusers. Yet the context of the dialogue as a whole and its individual arguments make it clear that Socrates is indeed sincere at some level about not knowing the nature of his fate in death.

This, I take it, gentlemen, is the degree, and this the nature of my advantage over the rest of mankind… that not possessing any real knowledge of what comes after death, I am also conscious that I do not possess it. *But I do know that to do wrong and to disobey my superior, whether God or man, is wicked and dishonorable,*

---

\(^{21}\) *Apology* 42.

\(^{22}\) This latter “esoteric” interpretation of the “one of two things” argument is defended by David Roochnik in his article “*Apology* 40c4—41e7: Is Death Really a Gain?” in *The Classical Journal* (v80, #3, Feb-Mar, 1985) pp212—220.
and so I shall never feel more fear or aversion for something which, for all I know, may really be a blessing, than for those evils which I know to be evils. 23

The one positive claim of certainty that Socrates puts forth is not about knowledge, but about obedience. He bears out this conviction with his continued insistence against disobeying the daimon who has led him into the philosophical life. He does not say that to disobey or do wrong is morally prohibited or even that it is ultimately self-destructive with regard to his happiness or well-being. He says it is kakon (ugly, deformed) and aischron (worthy of ridicule and abuse). Ugly to whom? Worthy of ridicule by whom? For the Athenians, Socrates’ faithful obedience to the daimon is neither attractive nor admirable, but simply obstinate and worthy of rebuke. The threat of public condemnation and death should thus settle the question of the moral quality of his obedience once and for all, since in the final judgment of the polis his actions will have led to his shameful ruin. But for Socrates, his primary audience is not the polis, but the gods and specifically his “god.” It is the gods that will somehow vindicate his virtue in the end.

Like his stalemate with Callicles in the Gorgias, there is ultimately not much Socrates can say to those who simply deny that virtue does not lead to well-being, and his position becomes all the more difficult when acting virtuously means going to one’s death. Earlier in the Gorgias, the more persuadable Polus asks disbelievingly, do “you wish rather to suffer than to do wrong?” to which Socrates replies “I would not wish either, but if I had either to do or to suffer wrong, I would choose rather to suffer than to do it.” 24 He reiterates this point a couple of other times throughout the dialogue, 25 but he

23 Apology 29b (my emphasis)
24 Gorgias, 469c
never manages to convince Callicles of it. As we noted, it just seems like nonsense to him and so he eventually just checks out of the conversation. By the end of the dialogue, Socrates is reduced to fervent pleading, to employing epic and mythological figures in his attempt to convince him that even should the virtuous die at the hands of the wicked, the virtuous man is the happier. “If you will listen to me,” he says,

you will follow me where on your arrival you will win happiness both in life and after death, as our account reveals. And you may let anyone despise you as a fool and do you outrage, if he wishes, yes, and you may cheerfully let him strike you with that humiliating blow, for you will suffer no harm thereby if you really are a good man and honorable, and pursue virtue.26

It is hard to imagine a more direct foreshadowing of Socrates’ (and Christ’s) death in this particular context. It is as if, when the discursive mode breaks down, Plato is driven to invoke the image of Socrates’ death as grounds for exhorting the pursuit of philosophical virtue even in the face of violence. Such an exhortatory argument is ultimately all Socrates (and Plato) can put forth, both at the end of the Gorgias and at the end of the Apology.

Without recourse to elenchos, Socrates can only propose his “belief” that the law of God would not allow a better person to be harmed by a worse one. To the Athenian jury he can only offer his “suspicion” that his death is really a blessing. Before laying out his “death is one of two things” argument, he reveals what I regard as his deepest reason for maintaining such beliefs and suspicions: “I have good grounds for thinking this—” that it is a mistake to suppose death is an evil— “because my accustomed sign could not have failed to oppose me if what I was doing had not been sure to bring some good

25 Ibid. 473a, 475e
26 Ibid. 527c—d
result.”  

Thus the basis for Socrates’ confidence in his fate after death is not the result of any logical induction or culminating insight, but rather a personal assurance of the goodness of the divine reality whose directives are leading him to that fate. His assurance is not based on any direct revelation (although the promptings of the *daimon* are private), but rather from the kind of life those divine directives have prescribed for him. He himself claims that the philosophical life of investigation and discussion to which the *daimon* has led him, “is really the very best thing that a man can do.”

His accusers reject the credibility of this *daimon* not so much for theological reasons but because they reject the sort the life it has produced in Socrates. It seems clear that the unexamined life Socrates describes as not worth living is the very life that characterizes the great majority of his contemporaries—his accusers included—and he criticizes the unexamined life because it depends for its fulfillment upon the accumulation and preservation of goods that are contingent and unstable. In an important sense, then, Socrates’ revolutionary approach to death is a function of his revolutionary approach to life. His alternative conception of human success—and his correlative understanding of death—are ultimately based upon a new way of life that has emerged, not as the result of any original insight or unprecedented penetration into human nature or the natural world, but rather from direct interaction with and obedience to a divine reality which has initiated communication with Socrates.

---

27 *Apology* 40c.
28 Ibid. 38a
2.1.3 Socrates on Wisdom, Fortune and Happiness

This close relationship between his conception of the good life and the goodness of the transcendent makes itself known perhaps most clearly in an argument he makes in the *Euthydemus*. The *Euthydemus* is often treated as the dialogue expressing Plato’s theory of language, but in its structure it is a kind of rhetorical *agon* between the philosophical visions of Socrates and his sophistic rivals. In the dialogue Plato depicts Socrates as engaged in a protreptic duel with the influential sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, with each side attempting to persuade a young prospective pupil named Clinias to follow their method of philosophy over the other. Euthydemus’ opening interrogation of the boy reveals the sophist’s relative disinterest in pursuing the actual meaning of things in comparison with demonstrating the power of rhetorical skill, which allows its possessor to create and reshape meaning according to their whim.

Socrates refers to such rhetoric as “a game,” a form of verbal play.29 His own attempt to draw the boy to his tutelage begins by taking up the question of wisdom and fortune (*tychē*), a topic that quickly gets to the heart of what separates Socrates’ form of inquiry from that of the sophists’. For Euthydemus, wisdom—knowing things as they truly are—is an inferior good to the ability to make others think what you want them to think. Wisdom is of little profit if the truth it uncovers turns out to be to one’s disadvantage. What good does it do to know the world more clearly if the world remains just as hostile to your interests as it was before such knowledge? Is it not preferable, the

---

29 *Euthydemus* 278b—c: “Well, all this is just a little game of learning, and so I say they are playing with you; I call it a game, because if one learned many such things or even all of them, one would be no nearer knowing what the things really are, but would be able to play with people because of the different senses of the words, tripping them up and turning them upside down, just as someone pulls a stool away when someone else is going to sit down, and then people roar with joy when they see him lying on his back.”
sophist would reason, to cultivate the ability to *mold* the reality in which one finds one’s self according to one’s advantage? Is it not more sensible to privilege an ability that minimizes the effects of fortune by adapting others’ perception of reality so as to suit one’s own interests? Socrates’ response to this general sophistic platform in the *Euthydemus* seems at first rather counterintuitive, but in the end presents a compellingly coherent alternative vision.

Socrates begins by inquiring into what it means to “do well” as a human being, and the various goods that one must secure in order to achieve happiness. The goods that first come to his mind are fairly straightforward and unsurprising: wealth, health, beauty, power and honor. Also, there are the virtues of temperance, justice and courage, and then to crown these Socrates finally adds wisdom. So far these make up a very pious, non-controversial set of goods necessary for human happiness.\(^{30}\) But then Socrates suddenly remembers one he forgot: “good fortune, Clinias, which everyone says is the greatest good of all; even the commonest fools say that.”\(^{31}\) And then comes a twist: Socrates bars good fortune from the list, claiming that it has already been accounted for with wisdom. “Wisdom, I suppose, is good fortune,” he says, “even a child would know that.”\(^{32}\) For it is the trained musician that enjoys good fortune with regard to playing music, the trained scribe that is fortunate with writing, and likewise one would prefer to brave the fortunes of war under a wise general and to risk the uncertainties of seafaring with the company of a wise captain. “For wisdom,” he contends, “could never make a mistake, but must

---

\(^{30}\) In his 2002 article “Happiness in the *Euthydemus*” in *Phronesis* (47:1—27), P. Dimas argues that this list of goods are clichéd set of attributes representing moral convention in general. They are in a sense simply the usual constituents of the accepted description of happiness at that time.

\(^{31}\) *Euthydemus* 279c

\(^{32}\) Ibid. 279d
always do right and have right fortune, or else it would not be wisdom any longer.”

Therefore no further good fortune is needed for happiness beyond the good fortune wisdom entails. Is Socrates himself now indulging in a bit of wordplay?

He goes on to explain that one gets no benefit from the goods just listed without actually using them, and that the benefit they in fact do provide depends wholly upon how they are used, which is a function of the sort of knowledge wisdom supplies. For the uninformed and misdirected the use of such goods can bring about more evil and misfortune than never having had any goods in the first place. In fact, Socrates concludes that both the goods he listed at the beginning of his protreptic as well as their opposites are in themselves not worth anything at all apart from the wisdom or ignorance with which they are used. “Then what follows from what has been said? [Only] that none of the things is either good or bad, except these two, and of these wisdom is good, and ignorance bad.”

For Socrates, wisdom is the supreme virtue that is capable of directing every human action within every possible circumstance toward the greatest possible good. Thus wisdom facilitates good fortune and minimizes bad fortune. Yet is this explanation sufficient to support his stronger claim that wisdom simply is good fortune? Here we return to the problem of the suffering sage raised in the Gorgias. Callicles would take it to be patent nonsense to equate virtue with “good fortune” because so often virtuous behavior leaves one vulnerable to physical and social abuse. For him, such a view has it backward: those with the strength to secure their own safety in the face of fortune are the ones we should call truly wise. In this way, the Euthydemus’ examination of the

33 Ibid. 280a
34 Ibid. 281e
distinction between wisdom and good fortune brings the impasse of the *Gorgias* into a
clearer light: Socrates conceives of fortune—and the human good in general—in an
entirely different way than both Callicles and the sophists, and thus his use of the word
itself is almost an equivocation of theirs.

What then does Socrates mean by good fortune? In the *Gorgias* 511d—513a,
Socrates launches a reply to Callicles’ suggestion that virtue should only be cultivated in
those arts that preserve one from danger, and, as in the *Euthydemus*, he invokes
proficiency in the less prestigious, practical trades as precisely the skills that would
accomplish this end. The boatman is the one whose skill is security against the dangers
of the sea just as the doctor’s skill is a defense against the misfortunes of illness. If these
tradesmen perform such invaluable tasks, Socrates asks, why then are their fees so
miniscule? Socrates responds that they themselves realize that the services they provide
against external misfortune are not a reliable indication of whether or not they render any
real benefit to their clients. For those whose souls are corrupt and wretched, he claims,
their skills are not fortunate at all, since they leave intact and perhaps even reinforce the
evil and ugliness of their souls. Only what leads to the improvement of their souls could
be considered “good fortune.” Goods or services that provide for material well-being are
in themselves signs of neither fortune nor misfortune; they only become so in relation to
the condition of the soul that directs them. For Callicles and the sophists, on the other
hand, the reverse relation obtains: the fortunate quality of an event depends primarily on
its consequences for increasing and preserving one’s material well-being. The two
accounts are therefore irreconcilable, and the arguments between them are arguments
over the very definition of fortune and ultimately the very definition of the good life.
Callicles considers his own state to be more fortunate than that of these menial craftsmen who provide merely material services. Thus Socrates asks him, “if we look at the reasons for which you praise you own accomplishments, what just cause have you for disdaining the engineer and the others I mentioned just now?” Socrates replies to his own question by pointing to the fundamental difference between their respective conceptions of the good life and human excellence:

I know you would say you are a better man and of better family. But if by ‘better’ you do not mean what I do, but goodness consists merely in saving oneself and one’s property, whatever one’s character, it is ridiculous to find fault with the engineer and the doctor and the other crafts devised for the purpose of giving safety. But, my good sir, just reflect whether what is good and noble is not something more than saving and being saved.\(^35\)

What Socrates says next is very revealing, and deserves to be cited at length:

Perhaps the true man should ignore this question of living for a certain span of years and should not be so enamored of life, but should leave these things to God and, trusting the womenfolk who say that no man whatever could escape his destiny, should consider the ensuing question—in what way one can best live the life that is to be his, whether by assimilating himself to the type of government under which he lives—so that now, after all, you must become as like as possible to the Athenian people, if you are to be dear to them and wield great power in the city. Consider, my good friend, whether this is of benefit to you and to me, so that we may not suffer what they say is the fate of the Thessalian witches who draw down the moon from heaven, and find that our choice of such power in the city means the sacrifice of what is dearest to us. But if you imagine that anyone in the world will deliver to you an art which will win you great power in the city, unless either for better or for worse you resemble its government, then in my opinion you are mistaken, Callicles.\(^36\)

An account of the good life based on the pursuit of merely individual survival, power and glorification is, according to Socrates, an ultimately self-defeating way to live. Those who attempt to acquire power within the city for their own personal gain suffer from underlying pathology of character that can only prevent lasting contentment, and they

\(^{35}\) Gorgias 512d

\(^{36}\) Ibid. 512e—513c
will inevitably meet the same fate as those—like the Thessalian witches—who attempt to exploit the gods.

Socrates here suggests that the soul can only attain fulfillment as a part of something bigger than one’s self; whether it be the city or the cosmos as a whole. In doing so, one must at certain points subordinate individual well-being to that of a greater order, and thus “leave to God” the concerns of one’s own flourishing. The thrust of Socrates’ argument against the Callicles’ egoism is that such self-seeking eventually cuts one off from the networks of social exchange and cooperation in which shared evaluations of honor and excellence are formed, and thereby excludes one from the realm of moral reasoning itself. Callicles’ concern for his own security above all else makes him effectively amoral: his reasoning lies beyond the bounds of any mutual exercise of moral reasoning. His character is duplicitous and contradictory insofar as the material well-being he prioritizes can only be secured within a larger social context whose ends transcend his own, forcing him always to act as if he conforms to its order while all the while seeking his own safety first and foremost.

For Plato, then, “good fortune,” like happiness itself, receives its meaning from a reality that transcends the self, from a greater ordered whole of which one is merely a part. Yet as I argued above, Socrates’ confrontation with the *polis* suggests the possibility of appealing to an ordered reality even greater than the *polis*, of which the *polis* itself is only a part. This higher order does not simply refer to the mythological world of the Olympian gods, which are concerned with the aspirations of humans only when it suits them. Rather, the “god” to which Socrates refers not only relates itself to human action, but reliably orders it in accordance with a pattern of wisdom. It is this
higher reality that allows Socrates to conceive of good fortune and human excellence in general as ordered to a superordinate form of goodness that transcends both material and social flourishing. One acquires knowledge of this higher reality through the practice of philosophy, and so becomes a member of the moral community governed by its order. The *polis* is not simply rejected or exploited, but rather is placed into larger context.  

This “theological” dimension of the philosophical life introduces a radically new understanding of the relation between the acquisition of knowledge, fortune and death. Both Callicles and Euthydemus value knowledge only insofar as it bears upon their ability to manipulate their circumstances and secure their own interests. For these parties, wisdom becomes a merely conditional or instrumental good: knowledge is neither good nor bad in itself, but depends only upon its usefulness for the material security of the knower. For Plato, on the other hand, wisdom is the one unconditional good without which all other goods hold no value. The lower goods of bodily health and material well-being receive their value because of their conduciveness to the highest activity of human nature: growth in knowledge.

Such an unqualified exaltation of wisdom proceeds from the assumption that the object of one’s growing knowledge is itself good in an equally unqualified sense. Socrates’ unconditional pursuit of knowledge bases itself on certain claims about the intelligible realm: (1) it is accessible to the human mode of knowing, (2) it is a higher, more perfected order of reality that “understands” and explains all reality inferior to it, and (3) it orders even the manner by which inferior forms of intelligence aspire toward contact with it. Thus since what is intelligible embraces all that is inferior to it, wisdom is the virtue that constitutes as the highest attainable good, and is therefore the basis of all

---

37 I was reminded of this point in personal conversation with Jean Porter.
other virtues. As Socrates concludes in the *Euthydemus*, nothing is good or bad except in relation to knowledge and ignorance; it is what tracks and determines whether human actions are expression of virtue or vice, reality or unreality, beauty or ugliness, happiness or wretchedness.\(^\text{38}\) However, this knowledge is not simply the refinement of personal opinion, nor the possession of merely technical or procedural information. Rather, it is an aspiration toward—a growth into—a higher, more real mode of existence that orders and perfects one’s own. The more one knows, the more things fall into place; the more one knows, the clearer and more intelligible the world becomes. As the myth of the cave comes to articulate, growth in knowledge constitutes a turn from formless shadows into direct light, and in this light, what once seemed perplexing and random now appears distinctly coherent. Thus Socrates’ identification of wisdom and fortune in the *Euthydemus* may be read as more than just his own attempt at sophistic wordplay.

Simply because irregular, unforeseen occurrences appear blindly unintelligible from my own moral viewpoint does not mean that they are in themselves unintelligible. Simply because such “chance events” may appear to threaten my pursuit of happiness does not mean that they actually do.

The semantic work Socrates’ argument is doing here is not merely performative, but definitional: one may call an occurrence “luck,” but only in order to designate one’s own ignorance of the relation such an occurrence bears to the intelligibility of one’s existence life taken as a whole. I contend that for Plato, the terms “luck” or “fortune” simply name what is inexplicable from our own viewpoint, but which are nevertheless still part of an overarching wisdom that directs every event. In his article “What Every

\(^\text{38}\) *Euthydemus*, 281e
Child Would Know: Socrates, Luck, And Providence at *Euthydemus* 277d—282e,” Mark McPherran points out an intriguing detail of the dialogue itself that supports this view. Socrates’ encounter with Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, which occasions the dialogue, begins with what Socrates himself describes as a providential, divinely guided bit of “luck.” “I happened providentially (*kata theon gar tina etuchon*) to be sitting in the place where you saw me,” recalls Socrates, “alone in the undressing room, and had just thought it was time to get up; but as I was getting up, I had my usual divine presentiment. So I sat down again, and soon after in came these two, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus…”

Such a detail could of course be a merely literary flourish or of no significance at all, but it could also reinforce the suggestion that Socrates’ own pursuit of wisdom is underwritten by a providential design, that it in a sense mirrors wisdom’s pursuit of *him*.

“Indeed, it seems to me,” remarks McPherran, “that this dialogue itself ‘leaves nothing to chance’, but is wisely crafted to educate us and warn us away from sophistic antilogy and its goals, while it simultaneously exhorts us to pursue philosophical dialectic and luck’s antithesis: pious wisdom.” He concludes that Socrates not only dissolves luck into wisdom in order to ground a causal account of human happiness (no matter what the amount of luck, wisdom always remains necessary for authentic happiness), but that he also dissolves luck into wisdom *metaphysically*

on the grounds that… like the Stoics he presages, he subscribes to the view that there are no chance events whatsoever. Rather, for him… all events are guided by the operations of a wise, cosmic intelligence; [and] therefore, all events—internal or external—are fortunate indeed, in the sense that they are all providential.

---

39 *Euthydemus* 272d—e
41 Ibid., p59.
If such a view of providence may indeed be attributed to Socrates, it closely attends his view of the nature of wisdom in general and its pursuit within a philosophical form of life. In the dialogues chronicling his trial and death, Socrates presents himself as a model for this way of life, as the exemplar for a new form of heroism directly challenging the warrior-hero Achilles as the preeminent model of human excellence. Plato presents Socrates as a “true guide” on the grounds of his superior wisdom, which he contends is a higher form of excellence than the power to overcome one’s enemies on the battlefield. He concludes in the *Meno* that “these two, true opinion and knowledge, are the only things which direct us aright and the possession of which makes a man a true guide. We may except chance,” he goes on to explain, “because what turns out right by chance is not due to human direction.” So as far as our own capacity for deliberative action is concerned, “these two principles are directive, true opinion and knowledge.”42 If one’s well-being is unconditionally bound in this way to one’s growth in knowledge, then one may conceive of the final aim of one’s life pursuits as ultimately impervious to factors beyond one’s control, specifically with regard to future social contingencies that bear upon one’s lasting legacy. Yet as Bernard Williams argues in his book *Moral Luck*, even if one were to grant such a providential nature to the pursuit of wisdom, luck would still apply to the events by which the philosopher comes to embark upon this pursuit.43 This chapter has attempted to make the case, however, that the divine plays a central role in Socrates’ account of the philosophical life from beginning to end. Insofar as the divine is for him an active, intelligent transcendent reality at work in his vocation to the philosophical life, then providence operates *especially* at one’s point of entry into this

42 *Meno* 99a.

And as we see, it is at the beginning and the end of Socrates’ life that the *daimon*’s guidance is most critical: the *daimon*’s initial oracle and continued intervention is the basis for Socrates’ assurance that his quest for wisdom will ultimately be fulfilled even against the threat of death.

2.1.4 Death as the Fulfillment of the Philosophical Life

Of all things beyond the scope of human control, of all thing subject to the whims of chance, death looms largest. It is the final variable, the ultimate universal contingency with which any model of human excellence must provide an account; it is the final foreordained twist of fortune that seemingly unravels every human accomplishment. We have gained a glimpse of how the warrior-hero model of excellence attempts to overcome this hurdle. Now let us look to the *Phaedo* to see how Socrates’ philosophical model of heroism negotiates it. “I want to explain to you,” he says to his young interlocutor Simmias, “how it seems to me natural that a man who has really devoted his life to philosophy should be cheerful in the face of death, and confident of finding the greatest blessing in the next world when his life is finished.”

Those who truly devote themselves to the philosophical life, he explains, prepare themselves directly and consciously for death. Indeed, the philosopher is in a sense “already half dead” inasmuch as he denies determinative influence to the desires of material, earthly life. The philosopher strives to subject his bodily senses and desires to the intelligible pursuit of truth, and so endeavors to achieve complete independence from all bodily distractions.

---

44 *Phaedo* 63e—64a.

45 cf. *Phaedo* 65c: “Surely the soul can best reflect when it is free of all distractions such as hearing or sight or pain r pleasure of any kind—that is, when it ignore the body and becomes as far as
Full independence, of course, comes only with full separation from the body. “So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be truth.”

The philosopher is therefore able to embrace death in a way that other archetypes of human excellence cannot. “We are in fact convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself,” and thus “the wisdom which we desire and upon which we profess to have set our hearts will be attainable only when we are dead, and not in our lifetime.”

For Socrates, the philosopher’s death is neither simply an interruption nor an inevitable sentence of tragic misfortune, but a natural and happy culmination of a human life lived well. Contrary to the traditional conception, mortality is not, according to him, the ineluctable flaw distinguishes us from the immortals. Precisely the opposite: death is the liberation that serves as our point of contact with the divine in that it removes from us the barriers to our knowledge. Death is not a problem after all, but rather a solution; the real problem is corporeality. But why not then commit suicide and be done with it?

Again Socrates’ postulation of a providential order confronts us: the progression toward full knowledge of which death is the culmination is itself not something ordered by our own wisdom, but rather by another’s. “I believe this much to be true,” he tells Cebes, “that the gods are our keepers, and we men are one of their possessions.”

possible independent, avoiding all physical contacts and associations as much as it can, in its search for reality…. here too--- in despising the body and avoiding it, and endeavoring to become independent—the philosopher’s soul is ahead of all the rest.”

---

46 Ibid. 66b.
47 Ibid. 66d—e.
not to abandon the post at which the gods have placed us until they command us to, and for Socrates in the *Phaedo*, that time is now. Nevertheless the quest for knowledge dictates that one distance one’s self as far as possible from the body, “and instead of allowing ourselves to become infected with its nature, purify ourselves from it until God himself gives us deliverance.”

Far from fearing or grieving death, Socrates believes the philosopher should greet it with hope and joy as the final culmination of his efforts, as an entry into that state in which the fullness of wisdom becomes possible. Those who fear death reveal their primary love to be something apart from wisdom and consequently dependent upon the existence that death takes away.

“Doesn’t it follow,” Socrates then asks, “that the virtue which we call courage belongs primarily to the philosophical disposition?” What follows seems to constitute a direct attack on the moral reasoning of the Homeric hero.

You know, don’t you, that everyone except the philosopher regards death as a great evil?
Yes, indeed.
Isn’t it true that when a brave man faces death he does so through fear of something worse?
Yes, it is true.
So in everyone except the philosopher courage is due to fear and dread, although it is illogical that fear and cowardice should make a man brave.
Quite so.

According to the inheritance of epic morality, a heroic life worthy of glory is to be preferred to a long but unremarkable life. A life of excellence is the only sort of life worth living. Thus one would promptly give one’s life for the opportunity to accomplish

---

48 Ibid. 62b.
49 Ibid. 67a.
50 Ibid. 68c.
51 Ibid. 68d.
something truly remarkable. Longevity is a value that one weighs against the deeds of excellence one may achieve in exchange for it. But as we suggested above in our treatment of Achilles, the desire for such distinction is itself a condition of mortality. The desire for excellence goes hand in hand with the fear of shrinking namelessly into oblivion, such that it is difficult to discern where the one ends and the other begins.

Socrates goes on to argue that “from the moral standpoint, it is not the right method to exchange one degree of pleasure or pain for another, like coins of different values. There is only one currency for which all these tokens of ours should be exchanged, and that is wisdom.”⁵² The philosophical model of human life thereby rejects the tragic view of human life as a collection of aspirations that inevitably come into irreconcilable conflict with death. Death for the Socratic philosopher is not an ineliminable foil to the designs of our hearts, but rather the last threshold through which what is divine in us comes to its fulfillment. In the Apology, when the jury asks his opinion of what his sentence should be, he reasons that his service to the city should earn him public financial support for the remainder of his life, which was the usual reward given to victorious Olympic athletes. “These people give you [only] the semblance of success,” he boldly declares, “but I give you the reality.”⁵³ By his death Socrates thus gives witness to a rival paradigm of human excellence based upon the pursuit of wisdom, offering himself as its first heroic archetype—a new Achilles.

---

⁵²Phaedo 69a.

⁵³Apology 36e.
2.2 Achilles or Socrates? Heroism, Philosophy and Noble Death in Aristotle

As the subject of intellectual reflection, the death of Socrates enjoys a place of perennial importance in Western thought that is unrivalled by any other except Christ’s. Despite the earnest attempts of later Roman chroniclers such as Plutarch and Tacitus to pull down the iconic status of Socrates’ death in favor of more congenial and illustrious deaths such as Cato’s, Seneca’s or even Cicero’s, it was nevertheless Socrates who continued to be the focal point for philosophical reflection upon death. Indeed, almost every major intellectual figure of the Western intellectual tradition at one point or another take up the death of Socrates as a point of departure for reflecting upon the nature and meaning of death.\(^{54}\) The above treatment of Achilles and Socrates as emblematic cultural figures is meant only to bring into focus a specific question for a relatively proximate but nonetheless important thinker: Socrates’ own “intellectual grandson,” Aristotle. Specifically, our account of the competing influence of Achilles and Socrates as moral archetypes raises some pressing questions with regard to Aristotle’s views on virtue, courage and death. These questions will serve as the touchstone for our subsequent study of the ethical significance of the assimilation of the noble death paradigm in early Christianity and in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. The question this chapter hopes to bring to light is whether or not Aristotle is able, like Plato, to commend Socrates’ death as the consummate exemplification of a new philosophical ideal of human excellence over and against more traditional models of martial heroism. After initially indicating reasons for doubt, this chapter aims to progress in four stages toward a more precise differentiation of Aristotle and Plato on the relation of courage,

\(^{54}\) For an excellent book-length treatment on the various treatments of the death of Socrates throughout the Western intellectual tradition, see Emily Wilson’s *The Death of Socrates* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007)
death and virtue: first we will examine the relationship Aristotle envisions between the moral and intellectual virtues within the overall life of the *polis*; then we will review Aristotle’s account of the role of pleasure in the acquisition and exercise of virtue; thirdly, we will pick out the ways in which Aristotle’s conception of courage departs from the courage Socrates expounds in the face of death, and in conclusion we will render a verdict as to whether Aristotle could in any way regard Socrates’ death as an act of virtue.

2.2.1 Aristotle, the *Polis*, and the Diverse Species of Human Excellence

While it is unclear whether Aristotle really was the teacher of Alexander the Great, it is generally agreed that he did in fact serve as tutor in the court of Philip of Macedonia for around seven years. Returning to Athens in 335 BCE, Aristotle then established the Lyceum. Shortly after the death of Alexander in 322 BCE, however, a leader of the anti-Macedonian political faction named Eurymedon conspired to indict him on charges of impiety, presumably because of his Macedonian connections. Rather than face the charges, he fled to Chalcis, where he had an inherited a villa, and there died about a year later of natural causes. Many of the scattered biographical sources recount him defending his decision to flee by saying that he did not want Athens “to commit a second crime against philosophy.” Unlike Socrates, Aristotle apparently did not regard exile to be an insuperable obstacle to his intellectual life, or else he did not consider his intellectual pursuits to be the *only* aspect of his life worth preserving. Any explanations we put forth here could only be speculation. The legend remains, however, that faced with an almost identical set of circumstances, Aristotle chose a different path than
Socrates: the execution that awaited him in Athens was clearly not a death he thought worth dying. Indeed if the final saying attributed to him has any merit, Aristotle thought Socrates’ death to be an evil, a crime, a loss. Whether the evil affected only the Athenians or included Aristotle as well, it was not something Aristotle felt he could embrace or incite. From the very start, then, the history Aristotle’s death signals a divergence between his understanding of death and that underlying Plato’s heroic portrayal of Socrates’ last days.

Nevertheless, this aspect of Aristotle’s history is at best suggestive and offers no substantive insight into this divergence. Before we attempt to discern what the divergence might actually be between their specific conceptions of death and the philosophical life, it is first necessary to review some fundamental points on which their systems of thought converge. In the dialogues surrounding Socrates’ death, Plato makes the case for the philosophical pursuit of wisdom as the highest possible form of human excellence. In *The Republic*, Plato rearticulates this pre-eminence in more detail, fleshing out in political terms the anthropology and polity implied by this vision of excellence. To a great extent, Aristotle inherits this vision. Throughout *The Nichomachean Ethics* (EN), he reiterates the definition of *eudaimonia*—or consummate human happiness—as the activity of the soul in accordance with excellence of the highest sort over a complete life. Merely bodily or social excellences are not sufficient to constitute the supreme good for the human person, since human beings share these sorts of excellence with other subrational creatures. Rather, the distinctively human good for Aristotle must be intellectual inasmuch as the human intellect distinguishes us from other creatures. The highest achievable human excellence for Aristotle is therefore intellectual, meaning that
eudaimonia consists in the exercise of the soul in regard to intelligible objects—the objects of philosophical wisdom.

Like Socrates, then, he considers the life of philosophy to be the supreme form of human activity. Philosophy is an ultimate good for the human person insofar as it is an activity that motivates and finds completion in itself, independent of any further end.55 Aristotle articulates this understanding of happiness most directly in The Nicomachean Ethics (EN) X.7 where he lays out his argument for the contemplative nature of absolute happiness in explicit contrast with practical activity in the political or martial spheres. Unlike the excellences of politics or war, the excellence of philosophical activity is desired for no further end beyond itself, bringing with it a distinctive awareness of well-being that exempts contemplative activity from all weariness and anxiety. “Such a life will be higher than the human plane,” Aristotle remarks, “for it is not in so far as [the philosopher] is human that he will live like this, but in so far as there is something divine in him, and to the degree that this is superior to the compound, to that degree will its activity too be superior to that in accordance with the rest of excellence.”56 So as to remove all doubt as to whether such an ideal is worth aspiring to, he then adds that one should renounce the common adage “mortal you are, think mortal thoughts,” and “instead, so far as is possible, assimilate to the immortals and do everything with the aim of living in accordance with what is highest in us; for even if it is small in bulk, the degree to which it surpasses everything in power and dignity is far greater.”57 If it is by its “authoritative and better element” that each thing’s identity is assigned, then it is with

55 Nicomachean Ethics (EN) I.7.
56 EN X.7, 1177b28—30.
57 EN X.7, 1177b34—1178a2.
our intellectual nature that our most proper identity is bound up, and likewise our ultimate happiness as the sort of creatures we are.

Aristotle’s account of intellectual virtue and the life of philosophy as the highest form of happiness seems very much in tune with Socrates’ views in the Apology, Crito and Phaedo. Yet immediately after laying out his view, Aristotle considers another species of human flourishing in EN X.8 that corresponds to the various other forms of excellence that may be manifested in human life. This secondary plane of happiness corresponds to the excellences of character realized in the cultivation of the moral or practical virtues. They belong to the composite nature of the human person, and to the proper ordering of bodily and affective activity in accordance with reason. Although the intellect remains active and involved in the exercise of these virtues, it applies itself to what is external to it, placing its imprint upon the spatio-temporal sphere. Here is where we begin to see traces of Aristotle’s divergence with Plato and the Socratic philosophical inheritance. Although happiness in its most perfect manifestation is contemplative, there are other proper modes of happiness that answer to the human person’s characteristically composite existence.

Unlike Socrates, Aristotle accords bodily and political activity their own proper place as legitimate realms of human excellence. He recognizes that the contemplative form of happiness is in a certain sense dependent upon lower forms, since the “divine life” of the philosopher always takes place within an equilibrium of leisure secured by stable passions, appetites and social relationships. He argues that “one who is happy will also need external prosperity in so far as he is human; for human nature is not self-sufficient for the purposes of reflection, but needs bodily health, too, and the availability
of nourishment and other kinds of servicing.”\(^{58}\) For as he initially observed in \textit{EN} X.4, “continuous activity… is impossible for any human capacity.”\(^{59}\) One might say then that Aristotle’s estimation of the human capacity for contemplative “divinization” is much more restrained than Socrates’. He recognizes that composite existence is a permanent part of human nature. No amount of cultivation of the divine element in the human person can emancipate us from our dependence upon the body and the \textit{polis}, or from the responsibility of cultivating the moral and social virtues that correspond to them.

Plato would develop the Socratic vision of philosophy into a vision of social life that aims to transcend such concerns. In the \textit{Republic}, the philosopher assumes a position of dominance in direct opposition to the warrior-heroes and myth-makers of old. As Alasdair MacIntyre observes in \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality?}, one of Plato’s main goals in \textit{The Republic} is the complete replacement of “the images and narratives of the poet and the storyteller by the concepts and arguments of the philosopher.”\(^{60}\) In the tenth book of \textit{The Republic}, Plato argues that the works of the poets only serve to deceive the \textit{populus}, since they are twice removed from reality—being mere imitations of imitations; and because of their deceptiveness, they morally corrupt the young by inciting their passions and suppressing their reason. Aristotle, on the other hand, defends the poet and tragedian in his \textit{Poetics} on account of their service to the formation of communal sentiment and their preservation of communal memory within the \textit{polis}.\(^{61}\) For him the poet does not obscure reality, but only articulates it in a way that renders it accessible to

\(^{58}\) \textit{EN} X.8, 1178b33—35.

\(^{59}\) \textit{EN} X.4, 1175a4.


\(^{61}\) \textit{Poetics} 1456b7.
the community as a whole. Like the moral virtues themselves, good poetry manifests a form of excellence that, while inferior to philosophy, is nevertheless wholly worth attaining. By inspiring and directing the passions according to what is noble, arts such as these may be of valuable service to the moral formation of the polis, and especially to those contingents of its citizenry whose souls are characterized primarily by their appetites and affections. His defense of the poets and playwrights conforms to what MacIntyre describes as Aristotle’s general pattern of emphasizing the actual embodiment of the human good within the concrete practices of communal life. Unlike Plato, Aristotle remains “committed to defend the actuality of the polis” and to the possibility of influencing its actual organization.

This emphasis follows directly upon Aristotle’s understanding of how the human intellect operates: only by directly engaging with what is concrete and particular can it advance toward the apprehension of any general concept. For Aristotle, the intellectual faculty—or nous—comprehends what is intelligible within and among the particular existents that present themselves to human perception. Thus, in contrast to Plato or Socrates’ view, Aristotle maintains that the insights of human understanding and prudence do not occur as a result of detaching or withdrawing from physical sensation, as if it obstructed the mind’s recollection of the intelligible; rather he thinks of intellectual insight as a synthetic organization of what one has actually encountered over time (which is one reason for his continual insistence that the sort of activity happiness names can

---

62 cf. Politics 1342
63 MacIntyre, Whose Justice? p90
64 Ibid. pp91—93
only take place over the course of an entire life).\footnote{cf. Ibid, p93: “Where Plato contrasts the form and the realm of particulars, emphasizing their disparity, Aristotle understands the form as confronted only in the particulars, albeit often imperfectly so exemplified; where Plato contrasts the ideal polity and the realm of actual poleis, emphasizing their disparity, Aristotle understands the type of polis which is the best as conforming to a standard which is already implicitly embodied and acknowledged, albeit in [imperfect] ways, within the practices of Greek politics.”} Aristotle therefore posits a proper diversity and autonomy amongst the various species of human virtue which each pursue separate but nonetheless authentic forms of excellence. While all distinctively human virtue is for Aristotle governed by reason, it is nonetheless the actual \textit{activity} of the composite human being that manifests the excellence of such virtue. It is by actually \textit{doing} what right reason prescribes in any certain context that the human potential for any virtue becomes actualized.

In \textit{EN} I, Aristotle rejects the Platonic notion of the subsistence of all human goods in one intellectual Form of the Good. He argues there that if the only thing good in itself is the Form of Goodness, “the Form [itself] will be empty.”\footnote{EN I.6, 1096b20 (Ross translation).} In other words, there would be no finite thing in which one could apprehend what it would mean to be “good in itself.” Yet Aristotle also remarks that those things to which we normally ascribe such goodness—honor, wisdom, pleasure—are themselves predicated to be good in distinct and diverse ways. He explains that “even if the good that is predicated in common of things [were] some one thing, something separate ‘itself by itself’, it is clear that it [would] not be anything doable or capable of being acquired by a human being.”\footnote{EN I.6, 1096b32.} In the realm of actual human activity, then, those who seek perfection in various human arts do so by first striving for the good achievable within the particular practice in which they are engaged. The doctor’s aim to bring about health in others does not proceed from any
universal abstraction of what human health is “in itself, by itself,” but is informed rather by his prolonged experience of perceiving what health looks like in various particular representatives of the species. Thus for Aristotle the virtuous person’s love of the fine may express itself in the pursuit of forms of goodness that are instantiated within various spheres of human life, such as politics, philosophy, medicine, athletics, or war.

Unlike Socrates’ more “dialectic” conception of philosophy as an activity whereby one disjunctively transcends the sensible world, Aristotle regards the body, the polis and all the other integral features of finite human nature as necessary operative elements in the achievement of the supreme human good. Whereas Socrates and the Platonic tradition think that we make this ascent in spite of the conditions external to our intellect, Aristotle believes the operation of intellect never fully divorces itself from these conditions. Thus while Aristotle’s account of the best and most complete form of human excellence appears on the surface to parallel Socrates’ endorsement of philosophical contemplation, Aristotle himself remains invested in the flourishing of its “infrastructure” in a way that Socrates and Plato are not.

For instance, in Book I Aristotle takes up a question Socrates raises in the Euthydemus regarding where one should place good fortune among the hierarchy of goods necessary for a successful human life. “There are some things,” he says there, the lack of which is like a stain on happiness, things like good birth, being blessed in one’s children, beauty: for the person who is extremely ugly, or of low birth, or on his own without children is someone we would be not altogether inclined to call happy… As we have said, then, one seems to need this sort of well-being too; and this is the reason why some people identify good fortune with happiness, others excellence.\footnote{EN I.8, 1119b1—8.}
Being so proximate to happiness, then, is good fortune something that we can cultivate by means of training? Or is it a purely divine dispensation? Aristotle concedes that since happiness is the greatest possible human possession, it is not unreasonable to think it may be god-given. On the hand, he argues, if “things in the natural world are as fine as it is possible for them to be,” and if it seems more perfect for one’s happiness to result from one’s own agency rather than wholly by chance, then one must suppose that human happiness comes about fundamentally by means of voluntary activity rather than chance. “To hand over the greatest and finest of things to chance would be to too much out of tune,” he says. Therefore the baseline definition of happiness must involve activity in accord with ideals of excellence. Nevertheless Aristotle recognizes that the cultivation of virtuous activity and happiness remains in many ways dependent upon the deliverances of good fortune. While some turns of fortune prove pivotal to one’s ultimate happiness, others are merely enhancements or ornaments to it. As Aristotle points out, even though King Priam had both excellence of character and good fortune throughout the great majority of his life, “no one who has had a fate like [his] and died miserably, [may be] counted happy by anyone.” The truly virtuous person is thus not immune from ruinous fortune, no matter how well-formed his character is. Although the one “who is truly good and four-square beyond reproach’ will bear misfortune in the finest way—" even

---

69 EN I.9, 1099b22.
70 EN I.9, 1099b26—26.
71 EN I.9, 1100a9.
72 EN I.10, 1100b21—22.
such that “the quality of one’s fineness shines through—” ill fortune nevertheless retains the power to destroy the prospects of one’s achievement of happiness.\(^{73}\)

All the same, Aristotle claims that “if one’s activities are what determines the quality of one’s life, as we have said, no one who is blessed will be miserable; for he will never do what is hateful and vile.”\(^{74}\) Like a general whose troops are outnumbered or a cobbler with inferior quality leather, the virtuous person brings the greatest possible amount of excellence out of the circumstances in which he finds himself. While fortune

\(^{73}\) In his article “Aristotle on the Goods of Fortune,” John M. Cooper convincingly advances the claim that Aristotle values external goods not necessarily because acts which do not succeed in acquiring them cannot on that score be virtuous, nor because such a failure somehow undermines the motivational structure underlying virtuous action. Rather, it is simply because a certain baseline amount of external goods are necessary to keep an agent going in their pursuit of what is most excellence. External goods make the life of virtue possible, but they are by no means the end of virtue. Hence although such goods are indeed a necessary component of happiness, their relation to the activity of happiness itself is a purely material one. The concluding paragraphs of Cooper’s article are worth quoting in full:

Of course, Aristotle recognizes that bad luck can cause even the virtuous person to fail occasionally to attain such goods despite his efforts to do so. And sometimes (as when his children turn out bad or die young) such bad luck can be no trivial matter, something to be made good later by trying again. Aristotle’s view, if I am right, is that such occasional failures (even these most serious ones) will not be such as to detract from his happiness insofar as the missing goods were wished-for outcomes of prior action, but only insofar as their absence deprives him of conditions he needs if he is to go on living in the full exercise of his virtues. Is this a reasonable view? It ought to seem so to anyone who shares (as presumably not everyone will) Aristotle’s central conviction that what determines the character of a person’s life is what he does. On the one hand, a virtuous person who suffers such reverses acted knowing both that his choice of action was the, or one of the, best available in the circumstances, and that human beings never do completely control the outcomes of their actions, since nature is such that unpredictable irregularities and accidental results are simply always possible. Since he has done the best he or anyone in the circumstances could do, he should not count his own actions as in any way defective just because they did not lead to the wished-for outcomes. Instead as happiness consists in deciding and doing what is best, his happiness has not been diminished by such failures. And on the other hand Aristotle pictures the happy person’s life as a forward-looking progress from virtuous activity to virtuous activity, so that it is natural that he should regard the contribution to the virtuous man’s happiness of external goods not in this backward-looking way, as crowning earlier activities with success, but as making possible continued virtuous activity in the future.

When, therefore, one takes into account Aristotle’s conception of the virtuous man’s practical knowledge, one sees readily enough why he integrates the external goods into eudaimonia in the way we saw he does. Though he recognizes that external goods are very often objects of pursuit in the virtuous man’s activities, and things therefore that he values for themselves, Aristotle has good reasons for thinking that external goods are a second component of eudaimonia, alongside virtuous activity, only because of the effect they have in enabling the virtuous person to live, and go on living, a fully virtuous life (308—9, my emphasis).

\(^{74}\) \textit{EN} I.10, 1100b34—35.
can never be excluded as an active ingredient to happiness, the virtuous person will
always act out of a disposition that has been habituated to seek what is finest and most
excellent, regardless of the circumstances. Thus while conceiving of it as an ancillary
dimension of human action, Aristotle’s account of fortune nevertheless admits the
possibility of an authentic conflict of goods in a way that Socrates’ account in the
*Euthydemus* does not. Although things in nature are as perfect as they can possibly be,
that doesn’t mean that the mutual exclusion of integral human goods—which ill fortune
often occasions—constitutes merely an *apparent* conflict. In Aristotle’s view, it is
simply the hard truth that sometimes chance events make us trade one set of goods for
another. That is not so much a sign of a flawed natural order as it is the reflection of its
finitude. Natural things are as perfect as they can be as *the types of natural things they
are*, which means that their perfection includes the vulnerability that attends anything
finite. There is no reason to suppose, like Socrates does, that from the perspective of
some comprehensive ordering wisdom, every event possesses a coherence corresponding
to both the natural and moral order.

In particular, for Aristotle there is no reason to suppose that death “evens out” the
disparate lots of fortune dealt to each individual. “The most fearsome thing is death,"
Aristotle plainly says, “for it is an end, and there seems to be nothing any longer for the
dead person that is good or bad.”75 The fact that, for reasons beyond human control, the
possibility of attaining the fulfillment of human excellence may not lie open to everyone
is for Aristotle simply a part of the way things happen to be. One’s life as a whole is like
a scale upon which bodily, intellectual and external goods are balanced, and one’s best

75 *EN* III.6, 1115a26—27.
hope is that they line up as congruently as possible. It simply mistaken to think that somehow all these goods are invincibly reconcilable in virtue of being reducible to some intellectual Form. In this sense, then, Aristotle leans toward the ancient approach toward mortality in that, while recognizing human aspirations as ultimately tragic in nature, he nonetheless attributes to temporal actions an unparalleled degree of significance and pathos.

2.2.2 Aristotle on Virtue’s Relationship to Pleasure

Hence Aristotle’s recurrent attentiveness to the role of pleasure in the shaping of virtue. In EN II.3, he attributes fundamental importance to pleasure, saying “we measure even our actions, some of us more and others less, by the rule of pleasure and pain. For this reason, then, our whole inquiry must be about these; for to feel delight and pain rightly or wrongly has no small effect on our actions.”

Pleasure is an indication of the unimpeded activity of the will in reference to a desired end; and likewise pain conveys the frustration of this desire. Even though we share this dimension of our activity with sub-rational species, Aristotle maintains that “the whole concern both for [human] excellence and for political expertise is with pleasures and pains; for someone who behaves well in relation to pleasure and pain will be a person of excellence, while someone who behaves badly in relation to the will be bad.” Thus the educator of virtue orients the dispositions of his pupils toward what is noble by reinforcing and censuring

---

76 Achilles’ famous rumination from Iliad 24 express the idea well: “On Zeus’ floor stand two jars which hold his gifts—/ one has disastrous things, the other blessings:/ When thunder-loving Zeus hands out a mixture,/ that man will, at some point, meet with evil, then, some other time, with good” (24.527—31, trans. Ian Johnston).

77 EN II.3 1105a4—6.

78 EN II.3.
their particular actions, thereby instilling the proper associations of pain and pleasure. For Aristotle, then, virtue does not abolish pleasure but rather transforms and redirects it. To the extent that everyone desires the supreme good of happiness in some form or another, pleasure should therefore accompany its unimpeded pursuit and eventual attainment.

In that case the chief good will be a kind of pleasure, even if most pleasures turned out to be bad, even without qualification. And it is because of this that everyone thinks that the happy life is a pleasant one, and incorporates pleasure in happiness—with good reason; for no activity is complete if it is impeded, and happiness is something complete. 79

Aristotle goes on to argue that since the pain introduced by a lack of bodily and external goods may interrupt and undermine any activity at the most fundamental level, provision of such is necessary for final happiness. However far these external conditions recede from the consciousness of one immersed in intellectual activity, the philosopher depends upon their maintenance all the same. Then in an almost parenthetical remark, he makes this most revealing claim: “Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense.” 80 Even for people of good character, a refined sense of pleasure serves to inform them that things are running smoothly, while pain likewise gives notice that things are not as they should be. So it is simply nonsense to think that torture or other undeniable causes of pain do not constitute impediments to happy activity. Although happiness may not consist in pleasure alone, a certain baseline of fortune is needed to create the possibility of pursuing and attaining happiness.

79 EN 1153b14—16.
80 EN VII.3, 1153b20—21.
Pleasure’s fundamental role in virtuous activity is also a sign the ends of virtue are somehow connected to being alive. “That everyone desires pleasure,” Aristotle writes in *EN* X.5 “one might put down to the fact that everyone also seeks to be alive.” In desiring any sort of activity, or in striving after a life characterized by a certain sort of activity, one also implicitly desires first and foremost to be alive.

As for whether we choose living because we want pleasure or pleasure because we want to be alive, this is something that may be set aside for the present; for the two things appear to be yoked together, and not to allow themselves to be separated: without activity pleasure does not occur, and every activity is completed by pleasure.

If every object of desire implies this fundamental desire to live, how could Aristotle ever consider any action that includes death as a part of its end to be virtuous, or even rational? Nothing is good or bad for the dead, and so desiring death is in a sense blatantly contradictory: it is to desire not to desire. It would seem that for Aristotle death can never be the proper object of desire, but rather that it must always be an occurrence dictated by fortune, always something that happens to a person, and never an end in itself.

But if death is entirely a matter of fortune, and fortune is only incidental to nobility, it would simply make no sense to call any death “noble.” What pleasure, after all, could attend the completion of an activity if the completion of that activity meant the annihilation the very capacity for pleasure?

Aristotle’s discussion of self-sacrificial death in *EN* IX.8 seems at first to make matters even more confusing. There he is trying to properly differentiate the self-love

---

81 *EN* X.5, 1175a11—12.
82 *EN* X.5, 1175a17—22.
83 But of course, Aristotle seems to ascribe degrees of nobility to agents’ death, and even seems to think that one remains vulnerable to misfortune after death. I am here only emphasizing one side of the tension that I find in Aristotle regarding the possibility of virtue in and after death. Nonetheless, I believe it to be the predominant side of the tension, at least with respect to his larger theory of virtue.
befitting a virtuous person’s honest recognition of his own excellence from the common understanding of self-love as conceited self-absorption. Proper self-love desires what is fine in itself and seeks to assimilate it to one’s self. The good person’s self-love thus impels him to acts of excellence, which benefit both himself and others. The bad person’s self-love, on the other, is fundamentally at odds with the fine and even with the dictates of his own intelligence, and so by his actions he does harm to both himself and others. “But it will be true of the person of excellence,” Aristotle says,

that he does many things for the sake of friends and fatherland, even dying for it if need be; for he will freely give up both money and honors, and generally all the goods people fight over, while keeping the fine for himself, since he will choose intense pleasure for a short duration over mild pleasure for a long one, and a year’s life lived in a fine way rather than many years lived indifferently, and one fine act on a grand scale over many small ones.\(^{84}\)

It is certainly conceivable that a person of excellence would be of service to others if the excellence to be achieved were to exceed the sacrifice involved. As long as one still retains the bare minimum of external goods needed for happiness (and even for Aristotle this minimum is not that great) then one would surely enhance one’s happiness by performing an act of extraordinary excellence. But in the case where excellence calls for one’s death, it is very difficult to see how Aristotle could conceive how such an act could enhance one’s happiness.

One should note that Aristotle initially talks about the enhancement of happiness involved in terms of the pleasure that such an act would bring. Some pleasures are simply greater than others, while the quality of some pleasures vastly outweighs any quantity of other lesser pleasures. Thus if the pleasure involved is great enough, acting on behalf of others is not really self-sacrificial at all, since one knows that one is pursuing

\(^{84}\) *EN* IX.8, 1169a20—24.
an end that promises superior pleasure. Like the pseudo-temperate man Socrates mentions in the *Phaedo*, one may despise the fear of losing some pleasure merely out of a greater fear of losing one even more enjoyable. But again, no matter how much excellence is displayed and no matter much benefit it is to others, its seems inconceivable that one could desire to perform an act that will foreseeably render one unable to desire or enjoy any pleasure whatsoever.

Aristotle speaks of the decision to sacrifice self not only in terms of pleasure, but also in terms of opting for one fine action “on a grand scale” over many insignificant ones. “And this, presumably, is what happens with those who die for others;” he says, “they are, then, choosing a fine thing for themselves, on a grand scale.” In this way the good person “assigns” this surpassing excellence to themselves, refusing that even death should prevent them from staking their claim to it. But can Aristotle say that the person who dies in this way *happy*? If not, then what virtue does such an act really display?

### 2.2.3 Aristotelian Courage

We will return to this important passage in *EN* IX.8 soon, but at this point it is necessary to spell out the grounds upon which Aristotle might construe the act of dying on behalf of another as an act exemplifying the specific moral virtue of courage. Courage is the first individual moral virtue that Aristotle discusses in Book III of *EN*. Like any virtue, it is a self-reinforcing disposition that proceeds from voluntary actions intermediate with respect to two characteristic extremes. The behavioral extremes that

---


86 *EN* IX.8, 1169a25—27.
mark off courage are fear and boldness (also sometimes translated as daring or rashness). As Aristotle summarizes, “courage is an intermediate state relating to things that make for boldness and things that make for fear,… and it makes its choice and stands firm because doing so is fine, or because not doing so is shameful.” Although courage is an intermediate in the sense of being situated between two extremes, Aristotle explains that it is really not equidistant from the two: “the person who is undisturbed in face of fearsome things and is in the condition one should be in relation to these is courageous, more than the person who is so in relation to the things that make for boldness.”

Courage is a character trait occasioned by the immanent presence of something fearful, something to which an agent feels a pressing aversion. “It is by virtue of their withstanding what is painful… that people are called virtuous. Hence courage is also something that brings pain with it, and is justly an object of praise; for it is harder to withstand what is painful than to hold back from what is pleasant.” So courage is perhaps an exception to the rule that pleasure always attends virtue, since one never finds courage without pain. Pain is in a sense a necessary occasion for the exercise of courage, since it is the pursuit of the fine in the face of pain that specifies courage as a virtue. According to Aristotle’s psychology, the end toward which one acts—as it is held in the mind—fades from view when one’s consciousness is confronted by the immediate presence of an object of spontaneous and urgent aversion. In this situation, the courageous person distinguishes herself by persevering in her pursuit of what is fine in spite of its concealment by what is fearful.

87 EN III.7, 1116a10—13.
88 EN III.9, 1117a31—33.
89 EN III.9, 1117a33—35.
Yet it is not simply withstanding any sort of fear that makes one courageous, “since there are some things which we actually should fear, and fearing them is a fine thing, while not fearing them is shameful.”90 One should fear that which would prevent one’s achievement of what is fine and honorable, such that courage is constituted by one’s persistence in seeking a worthy end in the face of substantial threats to the actualization of that very end. One must withstand these threats in the right way so as to display in each particular situation the full correspondence of disposition and intentionality. As Aristotle concludes,

the person who withstands and fears the things one should and for the end one should, and in the way and when one should, and is bold in a similar way, is courageous; for the courageous person feels and acts as the occasion merits, and following the correct prescription, however it may direct him.91

Courage, then, in its most purified form depends upon the prior establishment of a “correct prescription.” This preformed “rule” or “choice” guides the agent in the absence of one’s direct attentiveness to the end, which would normally orient one’s actions according to a clear means-end pattern. Pain disorients this attentiveness, and thus short-circuits the normal function of practical reason, requiring an absolute and unyielding adherence to a predetermined course of action.

Although courage only makes itself known in the presence of what is fearful and disorienting, it is a reflection of the virtuous agent’s prevailing disposition toward the fine, which has conditioned them to cling to the standing directive to pursue the proper end even without the full present assistance of phronesis. When the direct intellectual apprehension of the proper worth of an end is heavily diminished or even negated by the

---

90 EN III.6, 1115a11—13.

91 EN III.7, 1115b18—21.
presence of pain and loss, the agent must rely solely upon the continuing responsiveness of the will to the dictates that the intellect has already given it. Pain distorts the proportion of the good of the end with respect to the adverse conditions being presently endured, and so courageous action in a sense has to take it cues from some imprint or afterimage of the original specification of the end prior to the arrival of those conditions that have destabilized the normal processes of practical reason. In this way, the courageous person places their trust in their own disposition at the point when courage is called for. Aristotle thus insists that the resilience displayed by the courageous person must be marked with a certain kind of hope. But it is not enough merely to be fearless out of a kind of senseless disregard for danger, a trait Aristotle attributes to the Celts, nor is it properly courageous to disregard mortal threat for merely material compensation, as Aristotle remarks is the case with most mercenaries.

It is an interesting paradox of courage that to the extent that one’s virtue disposes one to exhibit courage when required, the same excellence of character renders the prospect of death more painful, “for to such a [virtuous] person, most of all, is living worth while.” The very excellence of character that makes courage possible is also what makes it agonizing; the presence of virtue in this instance is inversely proportional to the presence of pleasure, such that the courageous person “will knowingly be depriving himself of good of the greatest kind, which is something to be pained at. But he is no less courageous because of that, and perhaps even more courageous, because he chooses what

---

92 EN III.7, 1115b25—29.

93 EN III.9, 1117b16—21.

94 EN III.9, 1117b11—13.
is fine… in place of those other goods.” What gives dilemma its force is not simply the fact that the agent is forced to judge between different two actions that yield two different probabilities of achieving happiness; rather, it is the awareness that neither option appears to offer the prospect of happiness insofar as happiness requires nobility of action over a complete life. Such a situation undermines the eudaimonistic teleology Aristotle has set forth, insofar as it alters the first object of the agent’s intention: what before was happiness simpliciter is now a slightly flawed form of happiness. Yet one of the essential qualities of happiness that qualified it to be the first object of our intention is that it was complete in itself. Can misfortune tinker with happiness in this way and still leave it intact as the principal source of motivation for human action?

Aristotle’s taxonomy of the forms of “counterfeit courage” in III.8 uncovers a more precise understanding of this paradox. The first form of counterfeit courage is what he calls “civic courage,” wherein citizens face dangers on behalf of the state because of socially imposed penalties or rewards. This semblance of courage is closest to the authentic virtue, because it is based upon an aversion to what is shameful (as one is held accountable for such by the state) and a pursuit of what is fine (on account of the concrete incentives provided for such by the state). Although these social inducements produce only continence with respect to dangers and not true courage, Aristotle comments that it

95 EN III.9, 1117b14—16.

96 Another way of putting this question would be to ask whether misfortune undermines Aristotle’s moral teleology or simply makes it more realistic. One might pursue the latter alternative if one presumed the priority of “political happiness” in Aristotle’s account. Such a priority renders a more consistent relation between happiness and the possibility of misfortune, but nevertheless as my examination aims to show, there seems to be sufficient evidence in Aristotle’s own writing that he wants to privilege a higher and more contemplative ideal of human perfection. And since it is this latter ideal of happiness that I believe Aquinas adopts first and foremost, I give more attention here to the problematic implications it entails with respect to Aristotle’s larger ethical theory.
seems as if there is a greater prevalence of the virtue among communities where such expectations remain in place. A more vulgar semblance of courage is that in which a superior constrains an inferior by threat of direct physical pain. The third semblance is a confidence based on extensive experience in a particular sphere, which is what Aristotle thought Socrates was really referring when he supposed courage to be a kind of knowledge. Yet the confidence that one has the advantage in a confrontation falls short of true courage insofar as it is relies upon a conditional judgment based upon certain features of the present situation. Should those features change, such confidence would dissolve and the real opportunity for courage would arise. It is easy to be courageous in battle when one knows one has superior numbers, equipment and training, but only those who would stand and fight even in the face of overwhelming disadvantage should be considered truly courageous. The fourth semblance of courage is aggressiveness of temper, which applies equally well to irrational animals who are incapable of virtue. And the fifth semblance is the boldness characteristic of an optimistic outlook, which is very similar to the third semblance except that it does not always entail reasoned judgment (as in the case of the inebriated daredevil). These semblances reveal that what really specifies courage for Aristotle is what a person fears, how they fear it, why they fear it, and why they nevertheless act well when confronted with it.

In a sense, one may characterize Aristotle’s notion of moral virtue as the conditioning of one’s character to reliably and seamlessly direct action toward the fine in spite of unreliable or turbulent circumstances, and for this reason courage is the first and most exalted of virtues inasmuch as it delivers the fine actions in spite of the most subversive of external factors. Not surprisingly, Aristotle identifies the limit concept of
these sorts of subversions to virtue to be death. The courageous person is the one is able to withstand what is most fearsome, “and the most fearsome thing is death; for it is an end, and there seems to be nothing any longer for the dead person that is either good or bad.” If the excellence of character one displays in virtue must proceed from one’s own agency, there can be no greater threat to virtue than the annihilation of one’s agency.

And thus if the highest form of courage manifests itself in the face of the greatest of threats to worthy ends, then the epitome of courage is the display of excellence in the face of death.

2.2.4 Is Socrates’ Death Virtuous according to Aristotle?

The actual content of the directive to persevere in the pursuit of a fine end is specified by the intellect’s original apprehension of that end’s worth alongside the ordination of a particular action to it. The given value of an end is in turn determined by its expression of what is in itself fine or noble, relative to the particular excellence and overall flourishing that is characteristic of human nature. Therefore, the content of the directive according to which one’s disposition directs a courageous act is ultimately informed by certain fundamental assumptions about what counts as a fine act. There is for Aristotle a proper arena for courage that is circumscribed by what would count as an honorable way to die. Hence, courage applies only to the sorts of deaths that clearly reflect an agent’s pursuit of the most excellent of ends. Aristotle simply takes it to be the case that “such deaths are deaths in war; for then the danger is greatest and finest.” As evidence “in agreement with these conclusions,” he merely offers “the honors accorded

---

97 EN III.6, 1115a26—27.
in cities, and where there are monarchs in power.” Aristotle categorically excludes deaths such as those at sea or by illness, since “we show courage [only] in situations where there is the opportunity of showing prowess or where death is noble; [and] in these forms of death neither of these conditions is fulfilled.” Nor are the proper conditions fulfilled by a good man’s death on the rack, or by Socrates’ drinking of the hemlock. It just is the case that the display of true excellence is limited to certain sets of circumstances, and in the case of courage—where one displays excellence in the face of death—only war meets these requirements. At bottom it is Aristotle’s conception of the fine that determines the scope he accords courageous action; and I contend that this conception remains conditioned in large measure by the prevailing conventional paradigm of the warrior hero as the most exalted embodiment of human excellence, at least in the civic setting.

For Aristotle, the virtuous person loves what is fine simply because it is fine and pursues it for himself because he wishes to be fine as well. In book IV, Aristotle defines the virtue of magnanimity or “greatness of soul” as the disposition belonging to one who considers himself worthy of great or fine things. “He does not risk himself for small things,” he says, “or often, because there are few things he values, but for great things he does, and when he does he is unsparing of his life, as one to whom there are some conditions under which it is not worth living.” Aristotle simply asserts that there are not very many occasions in which the opportunity arises for one to achieve something truly extraordinary, and so the great-souled person will only very rarely trouble

---

98 EN III.6,1115a30—32 (my emphasis).

99 EN III.6,1115b4—6 (David Ross translation).

100 EN IV.3, 1124b6—8.
themselves with exploits that require courage. And it is also assumed that when such occasions do arise, the excellence one may display may well be worth the sacrifice of one’s very life. Otherwise stated, when such opportunities for surpassing excellence come along, the magnanimous person, deeming himself eminently worthy of great things, would rather not go on at all if it meant having to forego the honor and glory that such an opportunity affords. This hierarchy of value should by now sound very familiar: Achilles would rather die to preserve the honor and glory at stake than remain “by the beaked ships to be mocked, a burden on the ground.”

Pre-eminence and its praise are goods the attainment of which are worth exchanging the entirety of one’s life, for such acts are able to define one’s life, able to bring it to a worthy culmination, and so able to establish one’s legacy in the continuing life and memory of the community. That the noble person would desire this sort of honor is not an open question for Aristotle.

Let us now return to the argument from EN IX.8 about self-love and dying for others, which we discussed earlier. In his article “Eth. Nic. 9.8: Beyond Egoism and Altruism?” Arthur Madigan dissects this particular argument in an attempt to extract from it a consistent line of reasoning with regard what would actually lead someone with a good character to sacrifice their life in order to perform an action on behalf of another. According to Madigan, there are two pivotal concepts upon which the argument hinges: (i) the nous or reasoning activity of—in this case—the practical intellect, and (ii) the kalon or the fine, which specifies the worth of any action or pursuit. Madigan observes a

---

101 Iliad 18.121, also quoted in Apology 28d.

certain ambiguity and oscillation between these central concepts in Aristotle’s negotiation of how acts of self-sacrifice can be acts of self-love. The *nous* for Aristotle is nearly identical with the agent, such that it is not clear whether virtuous actions are self-loving because they are what the *nous* enjoins or whether the *nous* enjoins them as self-loving on some other grounds. Although much of the discussion of self-love in *EN* IX.8 revolves around considerations of the *nous*, the specific passage on self-sacrifice makes no mention of it. The arguments there invoke only conceptions of the *kalon*, and leave such questions about the role of intelligence unanswered. One may make sense of the sacrifice of only some goods for the achievement of surpassing excellence in terms of a cost-benefit analysis; but the sacrifice of one’s very *existence* is much more puzzling.

Madigan proposes two ways of rendering a coherent picture of the practical reasoning process behind this performance of this act: (1) one that appeals to the anticipation of others’ praise for fine acts and (2) one that appeals to the intrinsic self-loving quality of such acts. On the one hand, (1) makes better sense from an external perspective of why the *nous* would enjoin an act that ended in death, since it appears from that perspective that such magnificence toward and honor among one’s community are more worthy sorts of goods than maximal longevity alone. Where before Aristotle speaks of self-love in terms of intelligence (*nous*) and pleasure as the basis for a rational preference for acting on behalf of others, he now speaks only of a good *out there* that one may “choose for” or “assign to” one’s self. On the other hand, (2) seems to make better sense from the agent’s own perspective of how the *nous* could enjoin an act as beneficial to the self which appears to destroy what it supposedly benefits. But (2) rests on two axiomatic assumptions: (a) dying for friends and fatherland is *kalon* and (b) all acts that
are kalon are in the end (somehow) self-loving. Thus Madigan argues that in the end (2) collapses, at least in part, into (1) inasmuch as assumptions (a) and (b) derive their axiomatic status merely from their inculcation as conventions in the broader community. As a result, Madigan points out that Aristotle’s willingness to defend the claim that dying for others is both excellent and self-loving reveals certain limitations to the view that he associates the identity of the agent entirely with the activity of the nous. Because the agent’s sense of self is also deeply bound up with social membership, the agent’s understanding of the kalon will also be bound up with what is perceived as beneficial to the community. Madigan argues that it is therefore never clear in Aristotle whether the nous can ever conceive of itself in any other way except from the perspective of others, and thus whether the agent can ever conceive of its good apart from its social relationships. What is more important for our present purposes is that this ambiguity in Aristotle’s conception of the self suggests a more general tension between his conception of moral excellence, which appears to be ultimately based on conventional ideals of excellence derived from the Greek heroic and civic tradition, and his conception of philosophical excellence, which appears to be modeled on the Socratic and Platonic intellectual tradition.103

Whether or not it is the case more generally in Aristotle’s thought, in this particular instance where he argues for the nobility of dying for others, his reasoning seems to be informed by a view of human excellence drawn in great measure from traditional assumptions about the warrior-hero ideal embodied by Achilles. Whereas the

103 Madigan, p84. As Jean Porter has pointed out, “Aristotle introduces a division within the concept of happiness itself: in one form, it is a human and social ideal; in the other, it is more profoundly embedded in the social order than Plato could ever allow. [It is] closer, therefore, to Solon... than to Homer’s Achilles” (personal correspondence).
last lines from the *Phaedo* provocatively declare the usurpation of Achilles (and Odysseus) by proclaiming Socrates to be “the bravest and wisest of men,” it seems clear that Aristotle did not carry on this unqualified and singular exaltation of the philosopher.

Aristotle never disparages Socrates to be sure; indeed, he maintains his and Plato’s vision of philosophical contemplation as the preeminent human activity. But he also recognizes the need for and the independent merit of other forms of human activity, and so he never, like Plato, assigns philosophy the task of assailing and dismantling the various other prevailing ideals of human excellence within his community.

It is true, as Julia Annas and others point out, that Aristotle “insists, in his definition of virtue, that the virtuous person does virtuous actions for their own sakes, because they are virtuous actions and not because of some further reason.”

Virtue is not itself instrumental to any further ends. Nevertheless, virtue—human virtue, performed by human beings according to their natural capacities—requires “maintenance,” as it were. The virtuous act for the sake of virtue, but not without the awareness that they are human, and therefore need certain basic goods if their characteristic pursuit of virtue is to continue. These goods, as I mentioned before, do not enter into the essence of the virtue that is chosen for its own sake, but they are nevertheless real material components of its achievement in human beings. It is for this reason that I disagree with Annas’ association of Aristotle’s demand that virtue be chosen for its own sake with “what we would call the moral aspect of virtue” which in fact

---

functions “rather like the Kantian notion of doing one’s duty for the sake of doing one’s duty.... It is not enough to do, for example, the brave action,” she says;

one must do it from a developed disposition in which affective and intellectual aspects have progressed to a unified standpoint. But what marks the virtuous disposition is that the virtuous person now does the virtuous action just for its own sake; discerning that ‘this is what virtue requires’ is enough to motivate her, and no counter-motivation is produced in her. This is what it is for her to act ‘for the sake of the fine.’”

On my reading, I simply do not think Aristotle places such strict demands upon the motivation of the agent. It is true, as Anthony Kenny points out, that Aristotle distinguishes between those who act well and those who act nobly, between those who are rightly considered “good” (kagathos) because they make good decisions and those who are “nobly good” (kalos kagathos) and because their every act is imbued with overarching noble aims. Yet this designation of the “noble” establishes an ideal that Aristotle himself recognizes to be inherently unstable, on account of the external bodily and social goods that the human pursuit of virtue qua human requires. No matter how pure the motivation of the virtuous person is, as long as they remain human they remain susceptible to counter-motivations stemming from the consideration of those external goods that make the pursuit of noble ends possible. It is in part the rejection of possibility of such an intrusion of the “goods of fortune” into the sanctum of the virtuous

105 Ibid.

106 Kenny, pp12—13. To draw out this point he appeals to EN 1249a3—7:

“The kaloi kagathoi choose noble things for their own sake; and not only these, but also the things which are not noble by nature, but merely good by nature, are noble for them. For things are noble when the reason for which people do them and choose them is noble, and that is why to the noble person the natural goods are noble.”

and 1249a10—15:

To the kalos kagathos what is useful is also noble; but for the many there is not this harmong between the useful and the noble, for things prima facie good are not good for them, as they are for the good man; to the kalos kagathos they are also noble, for he does many noble deeds by means of them” (13).
person’s intention that animates the Stoic response to Aristotle. Likewise, it is Aristotle’s insistence upon the tension between the absolute demands of the good and the relative requirements of spatio-temporal existence that differentiates him off not only from the Stoics, but from the Socratic paradigm of philosophical heroism and noble death.

Aristotle always remains cognizant of the integral relation between the highest acts of virtue, which engage the highest powers of the human soul, and what one might call “the infrastructure” of human action: those lower bodily and social capacities that underlie and sustain the operations of reason.

Thus, at the end of the day, I do not believe Aristotle can call Socrates’ death a “happy” one. Admirable as his life might have been, it appears to end amidst the sort of categorical misfortune that, from Aristotle’s viewpoint at least, no goodness of character can outweigh. Nevertheless, Aristotle maintains that the philosophical life of which Socrates remains the principle advocate is the best possible type of human life. But unlike Socrates, Aristotle does not conceive of philosophy as a kind of “cure” for the mortal condition, nor is it for him a matter of “training oneself for death.” Like any other human being, the philosopher remains dependent upon certain bodily and social provisions, which in turn depend in some measure upon the whims of blind chance and fate. Should one be so lucky (as both Socrates and Aristotle himself were) as to spend the entirety of one’s life in intellectual examination and contemplation, it would above all others be the sort of existence that would merit the designation “blessed.” But there is nothing mystical or preternatural about this life; it is not protected by some invulnerable providence. Ultimately, like all of us, the philosopher cannot escape the final misfortune of death. Thus death for Aristotle is not a culmination of life, but an interruption of it,
and ultimately a frustration of its goals and activities, at least for the individual. The noble person should therefore meet it only when it can no longer be avoided, and try make the best of it when it comes. Yet for Aristotle there do not appear to be very many options for acting virtuously in the face of death. For, like the quintessentially noble death of the warrior, such virtue requires the ability to put up a good fight, which in turn requires a certain amount strength and vigor whose possession seems antithetical to the proximity of death—except of course, on the battlefield. But even on the battlefield, the display of such prowess can only appear to be a protest against the condition of mortality itself—a condition that, as godlike Achilles himself teaches us, is always victorious in the end.
PART TWO

PRACTICAL REASON, PERFECTION AND FINITUDE
IN THE THOUGHT OF THOMAS AQUINAS

After exploring some of the prominent sources of ethical thought on noble death in pre-Christian antiquity, we now turn our attention to the assimilation of those sources in the Christian moral tradition. While much of the Socratic inheritance was accessible to early Christian thinkers through the dominant influence of Stoicism and Neoplatonism, Aristotle’s works were much less familiar.¹ For the first few centuries of the Church, most theologians drew predominantly upon Aristotle’s logical and analytical thought, with very little recourse to his theory of the virtues. Only until the late 12th century did his natural philosophy and metaphysical works appear in translated form in the Christian universities of the Latin West and there begin to gain prominence in the hands of such luminaries as Abelard, Robert Grossateste and Roger Bacon. By the middle of the 13th century, Aristotle’s entire philosophical corpus was a required part of the Master of Arts curriculum at the University of Paris. The ascendancy of Aristotelian influence in Christendom would culminate in the writing and teaching of the eminent authority Albert

¹ Constantine Cavarnos’ *The Hellenic-Christian Philosophical Tradition* (Belmont, CA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1989) is a brief but fascinating set of lectures on the legacy of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in the Christian thought of the Hellenic East from patristic to modern times. It chronicles particularly well the Stoic elements at work in the eastern Church Fathers.
the Great, who boldly proclaimed his intention to make Aristotle “intelligible to the Latins.” From this point forward, the natural and moral philosophy of Aristotle would become, if not a canonical source, then at least a perennial resource for Christian higher education and research. However, the medieval Christian theological engagement with Aristotle’s ethics—and his theory of the virtues in particular—would reach its high point in the intellectual synthesis of one of Albert’s students: the Italian Dominican friar, Thomas Aquinas. It is Aquinas’ appropriation of Aristotelian virtue that will serve as the primary locus for engaging the question of whether and to what degree Christian ideals of martyrdom are conceptually reconcilable with classically-derived notions of moral virtue and noble death. Because of its enduring conceptual coherence and intellectual power, Aquinas’ integration of canonical sources of Christian tradition with classical and especially Aristotelian theoretical models continues to be a perennial object of fruitful reflection for moral philosophers and theologians alike. Aquinas’ thought therefore offers a promising point of departure for investigating the possibility of coherently articulating the theological paradigm of martyrdom in the philosophical language of Aristotelian moral theory.

To this end, these two chapters will render a general sketch of the way Aquinas adopts and adapts Aristotle’s theory of human perfection, paying special attention to the way their respective conceptions of human mortality bear upon their theories of practical reasoning. Chapter Three is devoted to a more general comparison and contrast between Aquinas’ and Aristotle’s theories of human perfection, while Chapter Four goes on to

---

2 The most illuminating source I have found on the rise of Aristotelianism in Christian Europe is Fernand van Steenbergen’s Aristotle in the West: the Origins of Latin Aristotelianism. Leonard Johnston, ed. (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1970).
delve into their respective philosophies of human finitude and mortality and the role
death plays in their ethical thought.
CHAPTER THREE

THE PERFECTION OF HUMAN NATURE IN AQUINAS

3.1 The Metaphysical Framework of Human Perfection

This chapter attempts to display the general continuity of Aquinas’ appropriation of Aristotelian virtue. It aims to provide an accurate sketch of the way in which Aristotle informs Aquinas’ account of the structure of human virtues and the symbiotic perfection of the different capacities or powers of the human agent in the performance and development of the virtues. I intend to highlight the fundamental principles and methods that Aquinas shares with Aristotle, with a correlative recognition of their opposition to certain claims and currents of Platonic and Stoic thought. The point of this chapter is not simply to offer a perfunctory rehearsal of Aquinas’ theory of the virtues or its indebtedness to Aristotle, matters which are the perennial subject of extended attention by scholars and continual reaffirmation in every introductory ethics class. The discourse to which my reading of Aquinas hopes eventually to offer a contribution—namely, the relation of Aquinas’ metaphysical and theological commitments to his model of virtue—is no less the subject of historical and contemporary analysis, but one in which there remains considerably less consensus. Yet in order to develop with due care the insights I hope to contribute to this discourse, it is necessary to offer at least a cursory interpretation
of certain foundational elements of Aquinas’ moral system in order to provide the supplementary emphases and critiques that will substantiate the frame of reference from which my own exegetical and constructive claims proceed.

3.1.1 Divine and Human Intelligibilities

Aquinas’ prologue to the second major section of the *Summa Theologiae*, the *Prima Secundae*, is very brief, but it nonetheless holds immense significance for understanding his general approach to the virtues and their role in the perfection of human nature:

Since, as Damascene states, man is said to be made to God’s image, in so far as the image implies *an intelligent being endowed with free-will and self-movement*: now that we have treated of the exemplar, *i.e.*, God, and of those things which came forth from the power of God in accordance with His will; it remains for us to treat of His image, *i.e.*, man, inasmuch as he too is the principle of his actions, as having free-will and control of his actions.”

His anthropological treatise thus begins with two related metaphysical premises that are vital to his method of inquiry. On the one hand, he asserts that human beings are not only *made*, meaning that their existence is dependent upon God’s creative will, but are made *in God’s own image*, meaning that the intelligence, freedom and self-movement characteristic to human activity reflect within the natural order God’s intellectual governance and providential care of creation. Aquinas maintains that on account of this capacity to *image* God, human agency constitutes a proper principle of its own movement, a fully intelligible cause and measure of the activity that is natural to it.

While the transcendent primacy of God is reaffirmed, Aquinas here signals an entrance into a field of inquiry whose particular intelligibility is distinct—though never

---

3 *ST* I-II. Prologue.
separate—from the intelligibility that pertains to God considered in himself (which was
the subject of the Prima Pars). This distinction he makes is a corollary of the absolute
distinction he continually maintains between God and creation: while creation is entirely
dependent for its existence and nature upon its relation to God, God is in no way
similarly related to creation. In Aquinas’ terms, a real relation exists between creation
and God, but between God and creation only a notional or logical relation applies. The
methodological upshot of this asymmetry between God and creation is that, while fully
acknowledging humanity’s dependency upon God, Aquinas nevertheless regards human
nature as possessing an intrinsic intelligibility corresponding to the rational principle that
human agency itself represents. Like the divine intellect, the human intellect is
authentically capable of measuring and ordering reality according to an authentic
intelligibility proper to its own nature.

While the human capacity to measure created reality in this way does not include
the power to educe the particular content of the divine intellect, it does in a sense reflect
or image the authorship of a transcendent intelligence, which measures in turn the
measuring activity of the human intellect according to its own absolute and unsurpassed
intelligibility (an intelligibility in which being itself subsists). To put it another way,

Aquinas remarks in his Disputed Questions on Truth that every created intelligible thing

---

4 ST I.13.7: “Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are
ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas
in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to
Him.” Cf. ST I.45.3, Summa Contra Gentiles II.11—14 and De potentia 8.2.

Among many secondary sources that engage the significance of the God-world distinction in
Aquinas, I have found these particularly pertinent to the concerns of the present project: Robert
pp21—87; Earl Muller, SJ, “Real Relations and the Divine: Issues in Thomas’ Understanding of God’s
Relation between God and Human Beings: the Difference It Makes to Human Happiness” in Relations:
from Having to Being, Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, v.66 (Washington,
in a sense stands “between two intellects—” divine and human—both of which measure it in their own distinctive ways. The divine intellect’s measurement is the very cause of the thing’s existence, while conversely the thing’s existence is in a sense the cause of the human intellect’s understanding of it, insofar as a thing’s existence is the first condition for the possibility of the created mind’s intelligible assimilation of it (*adequatio mentis ad rem*).

Aquinas hereby preserves a delicate metaphysical balance between his philosophical inheritance and his theological commitments. Human intelligibility is an authentic and autonomous power of receiving, measuring and ordering the external objects it perceives through the senses. Rejecting any theory of “divine illumination,” Aquinas locates the principle of the mind’s operation within the order of creation and (contrary to the Averroist reading) within each individual human soul. Yet since he claims that the human intellect is created, its ordering operation must itself be subject to measurement by the higher intelligibility in whose activity it participates. Yet that dependence in no way bars Aquinas from assuming that, according to its specific created mode of existence, the universe indeed possesses its own proper form of intrinsic perfections that correspond naturally to the human intellect’s intrinsic ability to

---

5 It is important to mention here that the human soul for Aquinas is not some discrete working part of a human individual, but simply the form of the body (*ST* I.75.5; *SCG* II.68). Following the legacy of Augustine, many medieval thinkers held the position that a plurality of forms exists within the soul. This position serves not only to account for the distinction of intellect from “natural things,” but also helps to account for the soul’s continued existence after bodily death and decomposition.

In his article “*Imago Dei*: A Test Case for St. Thomas’ Augustinianism” (in *Aquinas the Augustinian* [Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2007] pp100—144), John O’Callaghan points out that while such figures as Robert Grosseteste, John Peckham, Robert Kilwardby, Bonaventure, Scotus and Ockham all held forms of what he calls “the Pluralist” thesis, “St. Thomas… thoroughly rejects any sort of plurality of substantial forms in human nature…. A soul is entirely formal, and the human being is a composite of a simple soul and particular matter. St. Thomas argues that the soul is the substantial form of the body and qua form is act.” This point is significant because it establishes a strict formal unity between the human individual and its own intellectual activity, so as to forestall any confusion of agency such as arises in Averroes’ unity-of-intellect thesis.
understand them. In addition to concurring with Aristotle that the human intellect potentially contains all things, Aquinas insists that, however far it should extend, our knowledge will always simultaneously be contained by a transcendent intelligence whose knowledge of things (including created intelligences) remains the source of all that is.

3.1.2 Measured Freedom

Aquinas begins the Prima Secundae with a consideration of the last end of human action. There he establishes that it is a part of human nature to intentionally direct actions to ends specified by reason. It is this characteristic that make acts specifically human. “Of actions done by man,” Aquinas argues, “those alone are properly called ‘human,’ which are proper to man as man. Now man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions.” This mastery is obtained by means of the unique power of the human intellect, which can subordinate its sense perceptions and passions in accordance with an order set forth by reason. Thus emerges the conscious awareness of acting for the sake of some end, whether immediate or ultimate, which characterizes the reflective structure of human agency and allows human beings to “possess” the principle of their own actions in a way that other creatures cannot. Aquinas’ way of expressing this difference is to say that humans are “free,” or that they have “free-will.”

Aquinas follows Aristotle in asserting that the intrinsic principles of a thing’s nature are what govern its passage from potency to act. In other words, a thing’s nature

---

6 ST I-II.6.1. I have left the translation of homo as “man” because I think its substitution with “human being” or “human person” renders the passage less clear. Elsewhere I have tried to reflect when possible the impersonal nature of noun homo by rendering it in a gender-neutral way.

7 I will return later to Aquinas’ discussion on the hierarchy of ends and the necessity of a last end, but it suffices to note for now the way in which humans are uniquely capable of acting for known ends.
determines the way in which that thing exercises its inclinations in response to the
external objects it encounters in the world. The nature of a rock, for instance, specifies
that it fall when it encounters changing gravitational resistance. Similarly, the natures of
more complex creatures determine the ways in which their varying inclinations
(concerning nourishment, reproduction and sociality, for instance) react to the various
contexts in which some or all of these inclinations may be satisfied. However, to say that
the principles contained in a thing’s nature move it to act in characteristic ways is not to
say that those principles are in the thing itself. For without knowledge of one’s own
natural ends, one’s action remains in a real sense constrained by what is distinct from its
individual agency. “If a thing has no knowledge of its end,” Aquinas explains, “even
though it have an intrinsic principle of action or movement, nevertheless the principle of
acting or being moved for an end is not in that thing but in something else, by which the
principle of its action towards an end is imprinted on it” (I-II.6.1). A human act, on the
other hand, proceeds from the intrinsic principles of a rational nature that dictate the end
of that act in accordance with the agent’s knowledge of that end, such that the
intelligibility of that end resides within the agent herself.

Of course, in light of the relative subordination of the human intellect we
discussed above, one might object (as many have since Aquinas’ day) that the human
rational nature is no less imprinted upon human beings than other non-rational natures are
imprinted upon those who possess them. Simply because human nature is rational does
not mean that it is not capable of being affected by external action of any kind, since for
Aquinas all natures ultimately owe their existence entirely to God’s creating act. Yet

---

8 The will also remains subject to God’s direct movement of it. For “it is not contrary to the
essence of a voluntary act, that it proceed from God, inasmuch as the will is moved by God” (I-II.6.1). In
God’s creating act is the movement of a first principle, which Aquinas identifies as a different species of movement altogether from that proceeding from natural principles intrinsic to created things.⁹ For Aquinas, God’s creating action only determines natures to be *what they are*, but like any other extrinsic principle of movement, it does not impinge upon the principles of action that operate within an agent according to its nature. Thus God, or any other external force, does not necessarily prevent creatures from having or even “possessing” intrinsic principles of action specified by their particular nature. The pivotal factor for Aquinas is the ability to *know* the ends to which one’s own nature inclines one’s action in response to these forces. This capacity allows human cognition to be “the first principle in the genus of appetitive movement,” enabling the self-reflective agent to freely direct her actions toward the full panoply of possible ends specified by her nature.¹⁰ To sum up, although Aquinas always locates human nature and action in reference to a creating God, he nonetheless insists upon the independence of the internal intelligibility of the natural world, at least as it manifests itself to human reason.

---

⁹ *ST I-II.1.6 ad1

¹⁰ *ST I-II.6.1 ad1
3.1.3 Participated Perfectibility, Rational and Nonrational

Although human thought and action are always dependent upon and measured by the divine intellect and will, God never contravenes the autonomy intrinsic to human agency considered in itself. This autonomy stems from the capacity of the human being to gain self-awareness of the ends appropriate to its nature and to direct its actions toward those ends according to its own proper judgment. While for Aquinas the world depends upon the will of a Creator and is thus contingent, it is nonetheless made in such a way that the human intellect and will can exercise their own proper activity and dominion within it so as to actualize and perfect the nature to which it belongs. With these claims in mind, I now want to look more closely at what differentiates the perfecting behavioral dispositions that apply to human intelligent self-direction as opposed those that perfect other self-moving beings.¹¹

Most of Aquinas’ treatments of virtue are preceded with questions about habits (habitus): whether and in what sense virtues are habits or dispositions. In contemporary parlance, the term “habits” and “disposition” are often interchangeable, but in Aquinas’ context they require precise distinction. Let us first consider the notion of habits. For Aquinas, habits are necessary qualities of each being—whether rational or irrational—whose various natural capacities require coordinated development with respect to a multiplicity of objects and ends distinct from itself. Explaining these conditions in ST I-II.49.4, he first points out that habits apply only to whatever has potentiality with respect to a different manner of existence: thus habits are not necessary for God because God does not in any way pass from one state of being to another. We may first of all conclude

¹¹The methodological importance of this task is laid out nicely in Ralph McInerny’s Aquinas on Human Action: a Theory of Practice (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1992) pp3—24.
then that only perfectible beings require habits (and since God is by nature non-perfectible, he is non-habituated). Aquinas points out that habits apply only to what possesses potentiality to more than one state of being: “whence if something be in a state of potentiality in regard to something else, but in regard to that only, there we find no room for disposition and habit: for such a subject from its own nature has the due relation to such an act.”

Although the sort of movement Aquinas has in mind here is that of “heavenly bodies” (which the astronomy of his time erroneously regarded as naturally immutable), the category is still useful inasmuch as it conceptually isolates the notion of contingency as applied to created natures. If something is determined to actualize its nature in only one possible way within one possible set of circumstances, then it obviously does not need any further disposition to regulate its actions toward that end; the properties of its nature alone are sufficient for its full actualization. Contingent agents, on the other hand, must as a part of their natural development learn or otherwise acquire reliable patterns of action, i.e. habits, which can dispose them to fully actualize their various active potencies. Similarly, the third prerequisite for a habituated agent—that it be able to coordinate a variety of adjustable factors in its actions—marks a further distinction between the “simple qualities” that elements possess simply in virtue of their existence (fire’s heat, e.g.), and those which are proper dispositions or habits. These habits facilitate an agent’s perfection by means of a complex coordination of factors in response to the conditions of that agent’s particular existence in space and time. Habits are necessary for all beings that meet these minimum requirements, and their possession by no means entails full rationality. Whatever actualizes its natural potentiality by means

---

12 ST I-II.49.4 my emphasis.
of activity involving the coordination of various capacities requires in some measure
certain dispositions that reliably direct its activity toward that end.

It may prove useful at this point to lay out briefly the different senses which
Aquinas usually attaches to the terms inclination, disposition, habit and virtue, since these
terms are regularly conflated in modern English usage. First, by inclinations Aquinas
usually means the basic orientation of a species’ characteristic appetitive movements.
Human beings, for instance, possess general inclinations to preserve their own existence,
to perpetuate their species, to live in society and to pursue a reflective knowledge of the
truth. 13 Thus for Aquinas inclinations are conceptually equivalent to “pre-dispositions”
toward certain ends that are determined by a being’s nature. Aquinas normally uses the
term dispositio to denote what amounts to the same basic notion, but in more direct
reference to a soul’s particular powers or capacities. When Aquinas opens his treatise On
the Virtues in General with the question of whether virtues are dispositions, he is hoping
to clarify what sort of quality a virtue is, with Aristotle’s fourfold division of quality in
mind. 14 In particular, Aquinas argues that virtues refer to the dispositions of natural
capacities rather than to the capacities themselves, the second type of quality in
Aristotle’s taxonomy. The distinction emphasizes the “something more” that acting
beings of a certain complexity require for the full actualization of their natural powers;
just “being a kind of something” does not tell us all we need to know. For instance, the
disposition of a jaguar to run quickly is a distinct sort of attribute when compared to its

---

13 ST I-II.94.2. On the proper placement of inclination within the broader structure of Aquinas’
moral action theory, see Jean Porter’s Moral Action and Christian Ethics. (New York: Cambridge Univ.

14 Aristotle enumerates these types of quality in Categories 8.
muscle structure, its color or its shape. Lastly, Aquinas employs the term *habitus* to denote those dispositions that are the result of repeated action. These are, in essence, dispositions governed both by an agent’s nature and by the exercise of its natural powers. While the full actualization of certain beings’ potentialities requires the mediation of certain rules or measures which perfect its activity, it is the being’s nature that initially establishes the parameters of the particular potencies in accordance with which the agent’s activity may be understood as self-perfecting.  

Aquinas’ initial conception of *virtue* remains firmly attached to Aristotelian sources. In the body of the first question of *On the Virtues in General (VC)*, he writes,  

> We must say that virtue, in accordance with the meaning of the word, refers to the fulfillment of a capacity. For virtue, in accordance with its name, refers to the perfecting of a capability; that is why Aristotle says that virtue is the upper limit of something with respect to its capacity. But because capacity is defined in relation to its actualization, the fulfillment of a capacity will be found in its accomplishing fully what it does, since everything, according to Aristotle, is for the sake of what it does, as being its proximate end; for each thing is good insofar as it is fully ordered to its own end.

With breath-taking economy, Aquinas outlines his understanding of how the virtues perfect both acts and agents. They help to actualize as perfectly as possible the sort of existence to which their natures ordain them. In support, Aquinas invokes Aristotle’s definition in the *Nicomachean Ethics 2.6*: virtue merely names the dispositions that make

---

15 Of course, the third and fourth types of quality—sensory qualities and shape—could never be a serious candidate for the classification of a disposition for action.


their possessor good by making her actions good. In the case of corporeal natures—natures subject to the extension and succession of spatiotemporal existence—this perfection involves an incremental development of capacities by means of discrete actions. Virtue is thus unnecessary for angels, because their existence does not develop or grow in this way. But Aquinas’ conception of virtue—a habit or disposition of action guiding an agent’s various inclinations toward the gradual perfection of its natural capacities—can apply to nonrational creatures. He explicitly remarks in the same question that “all of this is true for the virtue of any kind of thing. For the virtue of a horse is what makes both it and its work good; similarly with the virtue of a stone, or of a human being or anything else.”

How can Aquinas predicate virtue to nonrational and even nonsentient beings in this way and still maintain its distinct relation to the self-generating actions of perfectible natures? First of all, we may assume that his attribution of virtue to stones here is analogical. This analogical use of “virtue” helps bring out its necessary relation to the good, namely that to be a virtue is to be a cause of goodness: something which brings about the realization of the good in a particular agent. Virtue applies analogically for Aquinas even to nonrational self-moving beings, since they do not properly “possess” the active principles by which they act and for that reason they cannot be said to fully govern their own actions. If an agent lacks the capacity to reason, it cannot consciously act for an end under the aspect of the goodness of that end, and thus cannot relate the attraction or repulsion they experience toward a particular object with higher order goods of the their nature—whether it be their own final end or the end of their species. Aquinas therefore concludes that nonrational agents do not act freely, but in accordance with

18 Ibid., my emphasis.
principles that are as it were “imprinted upon them.” An animal such as a horse possesses “virtues” to the extent that its nature extrinsically direct its actions so as to develop by means of the behavioral dispositions that gradually perfect the natural capacities particular to its species. Being “imprinted” upon the horse from outside, the inclinations that proceed from its nature are constantly and consistently operative, informed by ends that are more or less uniform for the species as a whole.

Here it is helpful to recall the claim laid out above that for Aquinas all material things are in a sense situated “between two intellects:” the divine intellect, which acts as the origin and measure of things, and the human intellect which conversely is originated and measured by things. For Aristotle as well as Aquinas, the intelligibility of every perfectible creature’s actions depend ultimately upon the divine intellect, and yet, as Aquinas will more explicitly articulate, within that all-inclusive relation the human intellect possesses a unique corresponding power to grasp, formulate and even to an extent manipulate the intelligible principles of other natural things. Thus while the operations of the human intellect remain dependent upon external objects perceived

---

19 This relation of dependence is very different for each figure, of course. For Aristotle, the nous of human contemplation is simply a less powerful, more limited version of the divine nous that is the eternal principle of the cosmos. As Antoine Côté argues in “Intellection and divine causation in Aristotle” (*Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43:1, pp25—39), the divine nous of *Metaphysics* XII (L).7 is simply a conceptual extension of the eternal agent intellect described in *De anima* III.5. Myles Burnyeat reaches a similar conclusion regarding the univocity of human and divine nous in his 2008 Aquinas lecture *Aristotle’s Divine Intellect* (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ. Press, 2008): “What is special about the exercise of nous, the highest form of cognition that humans can attain, is that it is no longer a more or less distant imitation of the divine life. It is a limited span of the very same activity as God enjoys for all time” (43). Reminiscent of his comments about the godlike quality of the contemplative life in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7, Aristotle writes in *Metaphysics* XII(L).7 that “God is always in that good state in which we sometimew. To be sure, Aquinas’ absolute distinction between the divine and human would prohibit this sort of univocally comparative attribution, but at the same time his notion of creation establishes an even more intimate relation of dependence between human and divine modes intelligibility.

20 One need only compare the characteristic ends of horses that live in the wild with the immense array of ends for which they have been bred and trained by humans. Of course, humans encounter limitations to the way they can manipulate the behaviors and operations of natural things, but nonetheless our capacity to “imprint” distinctively human modes of intelligibility upon the natural order is all too real, and indeed, with the advent of modern scientific methods, ever-expanding.
through the senses, its own ability to come to know and judge the goodness of those things (including itself) makes an enormous difference for the way in which human agents perfect themselves through their actions and hence for the way they possess and develop the virtues. The most salient consequence of this distinction for our present study is the human agent’s unique capacity to act deliberately against the most primary of its inclinations, that of self-preservation, for the sake of some greater end. The human person’s capacity to reason therefore allows it to conceive of ends whose realization lies outside the bounds of one’s own particular temporal existence. This ability to “surpass self” in the pursuit of ultimate ends is a crucial feature of Aquinas’ anthropology, one which facilitates his transformative understanding of courage as predominantly a virtue of endurance rather than aggression.

3.1.4 Eternal Law, Natural Law, and Human Self-perfection

The unique metaphysical status Aquinas accords to the human person, taken in large part from Aristotle, helps to explain the special role played by the virtues in his theory of human perfection. Another way of coming at the precise place of human agency in Aquinas’ metaphysical structure is to speak not of principle but of law. Both are analogous terms in the context of metaphysical speculation, the former being drawn from logical or technical discourse and the latter from the political realm; and as such, the correlative disanalogies to which they are susceptible must always be kept in mind. However, both are useful terms for trying to think through the relation between created agency and the divine and human intellect. Aquinas-affirms that like a formal principle, “a law is something pertaining to reason,” more specifically “an ordinance of reason.”
intended to govern activity according to certain ends. Many of the innumerable historical interpretations of Aquinas’ notion of law and its types underappreciate both the limitations of his complex analogical extension of the concept of law and the implications of the simple lexical resonance of the operative term *ordinatio*, whose meaning is much closer to “arrangement” than “command.” In any case, Aquinas’ treatise on law lays much of the metaphysical foundation for his action theory by grounding the intelligibility of all created agency in the eternal law, the divine knowledge from which each thing receives its particular existence, together with the specific inclinations and capacities that make it to be the sort of existence it is.

The *eternal law* is the measure of all things within the divine intellect: “the way God knows things to be,” or perhaps more correctly put, “the way he knows them *into being*.” Eternal law is thus the necessary and sufficient cause of the existence and governance of all creation. Like everything else, God governs human beings by determining the distinctive inclinations and capacities of their agency, perhaps the most important of which is that they themselves come to know and deliberately pursue their characteristic ends *as ends*. Human beings are therefore given a certain degree of access to the eternal law that orders their existence. Aquinas goes so far as to say that human agency is implanted with a natural habit he calls *synderesis*, by which the practical intellect is oriented toward the goods characteristic of our nature. In this way, human beings actively *participate* in the eternal law: by sharing God’s knowledge of their

---

21 *ST* I-II.90.1,4.

22 I owe this phrase to Romanus Cessario, OP.

23 This supplementary phrase I owe to David Burrell.

24 *ST* I.79.12.
natural capacities and ends (according to their own proper mode of knowing), humans also share in the governance of their own actions, by which they deliberately pursue the perfection of their nature.

This active participation in the eternal law is what differentiates human action from the action of nonrational agents, which have no access to the intelligible order of their nature, and thus no intentional role in the governance of their development and perfection. It is this capacity to self-regulate the activity by which our nature comes to perfection that informs Aquinas’ classic definition of the natural law as “the rational creature’s participation of eternal law.” The dispositions of agents incapable of knowing their own ends can only amount to what we might call “instinctual habits,” since, although their action is informed by the eternal law, their own practical capacities respond entirely to external stimuli; thus their process of perfectibility remains entirely receptive to extrinsic formal causes. Dispositions of human action, on the other hand, while occasioned and conditioned by what the eternal law determines human nature to be, nevertheless proceed from capacities for action that are informed and directed by the agent’s own knowledge of the ends for which she acts, as well as her deliberation and choice of the means thereto. While not denying that the capacities of human agency are acted upon by nature and circumstance, Aquinas claims that these external forces do not exhaustively determine its particular courses of action. This “sort of capacity that both acts and is acted upon,” he explains, “is moved by the powers that activate it in such a way that it is not determined by them to do one thing.”

---

25 *ST* I-II.91.2.

26 *De virtutibus in commune* q1 (as translated by E.M. Atkins in *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, p7)
universal jurisdiction over the governance of all things, its particular ordering of rational animals grants them an active role in, and hence a circumscribed dominion over, the perfection of their own nature, entailing a sphere of indeterminacy in the means by which their capacities become actualized. Despite the fact that the provenance of human nature lies beyond human agency itself, human beings possess the principle of their own acts by helping to determine the form whereby the exercise of their capacities actualizes their natural ends. The various forms of rationally-directed human action, which properly inhere in their possessor, are what Aquinas refers to as “virtues” in a primary sense: those dispositions toward intelligible patterns of action that make an agent and her actions good. Human perfection is therefore inextricably linked with the rational agent’s own apprehension of the intelligible good, as well as the relation its own acts bear toward it.

3.2 Human Perfection and the Moral Virtues

Before proceeding, let us briefly step back and assess the ground we have covered so far and its link with the forthcoming course of argumentation. We have dwelt upon Aquinas’ metaphysical framework in order (1) to establish his grounds for following Aristotle’s claim regarding the proper autonomy of human intelligibility and natural ends and (2) to unpack his argument for the human ability to freely determine actions and guide the development of dispositions in light of the human intellect’s ability to know, deliberate about and pursue its own proper ends. In other words, it is only because the human person is the sort of being she is—an individuated, intellectual body-soul composite—that she is able to actively participate in the development of those practical dispositions which perfect her natural capacities. While in one sense virtues are the
instruments by which any dynamic creature actualizes its nature, if our reading is correct, then Aquinas believes humans to be uniquely capable of perceiving, employing and guiding these instruments toward their appropriate ends. Humans for Aquinas are the only perfectible creature who, by their own actions, are able to perfect _themselves_ in a non-equivocal sense. Beginning with the reflective reception of the motive forces within their nature and environment, humans cultivate virtues by the habitual coordination of intellect and will in the pursuit of particular human ends by particular elected means.

In the next part of the dissertation, we will apply this interpretation of Aquinas’ virtue theory to his account of courage, whose specific function to regulate the passions in the face of threats to the will’s adherence to the good of reason. Aquinas’ account of courage demonstrates the full extent to which Aquinas commits himself to power of virtue in a rational agent to perfect its possessor according to the powers and operations internal to that form of agency. With Aristotle, he recognizes the extent to which in actual fact external misfortunes are able to frustrate the human agent’s pursuit of its own perfection, but he nevertheless insists that this vulnerability is an aberration brought about by sin, and is therefore absent from God’s establishment of human nature in Eden and his redemption of it through the incarnation. This theologically informed extension of Aristotle’s appreciation of the capacity of the human intellect to attain perfection through the proper exercise of its own rationality therefore transforms Aquinas’ understanding of the contingent threats which bring about misfortune, and leads as a result to a transformed vision of courage.

The principal aim of the present chapter, then, has been to examine the metaphysical and anthropological _foundation_ of Aquinas’ attempt to render an account of
virtue reconcilable with the Christian worldview as informed by sacred scripture. Hence the previous sections have attempted to draw out the precise sort of goodness or perfection which Aquinas believes human virtue yields. The following section will devote special attention to Aquinas’ account of the human aptitude for “complete virtue.” The chapter concludes with a consideration of Aquinas’ own acknowledgement of the various potential hazards of contingent human existence which may substantially diminish the prospects of achieving this form of perfection, thus introducing into the discussion the theological concepts of sin, grace and redemption. Only at that point will we be able to address properly the questions raised by Aquinas’ proposition of martyrdom as the paradigmatic exemplification of courage.

3.2.1 Aquinas’ Effort to Define Virtue as Such

In his direct theoretical exposition of virtue as a concept, Aquinas regularly appeals to a handful of authoritative definitions in order to support and orient his own positions. Unsurprisingly, several of these come from Aristotle, the most general of which we have already had occasion to mention: a “virtue is that which makes its possessor good, and his work good likewise.”27 A second Aristotelian dictum he repeatedly brings to bear is the remark in De Coelo that “virtue is the limit of a power,” or as some have otherwise translated it, “the perfection of a capacity.”28 This definition specifies what Aquinas takes to be the proper object of virtue, namely the natural

27 Aquinas invokes EN II.6 at least five times in the Prima Secundae alone: I-II.55.3, 56.2, 56.3, 66.3, 99.2.

28 Aquinas calls upon this dictum at least five times in the Prima Secundae alone: I-II.55.1ad1, 55.3, 56.1, 64.1ad1, 66.1ad1. The former translation is that of the English Dominicans. The latter translation is E.M. Atkins’.
 capacities or powers of the human being. He recognizes the working definition within the Christian tradition as the one attributed to Augustine in the second book of Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*: a “virtue is a good quality of mind by which we live rightly, which no one misuses, and which God works in us without our help.” In invoking the “mind,” Augustine further specifies virtue’s participation in reason as the distinguishing mark by which it perfects human capacities; for a virtue to be properly human, it must always accord with reason’s measure of the good. The impossibility of “misusing virtue” emphasizes the intrinsic goodness and ultimate unity of virtue’s end, a matter to which we will later return. And as Aquinas himself makes clear, the final clause regarding God’s intervention refers only to theological or infused virtue, once again an important topic from which we must prescind for now. Aquinas also invokes in his discussions Cicero’s description of virtue as “a habit like a second nature in accord with reason,” again pointing to the tension between virtue’s conformity to natural human capacities and its contingent development under the auspices of human intelligence.

In light of the spontaneity and consistency with which such rationally cultivated dispositions prompt human actions toward ends that are themselves foreseen and affirmed, Aquinas agrees that virtues rightly warrant the title “second nature;” and insofar as *human* virtue is essentially distinguished by its permanent reference to reason, both Cicero and Augustine are correct to include rationality in their definitions. What is more, Aquinas accepts Aristotle’s theory that virtue is principally distinguished by its pursuit of a “mean” or middle course between excessive dispositions marked the disproportionate

---

29 Aquinas devotes an entire chapter to considering the adequacy of this definition in I-II.55.4 and *On the Virtues in General* q.2.

30 Cf. I-II.58.1 and 58.4; and *On the Virtues in General* q.6 ad4, and q12 ad6.
presence of one dimension of action that virtue characteristically succeeds in balancing against others. In the case of courage, for instance, reason pursues a middle course between fear and daring with respect to the presence of actual or potential mortal danger. The same process of rational measurement applies to the positive requirements of human life as well: reason perceives that one requires a certain amount of nourishment, a certain amount of activity and rest, and a certain amount of intellectual and social maintenance. It is reason that measures and correlates acts with respect to these specific ends. One may reasonable object, at this point, however, that while reason governs actions with respect to such ends, such teleological governance need not go “all the way down;” one need not possess and consistently apply an overall vision of flourishing to one’s moral reasoning in order to be a competent practical reasoner.  

If so, then need the particular conceptual paths by which different virtuous courses of action are deliberated correspond in any meaningful way? In other words, is there anything about virtue as such that requires it have any meaningful conceptual unity amongst its different manifestations within the many distinct spheres of human life so that the notion of “complete” or “perfect” virtue is able to emerge coherently?

### 3.2.2 The Connection of the Virtues

The thesis of the “connection of the virtues” is that one cannot properly possess one of the virtues without possessing all of them together.  

---

**31** For a very clear and helpful discussion on the possible translation of Aristotelian conceptual language into more quotidian articulations of the reasons that are most often given for undertaking virtuous actions, see Rosalind Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999) pp121—140.

**32** *ST I-II.65.1*. This thesis is often called the “unity thesis” of the virtues, but I deliberately rephrase the terminology so as to distinguish what Aquinas puts forth on the integral connection between the virtues and what Augustine asserts on this score. Augustine defends the view that the virtues are
Aquinas employs for defending his endorsement of this thesis. The first strategy rests upon the integral relation between the perfected operations of the different capacities within the characteristic activity of the flourishing human specimen. It appeals to the coordination of the various dimensions that are part of the very structure of any human act, how in any instance of virtuous action an agent must concurrently exercise four principal dispositions: she must (i) deliberate upon the end of the act and its corresponding means (*prudence*), (ii) account for the act’s other-regarding consequences within a particular sets of circumstances (*justice*), and (iii & iv) simultaneously negotiate the sensible distractions (*temperance*) and threatening risks (*courage*) encountered in the execution of the act. Since every act of practical rationality includes all of these factors in some way or another, the act of any one virtue depends upon the exercise of all the others and thus the virtues are inextricably connected.

The second strategy appeals to the necessary connective function of prudence with respect to established moral knowledge and rectified appetite. In other words, this strategy relies upon ideals of human agency that specify *ex hypothesi* how prudence is to be ordered to justice, and how both prudence and justice are in turn underwritten and preserved by the proper regulation of the sensible and irascible passions *via* temperance and courage. As Aquinas notes, this strategy is the one Aristotle employs in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.13, where he compares the cultivation of prudence to the establishment of first principles of speculative science. Aristotle refers to prudence as “right reason about things to be done,” a description that includes every deliberate human

---

reducible to a single “quality” of soul, but Aquinas maintains their unity on the grounds of their common end, which is the perfection of the human soul, not in one particular capacity (however central), but in all its various capacities. See also Jean Porter’s *Nature as Reason* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), pp85—87.
act. Yet this “right reason” itself presupposes the presence of moral virtue in the form of ordered passions and social relationships. Often accused of circularity by its opponents, this argument in my view merely points to the social and developmental nature of human action, and the corresponding need for progressive moral education. The actions of children are in an important sense pre-moral for Aristotle, since children lack the education and cognitive maturity which enable them to independently discern and direct their actions to proper ends by proper means. As Romanus Cessario remarks, “the developed virtue of prudence represents the achievement of a complete moral culture in the human person whose intelligence and appetites function harmoniously towards good human activity.”33 Thus prudence unites the virtues as an animal’s genetic code unites the different stages of its growth, or as axiomatic principles unite the different inferences of a speculative proof. The formation of prudence through moral education calibrates the modality of practical reasoning without which an agent’s actions would be irregular and unreliable.

3.2.3 Human Goodness and Complete Virtue

A crucial aspect of this moral “enculturation” which informs the connective function of prudence is the situation of human ends in relation to the ends of other natural things, and for Aristotle and Aquinas, this task involves the placement of human ends within the teleological order of the cosmos as a whole. I contend that for Aristotle and Aquinas, prudence concerns itself with both the manner in which the natural ends of things in the world may serve as means to (higher) human ends, and also with how

properly human ends are ordered in turn to even higher natural ends. Does Aquinas have any explicit conception of what such superordinate perfections might be?

In the last section, we briefly remarked upon Aristotle’s direct application of his principle ordering the perfection of the part to the perfection of the whole to individual human action with respect to the activity of the political whole. And in his thought on the common good, Aquinas adopts this model to a great extent. Putting aside for the moment the theological limitations to Aquinas’ own application of this subordinate relationship, there are also limitations to it based purely on his anthropological claims, in particular the claim that because of the voluntary nature of human agency, the active principle of an individual’s actions resides within the individual and not within the form of the species imprinted upon the individual from outside. Nevertheless, the possibility that the perfection of human action may be ordered to the perfection of some greater whole remains intact.

With the idea of “complete” human virtue in mind, let us consider a fifth classical definition that Aquinas invokes in his attempt to assign a more differentiated meaning to the concept of virtue. It comes from Book 7 of Aristotle’s Physics, where the Philosopher states that virtue is “the disposition of something complete to what is best” (246b2). Both in questions 1 and 15 (ad.15) of De virtutibus in commune, Aquinas explains that this conclusion merely qualifies the more general premise that “virtue makes its possessor and his actions good.” “The character of virtue does not consist in being the best of its kind in itself, but with reference to its object,” Aquinas writes. “For it is through virtue that someone is ordered towards the upper limit of his capacity, that is

34 See above, pp256—274.
towards doing things well.”  

Thus an agent is good insofar as it optimizes its capacities for the sort of action that is characteristic of its particular kind. What is the particular sort of goodness characteristic to human agency? I contend that for Aristotle and Aquinas, it is not enough to point only to the empirical indications of a human organism’s flourishing with respect to the general norms of its species. For them, the upper limit of the rational animal’s capacity touches upon and relates itself to the nature of something higher, whether it be divine, angelic or cosmic. Human prudence thus “looks both ways” in its determination of human goodness, referring both to what it subordinates to human ends and to what in turn subordinates human ends to itself.

Along with the full development of the material capacities of the human person, the full manifestation of human goodness involves the self-awareness, self-reflection and self-direction characteristic of a distinctly rational being, participating in an order of intelligibility that ultimately transcends it. Whereas the natural inclinations and their development are prearranged in nonrational beings—imprinted upon them and thus determined to one direction—the inclinations of human nature are only the starting point for the development of the dispositions that perfect human capacities. The human intellect actively directs this process of development through its apprehension of the ends of action and the deliberate determination of the means to achieve them, which allows the human agent to coordinate and synthesize the various virtues corresponding to different capacities in light of a common final good to which they mutually contribute. It is in reference with this common ultimate end that reason ascribes a midpoint or mean to each

---

35 De virt. comm. 11ad15, my emphasis.
particular virtue in light of the demands the different virtues make upon one another in their mutual ordering toward the final end of human perfection.\footnote{36}

Aquinas reserves the title of complete virtue for this sort of rationally directed activity perfecting the human person to the full extent of its capacities. The achievement of complete virtue does not imply a uniform standard of particular activities, however. In this sense, human perfection is “underdetermined” with regard to its particular social and cultural manifestation. There are a multiplicity of possible instantiations of full human flourishing, especially in Aquinas where the supernatural final end depends principally upon the will’s relation to God as mediated through charity.\footnote{37} In answering the objection that virtues are in us by nature because both tend to one and the same end, Aquinas replies that while each natural inclination does tend to the particular virtue with which it is associated, “there cannot be such an inclination to do what is characteristic of all the virtues.”\footnote{38} The reason is that the natural inclinations themselves inevitably come into conflict with respect to the action required in any particular situation. One may have a natural impulse to boldness or patience, for instance, which facilitates virtuous action in

---

\footnote{36}{One may object that the mean of any virtue corresponds much more to the immediate ends circumscribed by the particular sphere of human activity to which they belong. The mean of courage is much more about optimizing the goodness that belongs to the soldier on the battlefield than it is about the human person’s cosmic or universal significance. Yet if we recall the curious remarks Aristotle makes about the bizarre insensitivity to fear displayed by the Celts and by mercenaries in EN III, he admits that these deficiencies may actually make them better soldiers than the properly courageous man, since the properly courageous man has greatest reason to love his life and preserve it. The virtuous man views his action in much broader terms than the immediate sphere in which he acts at any one moment. He is always focused on the broadest and most inclusive form of flourishing: \textit{eudaimonia}.}


\footnote{38}{\textit{De virt. in com.} 8ad10, Atkins p49.}
one situation but inhibits it in another. Aquinas’ example is the lion, which is naturally bold, but also naturally cruel. He goes on to explain:

“This natural inclination to one or the other virtues is enough for other animals, which cannot achieve complete goodness in respect of virtue, but follow a good of a determinate sort. Human beings, however, are apt by nature to reach goodness that is complete with respect to virtue: for that reason, they need to possess an inclination to all kinds of virtuous activity. This could not happen by nature. Therefore it need to happen in accordance with reason; the seeds of all the virtues exist in that.”

In light of Aquinas’ underlying metaphysical premise that all goodness emerges in reference to some intellect, his identification of human goodness as a kind of completeness with respect to “all kinds of virtuous activity” suggests some very intriguing implications for the specifically human form of perfection facilitated by the virtues.

3.3 Human Perfection in Broader Context

My analysis of Aquinas’ larger categories of thought is progressing toward the conclusion for him, courage is perfective of the human person chiefly because it defends and sustains the created intellect’s ability to know the truth about the world. In the following few sections I will begin to trace out the foundation for this view: Aquinas’ curious yet enormously important claim that the created intellect’s progressive apprehension of the universe’s intelligibility constitutes nothing less than the universe’s own culminating perfection. In order to begin exploring this far-reaching claim, I now want turn our attention to a somewhat underappreciated line of argumentation in the second question of Aquinas’ Disputed Questions on Truth. After establishing in the first

39 Ibid.
article the proper manner of attributing knowledge to God, Aquinas considers the possible content of God’s knowledge. Aquinas begins his response in this article by inquiring into “what kind of nature it is that can be both knower and known.” Aquinas also points out that when anything is said to know something, it at the same time knows that it knows it, and thus knows itself as the possessor of that knowledge. In recognizable continuity with Aristotle, Aquinas comes to conclude that, since there is no object that does not itself participate in the divine intellect, the only possible object of God’s knowledge is God himself. In his simple act of self-knowing, God constitutes in himself the ultimate perfection or completion of the universe. Thus all things derive both their being and goodness from this one ultimate act of self-knowledge. How exactly does Aquinas come to this conclusion?

3.3.1 Human Perfection and the Perfection of the Universe

First we must briefly acknowledge the peculiar path of Aquinas’ initial reasoning in the De Veritate. Although he is trying to work out God’s self-knowing, he begins by considering the nature of self-knowing in created beings, and the sort of perfected activity that is characteristic of them. But how does talking about self-knowing creatures help us to talk about God? In the previous article of de Veritate, Aquinas establishes the basic method by which any attribute may be predicated to God: we begin with our knowledge of creatures, and then attribute characteristics to God according to an analogical manner of representation. While the terms we apply to God do apply directly and substantially,

---


41 Cf. Metaphysics 12(L).7—9
they apply in a way that is purified of all the imperfections and limitations associated with our own particular nature. Thus to speak of God’s knowing Himself, we first must reflect upon the way in which we know ourselves, determine how that ability contributes to the perfection of our nature, and then apply those attributes to God in an absolute sense, independent from the imperfections inherent to our own manner of existence.

Accordingly, Aquinas sets out by distinguishing between two ways in which a thing may be perfect: 1) with respect to its own act of existence as determined by its particular nature; and 2) “absolutely,” with respect to the perfection of the natural order as a whole, which coordinates the particular natures that belong to it. With respect to the first kind of perfection, Aquinas says that “since the specific act of existence of one thing is distinct from the specific act of existence of another, in every created thing of [a particular] kind, [its] perfection falls short of absolute perfection to the extent that that perfection is found in other species.” ⁴² In other words, to be perfect according to one’s own specific nature is to be perfect only in a qualified sense, fully actualizing the potency of one’s particular nature, while falling well short of the perfection that is possible not just absolutely but within the actual natural order as a whole. What is more, this order is not simply speculatively projected onto some ultimate horizon, but is reflected in the symbiotic relations between individual natures. Hence the perfections of specific natures for Aquinas are ordered to the perfection of those natures which depend upon them for their own perfection, and in this way they converge toward the perfection of the natural order as a whole. Likewise, the perfections of higher beings depend upon the perfections

⁴² De Ver. II.2, corpus.
of the lower. Yet only those beings who can grasp the intelligibility of this order as such can aspire to perfection in the absolute sense.

Human beings, of course, are the only creatures who possess this “dual trajectory” of perfection, and in this way they bring the perfection of the natural order itself to a close. As Aquinas goes on to explain it more explicitly in *De veritate* II.2,

The perfection of each individual thing considered in itself is imperfect, being a part of the perfection of the entire universe, which arises from the sum total of the perfections of all individual things. In order that there might be some remedy for this imperfection [of aggregate particular natures], another kind of perfection is to be found in created things. It consists in this, that the perfection belonging to one thing is found in another. That human knowledge can assign order to natural things is itself a reflection of the ultimate order of the divine knowledge. Thus the act of a created knower knowing isn’t simply a neutral act; it isn’t a matter of just receiving and storing data for purposes useful only for its proximate ends: on the contrary, knowing “is the perfection of a knower in so far as she knows.” It is through knowledge that the perfection of one thing may be found in another, by one thing knowing something else. “For something is known by a knower by reason of the fact that the thing known is, in some fashion, in the possession

43 The examples of dependent cooperative arrangements between natural things are seemingly endless. Environmental ecology is little else but the study of such relationships. The food chain, for instance, is nothing but a series of progressively inclusive dependent relations, with the higher animals always relying upon the proper relation of their prey to their prey’s prey and so forth. Obviously, such ordered relations are highly contingent and subject to change. Among many examples of the fragility of these relations, the example of the tambalacoque tree of Mauritius comes to mind, also known as the “dodo tree:” scientists speculate that this tree, which produces an enormous amount of fruit each year, is nevertheless becoming quickly becoming extinct because the absence of the dodo bird (or the absence of some other now extinct species of animal) whose digestion of the seeds was essential for their germination. The 13 trees now remaining on the island are all well over 300 years old. In any case, the point of the example is twofold: (1) these inter-species relationships of dependence are necessary components of the perfection of the natures that participate in them, and (2) the level of dependency upon such natural symbiotic relationships becomes progressively more inclusive in proportion to the level of sophistication involved in a particular species’ perfection.

44 *De Ver.* II.2.corpus, p61.

45 Ibid. emphasis mine. Aquinas makes the remark here that this assimilation of the knower and the known is what Aristotle means when he says in *De Anima*, that the soul is “in some manner, all things.”
of the knower.’’\textsuperscript{46} This sort of knowledge \textit{constitutes the perfection of the knower}, and so in this sense, the perfection of intelligent beings is not like the perfection of any other being, for “in this way, it is possible for the perfection of the entire universe to exist in one thing.”\textsuperscript{47}

Let us pause at this slightly bewildering claim for a moment. First, where does it come from? It is unclear, really. He deals with the idea most systematically in \textit{Summa contra gentiles} II.46, where he argues that “the universe requires that there be some intellectual creatures.”\textsuperscript{48} It is noteworthy that in this context Aquinas makes no references, either to Scripture, to the Fathers or to other philosophers or theologians. The reasoning is inductive, in a sense, insofar as Aquinas is not trying to prove that \textit{any} world, by virtue of it being a world, must be perfectible and perfectible only in this way. Rather, beginning “with the fact that the universe is inhabited by intelligent beings, he seeks to persuade us that created intellectuality provides strong evidence that the universe is, literally, \textit{perfectum}, made thoroughly.”\textsuperscript{49} Again, two Aristotelian principles are operative here: the first is that “the good of the whole is better than the good of the single part;”\textsuperscript{50} and the second is that “the good of the whole consists in the mutual ordering of the parts.”\textsuperscript{51} In Aristotelian cosmology, the perfections of individual natures are merely

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} McCarthy, p73.
\textsuperscript{50} SCG II.44 (13:370): “cum bonum totius sit melius quam bonum partium singularium…”
\end{flushright}
“parts” of the perfection of the universe as a whole. Furthermore, the perfection of the whole comes about as a result of the ordering of these parts, meaning that if the second principle is to apply to the universe, one must assume it operates as a whole according to some orchestrated arrangement (some ordinatio). The perfection of this order is not simply additive; it does not simply come about as a result of the sum total of all its individual perfections. These perfections must be unified within an intellectual creature for the perfection of the whole to be realized within the whole, and this can only come about if some parts of the whole possess an ability to behold the order of wholes qua wholes. This vision of an ordered whole and the consequent unification of the perfection of its parts is the role of intelligent beings within a world “made thoroughly.”

This set of claims serves to locate created intelligent nature within a greater order of perfection than that which it is able to achieve through the full actualization of its own proper capacities. It relativizes human intellect without in any way downplaying its uniqueness vis-à-vis natural beings, recognizing the superiority of its own proper perfection to that of any other particular created nature. For Aquinas, the created intellect is able to unite and order these multiple particular natures within itself, bringing them to a kind of “completion,” while recognizing at the same time its own limitation with respect to an absolute completion of being surpassing its own capacity: a completed order of which its own intellectual nature is itself a part. In SCG II.46, Aquinas provides another line of reasoning for arguing that created intelligence perfects an intelligible world through its own proper knowledge of it “from within.” He rather suggests that this

---

51 SCG II.39 (13:358): “Sed bonum et optimum universi consistit in ordine partium eius ad invicem...”
52 In light of revelation, one must qualify this superiority by making exception for the angels, whose intrinsic intellectual capacities exceed our own.
participated reflection of intelligible unity within the created realm is the very imprint of the divine intelligence upon the world it has brought into being, and is thus a sign of God’s timeless assimilation of the world to himself through his knowledge of it.

Appealing to the very structure of natural activity, he argues that as an effect returns to its origin by “imaging” its cause, so “intellectual creatures bring about a closure to the universe simply by their being like God.” It is not that the universe would lack any perfection if the human intellect did not provide it, for every creature imitates its first cause in its own particular way and thereby “returns itself,” as it were, to that cause. The human soul, however, images its cause in a privileged way through intellect, and thereby is capable of returning to God not only its own perfected nature but also the perfections of the other natures that it contains within itself under the aspect of some intelligibly ordered whole or “completion” within which they are taken to belong. Thus the human being, by occupying this metaphysical midpoint between material and intellectual being, is unique among all creatures in its ability to “image” God insofar as the perfection of its own nature includes and orders the perfections of other natures.

3.3.2 Human Perfectibility and Divine Likeness

One might reasonably object at this point that such a vision of virtue has taken us far afield from the core collection of insights in Aristotle’s theory of virtue that have proven perennially fruitful for speculative moral thought. Many have argued that the natural and metaphysical background from which both Aristotle’s and Aquinas’ accounts of human virtue proceed are at best irrelevant and at worst an embarrassing impediment.

53 McCarthy, p73.
to their implementation within the contemporary context.\textsuperscript{54} What is truly valuable in their theory of virtue, such interpreters say, is the conceptual framework in which one accounts for the different modes of human goodness by relating the particular capacities of the human person to some provisional or ultimate end. Indeed, the general trend amongst contemporary attempts to appropriate Aristotelian virtue within the contemporary philosophical world is to take this qualified approach eschewing any metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical claims.\textsuperscript{55} The “naturalism” that emerges from many of these attempts employs criteria for ethical evaluation that apply across the entire spectrum of natural things: the virtues of any particular thing is what makes it a flourishing specimen of its kind, whether it be a plant, an insect or an advanced primate. However, the problem with such approaches, as I see it, is that their methodological grounding cannot satisfactorily account the odd phenomenon of ethical reflection \textit{as such}, which appears to be a uniquely important dimension of the flourishing of rational animals. It is a truly puzzling fact that there should be animals whose flourishing presupposes reflection and deliberation upon their own flourishing, and who are not only

\textsuperscript{54} The most well-known and pertinent example of this stance is Alasdair MacIntyre’s dismissal of Aristotelian “metaphysical biology” in \textit{After Virtue}. He plainly admits there that “Aristotle’s ethics, expounded as he expounds it, presupposes his metaphysical biology,” but that “any adequate generally Aristotelian account [of moral philosophy] must supply a teleological account which can replace Aristotle’s metaphysical biology” (pp 148 and 162, respectively, in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition). In the preface to his third edition of the book, MacIntyre acknowledges a softening of this position in light of his deepening allegiance to Aquinas’ appropriation of Aristotle. He writes there, “in \textit{After Virtue} I had tried to present the case for a broadly Aristotelian account of the virtues without making use of or appeal to what I called Aristotle’s metaphysical biology. And I was of course right in rejecting most of that biology. But I had now learned from Aquinas that my attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding. It is only because human beings have an end towards which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do” (xi, 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition).

\textsuperscript{55} Contemporary Aristotelian philosophers of this ilk, such as Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse, attempt to retrieve the notion of teleology which simply taking for granted modern presuppositions regarding metaphysical speculation. Their aim is mainly to point out the possibility of reconciling the notion of “natural end” with the sorts of empirical insights that contemporary methods of natural science provide. See Foot’s “Natural Norms” in \textit{Natural Goodness} (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001) p25—37 and Hursthouse’s “Naturalism” in \textit{On Virtue Ethics} (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999) pp192—216.
able to perfect their own functional capacities, but to apprehend, facilitate and coordinate
the perfection of other species’ as well. Yet this capacity for ordered reflection upon the
characteristic activity of different species (and their own among them) is an integral part
of the way these rational animals express and perfection their nature. This task, it seems
to me, does not require one to somehow step out of their “animalness” in order to behold
it from some mystical vantagepoint. Both Aristotle and Aquinas are able to reconcile the
contingent situatedness of our own natural activity with our ability to nevertheless situate
and even direct the natural activity of other beings by means of the metaphysical claim
that our ordering intelligence operates within a higher order of intelligibility to which it
has only partial access and in which it thus participates according to its own proper
capacity. Though such a claim may prove insolvent within some strands of contemporary
philosophical discourse, I have attempted to argue here that it is indeed an assumption
Aquinas shares with Aristotle, and one that he further develops in ways that have a direct
bearing on his theory of virtue.

As we touched upon in the previous section, in addition to the *polis*, Aristotle toys
with another superordinate perfection to which human virtue might be ordered—one that
deals specifically with humans’ intellectual capacities as perfected within the
philosophical life. The excellence that corresponds with what is highest and best in the
human soul is, for both Aristotle and Aquinas, an excellence of intellectual activity. In
*EN X.7*, Aristotle describes this form of excellence expressed in a life of reflective
activity, which engages the highest faculty in pursuit of the highest objects: objects of
intelligence that are most *knowable* and most desirable in themselves. For objects of
intelligence are not susceptible to alteration, dependency or corruption; on the contrary,
they are absolute, simple and self-contained. For Aristotle, a life immersed in the pursuit of intellectual goods, which above all else are to be loved for their own sake, represents the most complete form of human happiness: a life of peace, self-sufficiency, leisure and freedom from weariness and strife. “But such a life will be higher than the human plane,” Aristotle himself remarks,

for it is not in so far as he is human that he will live like this, but in so far as there is something divine in him, and to the degree that this is superior to the compound, to that degree will its activity too be superior to that in accordance with the rest of excellence. If, then, intelligence is something divine as compared to a human being, so too a life lived in accordance with this will be divine as compared to a human life.56

After paying exalted homage to this ideal, Aristotle then goes on to conclude his ethical treatise with measured resignation as to its feasibility within actual human existence. And, of course, his attention ultimately turns to that other, noble yet inferior form of human speculation to which exalted virtue may lead, namely the practice of political science. If it signals a retreat from a more “god-like” ideal, then it is only a measured retreat, since the tasks of political justice fully engage the faculties of human intelligence, and indeed integrate it with the demands of the subordinate capacities that support its operation. It is precisely because the establishment of political virtue is a prerequisite for purely intellectual virtue that it intrudes itself into Aristotle’s account of the ideal philosophical life.

Aquinas draws upon this view of where human perfection or completeness might lead while at the same time significantly transforming it. On the metaphysical plane, he shares with Aristotle the basic general idea that the perfection of her highest capacities in some sense render the human person god-like, pointing to something beyond the entirety

56 EN X.7,1177b26—32.
of “things” of which the human intellect is capable of receiving and assimilating to itself. Where Aristotle apprehends fleeting glimmers of divine resemblance in the intellectual capacities of human nature, Aquinas identifies an “image of God,” a formal imprint of the divine nature upon human activity.\textsuperscript{57} For Aquinas this image consists in the intellectual activity of the human creature, whereby, as we have said, it actively facilitates not only the perfection of its own nature, but the ordered perfection of others’ as well (what Aquinas might refer to in theological terms as “man’s ability to participate in God’s providence for the world”).\textsuperscript{58} Moreover, Aristotle and Aquinas attribute to this exalted activity an ultimate degree of goodness with respect to the human agent and her actions: it is this theoretical activity that constitutes the “best” to which the completeness of human activity points; for this reason both Aristotle and Aquinas call the one who achieves this form of activity happy or “blessed.” Just as all things absolutely speaking owe their goodness to divine intelligence, the goodness of created things can in some sense owe their goodness to human intelligence inasmuch as human intelligence perceives and actively participates in God’s ordering of the world.

We should pause and dwell briefly on the remarkable implications of this conclusion for the anthropology that Aquinas is able to weave out of his Aristotelian philosophical inheritance. In his reply to the ninth objection in \textit{On the Virtues in General} Question 8, Aquinas explains how could be is that, although human beings need more external assistance than nonrational creatures for the perfection of their particular nature,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{57} \textit{ST} I.93.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Cf. \textit{ST} I-II.91.2: “Now among all others, the rational creature is subject to Divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Wherefore it has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end: and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law... It is therefore evident that the natural law is nothing else than the rational creature's participation of the eternal law.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
their perfection is nevertheless of greater worth than those other creatures. Curiously, he begins by first making reference to angels:

> God is in himself perfect in goodness, which is why God needs nothing else to achieve goodness. The higher beings and those nearest to him [i.e., the angels] need only a few things to acquire perfect goodness from him. [However,] human beings, who are further from him, need more to acquire complete goodness, since they are capable of blessedness (beatitudinis).\(^{59}\)

Lower creatures, he goes on to conclude, are not capable of blessedness, and so they do not need as many things for the perfection of their nature. In this sense, as we mentioned before, humans are the only developmentally perfectible creatures capable of “blessedness,” which in this context we may assume means happiness in the thick Aristotelian sense of eudaimonia.\(^{60}\)

In virtue of their intellectual nature, angels bear the divine image (I.93.3) and bear it in an even higher manner than humans since they possess it as a part of an entirely immaterial nature. Yet because human creatures are rational, their nature infuses intelligence into their activity in a way that, in certain respects, gives them a dignity that surpasses even that of which the angels are capable. In particular, Aquinas concedes that the connection of human intellectual nature to material existence allows it to resemble the divine more than the angels in two respects: that it is able to beget other beings of an intellectual nature and that its soul is wholly and entirely extended throughout its body (as God is in regard to the world). Another way of putting the point would be to say that although the angelic intellect is in itself higher because it is unmediated by material

\(^{59}\) Atkins, p48, my emphasis.

\(^{60}\) Throughout this treatise, Aquinas is always careful to point out that the beatitude or perfection to which the theological virtues dispose us is strictly speaking beyond the capacities of our nature. Since in this passage, no such qualification is made, we may assume that Aquinas is speaking of the elevated end-state that the unaided powers of human intelligence make possible.
objects, the human intellect is higher in the form of sovereignty it exerts over its
development and over the development of other things insofar as it is capable of actively
directing both its own perfection as well as the perfection of other creatures. This form
of divine resemblance is possible only to creatures whose nature is both intellectual and
material, who can rationally order things within a realm of being proportionate to such an
ordering. Far from “weighing down” the intellect, bodily existence in Aquinas’ view is
precisely what enables the human agent to image God in its unique and (in some
respects) unsurpassed manner. Aquinas’ comparison of humans and angels thus serves to
illuminate the unique place that the human agent occupies within the hierarchy of being
as a whole: by bringing material natures to completion within itself, the rational animal
impresses upon the material universe the image of the divine intelligence that is its
ultimate origin and end. In the context of our present study, however, the question
immediately arises: how does this integral conception of human perfection reconcile
itself to the abiding condition of our bodily vulnerability, a condition of which we are
almost constantly reminded? What hope do any of us have of realizing the perfection to
which our rational nature directs us in this state? Would not the discovery of the
inextricable link between our ultimate perfection and our bodily integrity necessarily
undermine if not destroy the motivational structure that gives our virtuous actions their
intelligibility?
3.3.3 The Fragility of Human Perfection and the Stoic Alternative

Aquinas’ vision of human flourishing appears at first glance to be much too neat, tidy and removed to have much purchase upon the everyday dealings of human beings. It seems itself to be a product of the sort of detached philosophical speculation that was the mark of the otherworldly virtue of Socrates’ ideal philosopher, an ideal that Aristotle admired but could not entirely embrace. The impression given by such an account is that the ordering of human actions and development can be profoundly consonant with the actual ordering of the world. Not only does it suggest that the world is tailor-made for human activity and growth, but it even goes so far as to imply that the perfection of the world as a whole proceeds alongside that of the human person. Flying in the face of these notions is the near unanimous experience of struggle, dissonance and futility in the concrete reality of human lives. It is far from obvious that identifying the place humans occupy in the order of nature can serve as a viable basis for practical moral reflection and guidance. Most people are satisfied if their lives are relatively free of suffering. Though some may aspire to the noble goal of improving the conditions of other human lives and of the world at large, it is really not very realistic to think that in addition to the everyday demands of bodily and social existence, such speculative ideals about the order of nature should enter into what it means to be a good human being.

In the Platonic dialogues surrounding his death, Socrates does not seem much concerned with what a society would look like or how it would function if the philosophical life became broadly normative. In his Republic, Plato would of course structure the polity of his ideal society around the optimal cultivation of philosophical virtue (though it is highly doubtful whether he envisioned it could ever actually be
implemented). Aristotle, on the other hand, as I have tried to argue above, did struggle with the demands of politics upon philosophical life. He regarded the basic requirements of human life as in some sense impinging upon the demands of intellectual pursuit. Thus he seems to posit two parallel modes of happiness: one that refers to the heights of mankind’s intellectual capacity—a divine-like existence—and one that corresponds to mankind’s sensual and social capacities. The two need not be divorced (one might immediately think of Marcus Aurelius), but in general the higher sort of happiness is just too rare and fragile to be a normative guide for human flourishing broadly conceived. Fortune may have provided some people with the opportunity to “contain the world in themselves” through life-long philosophical speculation (and we would be hard-pressed to find a better example of that than Aristotle himself), but few would dispute that a human life could be happy and even great without such perfection. And even so, fortune does not even guarantee the opportunities for achieving the most modest ideals of happiness; the possibility of tragedy and ultimate calamity lurks in the background of every human act, poised to strike at any moment.

In his own account of the intellectual capacities of the human person, however, Aquinas negotiates his appropriation of Aristotle with what one might call Socratic or Platonic tendencies or sensibilities. Socrates (via Plato) denies the possibility that virtue could fail to accomplish the perfection of one’s nature, inasmuch as any supposed threats to this perfection are to be defined according to criteria that simply do not apply to the true perfection of the human person. For Socrates, virtue perfects the soul in such a way that one enjoys increasing independence from the concerns and demands of bodily, 

---

61 As we will see, some consider the idealist tendencies that set Aquinas off from the realism of Aristotle to be distinctly Stoic in origin.
temporal life. In this way, injury, shame and death are unable to interrupt or foreclose virtue’s proper relation to human perfection. It is upon this foundational claim of virtue’s imperviousness to contingency that the moral edifice of Stoicism would be built, wherein the ends of our bodily and social inclinations would be accorded an independent if not purely indifferent ethical value.

The intellectual legacy of Platonism and the Socratic philosophical ideal is a very complex one, and as such any adequate treatment of it would fall well outside the scope of this particular study. However, we would do well at this point to give a very general sketch of the Stoic alternative to the Aristotelian conception of happiness, as it will prove to be an important reference point for clarifying Aquinas’ own assimilation of Aristotle’s moral psychology.62 As Julia Annas demonstrates in her book *The Morality of Happiness*, Stoic moral theory emerges in the context of debates concerning the relation of virtuous actions to the external objects of value toward which they are directed.63 Virtue seeks the good of reason for its own sake, and yet the practical ends of *human* reason seem to presume the pursuit of subordinate contingent goods such as health, wealth and honor. So what should one’s attitude be toward the bodily and social goods which, in the normal course of human life, constitute the proximate objects of virtuous activity? The question quickly gives way to the question of whether success in attaining

---

62 In the following reflections on Stoicism, I rely primarily upon secondary sources that provide a general overview of the movement as a whole and its significance within the broader spectrum of ancient ethics. These sources include Julia Annas’ *The Morality of Happiness*, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), T.H. Irwin’s “Stoic and Aristotelian conceptions of happiness” in *The Norms of Nature* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986) and Genevieve Lloyd’s recent study *Providence Lost*. I have also benefited from the comparative analysis of Stoicism from a theological angle. James Wetzel details Augustine’s sustained engagement with and debt to Stoic thought in *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), and as we will discuss late, John Bowlin does something similar with regard to Aquinas’ theory of virtue in *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas’s Ethics* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

the ends of one’s actions should be regarded as an essential component to virtuous action. To what extent may we consider an agent virtuous if she fails to attain the ends toward which her actions are directed? If we extend this scenario over the course of a lifetime, to what extent may we consider such an agent happy? Whereas Aristotle argues for the necessity but not the sufficiency of virtue for happiness, the Stoics insist that virtue is sufficient on its own to ensure happiness independently of external determinants. For them, happiness consists in virtue alone.

This view may at first blush appear very similar to the uncompromising attitude of Socrates toward external goods, but in fact the Stoic view differentiates itself from his more radical dualism by allowing for the attribution of relative positive value to external goods. Since these sorts of goods accord with our nature as embodied social beings, they are not in themselves directly opposed to virtue, insofar as our nature serves as the material foundation of virtue. Nonetheless, for the Stoics the exercise of virtue does not depend upon the successful attainment of these natural goods, since that would mean that fortune functions as a determinative variable in the goodness of human action. The Stoic highlights the Aristotelian claim that the virtuous seek the good of virtue for virtue’s own sake and not for any further good, but unlike Aristotle they do not yield any ground in drawing out the implications of this claim for virtue’s relation to happiness. Just as fortune plays no determinative part in the exercise of virtue, neither is it a constitutive component of happiness. External goods such as health, wealth and honor answer to the substratum of our natural capacities, and to that extent they possess positive value for human life, but their goodness is limited to that sphere alone. The Stoics thus attempt to assert a sharp distinction between the absolute goodness of virtue and the relative
goodness of natural or “non-moral” goods. The two may coincide and that is fine—indeed it is desirable—but it is not necessary for human happiness. Happiness is therefore a matter that always and only depends upon the use of one’s cognitive and volitional powers. In this way, the Stoics seek to establish a middle way between the approach of the Cynics—who adopt the more radical Socratic rejection of external goods, and thereby completely deny any correspondence between human virtue and “the characteristic temporal shape of human life”—^64 and the Aristotelian approach, which misconstrues this correspondence as a dependent relation, thereby undermines virtue’s sovereign role in the attainment of happiness.^65

For the Stoics, happiness consists in embracing the place one’s nature and individual existence within the larger order of the universe. This embrace presumes a view of natural necessity as in some sense providential or benign. As A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley put it, for the Stoics “morality belongs first and foremost to the entire cosmic

---

^64 The phrase is Annas’ (*The Morality of Happiness*, p429).

^65 In his article “Stoic and Aristotelian conceptions of happiness,” T.H. Irwin advances the claim that the Stoic approach to happiness does not fundamentally diverge from the Aristotelian account, but merely highlights and advocates for one side of a conceptual tension that Aristotle himself acknowledges. Aristotle himself acknowledges the primacy of virtue for human happiness, but in addition he simply recognizes that the goods of fortune seem to play a part as well. The Stoics challenge this intuitive recognition, which resolves one paradox but creates another: if moral and non moral goods are incommensurable, then why do we in fact value of human goods to the extent that we do? If virtue and its external objectives are axiologically separable, why do they appear so inseparable in actual practice? What would virtue look like without the pursuit of goods that are subject to the tides of fortune? Here is how Irwin puts the matter:

Our conclusion will disappoint us if we expect the Stoics to be radical innovators on these basic questions about ethics. They do not reject the basic structure of ethical argument derived from Plato and Aristotle; and their Stoic paradoxes are in fact less Socratis than the seem. Though the Platonic and Aristotelian questions about happiness become questions about the Total, they do not go away. If we think that the Platonic and Aristotelian project of defending virtue as the dominant component of happiness,, but not the sole component, is a waste of time, we will regret the Stoics’ pursuit of essentially the same project. In that case we will welcome any tendencies that seem to challenge the assumptions of the Platonic and Aristotelian project. When the Stoics deny that the Total has any selective value greater than the value of virtue, we might think they are groping for some conception of the incommensurability of non-moral and moral values; and we might regret that their groping as so little effect on their general theory” (243).
plan. It is from there that it filters down to individual human lives.... Far from conflicting with morality, fate is the moral structure of the universe. Rather than an invitation to despair, the Stoics view fate’s determinative role in human virtue as the condition that preserves the possibility of true happiness. The goal of the Stoic is to “live in agreement” with the universe according to the capacities of our nature. Since we possess a distinctly rational nature, we are able to direct our actions in deliberate concert with the world around us, thus achieving “a good flow of life.” Happiness is nothing else but this stable disposition of tranquility and equipoise with regard to one’s place in the universe.

It is not surprising then that the Stoics are rather wary of the influence of the passions upon the operation of reason. Although many (including Aquinas himself) tend to associate Cicero’s infamous description of the passions as “diseases of the soul” with the Stoic view as a whole, the Stoic view of the passions is much more nuanced than that. Stoics acknowledged the emotions as a part of our nature, and as such they did not seek to repress them altogether. They did, however, seek to discipline and transform them through reason so that they would no longer be merely spontaneous movements of

66 As quoted by Genevieve Lloyd in Providence Lost, p97.

67 See Annas, pp159—179. Her excellent summation of the Stoic view of human moral development is worth including here:

“Human nature for the Stoics in fact involves two stages. At first it is a give that we go for what is natural for us, and avoid the unnatural. That is, it is a constraint on us that we must eat and drink, that we prefer comfort and success to pain and frustration, and so on. In Stoic theory, however, this forms the beginning of a developmental story about human nature which concludes with the claim that the developed life according to nature is once in which the original given impulses are controlled and transformed by an overall rational attitude to them. And, although this development is itself natural, there is a distinction of kind between the natural advantages that we feel attraction to, and virtue, the object of our developed rational attitude. Thus, although there is a single process of development from childhood to full rationality, our natural development requires us to grasp, at the crucial point, a difference in kind between what is natural for us hitherto, the pursuit and selection of the preferred indifferents, and what is natural for us as developed rational beings, namely virtuous activity” (p171).
appetite (*patheiai*) but rather “good feelings” (*eupatheiai*) that would sustain one’s tranquility of soul. As James Wetzel nicely describes, these three “good feelings” help ensure

the stability of an emotional life under rational control, one where right reason has excluded irrational passions and brought about a state of *apatheia*, fixity and tranquility of the mind. In terms of the fundamental forms of will or affection, the Stoics will preserve three in the transformation from error and ignorance to the beatitude of wisdom. *Wisdom turns desire into resolve, delight into well-being, fear into resolve.*

Where this view of the emotion differs from Aristotle, and from Augustine and Aquinas as well, is in its complete rejection of grief or sorrow as a passion is able to be guided by reason and integrated into a “good flow of life.” Sorrow and grief are passions occasioned by the loss of goods, but for the Stoic the loss of things which are able to be taken away by misfortune reveals the illusory goodness of those things. The value of such “goods” is independent from the value of what really constitutes our happiness, and if we only understand that fact then the loss of those goods will not engender grief. As T.H. Irwin puts it, the Stoic sage “values nothing besides his virtue as a good; hence he faces the loss of external advantages without fear; and since he has no fear of losing his virtue, he is entirely free from fear and disturbance. To some Stoics [esp. Cicero and Seneca] this seems to be sufficient for happiness.”

---

68 Wetzel, p102. Wetzel describes Augustine’s appreciation for the Stoics’ complex view of the passions in *City of God XIV*, and as we will see later in our consideration of *ST* III.15.6ad2, Aquinas himself picks up the doctrine of the *eupatheiai* from Augustine’s account. He refers to them instead as “will,” “delight” and “caution”. Though they are rendered differently by different thinkers, the important and common insight is that they denote a transformation in the affections as they come to be fully subordinated to reason. For both figures, the key point of divergence from the Stoic viewpoint is the admission of grief or sorrow into the constellation of rationally-governable passions conducive to our perfection. We will explore the deep theological implications of this divergence in the third part of this dissertation.

Although Aquinas exhibits some Stoic sensibilities,\textsuperscript{70} he for the most part sides with Aristotle in insisting upon an integral conception of human existence, in which so-called “moral and non-moral goods” are conceived in continuity with one another. Aquinas, like Aristotle, assigns the passions their own proper role in the full perfection of the human person.\textsuperscript{71} These passions are subordinated to reason, but they nevertheless emerge from inclinations that are prior to reason and as such direct themselves to goods upon which the operation of reason depends. Hence reason cannot help but come into conflict with these appetites if they fail to attain their objectives at a certain basic level. The sage who is unjustly tortured on the rack may possess all the dispositions he needs to live in agreement with nature, but in his current situation it is simply nonsense to say that his reason is able to maintain such tranquility against the overwhelming onslaught of his most basic passions. Such an approach sounds more intuitive and realistic than the Stoic one, and it does yield a more unified anthropology, but at the same time it also reopens the door to the possibility that simple misfortune could cause real moral tragedy. Unlike the Stoic alternative, Aquinas accepts that the authentic exercise of virtue may in fact fail to make its possessor good and ultimately happy on account of chance factors entirely beyond an agent’s control. If Socrates and the Stoics neutralize the threat of misfortune at the cost of affirm some form of dualism in their conception of the human good, Aristotle and Aquinas affirm the integrity of human nature at the cost of re-admitting misfortune as a real threat to virtue’s intrinsic relation to human well-being. While

\textsuperscript{70} John Bowlin highlights these sensibilities in his \textit{Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas's Ethics} (see especially pp161—177 and 215—221). We will return to his claims in more detail in Chapters Five and Six.

\textsuperscript{71} cf. \textit{ST} I-II.4.5—6.
affirming with Aristotle the proper role of embodiment and sensibility in the perfection of human nature (and recognizing as well the potential threats to these), Aquinas embeds human flourishing within a much more metaphysical—and ultimately theological—context, so as to allow virtue broader application. As I will argue in the next chapter, he even goes so far as to rest his entire theory of virtue upon a theologically-informed anthropology that conceives of the original establishment of rational nature as completely free from the threats of vulnerability and death. Reminiscent of Socrates and the Stoics, then, Aquinas’ virtue theory is able to preserve the prospect of ultimate perfection even in the most catastrophic of circumstances by appealing to the possible re-establishment of an alternative condition of human existence that precludes tragedy. Whether or not he is able to sustain his basic commitment to a unified Aristotelian anthropology in the face of this fundamental supposition is the question that will guide our ensuing analysis.
4.1 The Paradox of Human Mortality

One of the overarching questions of this dissertation is whether and in what sense voluntary acts of ultimate self-sacrifice may be considered virtuous according to an Aristotelian theory of virtue. Since Thomas Aquinas is the first and perhaps the most influential figure to expressly incorporate the act of martyrdom into a predominantly Aristotelian theory of virtue, our study takes his thought as a primary focal point for engaging the tensions and prospects involved with construing faith-inspired self-sacrifice as an act of human flourishing. In the first part of this dissertation I put forth the argument that, at least within the context of Aquinas’ classical forebears, the fact of human mortality and the various existential attitudes toward it exerted a decisive influence upon the moral imagination operative within those heroic, political and philosophical traditions. In all three of these classical paradigms, death acts as both an essential condition and defining moment of the respective models of human excellence which arise from them.

Within the heroic worldview, the inevitability of death was the catalyst for reflection upon what might constitute ends and values worthy of a limited human
existence vulnerable to chance and tragedy. For the Homeric Achilles, the answer was the accomplishment of extraordinary feats of individual human excellence which could win him everlasting renown amongst his peers and in the memories of future generations. According to this paradigm, the brevity and uncertainty of mortal existence inspires the great epic hero’s longing for unending glory, which is won by facing death in battle with exceptional prowess and bravery. For the Platonic Socrates, on the other hand, the answer to the riddle of human mortality is the fulfillment of a transcendentally motivated philosophical mission which progressively sublimates the human soul to a higher, more unified form of existence. According to this philosophical mode of heroism, growth in intellectual virtue progressively reveals the general evanescence of bodily existence, compelling one to detach one’s self from the demands of sense and passion in order to seek what is purely intelligible, a process by which one prepares for the final purification from the body in death. Aristotle, though highly appreciative of the philosophical life in itself, seems to locate humanity’s best hope against death in the establishment and perpetuation of a stable and culturally refined polis to whose perfection the temporally limited perfections of its members are naturally ordered. Although intellectual inquiry is of the highest value according to this model, Aristotle insists that the virtuous person keep sight of the goods which are proper to each and every dimension of the “infrastructure of human life,” the complex collection of those various types of excellence that make the loftiest pursuits possible. Chief among such goods are those that correspond to the political society in which one’s individual virtues may in a sense subsist despite one’s inevitable death. The highest instance of this enduring contribution
to the perfection of the *polis* is the soldier’s confrontation with death on the battlefield in defense of the common good.

In each of these characteristic types of ultimate fulfillment—heroic, philosophical, political—the fact of death plays a determinative role in establishing the parameters of human perfectibility. In the most evident sense, death stands as the ultimate consequence of the limitation of our existence *in time*: each individual “passes through” its lifespan according to a generally discernible pattern of emergent development and entropic decline. In each these renderings, death is also built into the very concept of human excellence as well as into the context in which it develops. Yet the encounter with death is also portrayed in these classical traditions as an event *against which* ideals of excellence most fully manifest themselves. In this way, then, critical reflection on death constitutes a central aspect of moral inquiry. Reflection upon death calls upon and intersects with the consideration of the most fundamental existential questions with which moral philosophy concerns itself: Who are we? What are we for? What sorts of activity promote and constitute our highest perfection(s)? While Thomas Aquinas inherits many of the basic methodological principles of these traditions, especially in their Aristotelian form, he does so only with significantly different and potentially subversive qualifications. All the same, Aquinas stands in accord with these classical moral traditions inasmuch as he formulates ideals of human virtue against the backdrop of what threatens human well-being (death being the limit-concept) and thus proposes acts of virtue which are able to find their fullest exemplification within the imminent context of death.
In light of the general account of Aquinas’ theory of human perfection given in Chapter Three, we now then turn to consider the specific role that human mortality plays in that theory. This chapter aims to show how, although Aquinas begins with many of the same categories and themes employed by the classical philosophical tradition he inherits, his theologically informed anthropological commitments lead him to a radically different view of human mortality and its bearing upon human perfection.

4.1.1 Returning to Aristotle on the Relation of Fortune and Perfection

Both Aristotle and Aquinas posit two distinct grades of human happiness corresponding roughly to the speculative and practical dimensions of human life. They also concur in assigning to the higher grade of happiness the contemplation of God and a certain degree of conformity to the divine. Beyond that, however, their accounts of imperfect and perfect happiness diverge substantially, both in terms of their content and in terms of the means of their attainment. Aristotle locates the division in large part already along lines traced out by Plato’s engagement with the predominant heroic and civic traditions operative within the Hellenic world of his time. According to the Platonic model, one attains the highest form of happiness through the practices and virtues associated with philosophical discourse and intellectual inquiry, the goods of which may also infuse the political realm should society allow philosophers to rule. Aristotle’s notion of happiness deals with this same division, but views speculative and political goods as much more mutually dependent; while contemplation is the highest grade of happiness, a “second-rate” form of happiness may come about through the development and perfection of the knowledge and skill required for political rule. For him, the goods
that attach to these two tracks to human fulfillment are not mutually opposed by
definition, though there is significant tension between them on account of their heavy
dependence upon goods of fortune. Both depend upon goods of fortune to the extent that
they require specific conditions for their cultivation, whether it be simply physical and
mental health, a competent cultural and moral education or a just and stable society.
What is more, the higher the happiness, the more vulnerable it appears to be the winds of
fortune. Bodily goods rely in large measure upon external goods, and intellectual or
spiritual goods rely upon sufficient external and bodily goods. Political good in turn
requires a critical mass of virtuous citizenry, and at least some political well-being is
necessary for the higher pursuit of speculative eudaimonia.

This edifice of human excellence ultimately rests then upon a foundation of
external goods highly subject to fortune. Knock out a brick at the bottom, and you
jeopardize the entire structure; Aristotle never flinches from this conclusion. For him,
both modes of happiness—political and speculative—nevertheless belong in a proper
sense to the capacities of human nature. Fortune is always a factor in human
development, but not one that keeps it from being properly human. On the other hand,
while the exalted happiness of contemplation may make one resemble something of a
higher nature, the material and social dimensions of human life never allow one to
completely detach from the goods corresponding to them. Though there is a distinct note
of lament in Aristotle’s recognition of human nature’s limitations with respect to
contemplation, there is no thought that it might actually be possible somehow to surpass
those limitations.
Aristotle is constantly and soberly aware not only of the way human nature itself establishes the proper boundaries of human excellence, but in addition to these intrinsic limitations, he is all too aware that external misfortune may impose even further limitations on what an individual might achieve. So in terms of the prospects of achieving these forms of happiness, neither of them are in any sense guaranteed even to those who develop the virtues to the greatest possible extent allowed by their particular circumstances. For the happiness associated with the practical and political virtues, good health, good education and a good social environment are necessary. From a purely pedestrian viewpoint, it almost seems as if practical happiness owes as much or even more to these factors as it does to the individual labor and discipline that actually engages the will and sensibilities of the individual moral subject. Aristotle does not appear to be troubled at all by the implication that the prospect of fulfilling even these lower capacities of human nature is in fact relatively slim for most because of the necessary prerequisites, and highly uncertain even for those for whom it conceivably remains within reach.

And for the more complete, contemplative form of happiness, the prospects are even bleaker. Aristotle asserts and Aquinas affirms that the purely philosophical contemplation of God, as first cause or highest intelligible object, is a degree of perfection that is possible only at the end of many years of cultivating both the intellectual and moral virtues.\textsuperscript{1} Although this contemplation (\textit{theoria}) is the highest form of \textit{eudaimonia} for Aristotle, its accomplishment demands that (1) one be given the opportunity to be educated in the moral and intellectual virtues, and (2) one be able sustain the self-sufficiency and leisure that this activity requires over the course of a lifetime in the face of material or political misfortune. A tall order to be sure, so tall in

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{ST} I.1.1.
fact that Aristotle at first shrinks away from it somewhat even as he articulates it: “such a
life will be more than human” he says in EN X.7. Yet it is highly significant that he then
goes on to preemptively deflect the pessimistic conclusion implied by his view:

One should not follow the advice of those who say ‘Human you are, think human
thoughts’, and ‘Mortals you are, think mortal’ ones, but instead, so far as is
possible, assimilate to the immortals and do everything with the aim of living in
accordance with what is highest of the things in us; for even if it is small in bulk,
the degree to which it surpasses everything in power and dignity is far greater."

Aristotle here implies that the awareness of our own humanity, and specifically our
mortality, can pose a threat to the pursuit and practice of theoria. He seems to make the
paradoxical conclusion that ultimate human happiness lies in the attempt to assimilate to
what is beyond human capacity. A life lived in accordance with what is highest in human
nature may yield a life that is divine in comparison with most other lives, but never quite
attains what it strives for. Can such an ideal fully satisfy the description of supreme
human happiness as such?

Unlike Plato’s portrayal of death as the final crystallization of a perfect and
enduring happiness in another realm of existence, Aristotle’s view of death seems to
commit him to the sensible, though somewhat tragic view that perfect human happiness
as a concept is simply a contradiction in terms. For inasmuch as rational human action
includes the awareness of finitude, it also includes as a permanent part of our
consciousness the acknowledgement of an insurmountable natural limitation to our
unlimited desire for perfection in the good. In other words, the knowledge that even the
most fortunate of us cannot escape death implies the certain impossibility of perfect
happiness in an absolute sense, for perfect happiness by definition implies the permanent

---

2 EN X.7, 1177b34—1178a3.
possession of the highest goods of our nature, and no matter how well or how long we manage to attain those goods, death will always take them away in the end.

Though for Aristotle some deaths may clearly be more desirable than others from this perspective, and in that sense more or less “fortunate” from an individual’s viewpoint, it is unclear whether death itself could ever be in its essence a positive natural good alongside other goods that are characteristic of natural human operation and development. Death, after all, is the negation of the good of existence, the endpoint of the degeneration that attends all material progression through time. Although it is a part of our nature that we all pass through a process of growth, development, deterioration and death, such a process does not necessarily enter into the essence of our specific nature except in its spatio-temporal dimension—a dimension that is inextricable from our material capacities, but not the intellectual ones that distinguish us as rational animals. Thus death may be subjectively desirable as a promise that the entropy of our material capacities will not be indefinitely experienced, but all the same it is never desired as an end in itself.

Can one then conclude from the Aristotelian model that death is an intrinsic aspect of natural development, or must one rather admit that, no matter how inevitable or circumstantially desirable, it always represents a misfortune at its core? The materiality of human nature ensures the finitude of human action and perfection as such, which as we said is a prerequisite for ethical reflection. Yet it is an inescapable fact about who we are that whatever form of excellence we achieve in our acts, it will eventually dissolve,

---

3 Although our intellectual capacities of course remain completely dependent upon sensible interaction with the material realm for the acquisition of phantasms, they move beyond the individual material realm through the apprehension of universals. They remain completely dependent upon sensible interaction with the material realm for the acquisition of phantasms, but by no means commits Aristotle and Aquinas to the view that the intellectual capacities themselves are material in nature.
whether gradually or suddenly. Thus the Solonic paradox that we cannot be happy until we are dead does more than simply communicate a message about the unpredictability of human life; it expresses the insurmountable gap between the happiness that humans can know and strive for, that which they can possess. In this sense, Aristotle is merely transposing into a philosophical key the tragic Greek anthropological vision that human life proceeds under the shadow of the certainty that we all will eventually be depossessed of the limited flourishing we are able to attain.

This is not to say that the traditional Greek embrace of finitude is nihilistic or despairing, however. As we touched upon earlier, in the heroic mindset mortality infuses the fleeting moments of human life with the urgency and gravitas that inspires the quest for lasting glory. Death is what distinguishes us from the gods, though the fact that we possess the knowledge that we will die is something that likens us to them. In one sense, then, the awareness of mortality allows us to enjoy the goods we attain within the proper bounds of our nature; and yet in another sense, it enables the desire of goods that are both known to us and known to be beyond our ability to obtain. Death is thus both a part of who we are as finite beings and yet the barrier to the possible perfection we can perceive and desire. Aristotle recognizes the tension that such a view creates, but displays little interest in reconciling it. It is a much more pressing matter for the Stoics, however, who resolve death’s tragic consequences for the pursuit of complete happiness by maintaining that the desire for its material and social constituents is somehow detachable from the essential motivational structure of that pursuit.
Aquinas cannot follow this path, however, not only because of his allegiance to Aristotle but more fundamentally because of his commitment to the essential goodness of the created world.

4.1.2 Aquinas’ Via Negativa toward the Final Object of Human Happiness

In one sense, death appears to play an elemental role in the identification and practice of one virtue in particular, that of courage, since for both Aristotle and Aquinas death enters into its defining characteristic, namely the ability to regulate action in the face of mortal danger in accordance with ends set by reason. Death belongs explicitly to the material object of courage in a way that it does not in the case of temperance, for instance. Death need not bear any explicit relation to the normal movements of sense appetite, which temperance regulates in reference to the proximate goods that correspond to them. In another sense, however, death enters implicitly into the account of any virtue or virtuous act insofar as it fundamentally shapes the existential context in which concrete human actions are perceived, related and evaluated. The finiteness of human life—that it has a real beginning and end—makes it possible to conceive of a relation between the goodness of individual acts and the goodness of an overall life of which those acts form a part. The reflective knowledge that one’s actions are leading to an eventual endpoint allows the human agent to deliberate teleologically, in light of ultimate ends that can characterize a life as a whole as a worthy or beautiful example of human goodness. In this way, then, death provides an ultimate reference point for attempting to relate the different goods that correspond to the particular capacities that virtues perfect, inasmuch as they are seen to be ordered to a more general perfection of the human agent.
as such. Only because lives begin and end is one able to render them as intelligible wholes, and by extended comparison of many lives over time to discern characteristic forms of human goodness and the patterns of action that facilitate their development.

In contrast to prevailing deontological assumptions in the ethics of modernity, many contemporary virtue theorists, Alasdair MacIntyre most notably, have emphasized the narrative form in which human acts are perceived, intended and judged. According to this view, the descriptions of acts find evaluative orientation only as they are placed within a narrative framework that can fully reveal an agent’s intention by appealing to the salient points of her past and anticipated future that bear most directly upon her reasons for choosing a certain course of action. Instead of attempting to directly conform one’s choice to timeless principles discerned by reason alone, proponents of narrative-based ethical models advocate a form of moral evaluation that appeals to a broader narrative context in which the fullness of voluntary intention can come to light.4

In relying upon such narrative structures to describe and evaluate particular acts, however, classical virtue-based theories do not prescind from comparative judgments about the varying individual accounts of what constitutes a happy or successful human life. Rather, ethical appropriations of narrative descriptions appeal to social formations of normative moral standards by pointing out how operative conceptions of the virtues emerge within communal structures of memory, exchange and critical dialogue which

4 Beyond MacIntyre’s seminal analysis in After Virtue, there have been many attempts to make such narrative structures a central component in constructive ethical theories. These have arisen with particular frequency and force in theological ethics, and specifically in connection to the legacy of Aristotelian virtue theory. See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas’ Community of Character (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981), Pamela Hall’s Narrative and the Natural Law: an Interpretation of Thomistic Ethics (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1994), Rufus Black’s Christian Moral Realism: Natural Law, Narrative, Virtue and the Gospel (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), and Craig Boyd’s A Shared Morality: a Narrative Defense of Natural Law Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).
can relate, compare and appraise the many different expressions of human goodness available to them. Within this communal context, the virtues merely denote those patterns of action that are seen to facilitate most typically and reliably the attainment and coordination of goods that mark the narratives of those human lives that are most generally regarded as worthy to be called *eudaimon*: happy or blessed.\(^5\)

\(^5\) I do not mean to suggest by these comments that Aquinas is what one might call “a narrative ethicist.” It would be grossly anachronistic to attribute to Aquinas the particular concerns and argumentative trajectories which are associated with this term in its usage within contemporary philosophical and theological debate. I invoke it only as a useful point of reference from which to reflect back upon an aspect of Aquinas’ thought that has perhaps been underappreciated in modern appropriations of his ethical thought that privilege a “transcendental” or analytical approach.

My point is simply that for Aristotle as well as Aquinas, ethical reflection necessarily involves descriptions of human actions and human lives that are in some way historical: successive through time and located within a particular social and political context. Such descriptions, it is true, do not represent the endpoint of ethical reflection; on the contrary, they are merely the starting point. Nevertheless, the task of formulating general propositional norms and universal categorical relations never divorces itself from the more quotidian task of describing particular acts and particular lives. The abstract conclusions of ethical theory both arise from and are again applied back to the common accounts of particular experiences. General moral truths and narrative descriptions thus mutually depend upon one another in this way.

The importance of descriptions of particular successive events becomes even more pronounced when one considers Aquinas’ debt to theological narrative. The events of sacred scripture, and especially the primordial history of *Genesis*, serve as a fundamental authority for Aquinas’ anthropological theory and hence determine his conception of human perfection in a substantive way. Thomas Hibbs nicely spells out the importance of theological narrative in his *Aquinas, Ethics, and the Philosophy of Religion*:

“Although Aquinas does not write narrative theology, he inscribes all discourse, ethical and metaphysical, within the narrative of redemption, whose history pivots on the Word becoming flesh and embracing the death of an outcast. A careful reading of Aquinas’s texts, especially the *Summa contra Gentiles*, evinces his quiet preoccupation with (a) removing impediments to the concept of creation as having a temporal beginning and end, and (b) turning back objections to the possibility of God’s intervening in time.... In the treatment of creation, Aquinas not only underscores the unilateral dependency of the creation on the Creator,... but also the notion of creation as *narratio*, that is, a ‘setting forth, an exposition, a telling or relating.’ The examination of God as creator introduces a reversal of discourse that marks the transition from philosophical to theological discourse about God. Aquinas puts the contrast this way: whereas the philosopher examines natural things in themselves, the believer studies them as ‘effects and signs of God.’ God himself is the transcendent and exemplary source of all that is. Creation... is not so much a making as it is a ‘transcendental appearing.... If Aquinas insists that the ultimate plan of divine providence is hidden from us, he is nonetheless careful in nearly every major battle in the *Summa contra Gentiles* to repudiate philosophical arguments that would foreclose the possibility of envisioning God, in whom there is no composition of essence with the act of existence, as *active in history*” (pp169—170).

If creation, sin and redemption are to serve as fundamental categories in Aquinas’ moral system, then one must recognize and somehow account for his acknowledgment of the absolute significance he accords to the particular historical events that surround these theological doctrines. I am not at all sure the contemporary appeal to “narrative” properly captures this space, but it nevertheless points us to the temporal and successive dimensions of Aquinas’ moral thought which I wish to emphasize.
In response to this basic reliance upon narrative structures, one might point out that Aquinas in fact makes no appeal in his fundamental ethical theory to narrative as such, but rather depends more directly upon an understanding the rational agent’s inherent orientation toward the good: a built-in habit he calls *synderesis*, which equips the practical intellect with certain first principles of action that are functionally parallel to the first speculative principles of logical inference and non-contradiction. However, as some recent thinkers have argued quite effectively, this innate habit or intuition does not get ethical analysis very far off the ground; it merely enjoins that what is good should be done and what is evil should be avoided. Different accounts of happiness and virtue offer different ways of supplying content to this most general principle of practical reasoning, and such accounts are contestable within the realm of moral debate. According to the Aristotelian model, this question of what constitutes happiness and the good life is the necessary beginning of all ethical analyses, since the virtues themselves derive their intelligibility from the sort of goodness they bestow upon acts, and the goodness of acts in turn derives its intelligibility from the sort of goodness that is taken to characterize human life as a whole. In short, ethics in the virtue model begins with the question of goodness, but cannot proceed until some account has been given as to what this goodness looks like over the entirety of a life. Such an account presupposes the ability to grasp with realistic stability a multitude of discrete, finite instances of human life. In short, death is built into Aristotelian moral deliberation at very deep level inasmuch as acts and the agents become the proper subjects of reflective judgments only when they are at an

---

6 For a nuanced exposition of the claim that Aquinas does not intend the precepts of the natural law to yield uniform moral prescriptions on the level of particular actions, see Jean Porter’s *Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) pp69—99 and John Bowlin’s more recent interpretation of her position alongside others in his *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas’ Ethics* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press) pp93—137.
end. It is to this conceptual dependence upon the finitude of moral objects that Aristotle attests when he invokes Solon’s dictum, “let no man be called eudaimon until he is dead.”

Aquinas argues that inasmuch as an action is rational, it is undertaken in view of a final end; every voluntary action proceeds from a desire for some terminal good desired in itself.⁷ “All desire the fulfillment of their [own] perfection,” he says, “and it is precisely this fulfillment in which the last end consists.” But as to the object in which this aspect is realized, all men are not agreed as to their last end: since some desire riches as their consummate good; some, pleasure; others, something else.⁸ With Aristotle (and Augustine), Aquinas names this object of universal desire happiness. That all rational agents desire happiness simply means that everyone desires their own ultimate good; it says nothing about what that good actually is. To supply sufficient content to this conception of happiness to guide voluntary action, one can no longer appeal to any innate habit or inclination such as synderesis. One has no choice but to appeal in some measure to the collective deliberation and debate of the human community (however extended or attenuated it may be), arising from the recollection, narration and comparative judgment of the exemplary (and deplorable) lives to which it is able to attest. And so in the very next article we find Aquinas—like Aristotle before him—enumerating the various candidates for the ultimate criterion of human happiness that have been perennially nominated by the tradition of collective deliberation and debate in which he finds himself situated.

⁷ ST I-II.1.6.
⁸ ST I-II.1.7.
In all, Aquinas considers eight possible contenders for the supreme good available to human beings, which he classifies into three general categories: external goods, bodily goods and goods of the soul. First of all, happiness cannot consist in external goods such as wealth, honors, glory and power for two reasons. The first is that their possession still allows for what is contrary to goodness, evidenced by the common judgment that many wealthy, famous or powerful people are nevertheless evil and unhappy, and that these people are evil and unhappy not *despite* these assets but *because* of them. The second sort of reason has to do with the impermanence of external goods: they do not by themselves fulfill all the requirements of our nature; nor do they, in bestowing their benefits, fully engage our distinctive capacities for action. Hence Aquinas makes the remark that “the four goods mentioned above [wealth, honors, glory and power] are due rather to external causes, and in most cases to fortune; for which reason they are called goods of fortune.”9 By definition, what comes about through fortune does not come about by means of anything within the possession of the individuals it affects. Thus any goods that accrue to a human agent independently from her exercise of her distinctive rational capacities cannot account for the essence of her happiness qua human agent.

The next supposed supreme good Aquinas considers is bodily health, which differs from the external goods already mentioned in that it *is* a good that proceeds from principles *within* human nature and so relies to a significantly lesser degree upon the whims of fortune. When a person attains bodily health, they attain a good that fully belongs to their nature as a human being and which depends to a great extent upon the courses of action they have chosen to that end. Yet according to Aquinas, bodily health nevertheless shares with purely external goods the attribute of instrumentality: the body is

9 *ST* I-II.2.4.
itself ordered to a further good, the good of the soul. Just as a ship’s captain does not seek to accomplish his mission in order to preserve his ship, but vice versa, so does the human agent seek to preserve her bodily health for higher ends.

However, even the accomplishment of these higher ends—the third sort of supreme good Aquinas takes up—does not properly constitute happiness in itself. Here St. Thomas’ reasoning becomes a bit more complex. There is a sense in which supreme happiness is a good of the soul, inasmuch as the activity of the soul serves as the venue in which we may partake and enjoy that good. “Happiness itself, since it is a perfection of the soul,” he writes, “is an inherent good of the soul; but that which constitutes happiness, viz. which makes man happy, is something outside his soul.”10 External and bodily goods are the cause of delight, but since they correspond to lower spheres of being, they do not make one happy as a human; they bear upon the highest and most proper part of the human person—the soul—only indirectly. At the same time, the soul is not its own source of good and the cause of its own delight. Contrary to what the Stoics claim, it does not possess the capacity to achieve complete self-sufficiency with regard to the possession and preservation of the good. If then the final good of the soul does not come from the powers of the soul itself or from lower goods capable of being received by the soul via the intellect, then the last end of the soul—which is also the last end of the human creature more generally—must consist in something distinct from the soul and yet superior to it in the order of being.

---

10 ST I-II.2.7.
4.1.3 Aquinas on Natural and Supernatural Virtue

Aquinas transposes Aristotle’s two-tiered account of human happiness into a twofold theory of the human good informed by theological premises regarding both the original creation and final destiny of the human person. Although the influence of the doctrines regarding humanity’s revealed supernatural finality seems to be the more salient factor in Aquinas’ organization of the virtues, I eventually hope to show that his doctrinally-informed view of the original condition of human life plays an equally important role in situating the moral virtues within Aquinas’ broader cosmology.

It must be acknowledged from the beginning that the transcendent finality to which Christian eschatology assigns the human person obliges Aquinas to posit an entirely new and distinct category of virtues that are ordered to a form of activity surpassing natural human capacities. There is no question that these supernatural virtues are central to his understanding of death. From the very first article of the very first question of the Summa Theologiae, Aquinas consistently insists that the ultimate end of the human person is eternal union with God in the beatific vision: “man is directed to God as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason….”

To be sure, the natural order and the human creature’s participation in it possess their own proper mode of intelligibility: one whose most accurate and comprehensive articulation Aquinas believed came from Aristotle. All the same, Aquinas never goes so far as to assert that the ends corresponding to this natural intelligibility constitute an alternative last end for humanity in re; his working assumption is always that the actual present order of providence ordains humanity to participate in the divine life by means of a graced exaltation of its

---

11 ST I.1.1.
nature. It is against *this* final perfection of happiness that all other forms of happiness are, for Aquinas, imperfect.\footnote{12}

Not having any immediate access to this supernatural end or to the means by which it is attained, however, Aquinas can only express the development of human participation in it analogically, using the forms of intelligibility that are available to the human intellect. Thus he depicts the dispositions that conform the human soul to God as “theological virtues:” principles, placed in the human person by God, that direct her to a supernatural end, in a way analogous to the way moral virtues direct natural principles toward connatural ends. These virtues cannot be acquired through deliberate action like natural or “moral” virtues because they do not correspond to the active principles of human nature, and thus Aquinas says they are *infused* into the agent by divine grace, configuring the intellect and will to an object that the human intellect is incapable of receiving, and which is thus supplied by the virtues themselves—by faith in the order of

\footnote{12 It is true that Aquinas allows for the actual possibility of “purely natural happiness” in the case of children who died without committing any actual sin (*ST III.68.3* and *De malo* 5.3). Since they did not die in a state of grace, which bestows upon them the merit of eternal life, they do not enjoy the beatific vision upon their death. But neither do they suffer the punishments of the damned in hell. They exercise their nature to its fullest extent of its natural capacity, but no more, since grace has not elevated it. The souls of these children are grieved by the loss of the beatific vision, however, since in their natural state it never occurs to them as a possibility. Here is the summary of Aquinas’ conclusion:

“We say that the souls of children are not without natural knowledge such as is proper to a separated soul according to its nature, but they are without supernatural knowledge, which is here implanted in us by faith, because in this life they neither actually had faith nor received the sacrament of faith. Now it pertains to natural knowledge that the soul knows it was created for happiness and that happiness consists in the attainment of the perfect good. But that that perfect good for which man was made is that glory which the saints possess is beyond natural knowledge.... And therefore the souls of children do not know that they are deprived of such a good, and do not grieve on account of this; but this knowledge which they have by nature, they possess without grief” (*De malo* 5.3).”

Thus considered from the point of view of the children themselves, their “natural happiness” is not imperfect. From the perspective of one who has heard and received the grace of the Gospel, however, attaining merely this sort of natural perfection would be entail the loss of beatitude to which one had been called, and would engender great sorrow as a result. In other words, natural happiness is only imperfect with reference to the beatific vision.
knowing, and by hope and love in the order of willing\textsuperscript{13}. These virtues are extrinsically bestowed in a way that differs even from the manner by which the divine intellect “imprints” inclinations and dispositions upon non-rational natures. Supernatural virtues are never fully assimilated into our nature as such, and therefore they do not in any real sense belong to us as humans; their end and effect is to elevate human nature to an utterly different and higher order of being.\textsuperscript{14} Yet as it is so often remarked, Aquinas maintains that this elevation does not destroy the lower nature in any way, but rather perfects it intact. He thus reconceives Aristotle’s account of the highest human happiness—the contemplation of God—as a prefatory foretaste of a loftier and more perfect end: the direct speculative vision of God himself. Aquinas resolves the apparent Aristotelian dilemma of the instability and ultimate unattainability of perfect happiness by locating its final fulfillment in a supernatural realm that is accessible only through a divinely instituted order of salvation.

He manages to avoid the antagonistic spirit-matter dualism of the Platonic and Stoic models by maintaining the absolute distinction between the natural and supernatural realms. The pivotal question shifts from whether and how reason can preserve the good of virtue from the vicissitudes of entropy and misfortune to whether and how

\textsuperscript{13} This summary is taken from the four articles of \textit{ST} I-II.62 as well as \textit{de Virtutibus in commune} questions 8—10.

\textsuperscript{14} Aquinas’ comment in the corpus of \textit{ST} I-II.54.3 are particularly suggestive:

“Habits are distinguished in relation to nature, from the fact that one habit disposes to an act that is suitable to a lower nature, while another habit disposes to an act befitting a higher nature. And thus human virtue, which disposes to an act befitting human nature, is distinct from godlike or heroic virtue, which disposes to an act befitting some higher nature.”

supernatural principles (such as revelation, grace and providence) can bring us to perfection despite the evils that are bound up with the natural world of time and space.\textsuperscript{15} Aquinas insists that we have no direct knowledge of the positive content of supernatural ends beyond what divine revelation provides, and so as a result we cannot act for a supernatural end according to the principles of action that are proper to us. Does this mean that, prescinding from the actual order of providence, Aquinas admits the possibility of a complete, coherent form of natural happiness within natural parameters? For Aquinas there is a form of happiness that corresponds to the actualization of human capacities within this life, which chiefly consists in the practice of the four traditional cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. These virtues perfect those fundamental powers or functional capacities of the human agent that (1) belong to the structure of successful rational action as such, and (2) that also distinguish the particular concrete exemplifications of action that serve as points of reference for the conventional

\textsuperscript{15} Aquinas is by no means the first Christian thinker to move in this direction. More than any other figure, Augustine paves the way for Aquinas’ implementation of this strategy. In his book \textit{Augustine and the Limits of Virtue}, James Wetzel explores Augustine’s engagement with Stoic thought, which was much more direct than Aquinas’, though in the end Wetzel does not believe that Augustine is able to shed his “Stoic sensibilities” in the ethical realm. “There is a sense, a crucial sense, in which Augustine never gives up Stoic ethical sensibilities,” he writes.

“His evolving reflections on the ties between reason and affection are bund up with his intuition that the blessed life must in some way be expressed in virtue and self-determination. Although he comes to the very unstoic conclusion that virtue and beatitude never coincide in the \textit{saeculum}, he also refuses, in a very Stoic way, to admit that virtue and beatitude could even accidentally coincide. To get virtue and beatitude reunited again, divine agency rather than fortune must on his view serve as the impetus for reunion. He would never want to introduce chance or fortune as having to play a constitutive role in whether we manage to attain some degree of beatitude” (p54—55).

Augustine and Aquinas share a common concern to preserve the indispensability of virtue to happiness, and they both invoke divine agency in order to do that. Wetzel is quite right in his identification of these fundamental similarities. However, I would contend that Augustine’s appeal to the supernatural differentiates him from the Stoics at least as much as his rejection of coincidental happiness unites him to them. What Aquinas adds to Augustine’s account, in my view, is a metaphysical and anthropological framework that explicates the integral relation between the ends of our nature as embodied rational beings and the final perfection to which divine grace leads us. In allowing a circumscribed conceptual space for contingency and chance, this framework overcomes the Stoic objections to Aristotle’s inclusion of natural goods in the notion of happiness, and so makes the case that the appeal to divine agency can offer more than simply a contextual transposition of Stoic sensibilities.
identification and classification of human excellence. Aquinas construes the cardinal
virtues as four formal qualities that attach to every specific instance of a virtuous action:
every such action requires (a) knowledge of its ends and means (prudence), (b)
correctness with regard to its object (justice), (c) resolution and strength for its full
execution (fortitude) and (d) moderation in the application of one’s powers
(temperance).\textsuperscript{16} Every specific description of virtue belongs in some way to these four
genera, who take as material objects (the matter \textit{in qua}) the corresponding powers of the
soul which they perfect: the intellect for prudence, the will for justice, the irascible
appetite for fortitude and the sensible appetite for temperance.

In addition to being formal, general aspects of virtuous action, Aquinas also
differentiates the cardinal virtues according to the specific definable areas of human life
in which they are most fully displayed. Each cardinal virtue is a specific or special moral
virtue (\textit{virtus specialis}) according to the matter \textit{about which} (\textit{circum quam}) it exemplifies
itself most clearly in concrete circumstances.\textsuperscript{17} For instance, the matter-about-which
circumscribing the area of human life in which the virtue of courage most clearly
expresses itself is the circumstantial threat of mortal danger. As we will discover in more
depth in the next chapter, Aquinas construed the possible scope of this specification of
courage much more broadly than did Aristotle: whereas Aristotle delimits the specific
virtue of courage to the sphere of martial combat, Aquinas includes states of affairs that
involve mortal danger arising from efforts to defend justice, care for the sick, or adhere to
one’s faith. Of course acts under the same description may apply to different specific

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{ST} I-II.61.2.

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. \textit{ST} I-II.54.2, as well as R.E. Houser’s meticulous treatment of the differentiation of the
virtue of courage in \textit{The Ethics of Aquinas}. Stephen Pope, ed. (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press,
virtues, but they do so only by referring to different aspects of the same act-description: the specific virtue of justice applies to an act of protesting an unjust law, for instance, insofar as that act seeks to rectify disordered social relations, although courage applies to that act as well insofar as it may involve the threat of becoming a victim oneself. Setting out specific areas of human action in which the expression of one particular virtue is most salient is simply an attempt to identify typical concrete instantiations that clearly display the particular end-correlation informing a specific virtue-concept. These descriptions of specific virtues perform a function somewhat analogous to the grammatical illustration of a word’s usage that dictionaries usually give alongside its abstract definition.

It thus becomes clear when comparing Aristotle and Aquinas’ depictions of the specific virtue of fortitude that the process of specifying the proper embodiment of any virtue must involve the coordination of various pre-speculative factors and assumptions deriving in great measure from the prevailing moral environment of their respective cultures. The pluriform ideals and exemplars of excellence operative within these cultures provide the raw material, the fundamental grammatical standard as it were, for the speculative task of the moral philosopher, whose general aim is to order those assorted archetypes in light of some common objective. This commonality does not necessarily reflect itself in the descriptions of the different exemplifications of specific virtues: the specification of long-suffering and magnificence could hardly be more unrelated on the surface, and yet Aquinas classifies them both under the rubric of potential parts of courage. Aquinas generally provides only enough circumstantial detail in the specification of virtues to give a reliable contextual orientation to their identification and cataloguing. That Aquinas attempts in the Secunda Secundae to
comprehensively enumerate and organize every conceivable virtue and vice does not mean that he is trying to force these different areas of human life into an artificially contrived hierarchy. As many contemporary Thomists advocate, there is plenty of room in Aquinas’ account of the specific virtues for the sort of pluralism of specific natural ends that seems to characterize the broad spectrum of lives we hold up as representative of human virtue.\textsuperscript{18}

An important difference now emerges between Aristotle and Aquinas’ conceptualization of perfect and imperfect happiness. Both thinkers privilege certain orders of virtue: the speculative above the political and the political above the technical. For Aristotle, \textit{this scale alone} tracks the perfection that is possible to human nature. Ultimate human goodness is \textit{natural} goodness for Aristotle, and if he views it as twofold it is because of his hesitance toward the realistic prospect of achieving the contemplative way of life that corresponds with the full flourishing of the speculative virtues. It is an exceptional form of happiness for him; so much so that the perfection of the political virtues may alone be sufficient for the designation of a truly happy (though not the happiest) human life. Aquinas’ designation of the perfect human good, on the other hand, employs a categorically different measure in relation to a categorically different object: while true beatitude grows in concert with the formal structure of the natural virtues, its end and active principle (God) bears no real relation to the natural world at all. Hence for Aquinas, the human good is twofold not according to a relative distinction of degree but according to an absolute categorical distinction between the active principles at work. Thus unlike Aristotle, perfect and imperfect happiness for Aquinas is not a

distinction of states within the natural world: while there may be better or worse actualizations of the higher and lower functional capacities of the human agent, none of these gradations point to perfect happiness in an absolute sense, since truly perfect human happiness for Aquinas must be something more than human. As my foregoing arguments will show, Aquinas does not conceive the human person’s call to this “something more” as entirely unprecedented, inasmuch as prelapsarian humanity possessed a relation to God that surpassed the limitations of human nature alone and preserved the human person in a state of “perfect integrity” free from all harm, corruption and death.

4.1.4 The Roadblock of Death

Thus far I have given attention to Aquinas’ account of human perfection in light of his broader metaphysical and cosmological commitments and how this account contrasts with the same in Aristotle. We must now carefully distinguish between the two distinct senses of “perfection” that have emerged from this discussion: (1) one which refers to the optimal actualization of natural capacities and (2) one which refers to the permanent possession and complete enjoyment of this actualization. In the first sense, it seems reasonable to conclude that both Aquinas and Aristotle’s models accommodate the possibility of human perfection. For Aristotle, the virtues, as directed by reason, perfect the natural capacities of the human person for material and social excellence, and culminate in the speculative contemplation of intelligibility as such (i.e. thought thinking itself). This perfection depends upon many contingent factors that make its attainment rare (a fact we will explore more in the next chapter), but is a conceivable possibility nonetheless. Natural perfection is also a viable concept for Aquinas, inasmuch as he
believes that all creatures act according to principles that tend toward the actualization of the potential capacities that have been bestowed on them by God. The two generally converge in their allowance of natural perfection as a realistic possibility in this first sense.

In the second sense of the term, however, it seems as if neither can allow for the possibility of real human perfection. The problem is that the definition of perfection or blessedness (eudaimonia, beatus) includes the sort of permanent self-sufficient possession of the good that human life’s seemingly inherent vulnerability and finitude preclude. Aristotle explicitly concedes that only the gods are fully capable of this sort of perfection, because only they enjoy immunity from the threats of death and misfortune. Wherever such threats are still present, satisfaction in the possession of the good is necessarily incomplete due to the fear of loss. Likewise, Aquinas explicitly denies that the human agent can attain perfect happiness in this life. “For man naturally desires the good which he has to be abiding,” he writes. But “the goods of the present life pass away; since life itself passes away, which we naturally desire to have, and would wish to hold abidingly, for man naturally shrinks from death. Wherefore it is impossible to have true Happiness in this life.” Aristotle and Aquinas both recognize that the highest perfection attainable to human beings will always be intermixed with the flaws that attend our nature, and in particular the fundamental flaw of mortality, which ultimately undermines any possession of the good we may achieve by ultimately dispossessing us of our very existence, the first condition of any possible degree of happiness.

---

19 EN I.10.

20 ST I-II.5.3.
None perhaps have better articulated this thought than Augustine in Book XIV of *City of God*, a passage oddly resonant with EN I.10, and on that would in any case certainly have been familiar to Aquinas:

No man is happy unless he is righteous. But even the righteous man himself will not live the life he wishes unless he reaches that state where he is wholly exempt from death, deception and distress, and has the assurance that he will forever be exempt. That is what our nature craves, and it will never be fully and finally happy unless it attains what it craves. In our present state, what human being can live the life he wishes, when the actual living is not in his control? He wishes to live; he is compelled to die. In what sense does he live as he wishes when he does not live as long as he wishes?²¹

In this chapter, as in the whole of the *City of God*, Augustine has no qualms about directly attacking the prevailing Stoic view (in this case represented by Terence) that happiness can be effectively protected from such intrusive existential perturbations. To completely anaesthetize these emotions would prove even more violent to our natural operations than the emotions themselves.²² Yet in commenting on this very passage of *The City of God*, Hannah Arendt observes the seemingly incommensurable duality of the human good which emerges with the consciousness of mortality: the good is at once defined by the craving of what is “useful that man can find in the world and hope to obtain” as well as “the fear of death, that is, by life’s fear of its own destruction.  All


²² James Wetzel suggests that Augustine’s critique of the Stoics on this point does not amount to an endorsement of the intrinsic value of the passions as such, as much as it simply rejects a false compartmentalization of the passions from reason. In their many manifestations, the Stoics all seek to cordon reason off from the extrinsic threat of the passions. According to Wetzel’s reading, however, “Augustine suggests... that pagan philosophy’s common hope for the sovereignty of reason over passion rests on its misconception of passion.... Augustine contends that affections must have a ratio of their own; otherwise they would never move us. The basis of pagan moral psychology—that of two wholly distinct sources of motivation, only one of which emerges from reason—is therefore corrupt. Augustine’s reformulation of the nature of affection becomes part of his alternative moral psychology in book XIV of *De civitate Dei*, wherein he links affectivity to quality of willing: ‘It is the quality of human willing that is of interest. For if it is perverse, it will move us to have perverse emotions. But if it is well directed, its emotions will be not only beyond reproach, but worthy of praise. All emotions, certainly, involve the will; in fact they are nothing other than forms of will’” (p101, *De civ. Dei* XIV.6).
other accidents, which man does not have in his hand, are traced back to his lack of
control over life itself.”

For Aristotle and Aquinas as well, our desires are not neutral instruments; they are
a part of our nature and therefore give witness to the natural ends that animate them. And
so death appears as a kind of monkey wrench in the machinery of human desire and
fulfillment, a fundamental roadblock to the end toward which our nature inclines. While
Aristotle can reject the advice to merely “think mortal thoughts,” he cannot seem to
identify any means by which the desire for the complete possession of the perfect good
could be satisfied.

4.2 The Self-Surpassing Teleology of Human Perfection

Another student of Augustine, Blaise Pascal, also took interest in the impact that
our awareness of mortality has upon ethical reflection. In one passage from the Pensees,
Pascal even suggests that our awareness of our own mortality serves as the very source of
ethical reflection, and is thus the distinguishing mark of our nature with respect to the rest
of the created order:

The human person is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a
thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush her. A vapor, a drop
of water suffices to kill her. But, if the universe were to crush her, she would still
be more noble than that which killed her, because she knows that she dies and she
knows the advantage which the universe has over her. But the universe knows
nothing of this. All our dignity then, consists in thought. By it we must elevate
ourselves, and not by space and time which we cannot fill. Let us endeavor then,
to think well; this is the principle of morality.

---

24 Pascal, Pensee 347. I have, of course, changed the gender pronouns of the pronouns in the
original French.
I find it intriguing that Pascal should connect the awareness of mortality so directly with the notions of “nobility” and “dignity,” which of course are fully at home in the classical discourse that was the subject of Part One. The implication is that our superiority to the natural order as such consists in our ability to “stand above it” as it were by means of our capacity to know in a reflective, rational way. Though the object of this knowledge is precisely our common vulnerability to the forces of contingency and entropy that mark every other part of the natural world, the knowledge itself suffices to raise us above that world. In previous sections, we have looked at how this idea bears out in Aquinas’ account of the natural perfection of the universe through human knowledge of it. In the next group of sections, I want to explore the effect that our simultaneous knowledge of our own mortality has upon this account within Aquinas’ larger metaphysical and anthropological vision of human perfection.

4.2.1 Human nature as self-surpassing

As I argued above, Aquinas seems to suggest that the human creature is ordered “beyond itself” in two simultaneous ways: (1) the perfection proper to the human creature, like any other natural thing, integrates itself into the higher-order perfections of the universe of which it constitutes one part, and (2) the perfection of the human creature in a sense “contains” these higher-order perfections inasmuch as it is capable of apprehending and effecting them within its own rational activity. The human being is at once a part of the whole order of creation, and yet capable of grasping and directing that order as a whole. On the one hand, our nature is self-surpassing in the same way every other nature is self-surpassing: its existence presupposes in some small degree facilitates
some order of being greater than itself. On the other hand, in virtue of its intellectual capacities, our nature is self-surpassing in a second, unique way: in desiring the perfection of our nature, we desire not only the perfection of the whole within the confines of our individual contribution to it, but, inasmuch as our intellect finds rest alone in what is universal, it desires the perfection of the whole as it is in itself. In ST I-II.5.1 Aquinas argues that the perfection of which humans are capable is not merely delimited to our own particular potencies, but is coextensive with the perfect and universal good we apprehend intellectually; it is not merely the satisfaction of immediate desires that constitutes fulfillment for the rational creature; it is perfection as such, as a formal object of understanding, that our wills spontaneously and unceasingly long for.

Another line of thought in Aquinas that brings to light this unique twofold way in which human nature “surpasses itself” in its knowledge and desire of the last end is his account of how self-love and the love of God manifest themselves in created natures in general and in human nature in particular. At several points, Aquinas makes the somewhat puzzling claim that all creatures, even irrational and inanimate ones, possess a natural desire or love for God. In the Prima Pars 6.1, he writes that “all things, by desiring their own perfection, desire God Himself, inasmuch as the perfections of all things are so many similitudes of the divine being.” In this most general sense, “love” denotes the general dynamism that all creatures possess toward their own good, which is itself a participation in the being and goodness of God, inasmuch as it is ordered to the perfection of a greater universal whole. Since “it is manifest that the good of the part is

---


26 ST I.6.1.
for the good of the whole,” Aquinas reasons, “everything, by its natural appetite and love, loves its own proper good on account of the common good of the whole universe, which is God.” To love God in this sense is simply to move according to the dynamism of one’s nature, which is an ordered part of the natural world as a whole.

Though it is somewhat of a projection from the start to think of self-love in non-rational creatures, one may nonetheless attribute it to them analogically insofar as every creature inclines toward its own self-preservation. Although it may sound trivial at first to say that non-rational or inanimate creatures love God merely by following the dictates of their nature, Aquinas means to convey little more than the general idea that by inclining towards their own natural ends, creatures participate in a broader natural order of ends that, while coextensive with, are nevertheless conceptually distinct from the ends of their particular species. The final end of this larger order is the good itself, absolutely conceived, which Aquinas takes to God, understood as the intelligible principle of the natural order. Since nothing can be desired apart from the perception of its participation in goodness, and since God is in fact the absolute source of goodness

27 *ST* I-II 109.3.

28 All the same, there are certain instances of natural behavior in non-rational creatures that defy this inclination, for instance when salmon swim upriver to their death in order to spawn. Most would not say that this act does not exhibit “love of self” in any recognizable way, but at the same time neither would most say that it is an act of “self-sacrifice” except in the most equivocal of ways. The spawning of salmon merely exhibits the dynamism toward characteristic ends specified by a being’s particular nature. However, the fact that the nature of a salmon leads it to a contingent death—one that is not the result of purely external agents or the normal vicissitudes of time—only validates the notion that a creature may “love” or possess an inclination dynamism towards ends that are not necessarily coextensive with their own individual flourishing. There are also countless other examples of social cooperation among creatures in the natural world in which individuals either within a species or across species benefit symbiotically way from one another’s particular pursuit of characteristic inclinations.

29 As Jean Porter has pointed out to me, these nonrational creatures also “love” God by “loving” their own specific perfections, which are reflections of divine wisdom and goodness. Since their own perfections are themselves Ideas in the divine intellect, their love for them finds its terminus in God himself.
from which all things receive their goodness, when a creature “loves” or desires, it actually desires God in a more primary and essential way than it desires the proximate object that mediates goodness to its particular nature. As Aquinas puts it, “All things, by desiring their own perfection, desire God Himself, inasmuch as the perfections of all things are so many similitudes of the divine being.”

As one might readily suspect, this claim applies to humans in a unique way. As rational creatures, humans love God more than self by first of all desiring, like all other creatures, a particular participation in the good that corresponds to their place within the natural order, and also by desiring this participation reflectively in a way that corresponds to an intellectual desire for the good in a universal sense. Aquinas remarks in ST I.6.1.1 that it is characteristic of sensible beings in general to “love God” in this way through the medium of created things, but that it belongs only to intellectual creatures to love God as he is in himself, since they alone are capable of loving things under the aspect of their intelligible essence. However, a process of abstraction, human knowledge remains fundamentally embedded in the world of individuated singulars. Our apprehension of universals thus remains dependent at all times upon the empirical reception of particular individuated objects. Even the knowledge of God that Aquinas believes is accessible to natural human reason—that he exists, that he is the first cause of all things, and that he exceeds all things in perfection—is always based upon the apprehension of created existents and their perfections. For this reason, only a precious few can ever reach such speculative heights and even then only after very many years and most likely with a significant admixture of error. Even the wisest of such sages can only

---

30 ST I 6.1.
infer such conclusions from God’s sensible effects, never actually locating God as a distinct object of knowledge from which a distinct essence might be abstracted.

Though human mind does not naturally have a thematic, positive desire for God as a known object, our intellectual nature nevertheless does desire a final end that surpasses the conditions of our nature. Aquinas goes so far as to argue that “there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void.”

31 In receiving, uniting and ordering the various essences in the created world, the dynamism of our intellectual nature moves first toward the apprehension of the existence of a first cause, and then toward the extrapolation of its necessary attributes. Even though we know that we cannot fully comprehend this first cause to the full extent of its intelligibility, we nevertheless desire to know it as far as possible. Even without the propositions of revelation, it becomes readily apparent that there is no logical, natural point of completion to this ascent, as the very history of scientific and philosophical inquiry can testify. The discovery of order within the natural world—the crowning mark of created intelligence—is an activity that cumulatively traces empirical causation through progressively higher levels of intelligibility. Yet with respect to the absolute first cause, this movement will always be asymptotic. 32 though the universal last end of all intellectual nature is an inexhaustibly intelligible object, it remains categorically

31 ST I.12.1.

incomprehensible to us. In this sense, then, the perfection of human nature consists in an exercise of finite intellection within an infinite horizon of intelligibility.

Aquinas here provides merely a more technical philosophical articulation of the perennial paradoxical conjunction of two essential features of our existence: (1) our ability to reflectively understand the world and our place in it as the centerpiece of our nature, and (2) our inability to know all that is capable of being known, all that is worth knowing and even all that we desire to know about ourselves and the world. The asking and answering of questions is something that fundamentally defines who we are; it is the mark of rationality even in the smallest child. And yet once it begins, it never stops: the cessation of questioning signals the loss of an elemental dimension of our nature. Those who no longer have questions are either pre-rational or suffering from a permanent or temporary loss of reason. We never come to the end of our questioning, and the answers we do find usually give birth to more questions than they put to rest. Hence the most advanced travelers on the path of speculative perfection seem to be the ones with the most questions, with the most potentiality in search of fulfillment. For this reason, death can never be a welcome part of the process of human perfection; it will always be an interruption. It may be a fitting part of our participation in the temporal-material order, but as apprehended by intellect, it can only be the greatest of evils and a puzzling tragedy.

4.2.2 Acting for Ends beyond Our Nature

The main point of focus in this last section will be the set of claims by which Aquinas frames the self-surpassing and open-ended dynamic of human perfection within claims drawn from his theological anthropology. I argue that these claims (1)
successfully resolve the paradox of humanity’s natural desire for what it cannot fully obtain and (2) conceptually accommodate, without thematic specification, the role of the theological virtues in the complete perfection of the human person within the order of salvation. Let us first briefly elaborate on the problem that death, and finitude in general, poses for Aquinas’ conception of the full perfection of the intellectual capacities of the human person. Aquinas himself addresses it clearly in his treatise on the soul, especially in his consideration of whether and in what sense the human soul is naturally corruptible. The first objection contends that since the human soul traces its origin to material generation like any other animal, it is naturally corruptible like them as well. Aquinas retorts that the human soul does not originate from material powers, but from God himself. Theological claims become decisive at this point: the human bears not merely the likeness of God, but his very image.33 “It is written as to other animals: ‘Let the earth bring forth the living soul’ (Gen 1:24): while of man it is written (Gen 2:7) that ‘He breathed into his face the breath of life.’”34 While death may come naturally to the human body, it is not natural to the human soul, since it bears the image of God. Although the operation of the human intellect depends upon bodily perception, its intentionality extends beyond the immediacy of sense knowledge to apprehend objects under their formal dimensions of essence and existence.

Such knowledge gives rise to the correlative desire for things as they are known under these formal modes. Hence intellectual self-reflection upon one’s natural inclinations to self-preservation and knowledge, once understood under their formal dimensions of existence and truth, leads to an unrestricted desire for existence and truth

---

33 ST I.93.6.9.

34 ST I.75.6 ad1.
as such. We are able to grasp the essences of what we desire, and to desire those essences absolutely. Aquinas writes,

> The senses indeed do not know existence, except under the conditions of ‘here’ and ‘now,’ whereas the intellect apprehends existence absolutely, and for all time; so that *everything that has an intellect naturally desires always to exist*. But a natural desire cannot be in vain. Therefore every intellectual substance is incorruptible.  

The theological claim that God *creates* the intellectual soul supports the contention that the intellect desires absolute existence. It establishes a relation between the principle of the soul’s existence and the uncreated realm, such that, in loving its own existence, the human soul loves itself as an image of an uncreated cause. Moreover, because its operations image this uncreated cause in its ability to receive and understand the created order, its final happiness consists in the apprehension of an object *beyond* this order. Yet the possibility of such a distinction between things created and uncreated is clearly a theological presupposition.

Hence creation is categorically different from causation in that it need not be the term of any traceable reduction of natural causes. What is uncreated is absolutely distinct from the entire realm of being to which our intellects have access, meaning that while the act of God creating is construed as the *cause* of being, the attribution of causality is thoroughly analogical, since creation precedes the forms of causality (efficient, formal, final, material) that are apparent to our manner of knowing. In this way, creation holds the status of an irreducible metaphysical principle for Aquinas: the infinite source of all that is universally true and good is absolutely distinct from the order of individuated being, which is able to participate in divine perfections only diversely and partially.

---

35 *ST* I.75.6, my emphasis.
Hence the object that fully answers to the rational agent’s desire for the universal good is not really an object at all, at least not in the way in which any other object is apprehended. When Aquinas says that the human agent’s last end “is not to be found in any creature, but in God alone [since] every creature has goodness by participation,” he locates the final reference point for human happiness and the order of the virtues in something that transcends the natural order of perfections, along with the human mode of intelligibility that brings those perfections to completion.

Aquinas’ consideration of whether and in what way human happiness consists in an uncreated object in ST I-II.2.8 helps further elucidate the precise thrust of this point. In the first objection to the proposition, “whether any created good constitutes man’s happiness,” Aquinas invokes Pseudo-Dionysius’ metaphysical notion of a continuous, progressive hierarchical order in creation: “Divine wisdom unites the ends of first things to the beginnings of second things, from which we may gather that the summit of a lower nature touches the base of the higher nature.” This objection assumes the natural order to be one contiguous chain of different levels of being, and so implies that within this order, the last end of humanity should touch upon the lowest part of the nature that exceeds it, namely angelic nature: the angels “take up where we leave off” in the hierarchical progression of being. This solution is flawed on two accounts for Aquinas: either the identification of the angelic nature with universal good blurs the distinction between angels (who are creatures by definition) and God, or else human nature’s ordination to angelic nature falls short of the universal good that is the proper object of human will, since angels have particular natures. Since angelic natures do not exhaust goodness absolutely conceived, they do not constitute the ultimate object of human happiness.
In light of Aquinas’ position on human understanding and the perfection of the world, the next objection of ST I-II.2.8 poses in my view the more serious challenge to the idea that supreme human happiness could rest in something uncreated. This objection contends that the last end of the human agent—that unique being poised between the universal and individuated spheres of being—is itself the common good of the universe as a whole. This view fully coheres with the notion that the human person brings the universe to completion by perfecting its own intellectual nature, by “uniting the world” in itself through an ordered knowledge of its various intelligible natures and their corresponding perfections. Just as a microcosm finds its perfection in the macrocosm it images, the argument runs, so the human mind (which Aristotle calls a “microcosm” in Physics 8.2) finds its perfection in the actual ordering of the universe, which the human being is able to image via the intellect. In his reply to this objection, Aquinas appeals above all to the absolute and irreducible distinction he posits between God and creation:

If a whole be not the last end, but ordained to a further end, then the last end of a part thereof is not the whole itself, but something else. Now the universe of creatures, to which man is compared as part to whole, is not the last end, but is ordained to God, as to its last end. Therefore the last end of man is not the good of the universe, but God himself.36

The human intellectual soul plays a pivotal role in the good of the universe as a whole, but this higher good is nevertheless ordered to something beyond itself, namely God the creator. Of course, the grounds for this claim are necessarily theological, for it is unclear on what other grounds one could fathom the idea that in addition to the totality of the cosmos, there could something else, something entirely other, which brought the world into being from nothing and yet ordained it according to its own order to return to that other. In any case, on his rendering of ultimate human perfection Aquinas goes well

36 ST I-II.2.8.ad2.
beyond the Aristotelian notion of intellectually assimilating the world to one’s self and thereby attaining a likeness to a higher nature. For Aquinas, our last end lies unequivocally and categorically beyond the capacities of our nature, or any created nature. Human perfection consists in assimilating to itself the ordered perfections of the material natures inferior to it. However, this activity orients it to pursue the first cause, which necessarily remains out of its reach: the actual apprehension of the first cause, in which final human happiness consists, infinitely surpasses the capacity of any created intellect. And so even with the theological premise that God has created the human soul in his image, there remains an irreconcilable disproportion between the natural human desire for final perfection and the infinite uncreated object in which that perfection consists.

Before we go on to discuss how Aquinas’ theory of infused virtue bridges this gap, there is an oft-neglected point about the desire for happiness that bears brief elaboration here. Although we cannot have any proper knowledge of the objective essence of the first cause that is the term of our speculative powers, there is a sense in which our desire for the pursuit of this form of knowledge brings the human person into a certain quasi-intentional relation with the first cause. I say “quasi-intentional” because the human intellect cannot bear any direct intention to the first cause as a distinct categorical object, though it can bear intention toward the dynamic of speculative contemplation that ultimately terminates in the first cause. Hence while the human person cannot love God as it loves other objects that that are subject to its appetitive powers, it can love God as the source of its existence and the final end of its unconditional desire to know what is ultimately beyond its capability to know. To be
sure, such a desire for the unreachable first cause does not give any more grounds for speculative progress toward it, nor does it provide practical reason with any starting point for discerning the means to attain it. All the same, given the premise that the human intellectual soul was created by God and for God, a lack of positive knowledge regarding this first cause does not prevent the establishment of a relation of desire with it as a last end.

Such a relation is possible only because, according to Aquinas, the relation between the will and its object is fundamentally different than the intellect’s relation to its object. To bring out this difference, let us recall the distinction Aquinas makes between the two ways in which an object can be present to a subject: (1) as it is known in the intellect by its likeness, and (2) as it stands in a “real conjunction” with us, either potentially or actually. The presence resulting from a real conjunction between subject and object is greater than the presence resulting from only a notional conjunction between the two. Hence Aquinas concludes in this same article that the pleasure arising from the immediacy of sensation is greater than that arising from the notional deliverances of memory.\(^\text{37}\) Appetitive powers establish a real conjunction between subject and object because they are drawn toward those objects as they are in themselves, whether potentially or actually.\(^\text{38}\) One can therefore achieve a deeper union with something from loving it than from knowing it, since the object of love is in this way more present to the lover than the object of knowledge is to the knower. As a

\(^{37}\) *ST* I-II.32.3.

\(^{38}\) See also *ST* I-II.22.2: “Now the soul is drawn to a thing by the appetitive power rather than by the apprehensive power: because the soul has, through its appetitive power, an order to things as they are in themselves: hence the Philosopher says (in *Metaphysics* 6.4) that ‘good and evil,’ i.e. the objects of the appetitive power, ‘are in things themselves.’ On the other hand the apprehensive power is not drawn to a thing, as it is in itself; but knows it by reason of an ‘intention’ of the thing, which ‘intention’ it has in itself, or receives in its own way.”
consequence, it is not necessary for the lover to *comprehend* its object intellectually in order for it to unite itself through love to that object *as it is in itself.* And so Aquinas makes the claim that “something is required for the perfection of knowledge that is not required for the perfection of love.” For knowledge always tends to any object *as the product of its relations to other objects:* even in the imagination, the likeness of an object always relates itself to that which it represents, and in the intellect itself the essence of any object emerges only out of a process of composition and division by which the mind identifies the differentiating relations between the many singulars it perceives via sense perception. Love as an appetitive power, on the other hand, dispenses with these mediations; its desires its object in all its exteriority, immediately, as it is in itself.

“Hence it is, therefore, that a thing is loved more than it is known; since it can be loved perfectly even without being perfectly known.”

4.2.3 Supernatural Virtue

Does this principle apply to the natural human desire to know the first cause of things in this life? It is this intriguing question that brings us finally to Aquinas’ resolution of the paradox of infinite desire within a finite nature. Although the first cause cannot be perfectly known, it nevertheless operates as a last end moving the appetitive dimension of human speculation toward itself. The first cause cannot be perfectly loved,
however, since the human creature lacks the natural capacity to behold it as it is in itself. All the same, the human person’s appetitive faculties possess the ability to unite themselves to things in a deeper and more direct way than the person’s intellectual faculties. However, according to the Aristotelian metaphysic employed by Aquinas, the possession of natural things via knowledge serves the perfection of the human person better than the possession of them via desire because the existence of the thing itself as a composite of form and matter is actually a less noble form of existence than that thing’s immaterial existence within an intellect. Furthermore, an object of desire acts as an agent of change in the soul, which submits itself to its influence, whereas the intellect, by knowing things, makes other things like itself. If therefore the human intellect is truly at the summit of all natural things then all things should be assimilated to it through knowledge. On the other hand, however, if there are things that are higher than the human intellect in the order of being, then the appetite’s heightened capacity to unite the person to these higher things might in fact facilitate a higher form of perfection by enabling a kind of ecstatic union with objects that the intellect is simply unable to receive into itself.

It is this possibility to which Aquinas’ account of the theological virtues gives expression. Aquinas posits the theological virtues as the dispositions that introduce within the soul the presence of a supernatural object capable of being fully loved without being fully known. The theological virtues introduce a medium of relating to a transcendent end in which the union accomplished by desire is superior to the union accomplished through knowledge alone. Aquinas nicely summarizes these foregoing points in his treatise on charity:
When things are below the one who understands them the intellect is higher than the will, because the things exist in a higher manner in the intellect than in themselves, since everything which is in another is in it according to the manner of that in which it is. But when things are above the one who understands, then the will rises higher than the intellect is able to attain. Thus it is in moral matters, which concern the things below the human person, the cognitive virtue informs the appetitive virtues, just as prudence informs the other moral virtues. But in the theological virtues which concern God, the virtue of the will, viz., charity, informs the virtue of the intellect, viz., faith.42

While recognizing the distinctive and exalted quality of intellect in relation to “natural things,” Aquinas indicates the point at which the intellect must recognize its own limited existence in relation to what is higher than it, and yield in such cases to the operation of the will, which submits the soul to the influence of that which surpasses its nature. These supernatural virtues transform the human soul so as to enable it to attain its final and lasting end in a way that it could not by means of its own natural powers alone. Just as prudence directs the coordination of the natural virtues according to the intellect’s own speculative grasp of the natural good, charity coordinates the infused virtues so as to direct the soul to union with God as a lover to its beloved, equipping the soul to see God speculatively in the beatific vision. This conception of supernatural elevation dissolves the paradox that natural human perfectibility terminates in the understanding of a first cause it cannot naturally apprehend. Because contingent fortune and sensible appetite place limitations upon the intellectual capacity and development of the human soul, it cannot attain to the perfectly intelligible object it desires. But can God really infuse us with dispositions whose active principle transcends these limitations, enabling the human agent to attain the sort of complete perfection that warrants the title of true happiness?

42 De caritate 177.
4.3 Aquinas' Theological Reformulation of Death’s Relation to Human Perfection

For a purewater Aristotelian, however, this solution does not offer any real resolution to the tragic existence of rational beings within the material realm, and this for two reasons. The first reason is that it does not take the role of positive human action seriously enough. According to Aristotelian model, we are, by our nature, both drawn to the highest heights of contemplation and yet precluded from attaining them because of our immersion in material potentiality and our ultimate susceptibility to death; those are simply the conditions of our natural existence and we thrive or deteriorate as beings circumscribed by them. So if the virtues that are natural to us—the virtues whose active principles we ourselves possess within the characteristic conditions of our existence—are too fragile to realize the absolute perfection to which intellectual nature inclines us, then any prospective virtue extrinsically superimposed upon us could only be an even more unreliable vehicle for that task. The agent has even less control over grace than she did over fortune. Unlike the natural objects of our knowledge, to which we can at least choose to expose ourselves in the hope of acquiring understanding and right desire, God remains entirely beyond our ken, and only equips us with the capability of receiving him as he sees fit. We are entirely helpless to initiate the process. The bestowal of the supernatural virtues, which proportion the soul to God as a final end, depends solely upon God’s free gracious action. From an Aristotelian vantage point informed by heroic Greek ideals of self-sufficiency, would not this cure be worse than the sickness? Does it not produce an ever more radical dependence upon chance, since the one countervailing force to chance, free rational action, is rendered entirely inefficacious by the complete dependence of supernatural virtue upon the reception of divinely-bestowed principles?

43 Cf. ST I-II.63.3—4.
The second problem an Aristotelian might have with Aquinas’ theological solution is that it does not take the identifying features of human nature seriously enough and that as a result, it locates the completion of human nature in an activity that is not distinctively human. Since supernatural virtues perfect capacities that are themselves extrinsically bestowed upon the human agent, the happiness that results from this perfection must also be something distinct from the perfection of human nature as such.  

These infused virtues thus circumvent the paradox of humanity’s tragic desire for universal understanding by simply positing the alteration of the conditions that create it. Is not this strategy just a variation of the one taken by the Platonic Socrates when confronting the limits that human finitude places upon the realization of the philosophical ideal? Do we not see here a retreat from Aristotelian naturalism to what can only be thought of from a philosophical perspective as a kind of theological recapitulation of the Stoic appeal to a parallel mode of interior virtue, which is able to achieve a transcendental form of fulfillment that remains impossible for the virtues belonging to space and time?  

After all, Aquinas maintains that final human happiness is not

---

44 Again, see Angela McKay’s dissertation, *Infused and Acquired Virtues in Aquinas’ Moral Philosophy* (University of Notre Dame, 2004) especially Chapter 3: “The Gap between Infused and Acquired Virtue,” pp58—86. It should be acknowledged that we have not dealt sufficiently here with the infused moral virtues that Aquinas posits, which while distinct from acquired moral virtue with regard to their last end, nevertheless share a common “matter” with regard to the functional capacities they perfect. However, the distinction itself lends credibility to the claim that the infusion of supernatural virtues initiate a process of perfection that is not contiguous with the natural perfection of the human person as such. Though human nature is capable of being proportioned to this elevated final end without violence—and this is the thrust behind the claim that the theological virtues are connatural to us—nature as a philosophical category no longer serves the same conceptual purpose as it does in Aristotle’s cosmology and virtue theory. To that extent, the introduction of the supernatural virtues does indeed subvert the Aristotelian foundation upon which Aquinas’ moral thought is built. Cf. Jean Porter’s “The Subversion of Virtue: Acquired and Infused Virtues in the *Summa Theologiae*.” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 12 (2001) pp19—41.

45 Cf. John Bowlin’s argument that Aquinas’ appeal to the theological virtues betrays a Stoic strategy of avoidance in the face of the de-stabilizing effects of contingency and fortune with respect to human virtue and happiness. *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas’ Ethics* (New York: Cambridge Univ.
attainable in this life, but only in some other, higher realm of existence that demands the
death of the body as a precondition for full entrance. What is more, even to the extent
that this supernatural existence takes root within the context of natural life, it does so
primarily in the will. The human agent infused with charity develops and exhibits
virtuous action within the natural realm in the same way as it did before; it just happens
that the will of this person is drawn to a new, higher final end beyond its comprehension,
an end that now serves as the basis for the hope of final fulfillment.46 Is it not the case
then that, like Plato and the Stoics, Aquinas’ attempt to resolve the disparity between our
desire for final happiness and our capacity to achieve it bifurcates human nature itself
into a volatile composite of material and immaterial elements, and that, as a result,
Aquinas, like Socrates, conceives death as a redemptive purification from the confines of
material vulnerability?

Press) pp161—165, 215—221. This passage from the epilogue sums up this view, as well as the general
gambit of the book as a whole:

Aquinas [finds himself] awkwardly in between confidence that the virtues can succeed
against fortune on the one hand, and discontent, perhaps even despair, over their fragility, on the
other. He cannot revise his treatment of the virtues in the manner the Stoics suggest, effectively
eliminating their exposure to luck, for this would not only ignore his confidence in
unreconstructed Aristotelian virtue, it would also deny the reality and consequence of our fall from
grace—that virtue and happiness are in fact exposed to misfortune in ways that can undo each.
Nor can he simply rest content in his Aristotelian commitments and maintain that the virtues do
well enough against fortune’s challenges, for this would ignore the obvious—that virtue in Eden
does far better. And of course it is this fact that gives him grounds to find fault with what he has,
to yearn for something more, and to tempt Stoic revisions of his largely Aristotelian treatment of
the moral virtues. His actual response, if we can call it that, resides between these two
alternatives, and since hope is the mean between confidence and despair we should not be
surprised to find Aquinas’ reply in his treatment of the theological virtues” (215—216).

46 Or so claim those who would oppose the claim that Christian morality is substantively
distinctive from morality considered from a natural or universal viewpoint. According to the leading
expositor of this view, Josef Fuchs, SJ, Christians possess a distinctive “intentionality” in their moral
actions in virtue of their religious commitment to supernatural ends, but this intentionality in no way alters
the actual shape of their actions as seen from an external perspective. For a good collection of pivotal
essays in this debate, including Fuchs’ seminal essay “Is There a Specifically Christian Morality?”, see
Readings in Moral Theology No.2: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics, Charles E. Curran and Richard
4.3.1 Prelapsarian Virtue and Human Perfection

In response, there is a second set of theological premises surrounding his understanding of human finitude that might enable Aquinas to fend off these two Aristotelian objections to supernatural virtue. They involve the speculative conclusions he draws from the primordial anthropology found in the book of *Genesis*, where God creates the first human being and establishes the order whereby he might attain the perfection of his nature through by means of his own activity with the continual aid of supernatural guidance. From an ethical standpoint, the pivotal moment of this pre-history is of course, the sin of Eden and the consequent introduction of death, futility and tragedy into the world. The anthropological and cosmological conclusions Aquinas draws from this narrative represent a necessary naturalistic supplement to his supernaturalist eschatology; these fundamental claims constitute the often-neglected anterior half of Aquinas’ account of the providential economy within which the supernatural virtues play their salvific role. Aquinas appeals to *Genesis* as a way of both establishing the definitive parameters of human nature in its original perfected form and accounting for the disorders and limitations that plague human nature in its fallen form. As we will see, both “bookend moments” of Aquinas’ theological anthropology—his account of the supernatural vision of beatitude *and* humanity’s original prelapsarian state—directly shape his understanding of the precise role that virtue plays in the perfection of human capacities. Aquinas’ prelapsarian anthropology bears particularly upon his approach to the virtue of courage and its paradigmatic exemplification in martyrdom, most obviously because the distinctive matter *circa quam* belonging to courage (the threat of death)
simply does not apply to humanity’s original state in Eden.\textsuperscript{47} Hence this chapter will culminate with Aquinas’ bold assertions regarding exemption of prelapsarian nature from the fundamental conditions for the possibility of courage, with a view toward the following chapter’s attempt to lay out its implications for his understanding of the possibility of virtuous action in the face of death.

Many studies of Aquinas’ theory of virtue fail to sufficiently appreciate the formative influence of his conception of prelapsarian human nature. Aquinas devotes no less than eight articles of the \textit{Prima Pars} to the speculative reconstruction of the first man’s intellectual, material and moral qualities. Two principal reasons for this neglect come to mind: (1) it is too radically at odds with the Aristotelian anthropology he broadly and consistently applies throughout his work to be incorporated as a serious element of his general moral theory, and (2) it is merely the primordial correlate to the supernatural perfection of humanity in the beatific vision, locating at the creation of humanity the condition that the infused virtues restore eschatologically. My own developmental interpretation of Aquinas departs from both of these misconceptions. First, I contend against the latter claim that Aquinas’ vision of the perfection of prelapsarian human nature is indeed clearly distinct from his vision of the perfection resulting from the infusion of supernatural virtue. And against the former claim, I argue that the distinction between these two accounts of human perfection actually helps reconcile Aquinas’ soteriology with his Aristotelian commitments regarding the unity and autonomy of embodied human nature considered in itself.

\textsuperscript{47} This is also the case with regard to temperance, since in Eden there is no disordered concupiscence to be moderated. Aquinas does still insist that courage and temperance are present in prelapsarian Adam, inasmuch as they reinforce the spontaneous movements of the sensible and irascible appetite by responding to them with joy and hope (\textit{ST} I.95.2—3).
Since the first of these contentions is the more straightforward and less controversial, we will start with it. That Aquinas distinguishes between the happiness of Eden and the happiness of heaven is clearly evident in his treatise on the first man:

Man was happy in paradise, but not with that perfect happiness to which he was destined, which consists in the vision of the Divine Essence. He was, however, endowed with ‘a life of happiness in a certain measure,’ as Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. xi, 18), so far as he was gifted with natural integrity and perfection.  

Adam was enabled to achieve a form of happiness that, while not as lofty as the happiness of seeing God’s essence, is perfect in proportion to his nature in its original integrity. By “natural integrity,” Aquinas refers to the way the powers of the human agent in this state are perfectly ordered to one another, and are therefore capable of their full actualization within the larger created order. Hence prelapsarian intellect possessed full knowledge of the natures of created things in the world, uniting them within itself through its apprehension of their ordered intelligibility. In this intelligibility, Adam possessed the knowledge of God as its cause to the fullest possible extent of his intellectual capacity.

How is this natural integrity by sin? Although Adam was originally ordained to happiness through the exercise of his natural capacities, the order by which this perfection was to come about nevertheless depended upon God’s gracious assistance. In the treatise on the first man, Aquinas returns four different times to Ecclesiastes 7:30, which states that “God made man right” (Deus facit hominem rectum). This term refers both to the proper symbiosis of human powers and to Adam’s proper moral standing with
God, insofar as for Aquinas the former relation depends directly upon the latter. We see here a conspicuous lack of any paradigmatic distinction between the “moral order” and the “natural order:” the concept of original justice encompasses for him both the will’s proper adherence to God and the bodily and emotional faculties’ proper adherence to reason. Hence the “integrity” of human nature in its original form did not exclude the direct assistance of God, but rather was from the start in a “state of grace.” “The very rectitude of the primitive state,” he writes “seems to require that, as others say, he was created in grace… For this rectitude consisted in his reason being subject to God, the lower powers to reason, and the body to the soul: and the first subjection was the cause of both the second and the third.”\(^{52}\) If the correct ordering of the human composite were not dependent in this way upon a correct ordering to God, he goes on to reason, then it would have remained after the fall. Fallen men and demons who lack grace still retain the full ability to act according to the proper principles of their nature, though they do not retain the ability to perfect their nature fully, since even for the first man, a direct relation to God was necessary for the attainment of complete happiness.

According to Aquinas’ reading of Genesis, this relation was freely provided for humanity from the very beginning, such that the human soul possessed all the virtues it was capable of receiving, including the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, which were directed toward the state of grace that ensured the full actualization of his natural capacities. Adam had knowledge of this grace to the extent that he possessed a certain knowledge of God derived from the intelligibility of created things. Thus the unseen object of his faith was not the beatific vision but the fullness of the transcendent first cause, and likewise the anticipated object of his hope was not the vision of God in

\(^{52}\) ST I.95.1, my emphasis.
himself but simply the attainment of the final happiness to which his relation to God made him capable. Thus the final ends of prelapsarian and glorified humanity are substantively different, but no less dependent upon grace for their realization. Both depend upon a right relation to God, both depend upon a preservation of justice with respect to him; and as we mentioned above, this relation is principally manifested in the adherence of the will to an object that surpasses its comprehension. Though Adam was never destined to know God in the way that those who are glorified in the beatific vision know him, he was ordained to love God in the same way as the baptized: “In the state of perfect nature,” Aquinas writes, “man referred the love of himself and of all other things to the love of God as to its end; and thus he loved God more than himself and above all things.”53 While admitting the differences between the manners in which Aquinas accounts for the final perfection of prelapsarian and glorified humanity, both equally require grace and charity in maintaining a relation to God that is vital to the full perfection of human nature. This fundamental relation orders both the internal relation of the intelligible and material powers of the human agent and the external relation between the human agent and the rest of the natural order.

4.3.2 Original Justice and The Non-Inevitability of Death

In a sense, then, the account of the perfection of human nature in the state of original justice and postlapsarian grace necessarily involves an order of providence by which God relates himself to the human soul and orders it to universal ends. The essential character of the intrinsic functional capacities of the human person remains unchanged between these two orders of providence, as does the fundamental need for

53 ST I-II.109.3.
God’s presence to order them to their perfection. In this way, God’s providence is always an operative constituent of the full actualization of human nature. God is of course free to alter this order of providence, and the biblical narrative of salvation history specifies precisely how he has done so from the perspective of human history. At no point in history, however, could human beings find fulfillment merely by means of their own natural powers in isolation from divine assistance. The soul’s own operations order it to what surpasses its own ability to possess, and hence it was designed for an openness to grace, an *obediential potency* to an order of providence by which it might submit itself to the ordering influence of God.\(^{54}\)

In this way, Aquinas’ account of prelapsarian providence supplements his postlapsarian soteriology in a way that helps preserve his Aristotelian commitment to the unity of the body and the soul. As we touched on above, one might construe Aquinas’ theological answer to the paradox of human futility and tragedy as a Stoic-inspired strategy of escape from the threats of spatio-temporal existence. Looking closer, however, we see that Aquinas insists at almost every possible opportunity upon the real unity of body and soul as an essential feature of human existence in its natural form.\(^{55}\)

While he admits as a metaphysical possibility the separate subsistence of the human soul

---

\(^{54}\) This term has been the subject of extended treatment in the field of theology, especially in the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century, where it figured prominently in the debate over nature and grace among such luminaries as Henri De Lubac, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. My use of the term here prescinds from the many implications of that debate and intends merely to invoke the idea Aquinas articulates in *ST* III.11.1 with regard to the infused knowledge of Christ:

“As has been stated already, the soul of Christ had to be entirely perfect, having all its potentiality actuated. It must be remembered that in his human soul, as in every creature, there is a twofold passive potentiality: one answers to a natural agent; the other to the first agent (*agens primum*), who can bring any creature to some higher actuality, to which a natural agent cannot bring it. And this latter is usually called the ‘obediential potency’ (*potentia obedientiae*) of the creature.”

\(^{55}\) His theory of the soul’s union with the body is laid out most directly in *ST* I.75—76. See also, however, *SCG* II.57, 65-72, 83, IV.79 and *Compendium of Theology* I.153—184.
apart from the body, this separated existence is profoundly discordant with the natural inclinations and functionalities of the human agent. The soul is not itself without the body. In fact, Aquinas goes so far as to say that the separated soul is not even really human without its substantial union with the body. Far from the insurmountable obstacle to human happiness that the Platonic tradition takes it to be, Aquinas views matter as an integral element to the completion of human nature.  

Since it was created by God, matter is essentially good, but always dependent upon the principles of intelligibility inform it. Aquinas’ account of human action and development in the state of original justice reveals that although human nature in itself is immutable in the way any other nature is, its capacity to receive the active ordering assistance of God’s grace makes it capable of perduring indefinitely in its material existence. In other words, as Aquinas envisions prelapsarian human nature within a particular order of providence in which death is not a “natural” part of our perfection. Death is always natural with respect to our finitude, of course, but it is “unnatural” in the sense that God did not intend it to be a part of our perfection within the order of providence that obtained in the state of innocence. “Man was incorruptible and immortal in the state of innocence,” he declares.

For man’s body was indissoluble not by reason of any intrinsic vigor of immortality, but by reason of a supernatural force given by God to the soul, whereby it was enabled to preserve the body from all corruption so long as it remained itself subject to God. This entirely agrees with reason; for since the rational soul surpasses the capacity of corporeal matter… it was most properly endowed at the beginning with the power of preserving the body in a manner surpassing the capacity of corporeal matter.  

---


57 *ST* I.95.1, my emphasis.
The ordering of the soul to God established by original justice exempted Adam from death, according to Aquinas. Although this preservation from death is not proper to the powers of the human soul in itself, it is eminently fitting—or so we have argued—with respect to the intellectual creature’s desire for existence not merely within a particular specification, but as such. Unlike the beatific vision, which draws the human person into the very life of God, the final happiness of prelapsarian man consists in the perfection of natural operations as maintained by supernatural means. Nevertheless, there is no death. Death is therefore truly unnatural to Adam, an unequivocal evil.

Aquinas goes so far as to say that the supernatural guidance of original justice preserves prelapsarian humanity from even the threat of harm:

Man’s body in the state of innocence could be preserved from suffering injury from a hard body; partly by the use of his reason, whereby he could avoid what was harmful; and partly also by Divine Providence, so preserving him, that nothing of a harmful nature could come upon him unawares.\(^{58}\)

Hence, as John Bowlin has pointed out, any virtues whose exercise is occasioned by the imperfections usually associated with the contingent material world are absent in Eden, and therefore absent from the actual operation of human nature in its original existence.\(^{59}\) For Aquinas, this arrangement is the actual starting point from which the meaning of death arises, a meaning that can only be universally negative for unredeemed humanity. Death is fundamentally a punishment, not in the sense that God conjured up death as a retribution for the sin of Eden, but in the sense that death severs human nature from its “natural”—as in its divinely intended—object of final happiness. Apart from God’s

\(^{58}\) ST 1.97.2.

\(^{59}\) Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas’ Ethics*, pp163—165.
sustaining presence, humanity becomes “like the beasts,” who are immersed in the immediacy of matter, and its ultimate evanescence.

In this way the sin of our first parent is the cause of death and all such like defects in human nature, in so far as by the sin of our first parent original justice was taken away, whereby not only were the lower powers of the soul held together under the control of reason, without any disorder whatever, but also the whole body was held together in subjection to the soul, without any defect... Wherefore, original justice being forfeited through the sin of our first parent, just as human nature was stricken in the soul by the disorder among the powers… so also it became subject to corruption, by reason of disorder in the body.  

By looking at Aquinas’ account of the contingency and aberrancy of death for prelapsarian humanity, his treatment of courage takes on an entirely different light, which at once answers and raises unexpected questions. Courage as a virtue is defined by its exercise in the face of danger, the highest instance of which is the danger of death. But death means something entirely different to the Christian than it does to the Aristotelian or the Platonist. Since Aquinas takes the Genesis narrative seriously as a source for his anthropology, he is able to regard death as the greatest and most fearful danger to human life, but at the same time claim that this evil was not intended as the inevitable end of our natural functioning. And as a Christian, Aquinas ultimately views the exercise of courage as an expression of hope for the restoration of that form of existence in which the justice and mercy of God preserves us in our entirety from all harm.

---

60 ST I-II.85.5.
PART THREE

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON COURAGE, DEATH AND MARTYRDOM

Having spelled out the fundamental metaphysical and anthropological framework surrounding Aquinas’ general theory of human perfection, we may now properly examine his particular account of courage as a virtue, as well as the theological grounds upon which he determines the act of martyrdom to be its paradigmatic exemplification. The primary goal in this final part is to elucidate how Aquinas’ understanding of human perfection informs his account of courage. These final chapters aim to highlight in particular the central place of Aquinas’ Christological commitments within his larger ethical system.

With this in mind, Chapter Five undertakes a careful exposition of Aquinas’ theory of the passions and their role in human perfection. It then narrows its focus to examine how Aquinas conceives the regulation of the irascible passions—the passions regarding matters of struggle—by the virtue of courage. Aquinas follows Aristotle by acknowledging the possibility of internal conflict and struggle in the presence of external threats, and especially in the face of immanent death. Indeed, the chapter concludes by arguing that Aquinas’ prioritization of endurance rather than aggression extends Aristotle’s account of courage by characterizing it *principally* as a matter of restraining
the passions and remaining steadfast in the good of reason rather than actively pursuing any proximate objective.

The following chapter fills out the broader context of this view of courage by inquiring into the way the paradigm of endurance fits into Aquinas’ broader theory of human perfection. It argues that Aquinas’ designation of martyrdom as the paradigmatic act of courage is not as odd as it might first appear, insofar he maintains that the human person possesses a natural love of the common good that surpasses its own love of self. He grounds this claim that human perfection naturally finds its completion within the perfection of a larger whole, which he identifies ultimately with God, the Creator. The chapter concludes with an exploration of how Aquinas integrates this natural teleology into his theological claims regarding providence, original sin and grace, and how these claims inform the motivation that underlies the martyr’s act of courage.

The final chapter, which serves as a departure point for further theological inquiry, considers the Christological inspiration behind Aquinas’ account of the possibility of virtuous action in the face of death. Hearkening back to the findings of the first part of the dissertation, this brief chapter argues that Aquinas locates the highest paradigm of courage not merely in a certain type of actor—the heroic warrior or philosophical provocateur—but in an individual figure whose life embodies and defines the persevering pursuit of the good whose attainment is worth the greatest of risks. The figure that informs Aquinas’ own paradigm of courage’s highest exemplification is Jesus of Nazareth, the very Word and wisdom of God whose assumption of human finitude establishes most definitively both the fullest possible perfection of human nature and the
means by which those who accept his testimony by faith may strive toward the same perfection.

The intended aim, then, of this final section is to draw out the theological and ethical significance of Aquinas’ transformative assimilation of ancient conceptions of courageous noble death in light of the Christian confession of Jesus’ redemptive and perfective sacrifice.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROLE OF COURAGE IN AQUINAS’ ACCOUNT OF HUMAN PERFECTION

5.1 Difficulty, Danger and the Imperfect Sovereignty of Reason

This chapter is dedicated to the exposition of Aquinas’ conception of courage, its exemplification in the act of martyrdom, and the place this ideal holds within his account of how rational activity perfects the human person. The present reading of Aquinas will take its direction primarily from a continuing focus upon the inheritance and divergence of his ethical methodology from Aristotle’s, with the particular aim of showing how Aquinas’ distinctive claims regarding courage cohere with his larger metaphysical and theological framework. Since the principal function of courage is to regulate the passions, we will begin by investigating how the passions contribute to human action and how for Aquinas they are proper subjects of perfective habitus by means of their participation in reason. The irascible passions merit special attention in this context because they represent the specific capacities that the virtue of courage perfects. These movements of the sensitive faculty are defined by their orientation toward those external forces that interpose themselves in active opposition to one’s pursuit of the good. Thus Aquinas characterizes courage as a virtue essential to the attainment of “the difficult good.”
5.1.1 The Difficult Good

In order then to understand what the virtue of courage is, we must first understand the nature of the good whose pursuit and attainment it facilitates, and in particular why and how the courageous should regard it as being “difficult.” In the context of Aquinas’ virtue theory, this notion of difficulty has two related yet distinct aspects under which it applies itself to the human good: the difficulty pertaining to the human person’s teleological structure and the difficulty pertaining to the contingent events and circumstances that frustrate this teleology. Now, we have already said enough about how Aquinas envisions the teleological structure of the human person and how virtue facilitates this progressive growth toward perfection. Considered absolutely, the good that perfects the human person is difficult on account of the sheer complexity and scope of the various powers and capacities for coordinated action which the human agents possess. This complexity is a function of the relation between the end to which the human agent is ordered and the powers by which it attains that end. Aquinas’ accepts the Aristotelian metaphysical principles that (1) a thing is less perfect if it is ordered to a lower end, and (2) among those things ordered to the same end, those are more perfect that are able to achieve the end with fewer operations and powers. Hence, as Aquinas explains, although

the human person can acquire universal and perfect goodness, because he can acquire beatitude…. he is in the last degree, according to his nature, of those to whom beatitude is possible; therefore the human soul requires many and various operations and powers. But to angels a smaller variety of powers is sufficient. And in God, ultimately, there is no power or action beyond His own Essence.\(^1\)

\(^1\) *ST* I.77.2.
The human person thus finds herself “on the boundary” of two distinct forms of creaturely existence, the spiritual and corporeal, and as a consequence the powers and perfections that pertain to these converge in her own proper activity.

As we noted above, the human person is the most perfect of corporeal creatures on account of her intellectual nature, which not only bears the image of God, but also possesses the power to contain within itself the various perfections of the created universe as a whole, and so represents in Aquinas’ view the crowning perfection of the universe as such. What is more, salvation history reveals to us that the human creature also bears the capacity to receive the grace necessary for the beatific vision, which is nothing less than a direct participation in God’s own inner life. So in terms of the metaphysical “scale of perfection” Aquinas adopts, the distance covered in the human creature’s progression from origin to final end is greater, indeed far greater, than that of any other creature, whether microbial or angelic. At several places in the Summa, Aquinas actually claims that this unique metaphysical status explains some notable disadvantages that humans possess in relation to other animals: why we are born in such a vulnerable state, for instance, without natural means for defense, or even the ability to control the movement of our limbs. His basic explanation is that every creature is endowed with the attributes that befit their nature and manner of development. Aquinas argues that it is actually most befitting a being who can by her intellect “become all things” to lack the natural means of defense afforded other animals—claws, horns, fangs,

---

2 Specifically, Aquinas attributes the relative disadvantages of human infants to the size and humidity of their brains, whose heightened demands divert the strength and energy needed to develop other functional capacities. It is interesting to note that, although the particulars of his explanations reflect the science of his time, the essential reasoning that the relative sophistication of the human brain accounts for why human beings mature much slower than any other complex animal remains in force as the prevailing theory.
thick fur, tough skin—so that by means of his hands alone (what Aristotle calls “the organ of organs”) she might craft instruments of defense and production according to her own design in light of her own particular circumstances.³

Even these most basic of activities, which are required for bodily preservation and development, require the engagement of the human person’s distinctive rational capacity. In the pursuit of the ends proper to her nature, the human creature refers at every step of her growth to the intellectual operations that characterize her broader perfective function vis-à-vis the created universe as a whole. Of course, it is not as though the human agent performs these tasks with any formal conception of her own rationality and how it fits within the larger universe; it is simply her natural mode of being in the world. The human creature, uniting both corporeal and intellectual operations in its proper form of existence, acts in light of a dimension with which purely corporeal creatures (and purely intellectual creatures as well) do not have to contend. Hence the scope of the potential development of the human creature is unusually extensive—even without the supernatural elevation to the beatific vision.⁴ Therefore its perfection represents a

³ ST I.76.5ad4 and I.91.3ad2; the reference to Aristotle that appears in both places comes from de Anima iii.8. Aquinas also revisits this line of reasoning in de Veritate 3.22.7:

“For other animals are provided with special coverings for their bodies, such as a tough hide, feathers, and the like, and also special weapons, such as horns, claws, and so forth. This is because they have just a few ways of acting to which they can adapt definite instruments. But man is provided with those things in a general way inasmuch as there has been given to him by nature hands by which he is able to prepare for himself a variety of coverings and protections. This is because man’s reason is so manifold and extends to so many different things that definite tools sufficient for him could not be provided for him ahead of time.”

⁴ Aquinas maintains that as regards their intellectual nature, angels bear the image of God to a greater degree than human beings because their intellectual operations are completely free from any and all material involvement. However, Aquinas qualifies this judgment by asserting that with regard to certain accidental qualities, human nature exceeds angelic nature in its resemblance to God insofar as humans are capable of participating in the creation of beings with a their own intellectual nature—like God, we are able to proceed from one another—and also in the fact that the simultaneous extension of our soul throughout the whole of our body reflects the manner of God’s presence in the world. See ST I.93.3 as well as Thomas Weinandy’s gripping study of this comparison, “Of Men and Angels” in Nova et Vetera v.3, no.2 (Spring 2005) pp295—306.
“difficult good” in light of the sheer quantity and complexity of acts and operations it requires, regardless of the presence of sin and its defects. In other words, for Aquinas human nature itself sufficiently reveals, apart from any appeal to salvation history, the “difficulty” or laboriousness of the ultimate good toward which the process of human perfection leads. Human perfection is an extraordinarily difficult good (bonum arduum); and as such, it is an object of the irascible faculty. Hence Aquinas claims that the virtue of hope, by which one tends toward future goods that are difficult yet possible to obtain, would have been present necessarily in prelapsarian humanity both in habit and in act.6

At the same time, however, the presence of sin introduces disorder into this process of perfection and adds yet another dimension to the difficulty of obtaining the human good. And at the end of the preceding chapter, we briefly outlined Aquinas’ speculative treatment of the perfection of prelapsarian humanity, which clearly posits a distinction between the sort of difficulty inherent to the perfection of human nature in whatever state and the obstacles introduced into the pursuit of the human good by sin and the consequent rupture of original justice. As I attempted to argue there, the chief concepts governing this new dimension of “difficulty” are those of corruption and misfortune. Bereft of the original connection to God that directed the reasoning power of prelapsarian humanity in perfect accord with divine reason (and with the created order as well), Adam and Eve now find themselves subject to corruption and misfortune. The intellectual good that human nature seeks to attain—already arduous because of the demands of embodied rationality—becomes radically more difficult because one can no longer assume that the contingent events which serve as the natural context of our action

5 ST I-II.25.1ad1, I-II.40.1.
6 ST I.95.3.
will in fact facilitate our perfection as beings who desire the good universally. With the fall, the human agents can no longer reliably negotiate the structure of historical events in which their acts are situated for their own ultimate benefit. We now become subject to those events as both potentially beneficial and also potentially tragic; the tide of contingency can no longer be trusted as providential, and so becomes a blind force, something that merely happens to us and may in fact permanently frustrate our natural perfection. Hence the “difficult good” that the irascible passions take as their object are difficult in two distinct ways: (1) because of the complexity and intensity of the acts and operations required of human perfection as dictated by its very nature as an embodied rational creature, and (2) because of the threat of potentially tragic misfortune and ultimate corruption posed by contingency in absence of direct divine guidance.

It is important to make this distinction on the heels of our claims about the non-inevitability of death, because both the difficulty intrinsic to embodied intellectual perfection and the difficulty posed by the possibility of tragic misfortune play directly into Aquinas’ transformative characterization of courage’s exemplary act. I want to argue that what meaningfully differentiates Aquinas’ martyr from both the Platonic philosopher-hero and the Homeric warrior-hero is not so much the different substantive models of human flourishing to which they point as much as the different strategies for negotiating the threat of contingency which they reflect. For Aquinas, while the obstacles that call forth the exercise of the irascible passions are not necessarily the result of humanity’s alienation from God, the real possibility that they may prove fatal to the pursuit of the human good—and hence their specific construal as “misfortune” is a

---

7 Although I would claim that there is a substantive divergence between the religious-contemplative ideal of ultimate flourishing put forth by Aquinas and Plato and the martial-political ideal put forth by Homer and suggested at points by Aristotle.
direct effect of humanity’s historical sinfulness. Thus it is no coincidence that what defines the act that Aquinas identifies as the highest paradigm of courage is in fact a convergence of circumstances which most classical sources (including Aristotle) would classify as a textbook example of misfortune. For Aquinas, the specific function of the virtue of courage is not merely to strengthen us in the long, complex and demanding work inherent to the pursuit of the human good, for this sort of difficulty attends human perfection in its pre-lapsarian state.\(^8\) Rather, the defining function of courage for Aquinas is the preservation of the pursuit of the “difficult good” specifically as it has been colored by the history of sin. In this way, Aquinas’ theological anthropology helps explain how it is that events beyond our control can nevertheless prove fatal to our attainment of the good toward which our rational nature leads us.

I emphasize this point at the beginning of this chapter because I believe it underlies his more technical exposition of the virtue of courage, which proceeds along more traditionally Aristotelian philosophical lines. The expression of courage in act appears only in the wake of the rupture of original justice, for only in light of the loss of the superordinate ordering of reason to God does difficulty take on the quality of threat with regard the final attainment of the human good. While on its surface, this claim might appear to be an implausible and even irresponsible intrusion of scriptural narrative into a nature-based ethical system, I contend that it actually plays a fundamental and consistent role in his broader action theory. Its importance derives in great part from the fact that it lies at the intersection of his metaphysical theory regarding the ordered relations between the human intellect, will and body on the one hand, and his ethical

\(^8\) \textit{ST} I.95.3. As we will indicate later, courage is present in prelapsarian humanity in habit, but not in act.
theory regarding the relations between human acts and the structure of the created universe on the other. Let me try to explain the significance of this scriptural-historical claim by way of an examination of Aquinas’ description of reason’s relation to the passions, and how this relation ultimately depends and reflects back upon the very dislocation of human reason’s concord with creation that was the result of Adam’s sin.

5.1.2 Reason and the passions I: the Aristotelian Analogy of the Principatus Politicus et Regalis

Aquinas follows Aristotle in conceiving the passions as spontaneous movements of the soul in reference to objects that are immediately perceived to be good or evil. These movements of the soul are in themselves the same types of impulses found in other animal species, expressed in direct response to the perception of bodily goods and evils. Yet while the form of these movements is common among humans and other animals, their role in human activity is unique on account of reason’s regulative and directive power over them. This power over the passion stems from reason’s practical role in relating the ends of particular actions to the universal end as known and loved. In this way, as Paul Gondreau puts it,

The interplay that our lower sensitive appetite enjoys with reason and will, our highest faculties, introduces a whole new dynamic into the human experience of emotion. In addition to our internal affective ordering to created bodily goods,

9 ST I-II.24.1ad 1: “Considered in themselves the passions are common to both man and animal, but as commanded by reason (a ratione imperantur), they are proper to man.” For a comprehensive and incisive study of the passions in Aquinas, see Paul Gondreau’s The passions of Christ’s soul in the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas (Münster: Aschendorff, 2002). For a concise yet illuminating account of the passion’s participation in reason, see his article “The Passions and the Moral Life: Appreciating the Originality of Aquinas” in The Thomist 71 (2007) pp419—450 as well as Servais Pinckaers’ “Reappropriating Aquinas’ Account of the Passions,” in The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology, ed. John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 273-87.
from which arise the emotions, we enjoy a higher appetitive ordering: that of the will which orders us internally to the universal good, the *summum bonum.*

Aquinas situates his vast treatise on the human passions in *ST* I-II between his treatises on the human act and on habits (*habitus*). This organizational schema itself suggests that for him the passions act as a kind of conceptual mid-point between the basic structure of individual human acts and the functional dispositions that govern such acts in relation to the human good. In the content of his theory of practical reasoning as well, Aquinas fully integrates the passions into the process of human perfection by identifying them as the first movements—the “germinating seeds”\(^\text{11}\)—of human inclination from which the whole complex order of our acts and operations toward the good takes its shape. Thus the dynamism that draws us toward the universal good (*the summum bonum*) is one that engages the entire spectrum of our interior movements, even those that proceed from our corporeal inclinations. Unlike so many other perennial visions of intellectual ascent, whether Stoic, Gnostic or Cartesian, Aquinas’ account of perfection never repudiates, abandons or transcends the physico-emotional component of human experience and action. Aquinas goes so far as to say that all the virtues—including hope and charity—are in some way built upon the foundation of our most basic and spontaneous attractions to the goods connatural to us, what he calls *amor*, or the passion of love.\(^\text{12}\) In the course of our perfection, we never as it were “leave these attractions behind.”

However, this insistence on integration, inspired as it is by Aristotelian psychology, does not mean that Aquinas admits of no dissonance or conflict between the

---

\(^{10}\) Gondreau, “The Passions and the Moral Life,” p422.

\(^{11}\) This term comes from Gondreau, “The Passions and the Moral Life,” p430.

\(^{12}\) *ST* I-II.27.4 and II-II.17.8.
operations of reason and the passions. As we recalled above, Aristotle’s ethical programme begins, both conceptually and prescriptively, with the task of bringing the passions into conformity with the dictates of reason. Likewise for Aquinas, the passions are, in technical terms, the “proper matter” of temperance and courage. Under the aegis of prudence, these virtues direct themselves specifically to the proper formation of the passions.\(^\text{13}\) The aim of temperance and courage is to align the movements of passions with the directives of reason, so as to enable them to respond to the latter with promptness and ease. That this alignment requires the persistent cultivation of acquired dispositions clearly implies an initial gap or disconnect between the sovereignty (what Aquinas calls the imperium) which reason should enjoy over the passions in virtue of reason’s superior dignity and the actual compliance of the passions to reason’s directives. In order to describe this gap, Aquinas uses an analogy from Aristotle’s politics, by which he distinguishes the manner in which reason governs the passions as opposed to how it governs the body. Unlike the body, which reason governs in the manner of a despot, reason rules over the passions according to a political or royal principle (principatus politicus et regalis). “A power is called despotic,” Aquinas explains,

whereby a man rules his slaves who have not the right to resist in any way the orders of the one that commands them, since they have nothing of their own. But that power is called politic and royal by which a man rules over free subjects, who, though subject to the government of the ruler, have nevertheless something of their own, by reason of which they can resist the orders of him who commands.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^\text{13}\) \textit{ST} I-II.59.4—5 and I-II, q. 60, a. 3; cf. Aristotle’s \textit{EN II.6}, 1106b15—16.

\(^\text{14}\) \textit{ST} I.81.3ad2. This article from the Summa Theologiae is the classical locus for this particular claim of Aquinas’, which is borne out in more technical terms both in his subsequent moral psychology and, as I hope to show, in his larger theological anthropology. Cf. \textit{ST} I-II.9.2ad3. Aristotle’s original distinction between these forms of rule comes from his \textit{Politics} I.5, 1254b2—5.
Within their natural limits, and barring exceptional instances of psycho-somatic pathology, the parts of the body respond at once to reason’s commands to move in the particular ways it prescribes. Yet with respect to the movements associated with the sense appetites, this spontaneity simply does not apply. It should be noted that at this point Aquinas, unlike St. Paul, makes no attempt to elaborate upon the causes and implications of this limitation in reason’s governance other than to say that the concupiscible and irascible appetites do in fact resist reason and appear on that account to have “something of their own, in virtue of which they can resist the commands of reason.”\(^{15}\)

But what is this “something of their own” that enables the appetitive powers to exert a level of functional independence from reason? Do the senses somehow act purely of their own accord? Aquinas remarks that the sensitive appetite is actually subject to three powers in the human agent: the cogitative power, sense apprehension, and imagination.\(^{16}\) In his consideration of whether and how sense appetite can move the will,\(^{17}\) Aquinas elaborates on how these three powers influence the will’s operation. Aquinas has already established as a general principle that the movement of the will follows upon a judgment of reason regarding the goodness of an end, which acts as the motive principle of the will’s movement.\(^{18}\) In non-rational animals, such a judgment occurs without the mediation of the intellect, accomplished by the spontaneous operation of a simple “estimative power.” This power is called “cogitative” in rational animals.

\(^{15}\) ST I.81.3ad2.

\(^{16}\) ST I.81.3ad2 and I-II.77.1.

\(^{17}\) ST I-II.77.1.

\(^{18}\) ST I-II.9.1.
however, because these appetitive judgments are mediated by intellectual apprehension. Yet this apprehension is itself mediated by the operations of the senses and the imagination. Although Aquinas maintains that neither sense nor imagination can move the will directly, the multiplicity and complexity of the soul’s operations leaves the human will susceptible to indirect influence in the form of distraction.\textsuperscript{19} Since the soul’s powers proceed from one essence, Aquinas reasons, its energies are proportioned relative to the particular powers engaged by each act, such that a concentrated focus upon one power weakens the force of the others. While it remains true that only the cogitative power directly moves the will by means of a reasoned judgment, sense and imagination can exert an indirect influence by affecting the way in which the soul attends to any object.

In his treatise on sin in the \textit{Prima Secundae}, Aquinas notes the Platonic view (attributed to Socrates) that passion is unable to affect rational judgments and that therefore virtue is itself a kind of knowledge and vice a correlative form of ignorance. Yet simple experience shows, says Aquinas, “that many act contrary to the knowledge that they have.”\textsuperscript{20} The basic problem this fact reveals is not ignorance, however, but rather the difficulty in translating general knowledge into judgments about particular goods. Against Socrates’ view then, Aquinas sides with Aristotle in positing a certain vulnerability of practical reason to the passions on account of their ability to directly

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. As Aquinas explains here, the will may be thus distracted “because, since all the soul’s powers are rooted in the one essence of the soul, it follows of necessity that, when one power is intent in its act, another power becomes remiss, or is even altogether impeded, in its act, both because all energy is weakened through being divided, so that, on the contrary, through being centered on one thing, it is less able to be directed to several; and because, in the operations of the soul, a certain attention is requisite, and if this be closely fixed on one thing, less attention is given to another.”

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
affect the exercise of *phronesis*. Aquinas categorizes this influence according to three distinct degrees of its manifestation: (1) when the passions distract the soul from the judgments of reason, (2) when the passions directly *oppose* one’s general knowledge by actively inclining the soul toward what is *contrary* to reason, and (3) when the passions are so strong as to effectively fetter the free exercise of reason by means of determinative “bodily transmutation” (*transmutatio corporalis*), as when one is drunk or asleep. “That this takes place in the passions is evident from the fact that sometimes, when the passions are very intense, man loses the use of reason altogether: for many have gone out of their minds through excess of love or anger.” The capacity of the passions to so affect human action gives witness to the preeminence of particular knowledge in the process of practical reasoning: while judgments about particulars can and should be governed by universal deliverances of reason, there remain many potential obstacles to the mediating operation of *phronesis* insofar as this mediation depends fundamentally upon the proper functioning of our sense faculties.

The indirect influence of sense appetite upon the movements of the will—the capacity of the passions to distract, oppose or fetter the proper exercise of practical reason—is what Aquinas refers to as *concupiscence*. Concupiscence names the power that movements of sense appetite have upon the operation of the will, which effects in turn the progressive development of practical dispositions. The will follows a judgment upon the goodness of a particular end, which for Aquinas (following Aristotle) is determined in reference to the *fittingness* of what is proposed in relation to the one for

---

21 *ST* I-II.77.2.
22 Ibid.
whom it is proposed. They assert that a passion can decisively influence the will is thus proven by simply pointing to the discrepancy between courses of action that seem fitting when one is angry as opposed to when one is calm. The movements of these lower powers of the soul are never completely still, however, and so every voluntary act sets a precedent, as it were, for the degree and kind of influence that the passions will exercise in subsequent acts. In this way, the passions shape the determinations of the will either by their cooperation or by their resistance, and are thus said by Aquinas to be “rational by participation.”

The passions are the principal matter of virtue because they are the pivotal variable in the cultivation of active dispositions that accord with the judgments of right reason. Aquinas is fond of recalling the aphorism from *The Nicomachean Ethics* III.5 “according as a man is, such does the end seem to him,” because it expresses concisely the contingent nature of human character: that just because our actions proceed from a rational nature does not necessarily mean that they are governed by right reason. Although our will, being the appetitive expression of our reason, is by its nature superior to the movements of our sense appetites in themselves, this natural superiority simply does not translate into actual sovereignty. Hence the need for virtue, which by means of repeated particular actions conforms the movements of the passions to the ends

---

23 *ST* I-II.9.2.
25 *ST* I-II.9.2ad1. To the objection that the will could not be moved by sense appetite because of its superior dignity, Aquinas replies: “Nothing hinders that which is better simply and in itself, from being less excellent in a certain respect. Accordingly the will is simply more excellent than the sensitive appetite: but in respect of the man in whom a passion is predominant, in so far as he is subject to that passion, the sensitive appetite is more excellent.”
proposed by right reason. Virtue is what grants freedom and sovereignty to practical reasoning in that it orders the various powers of the human soul so that they operate in synergistic relation with one another. Virtue is what protects reason from usurpation in the execution of human actions. Aquinas employs the analogy of political rule to describe this “gap” in the causal structure of human action, a gap which both Aristotle and the Stoics believed was all but eliminated in the fully virtuous person.26

Aquinas’ third objection in ST I-II.9.2 invokes a principle of motion taken from the third book of Aristotle’s Physics: “the mover is not moved by that which it moves, in such a way that there be reciprocal motion.”27 But if reason moves the sense appetite, then sense appetite must obey the will as well, being but an expression of reason in an appetitive mode. So technically speaking, the will cannot be moved by the passions without admitting of some reciprocal motion between reason and sense. In his reply, Aquinas does not necessarily refute the validity of this conclusion; he rather rejects the adequacy of the analogy itself. The passions’ relation to reason is best understood not

---

26 See ST I-II.59.2 for Aquinas’ account of the essential agreement between the Stoics and the Peripatetics on this point. He appeals to Augustine’s claim in City of God 9.4 that their apparent divergence on the presence of the passions in the virtuous is one of terminology alone. In my view it is unclear to what extent this claim is in fact correct. Aquinas argues that inordinate passion cannot arise “deliberately” in the virtuous, but at the same time he echoes Augustine’s quotation of Aulus Gellius in City of God 9.4 on the point that “it is not in our power to call up the visions of the soul, known as its fancies; and when they arise from awesome things, they must needs disturb the mind of a wise man, so that he is slightly startled by fear, or depressed with sorrow,’ in so far as ‘these passions forestall the use of reason without his approving of such things or consenting thereto.’” It seems to me that the Stoic view would exclude even this possibility, and would thus come closer to the counterposition Aquinas has Aristotle describe immediately afterward: “Hence Aristotle says in EN II.3 that ‘some describe virtue as being a kind of freedom from passion and disturbance; this is incorrect, because the assertion should be qualified:’ they should have said virtue is freedom from those passions ‘that are not as they should be as to manner and time.’” Based on Aquinas’ characterization of the Stoics elsewhere in the ST, I am just not convinced that he understands the Stoics to make such a qualification. Their denial of any distinction between the sensitive and intellective appetite seems to me to rule out the possibility of making such a qualification.

27 I-II.9.2ad3.
according to an analogy taken from physical motion, but one taken from political organization:

the reason, in which resides the will, moves, by its command, the irascible and concupiscible powers, not, indeed, ‘by a despotic sovereignty,’ as a slave is moved by his master, but by a ‘royal and politic sovereignty,’ as free men are ruled by their governor, and can nevertheless act counter to his commands. Hence both irascible and concupiscible can move counter to the will: and accordingly nothing hinders the will from being moved by them at times.\(^{28}\)

Aquinas uses the analogy of political rule to circumscribe the limited form of autonomy which, according to our *experience*, the passions appear to possess in relation to the deliverances of reason.

5.1.3 Reason and the passions II: the Pauline Analogy of the *Lex Peccati*

The political analogy is not the only one he brings to bear upon his analysis of this phenomenon, however. For a theological description of this “quasi-autonomy” of the passions, Aquinas turns to St. Paul and his depiction of the “war between the law of spirit and the law of the flesh” in his *Letter to the Romans*.\(^{29}\) As Aquinas himself notes, this scriptural trope on its surface has proven particularly susceptible to dualistic

\(^{28}\) *ST I-II.9.2ad3*

\(^{29}\) Although references to the struggle between flesh and spirit more generally abound throughout the New Testament epistles, the most developed discussion of its specific character and theological significance occurs in *Romans* 7:14—25, and so it is primarily to Aquinas’ usage of these passages that we will direct our attention. Here is the *NRSV* translation of these verses:

“For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.”
interpretations regarding the relation of soul and body, and the correlative operations of reason and sense appetite. He is thus careful to insist in his exegetical lectures on these passages that when St. Paul writes “I am carnal,” we should understand the “I” to refer to his reason, which “is the chief thing in man; hence each seems to be his own reason or intellect.”

Aquinas wants to make it clear that the inner conflict that St. Paul describes so vividly here in Romans 7 is not a duality that descends to the core of human identity: it is a struggle experienced and mediated by the “I” of the rational agent qua rational. When St. Paul says “I am carnal” then, we should understand him to be saying that his fundamentally rational agency is embedded in the material operations of the flesh, and not that there is any real division within him between fully independent, parallel principles of agency.

Aquinas reads St. Paul as straining to describe here, in theological terms, the same gap between reason and sense appetite that he describes elsewhere in philosophical and political terms. Aquinas’ principal hermeneutical strategy for unfolding and appropriating these passages is to distinguish their meaning as applied to those who are in a state of sin on the one hand, and those who are in a state of grace on the other. This distinction is vital to Aquinas’ exegesis in that it specifies a normative theological horizon for human action that is not fully evident from the perspective of common experience alone. Hence St. Paul’s confession of carnality points to the twofold manner in which reason is bound up with “the flesh:” either reason is “submissive to the flesh,”

---

30 Lectures on the Letter to the Romans. Translated by Fabian Larcher, O.P. and edited by Jeremy Holmes with the support of the Aquinas Center for Theological Renewal at Ave Maria University. Available online at http://www.aquinas.avemaria.edu/Commentaries.asp/. §559.

31 Aquinas takes more than a bit of interpretive liberty to be sure, but the claim is based on a more general prior principle that when we refer the self, we are first and foremost referring to our reasoning capacity. More than anything else for Aquinas, our identities are bound up with our reason.
consenting fully to its impulses or “it is under attack from the flesh.” Taking the term “flesh” to be synonymous with sin, Aquinas asserts that the former relation of submission obtains generally to human agency “as yet unhealed by grace,” while the latter condition of “being under attack” obtains even to those in the state of grace. Either way, the power that “the flesh” exerts over reason reveals the influence of sin upon human agency, even among the redeemed. “In both cases [reason] is carnal on account of sin; hence [St. Paul] adds, sold under sin.”

So Aquinas begins to develop a theological account of the passions’ resistance to reason based upon the presence and enslaving power of sin within the world. Even those who have been freed from sin by divine grace cannot escape the effects of “the rebellion of the flesh against the spirit” that is the mark of the disorder ingrained into our species by the disobedience of our first parents. This disorder becomes regnant in those who consent to it and act upon it by way of actual sin. Those who resist this disorder, on the other hand, may not consent to or perform a sinful act, but nevertheless may act with fault “by desiring through a passion in the sensitive appetite” which “escapes the reason or intellect, because it exists before the intellect’s judgment.” Hence St. Paul’s famous exclamation “I do not do the good I want” could alternatively mean: (1) for the sinner, that the judgment of the will, which desires the good by its very nature, “is perverted by a bad habit or a perverse passion with the result that the will goes wrong, when it gets down to the particular case, and does not do what it knows in a general way should be

32 Ibid. §560.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid. §563. Strictly speaking, Aquinas does not consider inordinate desire itself to be a sin, although he says at STI-II 71.1 that there is a sense in which one may call it “vicious.”
done and would want to do” or (2) for the agent healed by grace, that the judgment of the will prevails in action, though not without being attended by the disordered movements of desire arising from the sensitive appetite.

More than simply a curious and somewhat puzzling fact of human agency, the resistance of the passions is for Aquinas the reflection that human agents remain to varying degrees subject to “the dominion of sin,” defined as the inclination of the sensitive appetite toward what is contrary to the aims of reason. In fact, Aquinas believes the extent to which sin may corrupt reason’s sovereignty over human acts is great enough to justify a straightforward reading of St. Paul’s declaration that “if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” Aquinas concludes, “therefore the doing of evil, which reason does, inasmuch as it has been overcome by desire, is not attributed principally to reason, which is understood here to be man, but rather to the desire or habit in virtue of which reason is inclined to evil.” The grace of Christ frees the sinner by transforming the intellect through faith and by strengthening the will through hope and charity; but the flesh, insofar as it remains subject to the effect of corruption caused by original sin, remains also under the dominion of sinful desires stemming from the sense appetite. Although divine grace inspires the redeemed agent to will the good, and strengthens her by the Spirit’s guidance to do the good, it by no means eliminates concupiscence entirely, for the inclination to sin remains in virtue of reason’s imperfect sovereignty over the movements of sense appetite.38

35 Ibid. §565.
36 Romans 7:20.
37 Lectures on the Letter to the Romans, §571
St. Paul goes on then to contrast this lingering inclination to sin with the revealed law of Moses, which corresponds to “the inner man.” “But I see in my members another law,” he declares, “at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” In Aquinas’ treatise on law, where he enumerates all the different forms of law, he devotes the last article to whether the movements of sin in fact qualify as a kind of law. His answer is that the movements of sinful inclinations do proceed according to a kind of law, but only by way of participation and not directly. Inclinations themselves operate in creatures according to the dictates of divine ordinance, such that each creature acts according to the conditions that are natural for it. “And so the law of man,” Aquinas writes,

is that he should act in accordance with reason: and this law was so effective in the primitive state, that nothing either beside or against reason could take man unawares. But when man turned his back on God, he fell under the influence of his sensual impulses: in fact this happens to each one individually, the more he deviates from the path of reason, so that, after a fashion, he is likened to the beasts that are led by the impulse of sensuality, according to Psalm 48:21: ‘Man, when he was in honor, did not understand: he hath been compared to senseless beasts, and made like to them.’

In one sense, then, the disorder of the sensitive appetite’s movements—qua disorder—is not a law at all but actually a deviation of the law of reason. In another sense, however, “since, by the just sentence of God, man is destitute of original justice, and his reason [is

---

38 Ibid. §580: “Therefore, the fast that I can will, once I have been healed by grace, is due to the work of divine grace, through which I not only will the good but also do some good, because I resist concupiscence and, led by the Spirit, act against it; but I do not find it within my power to accomplish that good so as to exclude concupiscence entirely. This indicates that the good of grace does not reside in the flesh, because if it did, then just as I have the faculty of willing the good because of grace dwelling in the mind, so I would have the faculty of accomplishing the good in virtue of grace residing in the flesh.”

39 Romans 7:23.

40 ST I-II.91.

41 He here refers these movements the “fomes” of sin.

42 ST I-II.91.6 my emphasis.
therefore] bereft of its vigor, this impulse of sensuality that leads him, in so far as it is a penalty following from the Divine law depriving man of his proper dignity, does have the nature of law.\textsuperscript{43} So while the natural movements of inclination in other animals are the proper expressions of law, being direct reflections of the nature from which their acts proceed, these movements in human beings are not fully subordinate to the distinctive measure of human acts, namely reason. Uniquely among active creatures, human beings characteristically experience a “pull” between rival principles of action, a pull that prohibits them from fully subordinating their passions to reason and causes them as a result to fail to act according to their nature.

St. Paul’s analogy of contrary “laws” captures two important dimensions of sin in Aquinas’ view, which roughly correlate with the principal effects of the law of sin he describes in his commentary on \textit{Romans}. “Now this law has two effects in man: first, it resists reason; hence [St. Paul] says [it is] ‘at war with the law of my mind.’”\textsuperscript{44} As we already remarked, this inner conflict—this resistance of the passions that allows human actions to deviate from the law of reason—possesses the nature of a law for Aquinas only because it is the effect of God’s lawful punishment of primitive humanity’s disobedience. “In this sense the very disobedience of the lower powers constitutes the inclination to sin and is called a law, inasmuch as it was introduced by the law of divine justice, just as the sentence of a just judge has the force of law.”\textsuperscript{45} Aquinas’ theoretical explanation of the imperfect relation between reason and the passions thus rests at bottom upon an appeal to

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Lectures on Romans}, §588.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. §587.
\end{footnotesize}
the scriptural account of humanity’s primordial history. We experience the struggle of sin individually because of our race’s implication in an ancient rebellion against God, the effects of which even the redeemed cannot escape. This struggle between spirit and flesh is therefore a *de facto* condition of human action, not an intrinsic feature of our agency defined by our nature as such. Thus while the political analogy of limited sovereignty served as a useful phenomenological description of the disconnect between reason and the passions, the analogical application of law and punishment here allows Aquinas to give a more robust explanation of the cause of this heteronomy by allowing him to integrate key points of anthropological theory into his larger theology of history.

Secondly, St. Paul’s legal analogy allows Aquinas to give voice to the more phenomenological dimension of sin’s subjugating effect upon human agency. The inclination to sin acts as a kind of law in its exercise of dominion over the sinner, directing his actions in conformity with the lower principles of sense appetite, which likewise direct the actions of non-rational animals. “*In fact this happens to each one individually, the more he deviates from the path of reason,* so that, after a fashion, he is likened to the beasts that are led by the impulse of sensuality.”46 Just as virtue subjugates the passions so as to give full scope to the guiding judgments of reason, vice progressively subjugates the operations of reason so as to give freer reign to the inclinations of the sense appetite. Aquinas therefore says that the law of sin’s second effect “*is that it makes man a slave; hence [St. Paul] says: ‘and making me captive,’ or leading me captive.*”47 In keeping with his prevailing pastoral mission as a Dominican, Aquinas is keen to point out that the passions’ propensity to resist reason is much more

46 *ST* I-II.91.6 my emphasis.

47 *Lectures on Romans* §588, my emphasis.
than a constant feature of embodied rational action as such; this propensity also represents a real and ever-present threat to human freedom and ultimately to the prospect of redemption and final happiness.

With regard to the sinner, the threat of reason’s subjugation is all too clear: even bracketing all explicitly theological claims we can regard the pitiable plight of those with severe addictions as sufficient evidence of this threat. Yet even for those who have received God’s healing grace, the pull of concupiscence remains such that St. Paul’s account of the agonizing struggle between contrary laws applies just as aptly. Commenting upon St. Paul’s impassioned question “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Aquinas remarks that the grace of God given through Christ “liberates from the body of this death in two ways: in one way so that the corruption of the body does not dominate the soul and draw it to sinning; in another way so that the corruption of the body is taken away entirely.” Aquinas uses the analogy St. Paul provides not only to describe the imperfect relation between reason and the passions, but to emphasize its full existential import in light of humanity’s final supernatural end and, in light of that, to propose a permanent remedy to its pervading influence over the exercise of natural freedom. Hence “it is fitting for the sinner to say: Grace has freed me from the body of this death, i.e., from sin into which the soul is led by the corruption of the body.” And the same applies all the more for the just person, who is freed not only from sin, but from the very corruption that afflicts the human condition on account of its implication in the original rebellion from God’s providential order.

48 Ibid. §593.
49 Ibid.
In general, this analogical construal of the passions’ imperfect alignment with reason as the result of two contrary “laws” at work in human agency—the law of God (or reason) and the law of sin—does not enter into Aquinas’ conception of the role of virtue in human perfection more generally. The virtues make their possessor good according to the sort of being it is, which means that, in the case of human beings, they enable us to order our actions according to the judgments of right reason. They discipline and form our passions so as to reinforce the determinations and directives of reason, and thus their growth in the human agent diminishes the tension and misalignment between reason and the movements of sense appetite. Yet as Aquinas points out in his commentary on *Romans*, one can never be completely immune to this “pull” of concupiscence, even when in the state of grace; though the influence of concupiscence upon human action may be reliably mitigated by virtue in the normal course of human development. What both the political and legal analogies of this disconnect share from different angles is the common acknowledgment that the rational and sensitive dimensions of human agency can not only detach from one another but actively oppose one another, and that this opposition disintegrates the agent in a way that frustrates her natural inclination toward unified purposive action. According to the Aristotelian political analogy, the passions possess the capacity to rise up in rebellion against reason, their rightful monarch, and it is virtue’s task to put an end to the insurrection. Similarly, according to the Pauline legal analogy, this rebellion extends beyond reason to the created order and its Creator, and so while virtue can help to contain the uprising somewhat, the final restoration of proper order is up to God alone.
5.2 Preserving the Viability of the Human Pursuit of Perfection

While Aquinas associates the very essence of human action with the sovereignty of reason, he nevertheless recognizes that the practical conclusions of reason require the mediation of the various lower faculties associated with our corporeal existence for the completion of any act. With Aristotle, he also recognizes that in the course of this mediation, the passions arising from the movements of sense appetite possess the power to resist and in a sense “push back” upon the governance of reason. I have dwelt upon Aquinas’ portrayal of this hierarchical yet imperfectly subordinate relation between reason and the passions because it serves as a fundamental anthropological condition for his particular conception of courage and its exemplary act. I have emphasized his theological characterization of this relation in particular in order to make the point that for Aquinas—and for the better part of the Christian tradition in general—this particular condition is not only contingent as a matter of possibility but contingent with respect to the particular providential order in which the drama of human perfection plays itself out. Thus Aquinas is able to describe the fact of moral weakness, or *akrasia*, as more than just one limitation among many owing to our finitude, but rather as an enduring reminder of the particular history of humanity’s encounter with the divine. This theological narrative relativizes reason’s limited sovereignty against a more perfect “original order” characterized by a more perfect relation to God, and so qualifies Aquinas’ primary conceptions of “difficulty” and “perfection” which frame his direct treatment of courage.

---

50 As I will explain shortly, it is also the condition for the exercise of the virtue of temperance as well, inasmuch as the common function of both courage and temperance is to regulate the passions in the establishment of rectitude within human affairs.
5.2.1 Courage and the Passions

Before examining more closely how Aquinas’ theological conception of these existential categories influences his particular account of courage, let us briefly recall the broad outlines of his assimilation of the Aristotelian notion of virtue in general. First and foremost, Aquinas affirms Aristotle’s view that the virtues are active dispositions which make their possessor good. Virtues perfect an agent according to the capacities of its nature, refining the qualities that are characteristic of its particular form of existence. Hence in the case of humans, virtue perfects one’s activity in relation to the directives of reason, since it is the ability to both know and knowingly pursue one’s own ends that distinguishes human acts from those of other species. This capacity enables one to apprehend and shape the principles of one’s own actions in coordination with the inclinations proper to an embodied rational nature. Hence the virtues name those dispositions by which one regulates one’s passions in the course of practical reasoning. The virtues are what successfully shape the inclinations in such a way as to direct them toward the ends prescribed by reason, ends that are both proximate and ultimate.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that moral science comprises only those acts that are deliberately chosen for the sake of some rational good. At the end of Book I, he defines those who possess virtue (*arête*) in contradistinction to those who merely possess continence or self-control (*enkrateia*). The difference between the two is the relative orientation of the passions in relation to the ends of reason. The virtuous person is one who has disciplined her passions to cooperate with reason in the active pursuit of what perfects her nature, while the continent or self-controlled person pursues
these goods *despite* the movements of her passions toward limited or illusory goods.\(^{51}\) The virtue of prudence establishes the rectitude of reason with regard to the coordination of these ends, while justice applies these conclusions to the realm of human affairs. Courage and temperance, on the other hand, serve auxiliary functions, “removing obstacles to the establishment of rectitude in human affairs.”\(^{52}\) Both temperance and courage regulate the will by maintaining the sovereignty of reason over the passions: temperance does so with regard to objects of potentially inordinate pleasure, while courage does so with regard to objects of potentially inordinate aversion. In Book III of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle situates courage in reference to the two opposing passions of fear and daring. Yet he explains that courage does not actually constitute a true mean between fear and daring. “The person who is undisturbed in face of fearsome things,” he remarks, is more courageous “than the person who is so in relation to the things that make for boldness.”\(^{53}\) The reason for this asymmetry is that by definition courage is “something that brings pain with it, and [is] an object of praise [on that account]; for it is harder to withstand what is painful than to hold back from what is pleasant.”\(^{54}\) By definition, then, courage is an odd virtue. Rather than being chiefly identified by the pleasure it effects, it distinguishes itself by the presence of pain,

---

\(^{51}\) As Aristotle explains, “For most people the things that are pleasant are in conflict, because they are not such by nature, whereas to lovers of the fine what is pleasant is what is pleasant by nature; and actions in accordance with excellence are like this, so that they are pleasant both to these people and in themselves” (*Nicomachean Ethics (EN)* 1099a11—15, Christopher Rowe, trans. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002) p104).

\(^{52}\) *ST II-II* 123.1.

\(^{53}\) *EN III.9*, 1117a31—33.

\(^{54}\) *EN III.9*, 1117a33—35.
discomfort and anxiety. What specifies courage is the pursuit of the good of reason in the face of evils that threaten its attainment.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas recognizes that there is a built-in asymmetry in courage’s regulation of the passions, for courage names the disposition that preserves reason’s sovereignty when the soul encounters what is fearful. This fear is simply the soul’s natural inclination to flee what threatens its attainment of the good. One therefore cannot describe an act of courage solely in reference to the agent, whether in terms of her psychological or physiological states. The hostile quality of an object or circumstance external to the soul thus enters into the very definition of this virtue. Courage presumes a concrete encounter with an obstacle to the good, one that pits reason against inclination.

In his book *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*, Lee Yearley assigns to the concept of courage three distinct levels of intention: “courageous actions manifest an external goal, an internal goal, and a “countergoal,” an objectionable result.” The external goal denotes simply the alteration in circumstances one hopes to bring about by one’s actions. The internal goal specifies the axiological quality of the particular action one pursues. The objectionable result, on the other hand, specifies the cost that any course of action exacts upon the compound set of goods one hopes to attain. “Courageous acts, then, necessarily involve conflicts in which a person must sacrifice desirable goods.” The objectionable result can impair or prohibit the achievement of one’s internal and external goals. But insofar as an objectionable result is a definitional part of the intentional structure of courage, the concept of courage itself

---

55 *Mencius and Aquinas*, p114. Cf. pp113—118. These categories, needless to say, are neither Aquinas’ nor Aristotle’s, but they usefully bring out a quality of courage that is implicit in their accounts.

56 Ibid. p114.
presumes an enduring gap between the external and internal goals. The exercise of courage presumes therefore that the value of the external objective one intends to bring about can never perfectly coincide with the internal value of the action which one is in fact able to bring it about. Aristotle and Aquinas highlight this same intentional structure by grounding their analysis of courage in circumstances where one encounters an “objectionable result” at its extreme limit. For it is not simply withstanding any sort of fear that makes one courageous.\textsuperscript{57} Courage is measured in reference to the greatest threat to the good—death—and thus the epitome of courage is the pursuit of excellence in the face of death.

Yet to the extent that one’s excellence of character disposes one to exhibit courage, the same excellence of character renders the prospect of death that much more painful, “for to [the virtuous] person, most of all, is living worth while.”\textsuperscript{58} The very excellence of character that makes courage possible is also what makes it painful, since, as Aristotle says, the courageous person will “knowingly be depriving himself of good of the greatest kind, which is something to be pained at. But he is no less courageous because of that, and perhaps even more courageous, because he chooses what is fine… in place of those other goods.”\textsuperscript{59} It would appear then that for Aristotle, the most perfect display of courage is also the one that is most painful. As Yearley puts it, “courageous people must recognize both that they will pay a price and that courageous acts, which they consider valuable, always involve paying such a price.”\textsuperscript{60} Since for Aquinas

\textsuperscript{57} EN III.6, 1115a11—13.
\textsuperscript{58} EN III.9, 1117b11—13
\textsuperscript{59} EN III.9, 1117b14—16, my emphasis
intellectual goods take precedence over material ones (even if at the same time they depend upon them), this price will almost invariably be paid at the level of sense appetite and inclination, which means that even though the need for courage emerges only in light of reason’s imperfect sovereignty over the passions, the exercise of courage bears witness to the superior dignity of intellectual goods, goods proper to our nature as rational.

One reason I want to draw attention to this peculiar feature of courage with respect to the relation of reason and the passions is that it seems to challenge a basic stance shared by virtually all the many advocates and allies of Aristotelian virtue theory over the past fifty years. This common position, held in various ways and for various reasons by these advocates, is the rejection of Immanuel Kant’s notion of moral worth in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and specifically his treatment of the place of natural inclination with respect to moral worth. In the *Groundwork*, Kant compares two philanthropists, one who takes spontaneous delight in the benefit of others, and one who is relatively insensitive to the needs of others.\(^61\) No matter how right and amiable the generous acts of the cheerful philanthropist are, Kant argues that these acts do not display any moral worth, because they may just as well be the product of natural inclination, and

\(^{60}\) *Mencius and Aquinas*, p115.

\(^{61}\) Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor, trans. (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998) p11—12. Taken on its surface, this passage from the *Groundwork* poses an easy target for those wishing to reassert the moral quality of natural inclination. Michael Stocker, for instance, makes the point that to visit a sick friend out of moral duty alone undermines the very intelligibility of the act as an act of friendship: after all, the sick take little comfort from their friends’ dogged obedience to the moral law (“The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theory” in *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976) pp453—56). Bernard Williams’ famous objection is a husband that would feel pressed to justify his preference to save his drowning wife rather another person in the same situation has “one thought too many” ("Person, Character and Morality" in his collection *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981) pp17—18). Williams is here commenting on Charles Fried’s search for such justificatory ground for exempting certain forms of personal relation from the demands of duties to universal fairness in *Anatomy of Values* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970) p227. His main point is that forms of moral reasoning based upon universal notions of duty overcomplexify and misrepresent situations in which personal relations elicit preferential action.
not duty. Such actions are not necessarily blameworthy, but neither are they to be deemed fully moral because there is insufficient evidence that they proceed from a free commitment to a rational maxim. Hence only the generosity of the unfeeling or sorrowful philanthropist shows true moral worth, on account of the fact that it is clearly uninfluenced by inclination.62

It is in contrast to this dogged adherence to moral duty that virtue theorists of the past few decades have attempted to construct a more suitable ethical model, one that offers a more satisfying account of the relation between reason and inclination. Although in recent years many contemporary thinkers—both virtue theorists and deontologists alike—have worked to reconcile Kant and Aristotle on the relationship between reason and inclination,63 the general boast among virtue theorists remains that an Aristotelian-based theory offers a thicker and more plausible account of this relation. They thus claim to provide a more harmonious, more fluid account of the moral life, centered upon particular yet adaptable principles rather than inflexible abstract rules, an

62 This particular view of duty has met with perennial criticism and caricature by those who see in it an exceedingly bleak and heartless conception of the moral life. Friedrich Schiller, for instance, penned this satirical line expressing a standard objection to Kant’s view: “Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with pleasure./ Hence I am plagued with doubt that I am not a virtuous person./ Surely your only resource is to try to despise them entirely,/ And then with aversion to do what your duty enjoins you (Originally from a collection co-authored with Goethe entitled Xenien, the translation by A.B. Bullock is here quoted is taken from Paul Guyer’s Kant’s ‘Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A Reader’s Guide (New York: Continuum, 2007) p54, who in turn took it from H.J. Paton’s The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant’s Moral Philosophy (London: Hutchinson, 1947) p48). Though admittedly glib, this parody captures well the widespread distaste for moral duty which, in my view, serves as one plausible common thread running throughout the recent resurgence in virtue ethics.

account of the moral life that is more suitable to our *embodied* rational existence with its
diverse and sometimes opposing demands.

Aristotle and Aquinas’ conception of courage seems to run against this general
boast, however. As opposed to the other moral virtues, which eventually reconcile the
goods of inclination with those of reason, courage by definition operates in the midst of a
conflict between goods. If this is the case, then acts of true courage, unlike even those of
its twin auxiliary virtue temperance, will never proceed from first-order motivations; they
will never be truly “second nature” to the agent. “This means,” writes Yearley, that “a
second order of motivations, a *reflexivity* or executive control, always must be present” in
every courageous act. Put another way, more strongly: “*Contrary inclinations* will be a
constitutive feature of courageous actions.”64 Courage then can never be completely
“spontaneous” in the way that other virtues—prudence or justice, for example—might be.

Yearley again:

People who are just… appear to lose something only from the perspective of the
unjust; the just themselves put no value on what is lost. The money or prestige a
lie would bring provides a just person with no reason to act and its absence no
reason for regret. With courage, however, valuable goods are lost, and that loss
provides an agent with reason to act differently and to regret the loss that
occurs…. With inclinational virtues the agent says ‘I will do this’ and knows that
he or she foregoes no real goods. With courage the agent says ‘I will do this even
if I must forego or lose that’ and acts despite the loss involved.65

But if pleasure and promptness is what distinguishes acts of virtue from acts of
continence, in what way could an authentically virtuous act of courage distinguish itself

64 *Mencius and Aquinas*, p115.

65 Ibid. pp115—116. This description makes it clear why the Stoics can never really admit
courage to be a virtue: because it recognizes that the value of goods external to rational agency itself can
serve as a substantive component in the rational determination of virtuous action. In other words, acts of
courage presume the acceptance of loss, but from the Stoic viewpoint no such acceptance should ever
accompany an act of true virtue.
from an act of mere continence? What source of pleasure could the virtuous person take in such an act? It would seem then that the perfection of the virtue of courage somewhat resembles Kant’s general description of moral perfection in the *Groundwork*. Unlike the pinnacle of temperance, where the inclinations are able to display their docility to reason and confirm it with delight, the pinnacle of courage finds the natural inclinations in fierce opposition to right action. While the crowning feature of temperance is reason’s graceful direction of the passions, the crowning feature of courage is reason’s heroic, unwavering opposition to them. How is it, then, that courage could be a virtue?

In order to unravel this dilemma, one must bracket for the moment concerns about the typical correlation between acts of virtue and the reason-passion interface and begin instead by focusing on the perfective dimension of courage. Acts of courage are virtuous not because of what they do to harmonize the relationship between reason and the passions—though the passions are by no means unaffected by these acts—but rather because of what they do to make their possessors good: namely, what they do to sustain the human agent’s pursuit of the good in the face of difficulty and danger. Hence what makes acts of courage virtuous depends primarily upon the goodness of the end for which an agent resists and endures the threats to its attainment. Likewise, the goodness of an end naturally corresponds to the degree to which one will so resist and endure. One may then determine the highest and truest act of courage by determining what counts as an end whose excellence is worth risking the loss of the greatest and highest good, which for both Aristotle and Aquinas (as well as for Homer and Plato) is the good of life itself. Aristotle insists repeatedly that not all acts of resistance to mortal danger count as courage: not all deaths are morally equivalent, or even potentially so. Deaths at sea or on
the rack hold no potential for virtue because they cannot facilitate the pursuit and attainment of the good. Deaths in war, on the other hand, are greatest and finest because they allow one the opportunity to pursue the highest sorts of goods and so attain the supreme heights of glory. Despite his claims about the superior dignity of the intellectual goods pursued in contemplation and the practice of philosophy, this claim suggests—according to the reasoning we have laid out—that for Aristotle the highest good is of a political and communal nature. Aquinas’ elevation of the act of martyrdom to this exemplary status, on the other hand, seems to suggest that for him the sumnum bonum is of a speculative and religious nature. Both figures seem to agree on the point that the specification of courage in actual practice depends upon one’s conception of the highest good: that which is most worthy of the ultimate risk. Aristotle’s designation of this highest good is notoriously unclear; Aquinas’ appears a bit clearer, though as we will see, his account comes with its own set of puzzles.

5.2.2 Endurance versus Aggression: Rival Paradigms of Courage

Our use of the word “risk” raises an important question. What exactly are we talking about when we talk about “facing” or “confronting” the threat of mortal danger? What does it mean to “face death,” and to what extent do the particular circumstances in which one is said to do so determine the morally salient aspect of the act? For instance, as we remarked above, Aristotle’s apparent prioritization of combat on the battlefield carries with it—among other commitments—a privileged view of outward performances

\[66\] ‘For [the warrior] the danger is not only greatest but finest’ (EN III.6,1115a30—32, my emphasis).

\[67\] See infra, 3.4 and 4.3.
over interior acts of the soul,\(^\text{68}\) which resonates with his claim that, although every act need not fully accomplish its intended aim to be virtuous, every act of virtue should provide the agent with some opportunity to actively \textit{display} the excellence of the powers one possesses.\(^\text{69}\) Even if the courageous person must accept death in his resistance to what impedes his pursuit of the good, he must at least be able to resist this threat \textit{outwardly} so as to display his extraordinary (if not indomitable) skill and prowess. In other words, the primary mode by which courage resists threats to the good is \textit{aggression}; and so acts of courage are first and foremost acts of aggression.

Aquinas, on the other hand, reorients the virtue of courage around the ideal of martyrdom, and so commits himself to a contrary emphasis on \textit{endurance} rather than aggression as the elemental act most essential to the virtue of courage. In the \textit{Secunda Secundae} question 123 article 5, Aquinas appears to accept Aristotle’s claim that courage most properly concerns dangers of death in battle. Yet he introduces a distinction there between general battle, answering to conventional notions of martial combat, and singular or private battle, “when a judge or even a private individual does not refrain from giving a just judgment through fear of the impending sword, or any other danger though it threaten death.”\(^\text{70}\) Aquinas is thereby able to categorize martyrdom as an act of battle, inasmuch as “martyrs face [a] fight that is waged against their own person, and this for the sake of the sovereign good which is God; wherefore their fortitude is praised

\(^{68}\) Aquinas does agree with the basic principle of Aristotelian metaphysics, however, that activity in itself is superior to passivity. See \textit{ST} I-II.55.3 and I-II.55.6.

\(^{69}\) “We show courage [only] in situations where there is the opportunity of showing prowess or where death is noble; [and] in these forms of death neither of these conditions is fulfilled” \textit{(EN} III.6,1115b4—6).

\(^{70}\) \textit{ST} II-II.123.5.
above all."\textsuperscript{71} As Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches have pointed out, by conceiving of martyrdom as an act of battle, Aquinas is not analogically extending the notion of warfare so much as redefining the primary analogue itself. Political warfare is only one possible expression of the broader struggle for the good in which every human action is engaged. The admission of this notion of singular battle broadens the scope of courage’s preeminent exercise exponentially, insofar as

one may be in danger of any kind of death on account of virtue: thus may a man not fail to attend on a sick friend through fear of deadly infection, or not refuse to undertake a journey with some godly object in view through fear of shipwreck or robbers.\textsuperscript{72}

Any human action then that seeks to manifest the good and resist whatever opposes the good, may be conceived as an “act of battle.” And while this analogical characterization of all virtue as potentially combative depends (within the order of knowledge) upon concrete reference to traditional military combat, Aquinas effectively subsumes all particular acts of war under a common extended notion of “battle” with respect to the struggle for the good against whatever opposes it.\textsuperscript{73} In other words, war is simply one way of “doing battle” in defense of the human good.

The rhetorical significance Aquinas’ reference to the courage of ‘one who endures shipwreck during a journey with some godly object in view” must not be overlooked. Not only does it contain undeniable overtones of the multiple shipwrecks St. Paul endured during his missionary journeys, including his shipwreck in \textit{Acts} 27 on his way to Rome (and martyrdom), but it also bears upon Aristotle’s own discussion of

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{ST} II-II.123.6.
courage and in particular courageous death, being precisely the sort of death a brave and
noble person would spurn. In this context, it would be hard to deny that this reference
does not represent a direct and provocative critique of the Aristotelian claim that in the
face of difficulty and danger the courageous person must have the opportunity to display
his excellence by acting out against what threatens him, actualizing the powers that virtue
has perfected in him. In a shipwreck, after all, there is nothing to act out against, no
meaningful object to which one might direct one’s efforts of resistance. The
courageous can literally do nothing, and so are unable to act virtuously. In contrast, St.
Paul refers to his shipwrecks, along with his many other hardships, as a means of
perfection and mark of honor. He boasts not in his heroism at striking out against them,
but in his endurance of them, because they have induced him to depend more completely
upon God’s provision and have allowed him to give more powerful witness to the power
of the Gospel of Christ. The different perspectives on the possibilities for virtue in the

74 As a way to understand the ethical significance of this predicament, one may recall Herodotus’
contemptuous account of Xerxes’ flogging of the Hellespont. As he tells it, no sooner had the Persians and
their mercenaries completed a bridge across the strait than a great storm destroyed it completely.
“Xerxes flew into a rage at this and he commanded that the Hellespont be struck with
three hundred strokes of the whip and that a pair of foot-chains be thrown into the sea…. He also
commanded the scourgers to speak outlandish and arrogant words: ‘You hateful water, our master
lays his judgment on you thus, for you have unjustly punished him even though he’s done you no
wrong! Xerxes the king will pass over you, whether you wish it or not!’… In these ways he
commanded that the sea be punished and also that the heads be severed from all those who
directed the bridging of the Hellespont’ (Histories 7.34—35ff, Richard Hooker, trans).
At the same time that this account conveys the absurdity and impiety of Xerxes’ rage against fate
and the forces of nature, it also brings into focus the dire predicament of the brave and noble warrior who
encounters difficulties about which he can do nothing, against which his characteristic powers and
excellences are manifestly futile.

75 “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten
with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at
sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger
from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and
sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold
and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.
midst of difficulty and danger that resonate in this trope of the shipwrecked missionary provide a foreshadowing glimpse of the sort of transformation of Aristotelian courage that Aquinas has in mind. What makes an act truly courageous is no longer the power of one’s resistance to any difficulty or misfortune, but the object for whose sake one endures that difficulty. Courage is no longer primarily about the power of the courageous person, but rather about the power of the good in whose pursuit one perseveres. For Achilles, courage is about attaining the glory of facing and overcoming the greatest of dangers. For St. Paul, however, courage is about God’s power being made perfect in weakness, through association with Christ’s suffering.

5.2.3 Courage as the Ordered Conflict between Reason and the Passions

One advantage that the Aristotelian model of courage has over the Pauline one, of course, is that it still allows ample room for the enlistment of the passions in the face of difficulty. Although the circumstances that occasion courage are such that one cannot perform one’s actions with complete ease and delight, under Aristotle’s model passions such as sorrow, anger and daring can and often do strengthen the courageous person’s attempts to act out against the evil that besets him. One can show one’s ability to fight back in the face of danger, and a component part of this ability is the ordered direction of

Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness….

“But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” (I Corinthians 11:24—30; 12:6—10)
at least some of the passions toward action. Aquinas, however, will argue that endurance and not aggression is the primary act of courage, and in doing so he rejects Aristotle’s assumptions regarding the necessity of activity and performative display in the exercise of virtue. Instead, he grounds his argument for the priority of endurance on the greater degree of difficulty involved in resisting danger without acting out against it. His reasoning is that endurance is superior to aggression because it implies (1) that an evil is already present, (2) that it is superior in strength and (3) that it is present for a protracted length of time. All of these factors exacerbate the threat posed to the will. In contrast, acts of aggression usually involve meeting an evil not yet present. They also usually presume that one is able to effectively resist them in one way or another. Finally, difficulties that arise in the midst of aggression appear to be briefer, if for no other reason that one can do something about them. Whether these explanations seem intuitively compelling or not, it is clear from this point forward that Aquinas’ dominant model of courage is not the attacking warrior, but the enduring martyr. Likewise, it is clear that the touchstone of courage is no longer the performative display of outward excellence, but the strength of reason’s hold upon the will in the face of opposing natural passions.

This shift of perspective is further confirmed by Aquinas’ claim that in the performance of the highest act of courage, the virtuous agent does not delight in her act. The claim is puzzling, since it is one of the hallmarks of the virtuous person that the completion of her acts be spontaneously accompanied by pleasure in the goodness of the act performed. Since the virtuous person takes delight in virtue above all else, it would

---

76 ST II-II.123.6

77 ST II-II.123.8.
seem reasonable that the pleasure resulting from an act of virtue would outweigh any countervailing pains, such as the bodily pain of death. Indeed, Aquinas grants that the courageous act does elicit a corresponding spiritual pleasure in the virtuous soul, and that the sorrow caused by bodily pain, being of a different order entirely, cannot affect the substance of this spiritual pleasure. However, in its most extreme form, the prospect of death does bring with it a countervailing spiritual sorrow even in the virtuous person. Indeed, as Aristotle himself remarked, the virtuous have the most to lose in death, since their attachment to the good, which their life enables them to realize, is so much the stronger. Although the grief of losing all capacity for future action cannot overcome the virtuous agent’s attachment to the ultimate good she pursues, Aquinas admits that the margin is narrow enough to drown out one’s perception of this delight. Therefore “it is not necessary for a brave man to delight so as to perceive his delight, but [it] suffices for him not to be sad.”

How can we really consider such an act “virtuous” in the full sense if there is no perceptible delight in its completion? How could it be enough, when we are considering an act of preeminent virtue, for the inclinations to simply “break even,” to simply avoid falling into sadness? Is the martyr unable, without “the copious assistance of grace,” to perceive the good of the final end for which she suffers? Does this end fade from view entirely amidst the pain of martyrdom? If so, what is there left to hold onto that could give content and structure to the martyr’s moral motivation? First of all, we should ask

78 ST I-II.4.1.

79 “Since bodily pain is more sensible, and the sensitive apprehension is more in evidence to man, it follows that spiritual pleasure in the end of virtue fades away, so to speak, in the presence of great bodily pain” (ST II-II.123.8). Aquinas inserts the caveat, however, that the miraculous assistance of God’s grace can enable the martyr to delight in her act, as many supposedly have.

80 ST II-II.123.8
what Aquinas means here by “sadness.” The point is that the inclinations are unable to confirm reason’s choice by producing the effect of sensate delight. The strength of reason’s choice alone must guide and sustain one’s course of action without the assistance of properly habituated inclinations. As long as reason is not dislodged from its original choice of the good, the will maintains its rectitude; but should this choice be abandoned, the act ceases to be endurance in the proper sense, and becomes merely involuntary suffering. It makes the best sense then to say that for Aquinas, it is sufficient for the courageous person not to regret her choice to pursue the difficult good amidst the evils and pains that result from it.

At the same time, this construal of courage’s highest act only sharpens the question of this virtue’s relation to the passions and natural inclinations: how can one prepare, train and habituate one’s self so as to perform such an act promptly, gracefully, and with ease in the face of mortal danger? Even for the warrior, occasions of mortal danger are rare, and impossible to fully replicate through deliberate training. This problem is all the more conspicuous for the martyr, who by definition faces not only the threat of death, but its certainty.\(^{81}\) The martyr’s situation is utterly unique: we can only truly meet death once.\(^{82}\) So how it is that Aquinas can center his account of this cardinal virtue upon the quality of an unrepeatably and final act?

\(^{81}\) In *ST* II-II.124.4, Aquinas explicitly argues that actual death is part of the essence of martyrdom: “It belongs to martyrdom that a man bear witness to the faith in showing by deed that he despises all things present, in order to obtain invisible goods to come. Now so long as a man retains the life of the body he does not show by deed that he despises all things relating to the body. For men are wont to despise both their kindred and all they possess, and even to suffer bodily pain, rather than lose life…. Therefore the perfect notion of martyrdom requires that a man suffer death for Christ’s sake.”

\(^{82}\) This claim of course brackets the question of reincarnation. But even if one admits of reincarnation, one would also have to posit conscious awareness of one’s previous death experiences in order to counter the claim that the act of death as experienced by human agents is not necessarily a unique one. Even if does not believe it to be absolutely unique, it is hardly plausible to admit of the possibility that
Aquinas explains that while the act of martyrdom is indeed a sudden and unique act, it does require extensive “preparation of the mind”\textsuperscript{83} to successfully endure the unjust suffering it entails.\textsuperscript{84} In this sense, then, like the example given in Kant’s \textit{Groundwork}, the martyr who endures death for the sake of the highest good exemplifies the virtue of courage inasmuch as she fixes her will upon this (rational) good in spite of the greatest possible loss with respect to her natural inclinations. Hence Aquinas concludes that of all virtuous acts martyrdom is the greatest \textit{proof} of the perfection of charity: since a man’s love for a thing is \textit{proved} to be so much the greater, according as that which he despises for its sake is more dear to him, or that which he chooses to suffer for its sake is more odious.\textsuperscript{85}

Certainly, martyrdom is not the only manner in which one might sacrifice one’s life out of a motive of charity; Aquinas explicitly cites dying in defense of one’s country or dying while caring for the sick as valid examples. But martyrdom is unique in that it isolates the state of the will in a way that \textit{communicates} with unparalleled clarity the highest possible intention an agent can have. Since the martyr accepts the greatest evil for the sake of the greatest good, she is able to display her unconditional adherence to that good without any possible ambiguity. Martyrdom thus reveals the \textit{sumnum bonum} governing one’s pursuit of every other end insofar as the capacity to will one’s death for the sake of

\textsuperscript{83} ST II-II.124.1

\textsuperscript{84} In his book \textit{The Four Cardinal Virtues}, Josef Pieper suggests that such “preparation of the mind” for death is an inherent part of the notion of endurance, insofar as every injury irregardless of degree constitutes a certain foreshadowing of death. According to him, every difficulty and danger in a sense “participates” in death, which represents the full and final culmination of our vulnerability. It is an interesting interpretation of courage, but one that is certainly colored by existentialist and phenomenological currents that far post-date Aquinas himself. While I am not sure the extent to which Aquinas would endorse Pieper’s view, I do think that Aquinas would agree that our susceptibility to corruption and death is a pervasive and enormously influential dimension of our moral psychology.

\textsuperscript{85} ST II-II.124.3, my emphasis
the good expresses the human agent’s ability to adhere unconditionally to the good of reason in the face of the most powerful opposing movements of sense appetite.

For this reason, the concept of *continence* applies differently to the regulation of the irascible appetite than it does to the regulation of the concupiscible appetite. Aquinas acknowledges two principal uses of the term “continence:” one that refers to abstinence from lawful acts (particularly sexual acts) in order to pursue greater growth in perfection, and one that denotes the presence of imperfect virtue. “Continence has something of the nature of a virtue,” he explains,

> in so far as the reason stands firm in opposition to the passions, lest it be led astray by them: yet it does not attain to the perfect nature of a moral virtue, by which even the sensitive appetite is subject to reason so that vehement passions contrary to reason do not arise in the sensitive appetite.”

Therefore continence is generally assumed to be inferior to temperance, since in the latter the passions have been subdued and subordinated to reason. As we have argued, however, such a clean distinction cannot apply in the case of courage, since the presence of vehement opposing passions is a necessary condition for its exercise. If it is enough for the exemplar of courage to avoid being overcome by the operative passions that urge her to flee from adversity, what would it mean for her to be imperfectly courageous in the same way as the continent person is imperfectly temperate? One might think of the likes of St. Peter or St. Joan of Arc, who both at first give in to their fear and attempted to flee persecution by denying their attachment to what they had before confessed to be their highest good. But of course, their flight from martyrdom was not courageous at all. Or one might think of St. Thomas More, who in his last writings seemed to have struggled with some instability in his resolution to persevere in his resistance to the king. Once

---

86 *ST II-II.155.4*
again, however, Aquinas admits that, barring exceptional cases owing to the bestowal of “copious grace,” it suffices for the martyr to avoid falling into sadness and despair. Even the most arid and agonizing martyrdom qualifies as an act of paradigmatic courage.

When considering the question of whether continence is superior to temperance, Aquinas finds the need to make a crucial distinction between the two principal sorts of causes to which one could ascribe the alteration in the movement of sense appetite which sets temperance apart from continence. According to him, there are bodily and spiritual causes of the growth or diminishment of the passions, and it is of enormous significance which of these accounts for the strength or weakness of the passions within any given act, because these causes bear inversely upon the merit of the act. Bodily causes on the one hand (which include both one’s natural disposition with respect to concupiscence as well as one’s circumstances with respect to the presence and proximity of objects that incite concupiscence) increase merit if they make it harder to perform goods acts, while they diminish merit if they make it easier to do so. In the case of bodily causes, merit is a function of difficulty—just like a more difficult jump earns an Olympic diver higher marks from the judges. Spiritual causes of alteration in concupiscence, however—and for Aquinas these consist primarily of “the vehemence of charity” and “the strength of reason”— increase merit to the extent that they serve to weaken concupiscence, since the subordination of the passions is a direct effect of the growth of these principles in the soul. Here merit is a function not of difficulty, but perfection.

It is unsurprising then that Aquinas would claim that we cannot adequately determine the merit of any particular action. For when we look upon an agent performing

---

87 Ibid.
what we consider to be good actions, and see that they appear to be easy for the agent to perform, we may attribute this ease to one of two causes inversely correlated to merit: either (1) their inclinations naturally dispose them to this sort of act, thus requiring only a very weak command of reason and resulting in minimal merit, or (2) their inclinations do not in fact dispose them to act this way (and may even strongly dispose them to the \textit{opposite} sort of action), thus necessitating a very strong command of reason, and resulting in maximal merit. So which is it? In the normal course of human affairs, there is really no way of knowing. Even in extreme cases where an agent faces manifest difficulties and dangers that indisputably disincline them to act according to right reason, there is still no way of knowing how sensitive one might be to these difficulties by natural temperament. These extreme cases nevertheless help to clarify the strength of the will’s command by introducing circumstantial factors that “pull” the sense powers away from following right reason, and thus isolate reason from the possible support of the inclinations.

We might say then that Kant was right about moral worth with respect to the virtue of courage, inasmuch as situations that call for courage possess a kind of \textit{communicative} power with respect to revealing merit. Still, we can never be completely sure: one’s sense powers may only be minimally responsive to what would otherwise inspire overwhelming aversion in most. What if, for instance, one were to have an extraordinary pain threshold or absolutely no social apprehension of shame? The closest we might come to a universal type of difficulty that would reveal in almost everyone the ultimate strength of the will in act and hence prove the strength of one’s commitment to the pursuit of rational goods would be situations of immanent mortal danger. Some may
not fear death, it is true (and Aristotle mentions the Celts in this regard), but to be naturally insensitive to death would suggest a degree of psychological pathology that would call into question the very rationality of such an agent.

In any case, I contend that Aquinas’ account of the exemplary courage of the martyr agrees with Kant’s portrayal of the miserly philanthropist to the extent that their actions amidst opposing passions reveal by way of remotion the will’s sovereignty over the pursuit of the good as determined by reason, goods whose ultimate preeminence is thereby confirmed. However, for Aquinas the communicative significance of martyrdom runs deeper than simply confirming reason’s preeminence. By means of her explicit confession, the martyr provides witness to the specifically divine nature—and as I hope to show, the irreducibly Christological nature—of the ultimate good for which she is willing to sacrifice all else. It is for this reason that Aquinas will say that the act of martyrdom “belongs to perfection in its highest degree,” for it manifests the perfection of charity, the supreme love of God manifested most fully in Christ’s willing sacrifice on the cross. It is in light of this construal of Aquinas’ psychology of courage that we will now turn to examine more closely the specifically theological premises at the heart of his conception of courage and its exemplary act of martyrdom.
CHAPTER SIX

AQUINAS ON COURAGE, MARTYRDOM AND THE COMMON GOOD

In the last chapter, the focus of our analysis was upon Aquinas’ portrayal of the psychological inner workings of courageous acts, and specifically upon how these apply to his understanding of the paradigmatic act of martyrdom. The main theme that ran through that analysis was the way in which the interaction between reason and the passions typically associated with courage differentiates courage from the other cardinal virtues and so raises questions about certain prevalent aspects of virtue theory more generally. In particular, there seem to be three basic assumptions that usually inform broadly eudaimonistic accounts of moral psychology: (1) the axiomatic claim that an agent’s every voluntary action is somehow motivated by and ordered to her own happiness or flourishing; (2) the theoretical claim that a certain synergistic harmony between reason and the passions is integral to the human agent’s characteristic form of flourishing, brought about by acts of virtue; and (3) the inference that, in acting for the sake of her own flourishing, the virtuous human agent acts so as to bring about a greater harmony between the passions and the ends of reason. The previous chapter attempted to show how Aquinas’ theory of courage challenges these assumptions insofar as he suggests that courage entails a conflictual relationship between reason and the passions,
and especially so in its purest and most exemplary instances. Even where Aquinas departs from Aristotle—in his elevation of endurance over aggression and in his consequent exaltation of martyrdom as the highest act of courage—this psychological differentiation of courage from other forms of virtue seems to assert itself all the more. For these reasons, I would contend that for Aquinas acts of courage are not in themselves constitutive components of complete human perfection. On the surface, this claim is not all that controversial because Aristotle too portrays courage as an auxiliary virtue, as a virtue that protects reason’s rule over the passions in the face of situations which threaten to overwhelm reason with fear. In other words, acts of courage do not in themselves perfect the psychological operations of the agent.

On account of this fact we are able to hear quiet echoes of the paradox confronting the Homeric warrior at the crucial point where Aristotle disagrees with Aquinas (about whether courage is primarily about active resistance or passive resilience): though occasions which call for courage are by definition the most threatening to human virtue, they also represent the greatest opportunity for the display of virtue and the realization of human excellence. Aristotle believes that the courageous person must be able to act out against what threatens him, and this insistence on activity in turn allows for a fuller engagement of the passions that fuel the vigor and valor of battle. The valiant warrior is a hero not in spite of the fact that he encounters instances of the strongest possible resistance to the normal course of his pursuit of the good, but rather he is made a hero precisely because of such instances. Bound up with this heroic status is an approbation of how he was able to channel his passions so as to strike out against the enemy with extraordinary force and effectiveness. Thus for the Greek epic tradition, and
perhaps for Aristotle as well, the psychological state of the courageous (attacking)
warrior is not merely an unfortunate but sometimes necessary detour in the ascent to
perfection, but rather represents a consummate and comprehensive state of perfection.
For Aquinas, in contrast, acts of courage derive their goodness from ends are that are
external to, and most often detached from, the psychological perfection of the agent, at
least with respect to the relative operations of reason and the passions.

6.1 The Natural Roots of Self-Sacrifice

In this chapter, I will argue that Aquinas actually clarifies and improves
Aristotle’s theory of courage by insisting with greater consistency upon courage’s
auxiliary role with respect to the larger human good. For Aquinas the primary function
of courage will always remain the regulation and restraint of the passions, especially the
passions of fear and despair. By recognizing that endurance is more essential to courage
than aggression, however, Aquinas places the weight of courage’s overall perfective
function almost entirely upon the as-yet-unrealized end for the sake of which one
willingly suffers what is most fearful. What matters now is not so much what one does in
the face of difficulty and danger but more importantly whether and how one’s will
continues to adhere to the good in such situations. Thus the agent’s determination of the
ultimate good for which one acts is absolutely essential to Aquinas’ account of courage.
It now falls to us then to explore the exact nature of that good both for human agents in
particular and for the human community as whole, and how courage facilitates its
attainment within Aquinas’ broader metaphysical economy. As I hope to show over the
course of this chapter, this increased reliance on the nature of the good and the will’s
attachment to it highlights salient differences between Aristotle and Aquinas’ moral ontologies. Of specific importance in this regard are their disparate views of contingency and difficulty as fundamental conditions of human existence and action, and their divergent valuations of human knowledge with respect to the overall perfection of the agent. We will come to examine these two points of difference in reverse order, but must first review briefly the general role of courage with respect to the primary inclinations.

6.1.1 Courage and the primary inclinations

I have argued that courage is not a “eudaimonistic” virtue in the same straightforward way that other virtues are because of its own accord it does not directly assimilate the soul to the good, but rather serves only to preserve the soul’s pursuit of the good in the face of substantial disruptions to this pursuit. If then courage perfects the virtuous agent by protecting her from external threats to the proper operation of practical reasoning, in order to get a complete grasp of this virtue one must look beyond its defensive function to the correlative external goods whose possible attainment it defends. We may begin to do so by considering the connection that Aquinas draws between the most basic principle of practical reasoning and the most basic natural measures of human flourishing in the Prima Secundae. The first irreducible principle of practical reason, of course, is that “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.” Aquinas grounds the establishment of this principle on an analogy to the first indemonstrable axiom of speculative science, often referred to as the law of non-contradiction: that any proposition or state-of-affairs apprehended of the intellect cannot simultaneously be affirmed as being the case and denied as not being the case. In other words, in the

\[^{1}\text{ST I-II.94.2.}\]
intellect’s apprehension of any object, the being of that object is always simultaneously apprehended and implicitly affirmed: “being” is in this sense the most fundamental feature of whatever the intellect grasps. Likewise,

The good is the first thing grasped by practical reason which is ordered to a work: for every agent acts for the sake of an end, which has goodness as its ground and motive. Therefore the first principle of practical reason is based on the notion of the good, which is, ‘The good is that which all things seek.’ This then is the first precept of the natural law: Good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided. On this are based all the other precepts of the law of nature; such that all things to be done or avoided pertain to precepts of natural law that practical reason grasps as human goods.²

This analogical relation is more than just a comparative description, since the speculative and practical intellect are not merely two diverse powers that just happen to share certain similar features. They are, in fact, the same power operating with respect to distinct objects. Speaking to this point in the Prima Pars Aquinas writes,

What relates accidentally to the notion of the object of a potency does not diversify the potency…. It is accidental to what intellect grasps that it be ordered or not be ordered to a work. Yet this is how speculative and practical intellect differ. For the speculative intellect is that which does not order to some work what it understands, but only to the consideration of its truth; the practical intellect is that which orders what it understands to a work.³

Hence Aquinas summarizes his position in this article with a dictum taken from Aristotle’s De Anima: “the speculative intellect becomes practical by extension.” In other words, for both Aristotle and Aquinas, what practical reason determines ought to be performed ultimately depends upon speculative reason’s apprehension of what is.

---

² ST I-II.94.2 This translation is slightly altered from that of Ralph McInerny, as it appears in his book Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992). I owe the line of reason that I follow in this section to McInerny’s analysis of the natural law on p113ff.

³ ST I.79.11.
This “extension” begins with the speculative intellect’s apprehension of the objects that correspond to one’s natural appetites and inclinations. That is to say, our natural inclinations have a great deal to do with what our intellect apprehends as good. Thus Aquinas asserts, “the order of the precepts of the law of nature follows upon the order of the natural inclinations.”

As Ralph McInerney puts it in Aquinas on Human Action, “practical reason is concerned with perfecting activities other than its own reasoning, and the theater of its directing and guiding activity contains the other inclinations which enter into the human makeup, some of them unlike reason in that we share them with other beings.”

The first of these inclinations is the most universal and the one most closely associated with the speculative intellect’s underlying operation, namely that everything that is inclines toward its own preservation in existence. This inclination applies to all existent beings, and is the foundation of any further goods they may be capable of seeking. The second inclination Aquinas mentions pertains to procreation and the care of offspring. This inclination applies particularly to animals and builds upon the first inclination by directing these beings’ actions to the preservation of their species. The third and final kind of inclination Aquinas enumerates is that which is peculiar to rational animals, and therefore pertains to the ends of reason in speculative and practical matters. “Thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God and to live in society.”

---

4 ST I-II.94.2.

5 Aquinas on Human Action, p119.

6 ST I-II.94.2.
Correlatively, there are three implications of Aquinas’ treatment of the connection between the natural law and human inclination that bear upon the role that courage plays in the perfection of rational animals. First, the natural inclinations which frame the human good apply universally in virtue of what it means to be human. While it is a general feature of the human species that within a great many spheres of action the individual agent may determine for herself what particular goods to pursue, it nevertheless remains the case that those goods will be pursued in accordance with the more general aspect of the human good as specified by the natural inclinations to health, friendship and justice.7 Though we may ourselves possess the principle of each of our deliberate actions as rational agents, we nevertheless do not determine the most general goods toward which such self-directed actions may be ordered. The important implication to note here is that, while a human agent may adapt in various ways to various situations in which the expression of one of these fundamental inclinations is

---

7 This is the sense in which Jean Porter characterizes the “common notion of goodness” that grounds each instance of voluntary appetition, whether virtuous or not. In her article “Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in Aquinas” in Theological Studies 47:1 (1986), she writes that “in this context ‘the common notion of good’ can only refer to the concept of the goodness of human beings as a natural species, and by extension to a reasonably well-developed notion of what promotes or hinders human flourishing” (p57). Whatever the will desires, then, it desires under this “common notion of goodness,” but the will is not thereby determined to any particular object. The proper correspondence between the particular goods that the agent actually wills and the particular goods in which the natural flourishing of the agent in fact consists determines at the most general level the specifically formal or “moral” notion of goodness. As Porter points out, it is the indeterminacy of reason that allows for a gap between these two senses of the good.

“Thomas does hold that the will is necessarily directed to the formal object of happiness (I.82.1; I-II.1.7). Furthermore, he asserts that human persons naturally seek certain general goals proper to us as existing, living, and rational beings, without specifying whether these goals are necessary, or simply natural and proper, goals of human desire (I-II.94.2). The rational indeterminacy of the will finds its exercise in each person’s efforts to achieve these formal and general goals for himself or herself. And it is here, too, that the moral life finds its context, since, for Thomas, to be moral is precisely to direct oneself to one’s natural fulfillment as a human being in accordance with a rational conception of what is truly good for humans” (pp57—58, my emphasis; see esp. fn10 on p58).

It is important to mention, however, that this “common notion of goodness” is distinct from the “common good” in whose perfection individual agents find the full fruition and completion of their own individual perfection. We will return to this themes in the next section when we discuss more fully Aquinas’ idea that created beings naturally love God more than themselves.
frustrated or endangered, one cannot adapt one’s own teleology without limit: one cannot suddenly choose to extirpate the inclinations to survive, reproduce and live in relation because these inclinations are fundamental to the species to which one belongs. Faced with the threat of death by starvation, for instance, one cannot ameliorate the situation by conveniently deciding that one no longer desires to preserve one’s self.

Secondly, Aquinas orders these different levels of natural inclination hierarchically. They do not reveal the specific content of the human good as much as the multiple necessary conditions for its possibility with respect to the various dimensions of our embodied rational existence. We cannot carry out the good of our species if we do not first attend to our own individual bodily needs, and likewise we cannot realize the higher goods of knowledge and culture without attending first to our preservation as a species. As was the case with the mere presence of these inclinations in us, we may adapt our actions indeterminately in relation to this hierarchy of goods, but we cannot by our own agency alter its order as this order relates to the human good most broadly conceived. We can will to endure death for the sake of truth or justice, but we cannot will that our bodily preservation be unnecessary for our own enjoyment and perpetuation of intellectual and communal goods.

Thirdly, Aquinas’ account of the hierarchy of these inclinations reveals another irreducible (though not uncontroversial) anthropological claim lying at the center of his vision of human perfection. As one ascends this hierarchy, the goods associated with

---

8 Of course, people have deliberately starved themselves for various reasons. In the case of those suffering from anorexia or other psychological illnesses, one may plausibly argue that something has gone terribly wrong with the rational capacity for self-direction toward natural ends. The case of self-sacrificial denial of primary inclinations, however, is more puzzling since most would not intuitively attribute their actions to psychological pathology (though some of course have). This chapter, and indeed the whole of this dissertation, represents an effort to reconcile such self-sacrifice with an Aristotelian account of rational self-direction.
human inclination progressively distinguish themselves from those of other beings by the increasingly outward orientation they require from the human agent. In other words, the perfection of natural beings in general progresses alongside a proportion development of the capacity to relate to the surrounding world, and in the case of rational beings, the capacity to relate to one’s self. A rock is unable to relate to anything except by means of its mere act of existence, but an amoeba is able to establish more sophisticated relationships to other discrete beings both by means of its movements and its reproductive capacity. Sentient animals are capable of even higher forms of relationality through sexual reproduction, social behavior\(^9\) and through more pronounced interaction with their natural ecological environment (in terms of both predatory patterns and habitat symbiosis\(^10\)). With humans, of course, we encounter a capacity for relation of an entirely different order.

One finds in the human person a capacity for relating to the world and to one another that exceeds even the most sophisticated of nonrational beings. Human procreative relationships are far-and-away the most complex and demanding, if for no other reason than the sheer amount of time and labor required for the successful upbringing of offspring. Moreover there are, beyond the family, an indefinite number of degrees and varieties of social relationships that make up the human community as a whole: associations, guilds, corporations, municipalities, nations and an indefinite number of intermediary and interpenetrating organizations which are perpetually changing, adapting and growing. The underlying precondition for this seemingly

\(^9\) Think of bees and wolves, for example.  

\(^{10}\) Think, for example, of the relationship between birds and insect populations or between beavers and stream water levels.
boundless social complexity is the indeterminacy of the human person’s relation to the world and to itself qua *intellect*. The ability to know in a reflexive manner means that one is able not only to perceive objects in the world through sense but also to reflect upon them through an apprehension of their intelligible forms. Humans are thereby able to mediate their relation to the world through the structures of intelligibility by which each particular being finds its place within a larger conceptual order. Hence we describe objects not merely in reference to our own perception of them, but in reference to their relation to other objects in the world, and to the natural order as a whole. By perceiving and naming a particular object as a member of some larger class of beings, we are implicitly locating it within a particular constellation of concepts, however provisional, by which we attempt to understand the natural order as a whole.

Another way of expressing this same point would be to say that our practical activity, mediated as it is through the organizational inclination of the intellect, is essentially discursive: our various natural appetites and modes of understanding mutually inform each other. The net result of this discursive mode of action is that human perfection proceeds by way of a progressive expansion of the relational parameters within which one’s practical reasoning takes place. As an infant, one’s actions are spontaneous, unmediated and almost entirely self-referential; but as one grows, one’s actions are informed by an emergent comprehension of an increasingly broader network of relations held together by some intelligible order. As we discussed in chapter 5, Aquinas considers this capacity of the human person for an indeterminate degree of coordinated and complex relationality to be not only a perfection of the human person *qua* species, but the culminating perfection of the entire created order. By knowing the world and acting in
the world in light of the full breadth of its intelligible relations, the human person contains within herself the various perfections of the natural world as situated within a larger intelligible order. It is on account of this capacity that Aquinas says that the human person bears the image of her Creator: by imitating the divine intellectual apprehension that underlies this order. In this way, she brings to perfection both her own potentialities and those of the natural order as a whole.

6.1.2 Courage and the Natural Love of God over Self

For Aquinas, the hierarchical order of the natural inclinations are the framework within which the human person uniquely participates in the intelligible ordering of the world through the exercise of practical reason. As one might suspect, this particular account of how the inclinations bear upon human perfection has important implications for Aquinas’ conception of courage. For unlike temperance or justice, which specifically perfect the goods of nutrition, procreation and societal intercourse, courage does not serve the good any particular inclination, but rather works with the intellectual virtue of prudence by seeking to maintain the proper hierarchy of natural goods in the face of that which threatens to dissolve or disintegrate that relational order. It performs this function when perceived threats to the ends of lower-level inclinations threaten to subvert and compromise the actualization of those higher-level inclinations that characterize the perfection specific to the human species. I contend that Aquinas associates this perfection with an increasingly broad and complex participation in natural ordered relations, beginning with one’s immediate physical and social environment and extending all the way to one’s most general understanding of the world and of being itself. Hence
for Aquinas the difficulties that occasion courageous action endanger not only upon one’s relation to bodily and communal goods where our survival or honor are at stake (the sorts of situations with which we usually associate acts of courage), but more essentially these difficulties endanger that dimension of human perfection Aquinas places above all others: the relation one has established with creation and its Creator through the act of understanding.

Yet in a more general sense Aquinas claims that all beings—not just humans—are other-oriented in their natural inclinations insofar as he presumes that everything acts more for the good of the universe and for the good of its particular species than for its own good. In this respect then, all things naturally seek a “common good” more than their individual good. This preferential love of the whole to which one belongs is inscribed into the very nature of non-rational beings in such a way that they express it by merely acting on their immediate inclinations within the larger symbiotic network of natural relations in which they find themselves. “In natural things,” says Aquinas, “everything which, as such, naturally belongs to another, is principally, and more strongly inclined to that other to which it belongs, than towards itself.”

Put another way, the perfection of any being remains subordinate to the realization of those superordinate goods which its perfection facilitates. In nonrational animals, the procreative inclinations presume and build upon the preservative inclinations, and likewise in human beings the social and intellectual inclinations presume and build upon the other two. The capacity of rational animals to live and seek the truth in society is therefore a higher (a more common) good than their capacity for physical or propagative flourishing. And built into this nested hierarchy of inclinations is a corresponding order

\[ST\ 1.60.5.\]
of preference for goods that are higher (or more common). Hence Aquinas remarks how “we observe that the part naturally exposes itself in order to safeguard the whole; as, for instance, when the hand exposes itself to a blow without deliberation for the whole body’s safety.”

Here we must distinguish, however, between the two prevalent meanings of the term “natural” in the context of Aquinas’ thought, the first conveying the idea of “inherent to a particular kind of being or species” and the other simply contrasting with “rational” or “deliberate.” It seems clear that Aquinas intends the latter meaning, since he couples the qualification of the hand’s action as “natural” with the description “without deliberation.” Aquinas appears eager to acknowledge then that for human beings, the love for the common good expresses itself through rational, and therefore voluntary, action. In other words, we act deliberately for the sake of goods that surpass our own, and are therefore capable of knowing reflectively that we are doing so. We are capable of apprehending not only the formal structure of our actions, but also the nature of the higher good of which our own perfection is a subordinate part. Aquinas refers to this higher-order good as the common good. By acknowledging and consciously pursuing the common good through fully rational action, human beings are able as it were to “come out” of themselves by elevating their intentionality beyond the attainment of those immediate goods correlative to their sense appetites. Of course, it is not necessary for us to have full reflective knowledge of the superordinate goods to which

12 Ibid.
13 Jean Porter nicely summarizes this distinction and its significance in “Desire for God,” p53.
14 Again, we should be careful to distinguish this idea from “the common notion of goodness,” which we discussed above. The common good is an actual composite good in the order of being, while the common notion of goodness remains (as its name suggests) a conceptual category.
our own perfection is ordered in order for our actions to express our affective preference for the common good. Nevertheless there are commonly accessible indications of the self-surpassing nature of our inclinations, such as the bond which Aquinas believed they established between the individual and society.

“Reason copies nature,” Aquinas declares: just as the hand instinctively sacrifices itself for the health of whole body, “it behooves the virtuous citizen to expose himself to the danger of death for the public weal of the state.”¹⁵ Aquinas invokes this political parallel as a functional analogy, and the proposition that a virtuous citizen would willingly die for the commonweal was doubtless a very plausible one in his time, though it is surely not an indisputable proof of the principle. For it is readily conceivable that a virtuous citizen might refuse to die for his sovereign if the cause for which he was asked to die was in itself unjust. And even assuming that a good citizen would volunteer his life for the sake of society’s well-being, one cannot assume that he would do so as promptly and instinctively as a hand would shield the head from a blow. The real force of this distinction becomes apparent, however, when considering Aquinas’ final remark on the political analogy of the self-sacrificial soldier: “if man were a natural part of the city, then such inclination [to sacrifice himself for the public weal] would be natural to him.”¹⁶ I interpret Aquinas to be employing the term “natural” here in the latter sense, in order to make the more modest point that the citizen’s membership in the city is mediated by reason and deliberation. To sacrifice one’s self for one’s city in this way involves making a choice. Unlike the reflex of the hand to block the face, the soldier’s act is not pre-determined and automatic; it remains possible for him to act otherwise. The sacrifice

¹⁵ *ST I.60.5.*

¹⁶ *ST I.60.5*, my emphasis
of one’s self for the sake of one’s city is also natural in that it is compatible with our inclination to love the common good above ourselves, an inclination which we share with all creatures. Ultimately then our love of the common good over self is grounded in the natural love for God that all created beings possess, and that we possess according to our distinctive capacity for rationality. Like all other creatures, our love for the common good expresses our natural ordination to the ultimate perfection in which our own perfection participates.

Consequently, since God is the universal good, and under this good both man and angel and all creatures are comprised, [and] because every creature in regard to its entire being naturally belongs to God, it follows that from natural love angel and man alike love God before themselves and with a greater love. Otherwise, if either of them loved self more than God, it would follow that natural love would be perverse, and that it would not be perfected but destroyed by charity.\textsuperscript{17}

Aquinas includes even angels in this conclusion,\textsuperscript{18} driving home the point that the natural inclination to prefer the common good over one’s own good applies to rational beings as much as non-rational beings.

All the same, the possession of rationality does indeed mark a critical watershed in the manner in which created beings come to their perfection. Though we have commented already upon this uniqueness, Aquinas clearly sets out the implications of human beings’ intellectual capacity for their love of self vis-à-vis their love of the common good in the first question of his treatise on grace in the \textit{Prima Secundae}. There he asks “whether by his own natural powers and without grace the human person can

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} This article, entitled “whether by natural love an angel love God more than he loves himself,” is actually located in the treatise on angels in the \textit{Prima Pars} (\textit{ST} I.50—64). Regarding angels more generally, it seems that one of Aquinas’s chief motives in speculating so much about them, apart from their place in the biblical narrative, is to highlight the metaphysical space they occupy in the larger hierarchy of created perfections. Thus angelic beings have a particular place in the hierarchy of created perfections, but it is unclear in the end (at least in my mind) how he envisions the connection between the perfection of their activity and the perfection of material creation.
love God above all things.” In his sed contra, he invokes what amounts to a hypothetical argument about the original constitution of the human person. “As some maintain,” he says, “humanity was first made with only natural endowments.” Aquinas makes it clear that he is not himself an advocate of this position in the body of the article, although he clearly believes the supposition to be both intelligible and instructive. Even if the human person was established with recourse only to her own natural powers, the human person would still possess a love of God proportionate to those powers. According to Aquinas, this natural love of God could not be equal to or less than the love of self, for if it were it would be sinful, and it is absurd to conclude that God would have established the human creature in a sinful state. Therefore even under the supposition that human beings were originally endowed with only natural powers, they would still have loved God more than themselves.

The best place to begin unpacking Aquinas’ explanation of this claim is his reply to the first objection of this article, where he distinguishes the natural love of God common to every creature from the love of charity, by which the blessed love God in a spiritual fellowship as an object of beatitude. All creatures love God as the beginning and end of all natural good in proportion to their endowments. We are not speaking about a love of friendship here, based upon the enjoyment of God in himself, but rather only a primary inclinational delectation for God as first mover and final cause. The second objection then anticipates the question of whether and to what degree human beings by their natural powers can know and hence love God in this way. The objection takes as its initial presumption that “no nature can rise above itself. But to love God

19 ST I-II.109.3
above all things is to tend above oneself. Therefore without the help of grace no created
nature can love God above itself.” Aquinas answers that while no creature may exceed
the capacity of its active powers, one can nonetheless be drawn through the operation of
those powers to objects that exceed it in perfection. In this way all creatures are drawn
by their natural operations to higher forms of existence in which their own perfection
finds its completion, and in this way human beings are drawn to God as the origin and
end of the natural order.

With these general presuppositions in place, we may more fully appreciate the
way Aquinas’ argument here builds upon the one he gave earlier in the Prima Pars,
particularly with regard to the role of the natural love of God in human perfection. It is
worth looking at this particular passage in its entirety:

To love God above all things is natural to human nature and to every nature, not
only to rational but also irrational and even inanimate nature, according to the
manner of love appropriate to each creature. The reason this is so is because it is
natural for everything to seek and love that for which they are naturally suited
insofar as ‘all things act according as they are naturally suited’ as stated in the
Physics (2.8). Now it is clear that the good of the part is for the sake of (propter)
the good of the whole; hence everything loves by natural appetite its own proper
good on account of the common good of the whole universe, which is God.
Hence Dionysius says in On the Divine Names that ‘God leads everything to the
love of Himself.’ Hence in the state of perfect nature the human person referred
both the love of himself and of everything else to the love of God as their
(common) end; and thus he loved God more than himself and above all things.

Aquinas’ use of Aristotle and Dionysius here is neither incidental nor ad hoc. He first
appeals to Aristotle to establish the part-whole principle, which is based upon
fundamental metaphysical assumptions about the teleological order of intelligible natures
within the overarching hierarchy of created perfections. He then appeals to Dionysius in

---

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.
support of the claim he extrapolates from this principle that all things naturally seek their own good for the sake of an ultimate good. Aristotle provides the metaphysical grounds for the claim in terms of a principle taken from natural philosophy, and Dionysius provides the theological description of what this principle implies in terms of the human person’s relation to the transcendent God. This juxtaposition raises an important issue surrounding the exact theological valence of this argument as a whole.

In his book *Love of Self and Love of God*, Thomas Osborne points to two crucial distinctions in Aquinas’ commentaries on the sources he uses here, which bear directly upon the conceptual scope of this particular argument. The first distinction appears in Aquinas’ analysis of Book XII of the *Metaphysics*, in which Aristotle argues that the good of the universe as a whole may be understood in two ways: in terms of the good of the order of its parts, and in terms of the good of the First Mover conceived absolutely. The analogy Aristotle deploys is that of an army, whose good lies both in the proper organization of its members and in the competence of its commander. Aquinas acknowledges this distinction between the good of order and the good belonging the one who is doing the ordering, but he adds that the latter good is more essential to the good of the army because the army exists for the sake of its leader. The analogy clearly has its flaws, but Aquinas’ point is, as Osborne puts it, that “the common good which is the order of the universe exists for the sake of the Prime Mover, who is the separate good of the universe.” This point is important because it establishes a basis in Aristotelian natural philosophy for the claim that in loving the common good above self, the human

---


23 Osborne, p90.
agent is loving not merely the “order” of which she understands herself to be a part, but above all the sovereign transcendent cause of that order. The second distinction, which builds on the first, appears in Aquinas’ commentary on Dionysius’s *In divinis nominibus*. There Aquinas speaks of two ways in which the human being may be considered to be a part of a larger whole. First, we belong to what Aquinas refers to as a whole made out of parts (*ex partibus*), by which he means the whole of the created hierarchical order of distinct yet interrelated natures in which the human person finds its particular place, not unlike the way in which the various parts of a computer belong to it in virtue of its functional design. Secondly, we belong to a whole that is prior to this functional interrelation of parts, what Aquinas calls a totalitas ante partes: a whole as it exists in the mind of its creator: the manner in which a computer, for instance, exists in the mind of its designer prior to its construction.

Aquinas insists that human beings are ordered toward a greater whole in both of these ways. Humans constitute one part of the amalgamated whole that is the natural order, and they also belong to this whole as it exists intelligibly in the mind of God. Aquinas thus places alongside one another two understandings of the part-whole relationship’s application to human perfection, one drawn from Aristotelian metaphysics and the other drawn from Dionysian neo-Platonic metaphysics, holding in creative tension both the human creature’s status as an individual constituent of the material universe and the unique capacity of the human intellect to participate in God’s intelligible ordering of the world.24 According to this Dionysian schema, every creature perfects itself by conforming more completely to its existence in the mind of God. Creatures

24 Aquinas is thereby able to affirm the metaphysical superiority of the intelligible over the actual, but recognize at the same time that only in God do these two realms perfectly coincide. Only in God are essence and existence identical.
complete themselves not only through their act of existence but more fundamentally by resembling their exemplar in the divine intellect. Hence their perfection consists in a certain participation in God via similitude.

By taking this similitude also to be the formal motive of God’s creation of natural things, Aquinas is able to relate this schema to the Aristotelian paradigm of efficient causality: God creates creatures for his own sake, and they find their perfection by “returning” to him. It should not be surprising that for Aquinas human beings occupy a distinctive place in this account of exemplar causality: they bear not only the divine likeness, as do all the products of God’s artistry, but also the divine image insofar as they possess the capacity to emulate God’s exemplar causality according to their own mode of being within the created order by means of the exercise of their reason. Human perfection thus relates directly to the “separate” or transcendent good of God (the good of the totalitas ante partes) in a way that the perfection of other natural things does not. Like all other creatures, God imprints the principle of this perfection upon the human person, but in the actualization of their natural potencies human persons come to possess within themselves (again, by way of participation) the very principle of their own perfection.

This unique capacity does not emancipate or exempt the human creature from its relation to the whole of the created natural order, however. Unlike certain strands of the neo-Platonic tradition, Aquinas remains insistent that the rational animal is still an animal even in its rationality, and that the human mind, though capable of participation in the transcendent intelligible realm, is nevertheless always a part of the world, part of the larger whole of the created order, understood both as a conglomeration of parts and as a
unified concept in the divine intellect.\textsuperscript{25} Aquinas’ Aristotelian anthropological foundation holds this assumption about our animal nature firmly in place, while his metaphysical debt to Dionysius helps to fill out the other side of the tension by securing the indeterminacy that underlies his account of independent practical reason. It is on account of this indeterminacy of self-directed action that Aquinas bases his claims regarding the capacity of the human person to “participate in God’s providence by being provident both for itself and for others,”\textsuperscript{26} and thereby to impress its own mark of intelligence upon the created order. It is on account of this embeddedness of human reason in the natural order that the wounding of human nature through sin affects not only the quality and degree of human perfection qua species, but the manner in which all created things order their own perfection to its completion within the nested hierarchy of created perfections.

With rationality comes the possibility of sin, which for Aquinas implies the failure to act according to the disposition of one’s nature with respect to the order of the good.\textsuperscript{27} Through the false identification of happiness with a concrete object of desire within the created order, sin introduces a systemic disorder into the appetites’ relation to reason, and so renders deficient the human person’s ability “to be provident” not only for itself but also for others.\textsuperscript{28} For Aquinas, the crucial moment in this dis-integration of the

\textsuperscript{25} It is this very location within the created order that grounds Aquinas’ claim that objects in the world are the measure of truth in the human intellect, while the reverse obtains with respect to the divine intellect: it is the measure of the truth of things. See \textit{De veritate} I.1.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{ST} I-II.91.2: “Wherefore the human person has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end: and this participation is called the natural law.”

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{ST} I.49.1.
hierarchical relation between human perfection and the perfection of the natural world is
the loss of original justice, which guaranteed the human person’s sovereignty over both
these processes of perfection. In Aquinas’ view, this sovereignty precluded even the
possibility of harm, corruption and death, so long as the human soul remained rooted in
its original relation with the divine. Apart from any considerations of grace and
beatitude, then, the order of human perfection is profoundly impacted by this contingent
privation Aquinas calls “sin.” The most pertinent part of this impact for our present
investigation is the emergence of danger and misfortune in human experience. For
Aquinas maintains that the actual manifestation of these phenomena occurs only in a
postlapsarian world. It is my contention then that while this claim does not make
frequent appearance in Aquinas’ proper treatment of the virtues, it remains a
determinative presupposition to his particular conception of danger and death, which in
turn directly influences his account of courage. Courage is, in essence, Aquinas’ answer

28 Jean Porter summarizes with utmost clarity the implications of sin with regard to our natural
ordination toward greater-order perfections in her article “Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in
Aquinas:"

The distinguishing capacity of the rational animal, for Thomas, is precisely the capacity
to direct oneself to one’s own proper good by acting on the basis of a rational apprehension of
what that good is (I.103.5; I-II.91.2). But it is possible to proceed along this course either well or
badly. The morally virtuous person proceed well, because he or she proceeds in accordance with
reason, that is, in accordance with a proper conception of what is appropriate to human nature and
what is not.... But Thomas also holds that it is possible to bungle the process of rational self-
direction through some form of sin. While he recognizes more than one kind of sinful
misdirection, he gives special importance to the kind of sin that results when an individual falsely
identifies happiness with some one concrete object of desire and attempts to build a whole life
around attempting to attain that specific good (I-II.2.4; cf. I-II.78.1, 4). What is significant about
this kind of sin is that it undermines, in an especially invidious way, the rational indeterminacy
that is constitutive of human freedom. The actions of the individual who sins in this way are so
constrained by his or her overriding attachment to some particular good that he or she inevitably
loses out even on other finite goods appropriate to human life” (p59—60).
As Porter goes on to explain, “the fact that the rational intellect and will are not determined to any
particular good, and are therefore open to universal intelligibility and goodness, is a logically necessary
condition for enjoying God, who is infinite and perfect goodness (I-II.5.1; cf. I.93.4).” Sin’s constraint
of this indeterminacy, therefore, obstructs the human agent’s ability to love God above all things.
to how these threats may be overcome through an enduring adherence to the truth about the world.

6.2 Enduring with Hope: the Motivational Structure of Courage’s Exemplary Act

The remainder of this chapter seeks to advance the argument that not only is human sinfulness a necessary pre-condition for the actual exercise of particular acts of courage, but that built into Aquinas’ very concept of courage is the presupposition that a certain systemic deficiency affects the way in which human beings are able to attain their perfection through the pursuit of the common good. This pervasive disorder is the result of sin, whereby the rational creature, who is ultimately responsible for uniting the perfections of the created order, turns away from the common good in order to pursue some other, lower good as the final end of its acts. Hence Aquinas frames his response to the question of whether we can love God more than self in reference to our abiding implication in sin:

In the state of corrupt nature, the human agent diverges from reason in the appetitive order of his will, which, unless it is cured by God's grace, follows its private good, on account of the corruption of nature. And so we must say that in the state of perfect nature the human person did not need the gift of grace in addition to his natural endowments in order to love God naturally above all things, although he did need God's help to move him to it; rather in the state of corrupt nature man needs, even for this, the help of grace to heal his nature.29

Just as the human good exists more perfectly in God than in us, the good of material things exists more perfectly in human understanding than in those things themselves. Hence the way in which human understanding brings the various perfections of material things to completion is analogous to the way in which God brings our own perfection to its completion. Sin occludes and shatters this congruence, and by doing so dis-integrates

29 ST I-II.109.3.
the common good of the natural world by dis-integrating its intelligible termination in the human person’s providential participation in God’s ordering of the world. The human person now experiences the natural world as deficient and disordered in key respects because she conceives it against a false horizon, a horizon in which the goods of individuals and the good of the whole come together only contingently and unreliably, if at all.

6.2.1 Courage, Original Justice and Providence

While the theological doctrine of the fall informs Aquinas’ approach to virtue and human perfection from the beginning, his account of courage uncovers the depth of this influence even upon his conception of basic natural categories. Sin impairs our knowledge and pursuit of the common good, and this wounds not only our own perfection *qua* rational animal, but the perfection of the whole to which our own is naturally ordered. It then becomes possible to set our good against the good of the created world, which in turn ushers in the notion of “misfortune,” and so colors our finite existence with uncertainty and fear. It is not merely that we fear the world because we do not understand it in terms of its universal end, as if all that would be needed to remedy the situation would be an appropriate intellectual adjustment.\(^{30}\) The view Aquinas advocates, while acknowledging the vital significance of postlapsarian humanity’s misapprehension of ends, nevertheless holds that the misfortunes that occasion courage are an enduring feature of the world as it now exists.

In explicit contrast with the Stoics, Aquinas argues in the third part of the *Summa contra Gentiles* that contingency, chance and luck are not fundamentally at odds with the

\(^{30}\) This, I will explain later, is the basic strategy that the Stoics take to misfortune.
constitution of the world by divine providence. It is worth taking some time here to highlight the main outlines of this argument, so as to clarify more precisely the sort of ordered harmony of perfections which Aquinas believes sin disorders. Aquinas’ main point against the Stoics is that necessity is not a uniform feature of being, but rather a specific perfection that pertains absolutely only to God. Necessity applies to created beings by degree, according to their proximity to God. For this reason, according to Aristotelian natural science, the movements of the heavenly bodies were thought to be perpetually unchangeable, on account of their causal proximity to the Prime Mover.

The nearer things are to God the more they partake in a likeness to Him: and the further they are from Him the more they fail in their likeness to Him. Now those things that are nearest to God are altogether immovable; these are separate substances who approach nearest to a likeness to God who is utterly immovable; while those that are nearest to them and are immediately moved by those that are unchangeable, retain a certain degree of immobility in that they are always moved in the same way...31

As the degrees of causation move further from the first cause, however, there is a proportionate diminishment in the necessity of the resultant movement of those causes, and this for two main reasons: (1) causes that are deficient in any way do not fully determine their effects—they can fail to attain their end on account of that deficiency; and (2) the number and variety of causes grows the further one moves from the first cause, such that the movement effected by one cause may inhibit or cancel out the movement of other causes.

One could actually construe Aquinas’ reasoning here as straightforwardly neo-Platonic, insofar as it resonates with the view that the material world is itself a dissipating shadow, which in virtue of its contingency can only reflect feeble glimpses of abiding order and true reality. Aquinas diverges from this neo-Platonic path, however, by uniting

31 SCG III.72
the metaphysical gradation of necessity with the notion of providence. The issue he addresses here in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is whether and how contingency and chance may be compatible with the divine ordering of the world. Providence implies that everything is already perfectly planned out, but contingency and chance imply the exact opposite, so how can these two concepts come together? Aquinas’ resolution of this question illuminates the theological horizon of his metaphysics: he reconciles contingency with providence by conceiving of providence not in terms of the infallible ordination of causes to effects but primarily in terms of the beauty manifested by a variegated order of perfections. As things are further removed from the divine first cause, they are less determined to singular movements such that their actions admit of a certain variety and unpredictability. “They are not always moved in the same way,” says Aquinas, and hence they are subject to contingency. Providence intends this contingency

---

32 In his book *Aquinas, Ethics and Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2007), Thomas Hibbs considers how this precise question leads to an appeal to theological forms of inquiry. In particular, it is the darker side of the contingencies we experience in the course of human life that leads us to the question of whether the universe is directed according to some ultimate intelligibility, or whether it is truly contingent to its core. Should the inquirer conclude that it is, the reasoning goes, she can only do so (while at the same time acknowledging the depth of the tragedy that pervades her experience of the world) in light of some soteriological narrative. This dilemma, Hibbs argues, applies especially to the “post-modern” inquirer, who has been fully disabused of the peculiarly modern hope of resolving all the discontinuities of human life purely through the mechanisms of reason.

“Modernity’s failure to fulfill the hopes that modernity itself fostered in humanity generates forms and degrees of despair peculiar to modernity. Pieper’s response is not so much to deny the hope for universal justice but to insist that hope can be a real and vigorous virtue only if it is grounded in eternity, not merely in the flow of time. But does the turn to eternity not risk a denigration of limited, temporal goods? Pieper responds: ‘It is this identical, created reality here and now present before our eyes, whose fulfillment, in direct overcoming of death and catastrophe, we hope for as salvation.’

It is at this point that the soteriological claims of Christianity may again enter into the sojourn of human inquiry with renewed force.

“The wisdom of revelation operates through contingent historical events unknown to the philosopher; it embraces and focuses on death and catastrophe, precisely those features of ancient tragedy that philosophy supplanted in its account of the good life. The vehicle of revelation is a historical narrative, the narrative of salvation history. The source of Christian wisdom is the singular, contingent event of the incarnation, upon which the whole of history pivots and in which time and eternity cross. ‘If anyone should consider diligently and piously the mystery of the Incarnation,’ says Thomas, ‘he will find such a profundity of wisdom that it exceeds all human knowing. As the Apostle states: The wisdom of the wise is foolishness before God’” (173).
because, as Aquinas concludes, “the beauty of order becomes manifest in it.” Hence for Aquinas, the primary task of divine providence is not to ensure a uniformity of causal relations among things, but rather “to establish and preserve order” among them.\(^{33}\)

Aquinas justifies the superiority of varied perfections on the basis of the beauty of order. He does so in the context of his preceding argument for the possibility of evil in a world governed by divine providence. The pertinent passage deserves to be read in full, as it is crucial to my interpretation of Aquinas on this point.

Perfect goodness would not be found in things, unless there were degrees of goodness, that is to say unless some things were better than others: otherwise all the possible degrees of goodness would be unrealized, nor would any creature be found like to God in the point of being better than another. Moreover, if the order resulting from distinction and disparity were abolished, the chief beauty in things would be gone; for the absence of inequality in goodness would also imply the absence of multitude, inasmuch as it is by reason of things differing from one another that one is better than another: for instance, the animate than the inanimate, and the rational than the irrational. Consequently if there were absolute equality among things there would be but one created good, which is clearly derogatory to the goodness of the creature. Now the higher degree of goodness is that a thing be good and unable to fail from goodness; and the lower degree is of that which can fail from goodness. Thus the perfection of the universe requires both degrees of goodness. Now it belongs to the providence of the governor to preserve and not to diminish perfection in the things governed. Therefore it does not belong to the providence of God entirely to exclude from things the possibility of failing from goodness. But evil results from this possibility: because that which can fail, at times does fail; and this very deficiency of the good is evil, as we have proved. Therefore it does not belong to the divine providence to ward off evil entirely from things.\(^{34}\)

This line of reasoning, for all its density, hinges upon two critical metaphysical claims. The first is that in terms of the perfection of the universe as whole, an ordered multitude of goods with diverse capacities manifests a higher degree of goodness than does a single uniform good, even though it be indefectible. The second, which is actually a premise of

\(33\) SCG III.72.

\(34\) SCG III.71, my emphasis.
the first, is that the good of beauty, which is attendant upon order-in-diversity, is superior to the actualized good of any one creature alone, no matter how exalted the end of that creature may be. This passage, in conjunction with the assertions of the foregoing exposition, suggests that according to Aquinas, the extraordinary multitude of natures and creatures—both animate and inanimate—is a direct testament to God’s goodness, which wills a world capable of manifesting an almost infinite number of diverse relations within a unified intelligible order. In this way, Aquinas firmly links the concept of beauty with that of plurality, variety and contingency. The real enemy of the good then is not contingency as such, but disorder.

Within the context of Aquinas’ metaphysics of creation, this association between beauty and multiplicity holds important implications for his particular application of the part-whole principle to the possibility of loving the common good more than self. Far from endorsing a mechanical interpretation of the part’s inclusion within the whole, in which the part must actualize its particular good in a uniform pre-determined way for the whole to function according to design, Aquinas’ emphasis upon the priority of the order of the whole leaves a surprising amount of room for contingency at the level of the parts’ particular perfections. In fact, he goes so far as to admit the notion of “evil” into the beauty of the providential order of creation, in the restricted sense that the particular contingent deficiencies which are natural to finite creatures represent merely new occasions for the ultimate (and inevitable) realization of the good. “Even as the silent pause gives sweetness to the chant,” writes Aquinas, so “certain goods are occasioned from those very evils through the providence of the governor.”35 From the perspective of

35 SCG III.71. “The good of the whole is of more account than the good of the part... Now if evil were taken away from certain parts of the universe, the perfection of the universe would be much
the creature who possesses a particular deficiency, it is viewed as an evil, but from the view of the providential governance of the created order as a whole, it only serves to heighten the beauty of the whole according to the Creator’s infallible artistry.

Does Aquinas thus refuse the possibility of tragedy? On this account, does God’s “artistic amelioration” of the suffering of creatures serve any purpose for the creatures themselves? Here we encounter a question that cuts to the heart of Aquinas’ understanding of contingency, misfortune and death and, by direct implication, his conception of courage as the disposition to act well in the face of these. The first point to be made in response is that for Aquinas God is absolutely distinct and absolutely transcendent with respect to the created universe, which depends wholly upon him as both its first and final cause. There is no sense then in which God and creatures stand “alongside one another” with respect to any perfection; the creature finds its perfection entirely in the perfection of the created order of which it is a part, according to the manner in which that order originates and terminates in the divine mind. Therefore it does not offend the dignity of any created existent to say that its perfection consists in the manifestation of the glory of God within the providential order of the universe. Regardless of a creature’s particular capacity or deficiency with respect to the perfection of its nature, it can have no higher or further end than to reflect God’s glory.

At the same time, this common termination in the glory of God does not mean that the presence of deficiency or “evil” in individual creatures has no effect upon the way in which the natural order operates, especially if one assumes the perspective of the diminished; since its beauty results from the ordered unity of good and evil things, seeing that evil arises from the lack of good, and yet certain goods are occasioned from those very evils through the providence of the governor, even as the silent pause gives sweetness to the chant. Therefore evil should not be excluded from things by divine providence.”
creature. Breakdowns in geological or atmospheric patterns (the depletion of the ozone layer, for instance) can threaten the order of life in the world. The extinction of even one species can cause an enormous change in the functioning of a particular ecosystem.

When we are talking only about irrational creatures, however—beings who act solely upon natural principles that are imprinted upon them—it is true enough that for Aquinas these “parts” belong to the whole in a completely subservient manner, just as individual notes belong to a concerto or individual brush-strokes belong to a fresco. This sort of comparison begins to breaks down, however, when we start talking about rational creatures, who according to Aquinas not only contribute to the natural order in their own particular way, but bring it to perfection by imitating in a limited manner the Creator’s own apprehension and enjoyment of it as an ordered whole. In this way the human person—qua part—bears the image of the divine mind in its own intellectual capacities. In one sense, then, the perfection of any individual human person is bound up with its relation to superordinate wholes within the natural order—family, city, ecosystem—while in another sense that perfection is not simply reducible to this relation. When it comes to human persons, the good of the whole precedes the good of the part not so as to subsume the good of the part, but rather in a way such that the good of the part finds its completion by actively participating in the good of the whole. The human person qua part wills its own good and the good of the whole in distinct ways. Although it wills a greater good for the whole in virtue of the good that is proper to the whole, it wills its own good more immediately and intensely.

One finds an instructive parallel in Aquinas’ treatment of the order of charity: although we love those more who are more virtuous and holy on account of the measure
of the good they possess (in virtue of their capacity to be loved—their “lovability” as it were), we love those with whom we have a closer natural relationship (our family, friends and neighbors) more directly and with a greater intensity.\footnote{ST. II-II.26.7.} It is interesting to note that Aquinas recognizes that in many cases, we are in fact obliged to prefer the good of those closest to us over the good of those who may be more deserving of it because, within this finite earthly context, our own perfection as human beings is bound up with our membership in the particular family and society in which we find ourselves. In the heavenly communion of the blessed, where the limitations of finitude do not apply, the extension of our love perfectly coincides with the degree of goodness to be found in the objects of our love. For in the beatific state, we are capable of extending our love universally insofar we comprehend every particular participation of goodness in our apprehension of the absolute Good. Yet our natural knowledge, being dependent upon the successive apprehension of individual objects via sensation, can extend itself only across a very limited range of beings, and thus the contingent setting of our existence plays a vital role in our perfection. The particular communal structures in which we find ourselves are partially determinative of our perfection inasmuch as these collective entities form the natural setting for our development as embodied rational beings. We are naturally inclined to love these entities as an integral part of our own good because our own perfection subsists in their perfection; in them we complete our own participation in the structures of the natural order. At the same time, however, this participation by itself does not complete the perfection to which the human person is ordered on account of its nature as a knower.
This point is particularly important with respect to the individual’s relation to political society. Aquinas writes that “the human person is not ordained to the body politic according to all that he is and has.” In his *The Person and the Common Good*, Jacques Maritain devotes much attention to this sentence in an attempt to locate in Aquinas the precise basis for limiting the priority of the political common good. Justifiably writing out of concern for the subordination of personal autonomy within the totalitarian movements of twentieth-century Europe, Maritain insists upon a distinction between the human agent’s material participation in the common good of the natural order and the human person’s direct spiritual participation in the divine common good. Like any other corporeal being, humans are ordered to the whole of the material universe, but unlike any other, the human person is created “for its own sake,” with the capacity for a certain “kinship” or “friendship” with God. While the human person depends upon her membership in larger social structures for the development, maintenance and exercise of her intellectual capacities, she may engage in the activity that most fully actualizes these capacities—namely, contemplation—independently. In other words, the human agent is able to possess within herself the principle of the activity that constitutes her own highest perfection. Though that activity remains dependent in various ways upon corporate membership, it is not itself an inherently corporate activity; it is rather the activity of an intellectual whole comprehending a unified *order* out of numerous individual parts.

On account of our twofold ordination to the universe and to God, contingency and deficiency take on an entirely different character as they apply to human perfection. Aquinas postulates that the human person was established in perfect concord with respect

---

37 *ST* I.21.4ad3, my emphasis

38 Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1947)
to both of these “wholes.” Humanity’s natural inclinations (preservative, generative and social) provided every necessary resource for fulfilling the role assigned to it as a part of the material world. While the finite conditions of humanity’s existence admit of contingency and deficiency as much as any other discrete part of the material world, Aquinas thinks that it is nevertheless fitting that humanity in its original existence should be preserved from harm, corruption and death. He explicitly states that this exemption is not in virtue of the perspicacity of human intellect—that it can foresee and forestall all possible instances of misfortune—but rather because God is able to guide human action directly on account of the intimacy of the original relation between the divine and human intellect. As long as humanity adhered to God in that way, as long as that relation of original justice was maintained, then both the order governing human perfection and the order governing the perfection of the natural world were maintained as well. In fact, as Aquinas says, the order governing human nature was strengthened even beyond the natural capacities of its physical constitution: and so the human person remained de facto immune from the fragility and entropy to which the rest of creation was naturally subject. It is not humanity’s inherent intellectual capacities, but rather its intimate relation with God and his providence that enabled and protected this understanding, which was ordained to perfect the universe as a whole. On account of our rational capacity, then, this union was not incommensurate with human nature, nor was it unfitting that God should have preserved human existence indefinitely.

What this means effectively is that while the acts through which prelapsarian human beings actualized their natural capacities were subject to contingency, they were not subject to deficiency or misfortune because of the direct relation humanity enjoyed
with God, the author and director of providence. Though deficiency and “evil” were a part of this original natural order, the human understanding of this order, while never exhaustive, was firmly united to the principle of its providential design. According to Aquinas, Adam thereby participated in God’s providential ordering of the world to the fullest extent possible in light of his natural capacities. In this way, Adam’s immunity from corruption did not flatten the variety and multiplicity of created good, which was (and still is) the wellspring of the natural order’s beauty.\(^{39}\) Nor was prelapsarian humanity determined to a uniform and changeless existence; on the contrary, Aquinas’ claim is simply that original humanity beheld the fullness of the natural world’s glory by grasping the order by which its thoroughly diverse and contingent members converged toward a common good.

With sin, of course, this relation of original justice dissolves, and the human person becomes fully vulnerable to the fragility and corruption of the natural world. She no longer enjoys immunity from the misfortune and corruption which is the natural concomitant of her finite nature. One part of this vulnerability is the inability to grasp the manner by which providence orders the world toward a common end. Humanity’s understanding of the natural order qua order disintegrates, so that what once appeared ordered now appears disordered. Hence Aquinas always couples Adam’s sin together with ignorance as the two basic ways in which the fall has wounded our nature. And with sin comes not only ignorance, but fear: Adam becomes aware of his vulnerability

---

\(^{39}\)Although Aquinas always associates the state of original justice with supernatural preservation from harm and corruption, I am not sure that the latter is in any way necessitated by the former. Aquinas argues that it is “fitting” that in the state of original innocence humanity should be preserved from corruption and death, but it also seems conceivable that God’s direct assistance could have ordained human rationality to understand its own finitude and susceptibility to contingency as a natural and essential aspect of its own form of existence and therefore not a tragic vulnerability to misfortune.
and attempts to protect himself and hide himself from danger. From this theological perspective, it is no coincidence that immediately after the Fall we come across the first instance of humanity’s flight from misfortune. Death enters the world through Adam’s sin, and with it—perhaps of even more significance—comes the fear of death. Thus for Aquinas the fear of death, which is the fundamental occasion of courage’s exercise, is itself an echo of the disorder that entered the world through the Fall. One may ameliorate the effects of this fallen, disordered condition by cultivating virtue (which to a limited degree brings the passion under the rule of reason), but this very cultivation now requires continual resistance toward and endurance of opposing impulses and emergent threats that arise because of our vulnerability to misfortune. And even if it were possible by the acquisition of virtue alone for one to perceive and properly orient one’s actions toward the common good of the universe, that is still no guarantee that one will succeed in avoiding misfortune. On the contrary, the universal fact of mortality is a constant reminder that, although our intellectual capacities may set us apart from other animals, we share in their vulnerability to corruption: a fact we may come to terms with objectively as a property of our finite corporeal nature, but one that will always repulse us subjectively as intellectual beings oriented to the universal good.

6.2.2 The Martyr’s Exemplification of Courage

In the foregoing sections we have explored in detail broad features of Aquinas’ metaphysical and anthropological framework in order to secure certain premises related to his account of human perfection that bear directly upon his conception of courage. These premises help clarify his departure from the paradigms of courage he inherited
from his philosophical forebears. In the remaining sections of the dissertation, we will
direct our focus back to the larger argument about courage and noble death in which
these premises function. The argument to this point has dealt principally with the
intersection of Aquinas’ theological commitments and his philosophical claims about the
perfection of both the rational creature and the universe as a whole. As a result, the
various conclusions that we will draw from this argument are most applicable to the
ongoing debate surrounding the relation of nature and grace in Aquinas’ ethical system.
His account of the virtue of courage raises very intriguing questions for this debate. They
become especially pressing when considering Aquinas’ designation of the martyr (and
not the warrior) as the paradigmatic specification of courage. How is it that the martyr
exemplifies the function of courage with regard to human perfection in both its natural
and supernatural dimensions? In what sense could one reconcile the martyr’s act of
ultimate self-sacrifice with the well-worn dictum “grace does not destroy but rather
perfects nature?” In what sense does the act of martyrdom actually preserve the natural
human good? Does it not, by definition, entail the loss of this good?

The easiest resolution of this tension, of course, is to draw a sharp and contrastive
distinction between natural and supernatural perfection and so interpret Aquinas’ account
of martyrdom as an instance in which he reveals his preference for the supernatural good
to the exclusion of the natural. After all, this interpretation seems to bear itself out in
Aquinas’ declaration of martyrdom as the greatest proof of charity, which is nothing else
than an unconditional adherence to the supernatural good. If it is true, as Aquinas says,
that “a person’s love for a thing is proved in proportion to the value of what he despises
for its sake, and likewise in proportion to the disvalue of what he chooses to suffer for its
sake,” then it seems fair to infer that martyrdom displays a simple decision for the supernatural good over the natural good. On this reading, situations of extreme misfortune in which authentic goods conflict with another merely serve as an occasion for revealing the true orientation of one’s pursuit of the good, for uncovering the object in which one hopes to find one’s highest perfection. Such situations of conflict presume the presence of a certain degree of deficiency, limitation and disorder in the wider context in which the human pursuit of the good takes place. We find that we often cannot fully integrate the goods we seek, and so we are forced to prioritize them and sacrifice the lower for the sake of the higher. Sometimes this sacrifice is so great that we call the situation “tragic,” meaning that it is bound to bring about some non-negligible and likely irreparable damage to one’s attainment of the good in its fullness. Yet it is not really tragic in light of Aquinas’ understanding of sin and the disorder, which fully accounts for the possibility of this sort of misfortune and consequently for the possibility of courage’s exercise. The martyr makes a radical decision to pursue the supernatural and reject the natural, and all the loose ends tie up nicely.

The martyr is the paragon of courage, one might say, because the martyr most resolutely rises above the demands of our wounded nature in order to hold fast to the promised perfection of her new nature in Christ. The martyr imitates Christ by “trading in” the old mode of human fulfillment based on natural inclination for the fundamentally new way of pursuing the good as an adopted son of God. Certainly, this appears to mesh well with the Pauline treatment of the Christian life as one of transition from the old law, the old self and the old nature to a radically new identification with the self-sacrificial

---

40 ST II-II.124.3, my translation
love of Jesus. Indeed, even according to Aquinas, the ultimate end to which human beings are now called in Christ exceeds the capacities of our nature in such a way that we must be “reconfigured” for this end by the external active principles of grace. But the question remains: what is the status of our natural perfection in light of our supernatural calling? If grace is what inspires the martyr to sacrifice her life as a witness to this calling, and if this act by definition entails the violent destruction of her life, is there any sense in which we can still say that grace does not destroy nature?

In my view, a dialectical interpretation of this sort, which takes Aquinas’ acknowledgment of the sacrifice of natural goods in the ultimate act of courage as evidence of an exclusive separation of natural and supernatural perfection, does not do justice to Aquinas’ larger metaphysical and anthropological commitments. Even in the case of the martyr, grace cannot contravene the operation and perfection of human nature. In recent years there have actually been quite a number of studies of Aquinas’ conception of courage and its implications for his wider thought. Of these, the most directly relevant to this study are Lee Yearley’s *Mencius and Aquinas* and John Bowlin’s *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas’ Ethics*. In addition, there are also numerous smaller articles on Aquinas’ notion of courage, including Lee Yearley’s groundbreaking article “The

---

41 Ephesians 4:22—24 is the classic text enunciating this theme: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Nature-Grace Question in the Context of Fortitude” and Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung’s study “Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas’ Transformation of the Virtue of Courage.” All of these recent studies recognize to one degree or another the curiously prominent role and undeniable salience Aquinas accords to the human agent’s supernatural end within his main treatise on courage in the Secunda Secundae, particularly with respect to Aquinas’ turn from a paradigm of aggression to one of endurance. Yet these studies also suggest that Aquinas’ account reflects a new emphasis upon the interior dimensions of courage, an emphasis which extends the scope of the necessity and practicability of courage to all rational agents—and not just male soldiers—acting within a world of chance and misfortune. With regard to the identification and exercise of courage, Aquinas thereby shifts the focus from the recognized attainment of excellence (which takes priority in the Homeric model) to the state of one’s pursuit of excellence: the orientation of one’s intellect and will to the good rather than one’s settled enjoyment of it. According to this interpretative trend, Aquinas’ conceives of courage primarily as a virtue that regulates one’s internal perspective on the world in the midst of contingency, danger and misfortune.

In his book Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas’ Ethics, John Bowlin argues that a defining feature of Aquinas’ account of the virtues is precisely their ability to neutralize

---

43 Yearley, “The Nature-Grace Question in the Context of Fortitude.” The Thomist. (vol. 35, Oct. 1971) p578. Here he compares the function of courage in relation to the different types of ends whose attainment it aims to safeguard. “The final goal… of the natural activity of fortitude,” he writes “is clarified and fulfilled by the relation to man’s ultimate, not proximate, end that characterizes supernatural activity.”

44 DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk. “Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas’ Transformation of the Virtue of Courage.” Medieval Philosophy and Theology. (v11, #2, Fall 2003) pp147—152, 179—180. In this study, she contends that Aquinas’ radical alteration of Aristotelian courage is principally the result of a radically different structure of moral motivation informed by an equally distinct horizon of human excellence. This new horizon, she claims, is none other than humanity’s transcendent supernatural end as revealed and mediated through God’s grace in Christ.
such various difficulties and misfortunes. The virtues are those dispositions that help us to achieve the “difficult good,” ⁴⁵ the good which fully actualizes our various potentialities despite the inconsistencies of time and circumstance. ⁴⁶ It is for this reason that the virtue of courage is considered to be a virtue whose characteristic function is required for every act of virtue as such; for every act of virtue must take into account to one degree or another the various threats to what it aims to achieve, whether they be specific direct obstacles or more universal countervailing forces. Yet as Bowlin rightly observes, Aquinas tempers the subversive effects of misfortune and contingency by appealing to theological claims regarding divine providence. According to Bowlin, Aquinas makes this move at crucial points to preserve the unity and accessibility of the virtues, but at the cost of what Bowlin perceives to be an increased focus upon the state of the will, a position that in his mind brings Aquinas closer to the Stoic view than to the Aristotelian one. ⁴⁷ It is easy to see how one might apply this same interpretation of Aquinas’ supposedly Stoic evasion of misfortune to his account of the virtue of the martyr.

Bowlin’s analysis of Aquinas’ negotiation of contingency and fortune suggests that what makes martyrdom virtuous for Aquinas is not any external act, but the state of the will in relation to the ends set forth by reason. What matters most is that the will continues to adhere to God through charity, and it is precisely this attachment to God that the act of martyrdom sets forth with unparalleled clarity. Aquinas counters the heavy

---

⁴⁵ ST II-II.129.2.
⁴⁶ Bowlin, p31.
⁴⁷ Ibid., pp213—221. Cf. Bonnie Kent’s account of this same trend in the broader scholastic context in her Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century. (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1995)
influence of fortune upon the Aristotelian account of noble death by making such circumstances as gender, age, military status and even rational capacity incidental to the full exercise of the highest form of courage. What counts is the attachment of our will to God, an attachment that is ultimately established and perfected by God himself through grace. Thus the receptive dimension of Aquinas’ account goes much deeper than the priority of endurance. Not only does he preclude an explanation of ultimate courage on account of the ultimate pleasure such an act would elicit in the virtuous person (since for Aquinas it is enough that the martyr not be sad) but he also insists that the supernatural end for which the martyr endures pain and death must itself be received, and it seems that the most any human agent can do to maintain their hold on that end is to prepare and sustain a proper disposition to receive it. Does not this view sound distinctly Stoic in origin? The similarity is striking, especially as Bowlin describes it:

Virtue whose completed act is nothing but a certain state of the will, success in action that is assured, at least with respect to the final end, and fortune made inconsequential, at least for the most part—these are the marks of Stoic virtue that Aquinas imprints upon the moral virtues, infused by grace and perfected by charity.

Is Aquinas’ characterization of martyrdom as a virtue merely a part of a larger Stoic retreat from the threats that contingency and misfortune pose to more context-specific ideals of noble death? Let us put the question even more strongly: if courage is by definition principally about counteracting the contingent difficulties that arise in the course of the human pursuit of the good, and if death poses the greatest such threat to this

48 Bowlin, pp167—212.

49 ST I-II.112.2.

50 Bowlin, 218.
pursuit, then why uphold the steady endurance of death as the highest possible act of courage? How does such an act succeed in counteracting this specific threat?

Of course, the answer that the Christian tradition holds in common with the Stoics is that death is not really the sort of threat it appears to be on its face. From the Stoic point of view, human mortality and the fact of one’s own death are matters that are in no way alterable by one’s actions. When confronting such inevitable threats, what distinguishes the virtuous from the vicious is not how they act upon those threats, but rather how much they allow those threats to act upon them. And it is for this reason that we should focus upon the state of the will in these circumstances, which no instance of contingent misfortune can touch. For the Stoic exemplar of noble death—and one rightly thinks of Socrates here—no external disturbance is able touch the sovereign equipoise that is the true hallmark of perfected human virtue. The end for which the Stoic endures death is the same end for which he endures all else that is not in his control.

It would seem, then, that what differentiates martyrdom from the other forms of self-sacrificial death we mentioned above is the degree to which the possibility of misfortune can affect the achievement of the ends for which an agent dies. There can be no possible assurance that death will ensure victory in battle or the safety of one’s homeland or loved ones. There can be no possible assurance that one’s own death will further the ideological or political changes one believes are desperately needed for the common good. As Yearley points out with regard to the Marxist martyr, a purely pragmatic consideration of the effects of one’s death reveals the deeply subversive effect that contingency has upon structures of moral motivation based upon the attainment of
external ends. In contrast, Yearley observes that the religious martyr suffers in light of a transcendent view of death’s meaning sustained by interior attachments. From this point of view, death requires from all of us an act of ultimate courage to the extent that it represents the ultimate moment of truth where our *sumnum bonum* comes to light. Likewise for Aquinas, martyrdom is a virtuous act because it reveals most clearly the greatest possible strength with which one can adhere to the highest goods of reason.

In terms of Aquinas’ departure from the Homeric model of courage with which Aristotle struggled, however, this characterization still begs the fundamental question of why, for what *purpose*, one would choose to endure evil or misfortune for the sake of an interior attachment or orientation. What is it exactly about the adherence of the will to reason that would make it worth suffering the misfortune of a publicly shameful death? The answer to this question offered by those ancient thinkers inspired by the Socratic tradition of philosophical inquiry is more or less the same: whether or not fortune treats us favorably or unfavorably, it remains the case that our highest perfection consists in the maximum realization of our highest natural capacity, which of course is the capacity to know the truth about the world. If this claim marks a definitive break between theories of virtue centered upon externally-oriented performative excellence and those centered upon internally-oriented intellectual excellence, Aquinas’ treatment of martyrdom appears more in line with the latter, since even though it is of the essence of martyrdom to be an act of performative and communicative witness, it is the attachment of the will to God that determines the goodness of the act, and hence what the martyr communicates is not

---

51 Yearley, pp568—70.

52 Death is not universally experienced as a crisis of this sort, of course. Many die sudden deaths, many die as young children, and many die with the same simplicity and directness of any other animal. Yet we nevertheless distinguish between “good” or “desirable” deaths and ones that are repugnant.
primarily her own achievement of excellence but the truth about the world revealed through Christ’s incarnation. Such an internally-oriented view of courage, which privileges endurance over aggression, accords a primary place to the apprehension of truth in their various conceptions of human perfection.

Based on the accounts we have explored in this study, I contend that the place Aquinas himself gives to intellectual knowledge in the perfection of the human person and the perfection of the universe as a whole offers us an avenue for understanding more clearly the way in which martyrdom, as the paradigmatic act of courage, preserves the natural structure of the human good as rooted in the unique form of deliberative relatioality for which our reason equips us. Martyrdom is the highest act of courage because it preserves the supreme mode of human activity. It defends the highest actualization of our natural potencies, which for Aquinas involves not only the perfection of our individual nature, but the perfection of the universe as a whole. And what unites these two levels of perfection is the operation of reason; for reason allows the human person to realize within itself, as a part of its own good, the superordinate good of the natural order to which it belongs and, by extension, the ultimate good of this order as it inheres in its first cause: the Good as such. Hence Aquinas goes beyond Aristotle in asserting that the perfection of our nature necessarily involves growth in divine similitude not merely through our understanding of the world, but through our understanding of its divine origin as well. As intellectual beings, we perfect ourselves by coming to behold and embrace our place in both of the “wholes” to which we belong: the order of the created universe and the divine intellect whose act brings that order into existence.
Aquinas believes human happiness consists in the intellectual activity by which we participate in God’s governance of the world and thereby obtain an infinitesimal glimpse of the divine essence.\textsuperscript{53} Thus by refusing to deny what she believes to be true, the martyr defends the perfection of her nature by preserving the intelligibility of her understanding of the created order. To betray this intelligibility would be to betray the basic inclination that distinguishes her as a rational being: the desire to know the truth about the world and its Creator, and to participate in communal structures based upon the communication of this knowledge. Aquinas says that “whatever pertains to this [distinctive] inclination belongs to the natural law; for instance, to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things”.\textsuperscript{54} But as the fact of martyrdom clearly demonstrates, the precepts immediately connected to lower inclinations may come into conflict with the precept to shun ignorance; and indeed the demands of one’s desire to know and share the truth may even appear to conflict with the precept to avoid offense or social subversion. The example of Socrates, the gadfly of Athens, would seem to demonstrate that point most plainly. Nevertheless as Socrates’ example also shows, the endurance of this conflict, even unto death, has an effect upon the larger world. Socrates’ motto that “an unexamined life is not worth living” was not

\textsuperscript{53} In his account of the intrinsic intelligibility of the divine nature, Aquinas inquires whether creatures can come to acquire any knowledge of God through their own capacities and inclinations. He responds with what amounts to a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} based upon these 3 fundamental premises: (1) happiness is the final cause of creatures, (2) the fulfillment of any creature’s highest natural inclination is a necessary condition of its happiness, and (3) our highest inclination is to know the truth about the world and its first cause. Thus Aquinas argues that “if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to happiness, or its happiness would consist in something else beside God.” The latter alternative he rules out because it contradicts faith, which tells us that “the ultimate perfection of the rational creature is to be found in that which is the principle of its being;” while the former alternative he rules out because contradict our experience of reason: “for there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void (ST I.12.1).”

\textsuperscript{54} ST I-II.94.2, my emphasis
simply a defiant battle cry against his accusers. It was a form of life he lived out and impressed upon the world around him, and which in turn gave birth to a form of inquiry that has continually transformed the world ever since. Likewise, Aquinas maintains that the proximate end of the courageous person enduring death is “the reproduction in action” of the likeness of the virtue he possesses. While the goodness an act of courage for Aquinas may take its goodness from the interior orientation of the will, the deaths of Socrates and Christ both demonstrate that this paradigm by no means brackets the transformative potential that such acts have with respect to the external world.

What differentiates Aquinas’ account of martyrdom from the various accounts of noble death in his philosophical forebears is the relative cosmological horizons against which they construe the obstacles to human perfection more generally. Are conflicts of authentic goods blind hazards of finite existence, or do they signal a fundamental segregation of ends corresponding to different dimensions of our nature? Either conclusion would seem to sacrifice a certain degree of intelligibility with regard to the natural order: either inclinations give us little or no glimpse into the structure of creatures’ natural flourishing, or else they tell us that the various forms of human fulfillment may inherently conflict with one another.

Aquinas’ treatment of martyrdom reveals his own strategy for dealing with the conflict of natural ends. It is a theological strategy, which takes as its point of departure the Christian narrative of creation, sin and redemption. This narrative allows Aquinas to make a distinction at the core of his anthropology between human nature as originally and integrally constituted and human nature as wounded by sin. Sin wounds human

55 *ST* II-II.123.7.
nature in both its intellectual and appetitive capacities by dissolving original justice: humanity’s direct and intimate relation to the divine. This relation secured not only the governance of reason over human acts but also maintained the congruence of natural ends. It preserved the human pursuit of the good from the disorder to which human beings were susceptible on account of their corporeal composition. Without this relation, the pursuit of our natural perfection is laid bare to the hazards of corruption and misfortune. And so we need the virtue of courage to regulate our fear in the face of these hazards. But what good is the regulation of fear if the underlying cause of the existential disorder that lies at the heart of this fear remains?

6.2.3 Aquinas versus the Stoics on Suffering and Invulnerability

This question leads us to the point where Aquinas parts ways with the Stoic approach to misfortune. Both Aristotle and Aquinas concur with the general Stoic consensus that while grave and frequent misfortunes can make virtue more difficult, they cannot eliminate its possibility altogether insofar as external circumstances cannot by themselves entirely abolish the rule of reason; but their reasons for maintaining this point differ. Commenting on Book I, Chapter 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas remarks that even amidst grave misfortune “virtue shines forth… not because one may not feel sorrow or sadness as the Stoics held,” but because in the courageous person “reason does not succumb to such afflictions.” For Aristotle and Aquinas, the exemplar of courage feels the full weight of the loss of goods that misfortune entails, whereas for the Stoic

56 *Commentary on the* Nicomachean Ethics, p195.
exemplar of virtue, such sorrow is not possible. Aquinas summarizes the Stoic view in his consideration of the way in which Christ himself felt sorrow.

The Stoics asserted... that no one is saddened save by the loss of his goods. Now the just man esteems only justice and virtue as his goods, and these he cannot lose; otherwise the just man would be subject to fortune if he was saddened by the loss of the goods fortune has given him. But Christ was most just... therefore there was no sorrow in Him.

The Stoic argument as he presents it here hinges upon the premise that virtue cannot be subject to fortune; if it were, then it would not bear an essential relation to free human acts, but would rather be reducible to arbitrary determinations of fate. Even though Aquinas defends the idea that Christ felt sorrow, he goes along with the better part of the Stoic view. It is true, he says, that with regard to the chief good of virtue, Christ could not have felt sorrow because he was never in danger of losing that good; but with regard to “secondary goods pertaining to the body” he could feel genuine sorrow in his sensitive appetite at the apprehension of their loss. This form of sorrow does not disturb the sovereignty of reason, and so Aquinas refers to the sorrow of Christ as merely a “propassion:” a movement of the soul limited to the sensitive appetite alone, as opposed to a “perfect passion,” an appetitive movement of the soul that succeeds in affecting the operation of reason.

The Stoics take the strong view that for the truly virtuous, the objects of sensitive appetite are not real goods at all, and so their loss would occasion no corresponding sorrow. For the Stoics, sorrow necessarily disturbs and obstructs reason, and so makes

57 It is worth noting that while in the Summa contra Gentiles, Aquinas engages the Stoics almost exclusively on issues surrounding necessity and chance, his treatment of the Stoics in the Summa Theologiae—filtered almost entirely through Cicero—is similarly relegated to one issue: that of the passion’s influence upon reason and virtue.

58 ST III.15.6
59 ST III.15.6ad2
one’s pursuit of the good susceptible to the shifting winds of fortune. For this reason, Stoics aspire to a degree of detachment from all passion that would also seem to necessitate an accompanying disengagement of interior action—what really determines one’s ethical perfection—from one’s immersion in the natural order of external goods. Aquinas cannot therefore subscribe to the Stoic view in its purest form. Throughout his writings, he repeatedly rejects Cicero’s claim that all passions are “diseases of the soul.” For him, the passions have their place in the perfection of human nature, such that even the virtuous feel fear and sorrow at the loss of bodily goods in a way that cannot simply be effaced by interior acts of reason. Does this not open the door to the threat of misfortune, though, as the Stoics would have it? Aquinas’ consideration of martyrdom is most instructive in negotiating this question, because it pinpoints the way in which the courageous are able to maintain their hold upon the good of virtue even in the midst of the greatest misfortune (as the Stoics reasoned they should be) without at the same time completely negating the integral significance of the pain and sorrow that naturally attends death.

Aquinas argues that martyrdom is an act of virtue insofar as “it belongs to virtue to safeguard the good of reason,” which has truth as its proper object and justice as its proper effect. The martyr stands firm in the truth that she professes, and in doing so she preserves justice with regard to her relation to God and to the human community. Aquinas cannot simply discount the martyr’s own loss of life as insignificant to her act of virtue; indeed it is her adherence to the good of virtue in the face of this loss that makes it

60 Although this phrase may not necessarily represent the Stoic view in its most sophisticated and defensible form, it does seem to represent the “extreme” form of Stoicism in reference to which Aquinas situates many of his psychological claims in the Summa Theologiae. Cf. ST I-II.22.2, 24.2, and 9.2ad2.

61 ST II-II.124.1.
the greatest possible proof of charity. But what exactly is the character of the “charity” that martyrdom proves? I have argued that Aquinas provides a philosophical basis for understanding the martyr’s voluntary self-sacrifice as a natural expression of her love of the common good over self. In my opinion, this philosophical basis also allows for the construal of martyrdom as a witness to an abiding belief in the ultimate convergence of the good, realized in the perfection of the superordinate structures in which human perfection comes to its completion within the natural order. It is true that in presuming the good’s ultimate convergence in higher order perfections Aquinas shares common ground with Stoic virtue theory, but his insistence that this convergence not necessitate the negation of lower order perfections differentiates his view from the Stoics. Like Aristotle, Aquinas maintains that the exemplar of courage feels sorrow at the prospect of death even more poignantly than a less virtuous person would. But for Aquinas, the martyr exemplifies an even higher form of courage by enduring death for the sake of an even higher good, a good which in the end is able to preserve her individual perfection within itself. Unlike the personal or social good that the warrior endeavors to defend, the martyr aims to preserve a good realized through her knowledge of the world and its first cause. In its most perfect form, this good includes the conscious awareness that one’s own intellectual perfection subsists within the divine intellect in which it participates. Hence for Aquinas, this intelligible good more closely approximates the perfection of the human person as a similitude to the divine. Thus the highest form of courage is that which is able to preserve the will’s adherence to this good.

The martyr proves her attachment to the highest good of reason by standing fast against its greatest possible threat, namely death. On this particular reading of Aquinas’
metaphysically informed anthropology, death appears to us as the greatest threat to our perfection not merely because it dissolves the bodily functions that sustain all our other activities, but more significantly because it seems to contradict the human desire to know the world as an intelligible order of goods converging in the Good as such. According to the Aristotelian tradition Aquinas inherits, even the most wise encounter death as an interruption of contemplation. Likewise for the Christian tradition Aquinas inherits, the martyr views death as a weapon of coercion employed against him in the hopes of driving a wedge between the goods associated with her social and bodily flourishing and the goods associated with her intellectual attempt to understand the world and its Creator. The martyr suffers the loss of bodily goods order to defend the goods of truth (virtue’s proper object) and justice (virtue’s proper effect), which together establish the proper relation of the human person to the natural world and its first cause. The martyr clings to the hope that what perfects her as an individual human being is not, despite all appearances, ultimately separable from the final unified Good in which the natural world as a whole participates.

For Homer and Aristotle, human mortality fundamentally challenges any such hope; the whole idea of “mortal knowledge” itself remains a tragic paradox. It therefore makes no sense from their viewpoint that enduring death for the sake of one’s mode of understanding should in any way exemplify human excellence. For Socrates, on the other hand, and for the Stoics who follow in his Platonic legacy, the endurance of death is the consummation of one’s unconditional pursuit of truth, the culminating point of one’s ascent from the particular, contingent realm of bodily goods to the universal.

---

62 Perhaps this paradox was part of the motivation for the Averroist interpretation of the agent intellect as a common universal faculty shared alike by all individuals.
immutable realm of the intelligible good. Aquinas charts a middle path with respect to these two approaches to our mortality’s relation to our perfection as rational beings. He agrees with Aristotle that death is indeed a genuine threat to our integral perfection as a body-soul union, but he maintains that its subversion of our distinctive mode of perfection is not irrevocable. He agrees with Socrates that our highest activity (and our first obligation to justice) consists in our pursuit of the truth, but he maintains that this activity is fully congruent with our material functionality as a part of the natural world. Indeed, Aquinas thinks that through the act of understanding we perfect both ourselves and the natural order as a whole. What allows him to strike this balance is his theological assumptions concerning creation, sin and redemption. The martyr adheres to the divine good through the virtues and gifts given to her by the Holy Spirit, which serve to heal her nature and perfect it in conformity with a true understanding of creation and its Creator.

On the one hand, then, Aquinas tailors his account of the martyr to his Aristotelian framework of virtue by depicting her act as an exemplification of courage’s defense of the good of reason in the face of the gravest threat to its sovereignty. On the other hand, however, his depiction depends upon his enduring commitment to the traditional understanding of the martyr as a witness to the victory of God’s redemptive love over the disorder of human sinfulness, as revealed through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Thus the courage of the martyr defends the good disclosed by grace, bearing witness to the truth that the perfection of the human person requires a reorientation of our relation toward the natural world and its Creator. Aquinas’ exaltation of the martyr’s endurance points to the theological core underlying his conception of courage: that the hope of our integral perfection as rational creatures depends upon a fundamental
restoration of justice with respect to our original natural relation to the material world via knowledge, and with respect to our original natural relation to God as its first and formal cause. For Aquinas, this reorientation and restoration comes about through the history of God’s covenant with the Jews and culminates in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fundamental building blocks of his theory of human virtue and moral perfection all depend for their full intelligibility upon this soteriological horizon. And so we shall conclude our study with a consideration of the irreducibly Christological character of this soteriological horizon.
CHAPTER SEVEN

RECONCILING ALL THINGS THROUGH HIS BLOOD:
THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CORE OF AQUINAS’ CONCEPTION OF COURAGE

While Aquinas depends heavily upon a more-or-less Socratic model of philosophical excellence (as filtered through Aristotle, the neo-Platonists and Stoics) in his delineation of the perfection of the martyr, he also rejects any essential discontinuity between this mode of excellence and the human person’s physical and social flourishing as a part of the natural order. The metaphysical catalyst that permits the preservation of this continuity is Aquinas’ account the disorder that original sin has introduced into the human soul and into the natural world more generally.\(^1\) He presumes that this disorder afflicts our nature as it is presently constituted, and infects the wider universe as a result. Aquinas attributes to this collective disorder key points of incongruence between the various capacities in which we pursue the good as embodied rational beings. As a Christian, it is not surprising that Aquinas then appeals to the grace of God manifested in the person of Jesus Christ as the means by which these various levels of human perfection are reconciled, both conceptually and in actual fact.

\(^1\) *ST* I.85.3: “As a result of original justice, the reason had perfect hold over the lower parts of the soul, while reason itself was perfected by God, and was subject to Him. Now this same original justice was forfeited through the sin of our first parent...so that all the powers of the soul are left, as it were, destitute of their proper order, whereby they are naturally directed to virtue; which destitution is called a wounding of nature.”
7.1 The Redeemer of Human Nature

Through the saving work of Christ, grace heals our nature by establishing once again a relation of justice between the human person and God. This grace also elevates our nature so as to enable us to share in the divine life through a direct vision of the divine essence. Aquinas sufficiently emphasizes his endorsement of the doctrine that Christ’s redemption confers upon the human creature a dignity surpassing that of Adam and Eve in their original state of innocence. What is less emphasized in Thomistic interpretation is the correspondence between the state of original justice and the state of grace to which Christ restores our nature. While Aquinas makes it clear that the two states are distinct, there are nevertheless certain striking parallels between them that similarly affect determinative features of the human person’s ethical situation. The most significant such feature, I contend, is the status of suffering and death with respect to the integration of our natural ends. For Aquinas seems to hold consistently to the belief that in both the state of original innocence and in the state of grace, the human person is ultimately protected by God’s direct assistance from the evils of misfortune, corruption and death. In both of these states, nothing calls into question human nature’s teleological integrity. Likewise, the human person’s union with God in both of these states circumvents the potential problem that contingency raises for the realization of human perfection by means of finite causality. The multiplicity of created agencies entails a certain degree of mutual conflict in their actual exercise, such that the fulfillment of one creature’s action may entail the curtailing or negating of another’s. There is no reason the human creature should be immune from this sort of deficiency, but Aquinas
nevertheless insists that it is: either in virtue of original justice, or in virtue of sanctifying grace.

After the fall, God withdraws the “grace” of original justice (and permits the human race to experience the misfortune, deficiency and entropy that affect every other bodily creature. “Consequently, death and all consequent bodily defects are punishments of original sin.”

Aquinas even argues that prelapsarian humanity experienced no passions whatsoever that take evil as their object—passions such as sorrow and fear—because such evils are incompatible with the perfection of the primitive state. Therefore the human person in the state of innocence had no need for the actual exercise of courage as a virtue regulating fear, although Aquinas does insist that even in this sense courage existed in Adam as a habit, which means that he would have spontaneously regulated his fear had there been anything to elicit such fear. This point is important because it establishes a more general premise regarding the dependency of human perfection upon contingent factors external to the soul. Aquinas fleshes out this relation by pointing out that “passions which relate to evil in another are not incompatible with the perfection of the primitive state.” For instance, “in that state man could hate the demons' malice, just as he could love God's goodness.” Similarly, he could also fear the loss of God’s goodness as a possible future evil. Aquinas allows that Adam could have exercised

\[2 \text{ST I-II.85.5.} \]
\[3 \text{ST I.95.2,3ad2.} \]
\[4 \text{ST I.95.3: “Any virtue which implies imperfection incompatible with the perfection of the primitive state, could exist in that state as a habit, but not as to the act; for instance, penance, which is sorrow for sin committed; and mercy, which is sorrow for others' unhappiness; because sorrow, guilt, and unhappiness are incompatible with the perfection of the primitive state. Wherefore such virtues existed as habits in the first man, but not as to their acts; for he was so disposed that he would repent, if there had been a sin to repent for; and had he seen unhappiness in his neighbor, he would have done his best to remedy it.”} \]
\[5 \text{ST I.95.3ad2.} \]
courage, but only in relation to the passions of daring and hope, which correspond to the pursuit of arduous goods.⁶

In most ways, then, the state of original innocence does not differ all that much from our current postlapsarian state, except for one major aspect: namely the possibility of misfortune, corruption and death and the fear that these prospects elicit. I have attempted to show the deep impact that various approaches to these features of our existence have in correlative theories of moral perfection and conceptions of courage. Accordingly I have argued that Aquinas’ own approach to the facts of death and misfortune determinatively shape his distinctive account of courage and its exemplary act. In this concluding chapter, then, I go on to argue that Aquinas’ approach to misfortune and death is theological at its core: just as these evils are among the primary effects of the sin which has separated us from God, their neutralization is a primary effect of the reconciliation with God that has been accomplished in Christ. The grace of Christ elevates our nature by bestowing upon it a new capacity for the direct vision of God, but not to the exclusion of its restoration. This restoration brings healing and wholeness to every part of the soul wounded by sin (evils which follow from the disorder of sin itself) and remits the punishment of sin as well (evils which are imposed ad extra according to the decrees of divine justice).

As the incarnation of the eternal Word of God, person of Jesus occupies an absolutely unique place in both the economy of being and the economy of salvation. As

---

⁶ Ibid. Since evil cannot be the object of the passions in the state of innocence, it seems to me that an intriguing consequence that the aspect of “arduousness” attached to the good would not be viewed as an object of aversion. Would it be bound up with the good so closely that either (1) it would never occur to Adam to think of the good he is pursuing as “arduous,” or (2) the arduousness would be embraced as a good in itself?
the second Person of the Trinity, the Word proceeds from the Father and is the perfect Image of the Father, and is therefore equally inaccessible to the created intellect as the Father himself. There is no necessity either obliging or prohibiting this Word from becoming flesh, yet Aquinas nevertheless deems it fitting (conveniens) that God the Son should become incarnate because “it would seem most fitting that by visible things the invisible things of God should be made known; for to this end was the whole world made.” Aquinas never fully commits one way or another to whether or not there would have been an incarnation without sin, but he does seem committed to the view that the perfection of the human person consists in coming to know God through its own particular knowledge of the created world. He also appears committed to the further view that in the rational creature’s apprehension of the Creator through creation, the material universe itself comes to its culminating perfection. Insofar as sin has hindered this coordinated order of perfections (through the evils of both fault and punishment), the incarnation could be thought of from a cosmological perspective as “God’s way of setting things right again”. But this is not in fact the primary way Aquinas explains the fittingness of the Incarnation.

What is befitting to a thing is that which belongs to it by reason of its nature; thus, it befits human beings to reason, since this quality belongs to him because he is of a rational nature. But the very nature of God is goodness, as is clear from Book One of Dionysius’s Divine Names. Hence, whatever belongs to the essence of goodness befits God. But it belongs to the essence of goodness to communicate itself to others, as is plain from Book Four of Dionysius’s Divine Names. Hence it belongs to the essence of the highest good to communicate itself in the highest manner to the creature, and this is brought about chiefly by ‘His so joining created nature to Himself that one Person is made up of these three—the Word, a soul and flesh,’ as Augustine says in On the Trinity (Book 13). It is apparent therefore that it was fitting for God to become incarnate.

---

7 ST III.1.1, my emphasis.

8 ST III.1.1.
This idea of God as highest goodness communicating himself in the highest manner to creation recalls a small but well-known passage from Aquinas’ commentary on Book I of the Sentences where he enumerates three ways in which God may be said to “exist within creation.”\textsuperscript{9} The first way is through the likeness or vestige of the divine goodness in every individual creature, whether animate or inanimate. The second way is peculiar to rational creatures, who are able to “touch” God in himself (as a separate first cause) through the operations of intellect and not simply by way of similarity. “This occurs when one adheres through faith to the First Truth itself and, in charity, to the Sovereign Good.”\textsuperscript{10} The saints then are the preeminent examples of how God makes himself present to the world in this second manner. The third manner in which Aquinas believes God may exist in creation is by way of union. In this form of divine “communication,”

The creature touches God himself not only by the mode of operation, but also in his being proper. This must be understood to be not the act that constitutes the divine essence—for the creature cannot be changed into the divine nature—but from the act that constitutes the hypostasis, or the person in union with whom the creature is elevated. That is the last mode [of presence], by which God is in Christ by the [hypostatic] union.\textsuperscript{11}

This union with God’s very being could not have been anticipated or attained in any measure by the proper operation of the rational creature. The hypostatic union is an utterly unique and unprecedented event. All the same, Aquinas argues in the Summa Theologiae that the incarnation stands as the highest manner by which God

\textsuperscript{9} In I Sent. d.37, q.1, a.2. I much of the following line of reasoning to J.P. Torrell’s analysis of this text in Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master, pp66—74.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., J.P. Torrell’s translation.
communicates himself to the world, and hence it befits God to do so since the nature of God is goodness and the essence of goodness is self-communication. The incarnation is hence something radically new, but also something that befits God’s nature as goodness.

Similarly, with respect to the perfection of the rational creature, the incarnation introduces into the natural order an entirely new and inconceivably transformative reality. At the same time, though, the union that this new grace establishes between God and the human person is something that “fits” the sort of perfection belonging to the person according to its nature. Aquinas explains that despite its radical newness, the union into which the grace of the incarnation leads us does not in any way contradict our nature or our natural perfection. “It is fitting that a naturally mutable creature should not always exist in one way,” he says. “And therefore, as the creature began to be, although it had not been before, so likewise, not having been previously united to God in Person, it was afterwards united to Him.”¹² The new creature that grace brings into being is truly new without at the same time nullifying the natural dynamisms that belong to the human person.

The striking similarities between Aquinas’ account of original justice and redemption highlight this integration. In both the state of innocence and the state of grace, the perfection of the human person consists in knowing God as the first Truth (as distinct from the natural order) and in adhering to God as the sovereign Good (as the common good ante partes in which every created perfection participates). Even more significantly, in both states this perfection is sustained and guaranteed by a certain union with God, made possible in the first instance by original justice and in the second by the hypostatic union of the incarnate Word. There is a sense then in which, although it

¹² ST III.1.1ad1
appears from our perspective as something totally new, the incarnation in fact represents a fitting completion of human nature and the natural order. For the teleology is fundamentally bound up with the way in which we know the world and the way in which this knowledge facilitates an encounter between created and uncreated intellect. By uniting itself to the human soul in this new way, God redeems and restores both the perfection of the human person and the perfection of the created order. Aquinas beautifully articulates this “fittingness” in his *Compendium Theologiae*:

Through the Incarnation man receives a remarkable example of that fortunate union by which the created intellect will be united through its intelligence to the uncreated intellect. Since God united himself to man by assuming his nature, it is no longer beyond belief that the created intellect can be united to God by seeing His essence. *It is in this that the whole work of God is in some way completed, when man, created last, returns to his beginning in a kind of circle, by being united to the very beginning of all things through the work of the Incarnation.*

It is no coincidence that Aquinas here places the human being’s return to God in Christ side by side with the circumstances of his original creation. The incarnation returns the human person both to his beginning and to his very beginning: to the relation of justice which restores and preserves the rule of reason in him, *and* to the inner life of God himself in the beatific vision.

7.2 The Courage of the New Creature

An examination of the way in which the grace of Christ restores human nature reveals that for Aquinas the incarnation is not an extrinsic theological doctrine that supervenes upon an essentially Aristotelian theory of virtue. The categories and concepts that Aquinas borrows from Aristotle and his philosophical inheritance give structure to a moral vision that is ultimately rooted in a theological cosmology of creation, sin and

---

13 *Comp. theol.* I, 201, as cited and italicized by J.P. Torrell in *Spiritual Master*, p111.
redemption. His understanding of moral perfection thus centers itself around the kind of union with God to which the grace of the incarnation ordains us. When commenting on the fitness of the incarnation, Aquinas dwells upon the various benefits of Christ’s coming into the world as viewed from the positive and negative aspects of human perfection. With regard to our withdrawal from evil, the incarnation draws us away from the devil’s enticement and enslavement, disabuses us of any underestimation of our dignity and rids us of our presumption and pride. As to the advancement in goodness, Aquinas sees the incarnation’s primary benefits in terms of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, which pertain to the newfound union with God that Jesus makes possible. But immediately after his consideration of these, Aquinas speaks of the benefit of the incarnation with regard to human virtue, “in which he set us an example.”

Hence Augustine says in a certain sermon on the Lord’s nativity, ‘The human being who can be seen must not be followed; and the God who must be followed cannot be seen; and thus God became a human being so as to show human beings the One who may be both seen and followed.’

Let us explain the metaphysical context of this claim a bit more fully. Aquinas frequently invokes the Aristotelian moral principle that what is first in the order of intention is last in the order of attainment. In terms of the significance of the incarnation for human perfection, what is first in the order of intention is God himself. Hence he describes the incarnation’s culminating effect in advancing humanity toward the good as the facilitation of our “full participation in the Godhead, which is humanity’s true beatitude and the end of human life, and [which] is bestowed upon us by Christ’s humanity; as

14 The term Aquinas uses here is *rectam operationem*, which I have rendered as virtue for the sake of conceptual continuity. I consider virtue and “right operation” interchangeable in Aquinas’ mind insofar as the defining mark of virtue is to bring human action into accord with right reason.

15 *ST* III.1.2 The sermon of Augustine’s is from *de Temp.* no.22. It is worth noting that in the lengthy body of this article, Aquinas quotes Augustine almost exclusively (10 times), with the only exception being two quotes from Leo the Great’s sermon 21, which also happens to be on the nativity.
Augustine says... ‘God was made man, that man might become God.’”\textsuperscript{16} Though this participation in divine life is the primary ratio of our pursuit of perfection, it is last in the order of our actual attainment of perfection.

In this connection, Aquinas specifically identifies Christ’s humanity as the instrumental means by which we may arrive at this final destination. Of course, as the eternal divine Word, Jesus Christ does not participate in Divinity but simply \textit{is} Divinity hypostatically united with a human body, which means that in his divine nature he permanently enjoys the beatitude of vision. While that exalted bond with the divine certainly remains an inscrutable mystery,\textsuperscript{17} the mystery to which Aquinas actually devotes more time and attention is the particular way in which the divine Word \textit{circumscribes himself} for humanity’s benefit by taking on the limitations of embodied rationality. These limitations stem principally from the degree to which the Son of God assumes the defects of our bodily nature. Christ subjects himself not only to the limitations of the intellectual operations intrinsic to our bodily nature (rooted as these are in successive apprehensions of sense) but also to the defects that belong to human existence in a fallen world, namely misfortune, corruption and death. The primary reason Christ should assume the existential condition of \textit{fallen} humanity, of course, is so that he could satisfy for humanity’s sin and so remit the guilt of punishment to which these defects testify.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{ST} III.1.2.

\textsuperscript{17} Reminiscent of the concluding words of the \textit{Gospel of John}, Aquinas always attentively acknowledges the conceptual and spiritual inexhaustibility of the incarnation event. After enumerating all the benefits of the incarnation in \textit{ST} III.1.2, he adds “and there are very many other advantages which accrued, above man’s apprehension.” He gives more direct expression to the “bottomlessness” of the incarnation in \textit{SCG} IV.54 when he writes, “If we contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation carefully and reverently, we find there such depth of wisdom that human knowledge is overwhelmed by it. The Apostle rightly says, ‘The foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. That is why to those who consider things reverently the reasons for this mystery appear ever more marvelous.’”
Now one satisfies for another’s sin by taking on himself the punishment that rightly belongs to the sin of the other. But these bodily defects, namely death, hunger, thirst, and the like, are the punishment of sin, which was brought into the world by Adam, as it says in Romans (5:12): ‘By one man sin entered into this world, and by sin death.’ Hence it befits the purpose of the Incarnation that [Christ] should assume these penalties in our flesh and in our place, as Isaiah says (53:4): ‘Surely He hath borne our infirmities.’

The salvation of the human race from its enslavement to sin and death is therefore the primary reason Christ assumed the defects of the fallen condition.

Closely associated with this reason, however, is the rectification of the intellect through faith, which enables the fallen human person to embrace the salvation that the incarnation has accomplished. Again, it is the fullness of Christ’s kenotic solidarity with human nature that brings about this rectification:

In light of the fact that human beings know their nature only as it is subject to these defects [of sin], if the Son of God had assumed human nature without these defects, He would not have seemed to be true man, nor to have true, but [only] imaginary, flesh, as the Manicheans held. And so, as is said in the Letter to the Philippians (2:7): ‘He . . . emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man.’ Hence, Thomas [the Apostle] was recalled to the faith by the sight of His wounds, as The Gospel of John relates (20:26).

It seems especially fitting that Aquinas here refers to Thomas’s post-resurrection encounter with Christ: Christ’s full solidarity with the defects of fallen humanity impel the human intellect to embrace the radically transformative truth that death and suffering no longer stand in the way of the enduring attainment of the good for which our rational nature longs. From this perspective then it is fitting that the evil of death should be revealed most fully in the person whose death also brings about the restoration (and augmentation) of the grace lost in Eden. In the Incarnation, the true nature of death is

---

18 ST III.14.1.

19 ST III.14.2.
displayed in all its hideousness, and is nevertheless conquered by Christ’s efficacious sacrifice, which makes satisfaction for the sin that has separated humanity from God. Those who follow Christ share in the benefits of his death through the grace conferred by the sacraments, and in particular the sacrament of baptism, which washes away both personal and original sin. Baptism also bestows upon the person the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, which reestablish and sustain a direct union with God, and reorient the moral virtues toward this supernatural end.

Yet if we take seriously both Aquinas’ theological presuppositions regarding the nature of human mortality and his concentration upon the overriding theological trajectory of courage’s exemplary act, we are left with a rather puzzling question: if death is the punishment for original sin, and if baptism washes away original sin, then why do the baptized still die? Lurking behind this question is a larger challenge to Aquinas’ theological conception of death: namely that the human race (both the baptized and unbaptized alike) still in fact suffer from the effects of sin which from Christ’s sacrifice supposedly freed us. If the grace of the incarnation is able to bring about this sweeping transformation of human nature and the created order, then why does the world seem to go about its business the same way it always has? What has really changed? Aquinas addresses this issue in both the Prima Secundae (I-II.85.5) and the Summa Contra Gentiles (IV.55). In the Prima Secundae, he poses the dilemma in an objection that begins with the premise that if a cause is removed, so is its effect, and hence if baptism removes both original and actual sin, then the effects of corruption and death should be removed as well. Aquinas’ answer is very revealing:

Both original and actual sin are removed by the same cause that removes these defects… but each is done according to the order of Divine wisdom, at a fitting
time. Because it is right that we should first of all be conformed to Christ's sufferings, before attaining to the immortality and impassibility of glory, which was begun in Him, and by Him acquired for us. Hence it behooves that our bodies should remain, for a time, subject to suffering, in order that we may merit the impassibility of glory, in conformity with Christ.\footnote{ST I-II.85.5ad2, my emphasis}

In Book IV of the Summa Contra Gentiles, Aquinas addresses the question in the context of his treatment of the incarnation’s fittingness. The objection runs: if Christ atoned sufficiently for the sin of humanity, it is unjust that humanity should still suffer the punishment of sin. Aquinas gives a very similar response:

Although by His death Christ made sufficient satisfaction for original sin, it is not unreasonable… that the penalties resulting from original sin still remain in all, even in those who have become participators in Christ's redemption. It was fitting and profitable that the punishment should remain after the guilt had been removed. In the first place, that the faithful might be conformed to Christ, as members to their head. Wherefore, just as Christ bore many sufferings before entering into everlasting glory, so was it fitting that His faithful should suffer before attaining to immortality. Thus they bear in themselves the emblems of Christ's suffering, that they may obtain the likeness of His glory; according to the words of the Apostle (Rom. viii. 17), Heirs indeed of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; yet so if we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him.\footnote{SCG IV.56, my emphasis}

More than anything else, then, the experience of suffering and death is for Aquinas an opportunity to be conformed to Christ.

This conformity speaks most directly to the third reason Aquinas gives for Christ’s incarnation: “to show us an example of patience by valiantly bearing up against human possibility and defects. Hence it is said in The Letter to the Hebrews that ‘He endured such opposition from sinners against Himself, that you be not wearied, fainting in your minds.’”\footnote{ST III.14.1} Christ’s suffering and death transforms the essential meaning of these

\footnotesize
\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
20 & ST I-II.85.5ad2, my emphasis \\
21 & SCG IV.56, my emphasis \\
22 & ST III.14.1
\end{tabular}
\end{center}
evils on account of the fact that he willingly accepted them not out of necessity or
constraint, but out of love. The Word of God did not have to enter the world and endure
its deficiencies, nor did he have to consent to enter the world subject to the same evils
that beset sinful humanity. According to the absolute freedom with which he willed to
become incarnate, Christ also willed to experience death as we experience it. Thus was
“Christ's body in its own natural condition subject to necessity in regard to the nail that
pierced and the scourge that struck.”

Similarly, the martyr undergoes the extreme evil of death not so much as a punishment for sin or even as a consequence of the “natural” vulnerability of her bodily functions to acts of misfortune and violence, but rather as an opportunity to imitate Christ’s “example of patience.”

Just as Christ patiently endured corruption and death in order to redeem to the
human race from its sin, the martyr imitates the patience of Christ by refusing to avoid or
deny the evil of what she suffers. Rather, as a recipient of God’s grace, her suffering
serves as a means for participating in Christ’s glorious redemption of creation. In his
commentary on Romans 8, Aquinas situates this reoriented view of suffering within a
beautiful constellation of scriptural passages:

---

23 Though he freely assented to such vulnerability, Christ’s body nevertheless recoiled from the nail and the scourge. Hence “Christ is said to be offered because it was His own will,” writes Aquinas, “namely his Divine will and deliberate human will; although as Damascene says in On the Orthodox Faith (III.23—24), death was contrary to the natural movement of his will” (ST III.14.2).

24 Although the martyr properly assumes that her sins have been taken away by baptism, there is still a sense in which death confronts her as an effect of sin the world, and therefore as a reflection of humanity’s alienation from God. Though the theological virtues of the martyr assure her that she is not in fact so alienated, I believe that this alienation that is bound up with the experience of death to the extent that it can still be an object of fear for her. She knows that death cannot separate her from the love of God in Christ, and yet the Psalmist’s anguished cry, “How can the dead give you praise?” can remain just as valid an expression of her experience.

25 Patience for Aquinas safeguards the good of reason against sorrow, and thus sorrow remains an integral component of courage within a worldview in which sin has been overcome by God’s grace.
It must be recalled that Christ, the principal heir, attained to the inheritance, of glory through suffering: “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter his glory?” (Luke 24:26). But we must not expect to obtain the inheritance by an easier way. Therefore, it is necessary that we attain to that inheritance through suffering: “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). For we do not receive an immortal and unsuffering body at once, in order that we might suffer along with Christ. Hence he says, provided we suffer with him, namely, along with Christ endure the tribulations of this world patiently, in order that we may also be glorified with Christ: “If we have died with him, we shall also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:11).

Christ’s patience gives witness to the good for which he endured suffering and death: it is what testifies to his will to take away the sin of the world and reestablish humanity’s friendship with God in the face of the greatest possible sorrow.

7.3 Suffering Love in a Suffering World

Now sorrow, or sadness, is a passion that follows upon the apprehension of the intellect or imagination. It corresponds to the passion of pain in the sensible appetite, but in itself is greater than sensible pain because it touches directly upon one’s desire for the good as such (and not only in reference to any particular good). Hence in his discussion of sorrow Aquinas repeatedly quotes Sirach 25:17, which says “the sadness of the heart is every wound.”26 Sorrow successfully hinders virtue by undercutting the agent’s moral motivation; it draws the soul away from the good of reason by causing it to despair of the possibility of the good’s attainment. For this reason, Aristotle and Aquinas maintain that the virtuous may continue to exercise fortitude even in the face of great pain and immanent death so long as their reason does not give in to “sadness,” or sorrow. Now Christ’s sorrow was greatest of all, Aquinas reasons, for four reasons: (1) on account of the sources of his suffering, both external and internal, (2) on account of his supreme

---

26 ST I-II.35.2.
susceptibility to pain in virtue of the perfection of his sensitive powers, (3) on account of
the independent operation of his soul’s powers, and (4) on account of his willing
acceptance of pain in proportion to the sins of humanity. Aquinas conceives Christ’s
passion as the most excellent example not only of courage but of all the virtues, because
it most clearly conveys redeemed humanity’s highest object of hope and the enduring
principle of our moral motivation in a world that still suffers from the effects of sin.

At the same time, however, this hope is not altogether other-worldly; the grace of
Christ’s incarnation restores human life in its totality, and consequently it restores the
human capacity to bring the universe to its perfection through its use of reason. The
incarnation thus reveals the way in which the perfection of human nature finds its
completion as both a participant in the natural order and as a participant in the divine
apprehension of that order’s intelligibility. Aquinas himself perceives the way in which
this new integration of ends provides a remedy to the tragic perspective of his ancient
philosophical inheritance. For them, an insuperable sorrow attends our embodied rational
nature insofar as our vulnerability and mortality inevitably frustrate our pursuit of
enduring happiness. Aquinas’ expresses his appreciation of the ancients’ tragic view of
human perfection in this penetrating passage from the Summa contra Gentiles:

We must note that the Incarnation of God was a most effective assistance to
humanity in its pursuit of beatitude. As we have already stated, man’s perfect
beatitude consists in an immediate apprehension of God. Now, on account of the
immeasurable distance between their respective natures, the human person might
deem it impossible for him to reach such a state in which the human intellect is as
immediately united to the divine essence as the intellect is united to its idea.
Paralyzed by despair, he would then abandon his pursuit of beatitude. But when
he comes to realize that God wished to unite himself personally with human
nature, he is convinced that he can be united to God through his intellect, so as to
see Him face to face. Therefore it was most fitting for God to assume human
nature, in order to reanimate humanity’s hope of attaining beatitude; and hence it
is that after Christ’s Incarnation humanity began to have greater hopes of
obtaining the beatitude of heaven, according to His own words, ‘I am come that they may have life, and may have it more abundantly’ (John 10:10).27

Only several chapters earlier in the Summa contra Gentiles, we find Aquinas attributing to Aristotle, Averroes and Alexander of Aphrodisias something very much resembling this “despair” regarding the possibility of integral human perfection.28 For these great minds realized that as an intellectual being, the human person desires an apprehension of the intelligible that exceeds the limits of its form of reasoning. One sign of this desire is that we never cease our inquiry into the intelligibility of the world. Although “our intellect is in potentiality to the knowledge of the forms of all things,” we can only know them one at a time, in their particular manifestations. We can however come to a partial knowledge of the world by means of composition and abstraction, but our reason is never

27 SCG IV.54, my emphasis.

28 It is worth including here the better part of this chapter in order to give a fuller glimpse of the problem that Aquinas is pointing to in the ancients:

“But someone might say that, since happiness is a good of the intellectual nature, perfect and true happiness is for those in whom the intellectual nature is perfect, namely in separate substances: and that it is imperfect in man, by way of a kind of participation, because he can arrive at a full understanding of the truth, only by a sort of movement of inquiry, and so fails entirely to understand things that are by nature most intelligible, as we have proved. Wherefore neither is happiness, in its perfect form, possible to man: yet he has a certain participation thereof, even in this life. This seems to have been Aristotle’s opinion about happiness. Wherefore inquiring whether misfortunes destroy happiness (in EN I.10), he shows that happiness seems especially to consist in deeds of virtue, which seem to be most stable in this life, and concludes that those who in this life attain to this perfection, are happy as men, as though not attaining to happiness simply, but in a human way…

Besides, as long as a thing is in motion towards perfection it has not reached its last end. Now in the knowledge of truth all men are ever in motion and tending towards perfection: because those who follow, make discoveries in addition to those made by their predecessors, as stated in the second book of Aristotle’s Metaphysics. Therefore in the knowledge of truth man is not situated as though he had arrived at his last end. Since then as Aristotle himself shows (EN X.7) man’s ultimate happiness in this life consists apparently in speculation, whereby he seeks the knowledge of truth, we cannot possibly allow that man obtains his last end in this life.

Moreover, whatever is in potentiality tends to become actual: so that as long as it is not wholly actual, it has not reached its last end. Now our intellect is in potentiality to the knowledge of the forms of all things: and it becomes actual when it knows any one of them. Consequently it will not be wholly actual, nor in possession of its last end, except when it knows all, at least these material things. But man cannot obtain this through speculative sciences, by which in this life we know truth. Therefore man’s ultimate happiness cannot be in this life.” (SCG IV.54, my emphasis).
satisfied insofar as our intellect “will not be wholly actual, nor in possession of its last
dend, except when it knows all, at least with regard to material things.”

For these and like reasons Alexander and Averroes held that man's ultimate
happiness does not consist in human knowledge obtained through speculative
sciences, but in that which results from conjunction with a separate substance,
which conjunction they deemed possible to man in this life. But as Aristotle
realized that man has no knowledge in this life other than that which he obtains
through speculative sciences, he maintained that man attains to happiness, not
perfectly, but proportionate to his capacity. *Hence it becomes sufficiently clear
how these great minds suffered from being so straitened on every side. We,
however, will avoid these straits if we suppose, in accordance with the foregoing
arguments, that man is able to reach perfect happiness after this life, since man
has an immortal soul; *and that in that state his soul will understand in the same
way as separate substances understand...* Therefore man's ultimate happiness
will consist in that knowledge of God which he possesses after this life; a
knowledge similar to that by which separate substances know him.*

The problem Aquinas is pointing to here arises due to the necessarily intellectual
character of human affectivity, and likewise the necessarily affective dimension of the
human desire to know the world to the full extent of its intelligibility. In other words, our
pursuit for perfection as a rational creature is bound up with the satisfaction of our
unlimited desire to know all things, but our vulnerability to contingency, misfortune and
death inevitably excludes the possibility of such perfection insofar as our desire to know
finds rest only in an intellectual good that is absolute and universal. We change, but the
intelligibility of the natural order and its first cause—the good in which our nature finds
its perfection—does not. This paradox, understood in different respects by the ancients
Aquinas mentions, is rightfully a cause of the deepest sorrow.

---

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid. Aquinas concludes with an interesting reference to eschatological descriptions from the
*Gospel of Matthew*: “Therefore man's ultimate happiness will consist in that knowledge of God which he
possesses after this life; a knowledge similar to that by which separate substances know him. Hence our
Lord promises us “a reward... in heaven” (Mt. 5:12) and states that the saints shall be “as the angels...” (Mt
22:30) who always see God in heaven (cf. Mt. 18:10).
The more a thing is desired and loved, the more does its loss bring sorrow and pain. Now happiness is most desired and loved. Therefore its loss brings the greatest sorrow. But if there be ultimate happiness in this life, it will certainly be lost, at least by death. Nor is it certain that it will last till death: since it is possible for every man in this life to encounter sickness, whereby he is wholly hindered from the operation of virtue; such as madness and the like which hinder the use of reason. Such happiness therefore always has sorrow naturally connected with it: and consequently it will not be perfect happiness.\textsuperscript{31}

Even the highest form of happiness we may attain in this world will be tinged with the sorrow that accompanies the inescapable awareness that it will ultimately and inevitably be lost to misfortune, whether it be on account of the incremental loss of functional capacities or on account of the final misfortune of death.

The incarnation and redemptive sacrifice of Christ answers this paradox by simultaneously revealing and countering the disorder of sin which has left human creature and the created order in this wounded condition, unable to reach the final end of its nature. It is fitting then that a measure of sorrow should accompany our sanctification by grace. In his treatment of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Aquinas follows Augustine in associating each gift with a corresponding beatitude from the Sermon on the Mount. Augustine’s association of the gift of knowledge with the beatitude “blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” seems on its face rather curious to say the least. But Aquinas affirms Augustine’s interpretive association and explains it in light of his own anthropological claims about human perfection.\textsuperscript{32} “Right judgment about creatures belongs properly to knowledge,” he writes. When it comes to the knowledge of creation which was originally intended as the instrument of our perfection, however, we find our teleology in a pathological state. For “it is through creatures that humanity’s aversion

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{32}\textit{ST} II-II.9.4.
from God is occasioned... [whereby] they do not judge aright about creatures, deeming the perfect good to consist in them. Hence they sin by placing their last end in them, and lose the true good."33 Such, of course, is the tragic predicament of fallen humanity in a fallen world. Christ has revealed this predicament in all its fullness, however, and liberates humanity from it through his grace. But this redemption itself entails a sorrowful recognition of what we have lost through this disorder, and so it is fitting that “by forming a right judgment of creatures man becomes aware of this loss... through the gift of knowledge.”34 Unlike original justice, the bond of grace does not preserve us from harm. Thus the full effects of our redemption upon our actual pursuit of the good by means of our own natural capacities remain as yet unrealized. The follower of Christ remains just as vulnerable to suffering, misfortune and death as the warrior-hero and public philosopher.

Even if it is true that Christ reveals a fundamental disorder within human nature and the created order, he seems to bring no essential change to the conditions that continue to preclude our attainment of full beatitude. So what is it then that this participation in Christ offers our tormented mortality other than another new way of looking at it? What could this new way of experiencing our suffering possibly offer? Aquinas addresses this issue directly in his commentary on the eighth chapter of the 

Letter to the Romans, verses 18 through 22.35 “The Apostle is assigning the cause of the

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Here St. Paul writes, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subject to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to
postponement of immortal life,” Aquinas explains, “which is the inheritance of the children of God, *namely that it is necessary for us to suffer with Christ in order to reach the fellowship of his glory.*” Aquinas then spends some time unpacking the surface-level thrust of Paul’s proposition that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us.” As a matter of simple proportion, the limited suffering we experience now is well worth the eternal glory and exalted dignity that God’s grace bestows upon us in Christ. It is a mere trifle to endure one for the sake of the other. But he immediately adds that “if these sufferings are considered insofar as they are voluntarily endured for God out of love, which the Holy Spirit produces in us, *then the human person merits eternal life ex condigno through them.*” In this claim one sees the pivotal difference between Aquinas’ conception of courage and the Stoic ideal of endurance. Like all external contingencies, the Stoic regards suffering and death with indifference, as unchangeable features of the universe. In Aquinas’ view, however, a person who believes and receives the healing grace of Christ’s own suffering and death is able to view these realities as united to a supreme good, the Good itself in human form, and hence is able to embrace them as means of assimilation to the highest good.

One of the objections Aquinas poses to the claim that Christ experienced unsurpassed sorrow appeals to the supreme strength of Christ’s soul to regulate the passions according to reason. “Strength of soul mitigates pain,” the objection runs, “so

---

36 *Commentary on Romans*, §652, trans. Fabian Larcher.

37 Ibid. §655, my emphasis,
much so that the Stoics held there was no sadness in the soul of a wise man; and Aristotle holds that moral virtue fixes the mean in the passions.”

Therefore Christ could not have experienced pain in any significant degree, because he perfectly possessed the moral virtues, whose job it is to govern the natural movement of the appetites in accordance with reason. Aquinas’ reply reveals much:

Moral virtue lessens interior sadness in one way, and outward sensitive pain in quite another; for it lessens interior sadness directly by fixing the mean, as being its proper matter, within limits. But, as was laid down (in I-II, 64, 2), moral virtue fixes the mean in the passions, not according to mathematical quantity, but according to quantity of proportion, so that the passion shall not go beyond the rule of reason. And since the Stoics held all sadness to be unprofitable, they accordingly believed it to be altogether discordant with reason, and consequently to be shunned altogether by a wise man. *But in very truth some sadness is praiseworthy*, as Augustine proves in *The City of God* (14), namely when it flows from holy love, as, for instance, when a man is saddened over his own or others’ sins. Furthermore, it is employed as a useful means of satisfying for sins, according to the saying of the Apostle (2 Corinthians 7:10): ‘For the sorrow that is according to God brings about repentance that leads to salvation.’

And so to atone for the sins of all men, Christ accepted sadness, the greatest in absolute quantity, yet not exceeding the rule of reason.

In particular, this reply reveals both how deeply Aquinas’ Christological commitments penetrate his account of courage’s exemplary act, and also how they at the same time leave intact the fundamental structure of human nature and human flourishing. Christ’s sorrow is not a threat to the sovereignty of reason, but rather the spontaneous effect of his infinite love coming into contact with the truth about the world’s woundedness. His sorrow is therefore a necessary aspect of his redemptive mission insofar as it flows from his comprehensive remediation of humanity’s sinfulness. This redemptive mission

---

38 *ST III.46.6ad2*

39 I cannot help but note the significance of the qualifying phrase that immediately follows this passage from Paul: “a sorrow that leaves no regret.” It is interesting that Aquinas did not quote this phrase, but it does seem to summarize nicely the significance of Christ’s sorrow for the moral motivation of the Christian, and especially for the moral motivation of the martyr.

40 *ST III.46.6ad2*
transforms the paralyzing effect that suffering, sorrow and death have upon the pursuit of human perfection by uniting them to an act of divine love in which human beings can participate and by which they can then embody within themselves an apprehension of the created order according to a higher and more enduring intelligibility than was possible even to prelapsarian humanity: the intelligibility of redemptive love.

7.4 The Way, the Truth and the Life

Aquinas declares in the prologue of the *Teria Pars* that it befits the study of theology to conclude with a consideration of Jesus Christ on account of the fact that “in order to save His people from their sins, as the angel announced *(Mat. 1:21)*, he showed us *in His own Person* the way of truth, whereby we may attain to the beatitude of eternal life by rising again.”\(^{41}\) Aquinas structures this masterful summation around Jesus’ self-identification in *The Gospel of John* as “the way, the truth and the life.” These three attributes correspond remarkably to his description of the preceding sections of the *Summa*: the consideration of the last end of human life and the consideration of human virtues and vices. Christ illuminates the truth about the ultimate good that we seek as rational beings, and also shows us the way to attain this good in the midst of a fallen world.

Aquinas’ soteriological claims about the woundedness of human nature and its restoration presume a metaphysical horizon in which the natural parameters of human contingency are themselves contingent. In this way, he is able to redefine the parameters of those dangers which appear most severely to threaten human perfection, and as a result he is able to give an account of virtuous action in the face of these ultimate dangers.
which radically diverges from the conceptions of courage found in Aristotle and the pagan philosophers. In one sense, by asserting that misfortune is not a necessary feature of human existence, but rather the result of original sin, Aquinas actually intensifies the tragedy of corruption and death: these events are not simply inherent aspects of our finitude, but they rather reflect a disorder that we have brought upon ourselves. In another sense, however, this supposition allows Aquinas to present the redemption of the human person through the grace of Christ’s incarnation as an authentic restoration, and not simply a supervening transmutation, of our nature. Aquinas is thereby able to mark out a path for the full perfection of our nature in both its intellectual and bodily dimensions.

The courage of those who participate in Christ’s redemption does not presuppose an agonized choice between one form of flourishing and another, nor the categorical denial of any of our bodily or intellectual inclinations. It is still a fact of our present existence that we are subject to the grave evils of death and corruption, but nevertheless the incarnation of Christ—both by mission and by example—reveals to the human race the startling truth that “from the beginning it was not so.” Christ’s own suffering of these evils satisfies our punishment and redeems those who seek to follow him in faith, word and deed. Hence for Aquinas, the intelligibility of his theory of courage depends fundamentally upon the historical event of Jesus’ life and passion, insofar as this event proves to be of determinative importance to his conception of the contingent threats that the courageous person endures and his conception of the preeminent good for which the courageous person endures them.

Christ is therefore not only the way by which we overcome the obstacles to our full perfection, but he represents the final destination of our beatitude as well. His
humanity is both God’s instrument for the remission of our sin and the exemplum of restored human nature in a fallen world. Christ’s words “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” from the *The Gospel of John* form the template in which Aquinas’ treatment of the created world and its Creator comes to its culmination. In his commentary on this passage, Aquinas explains more fully this passage’s encapsulation of Christ’s central role in our perfection as rational beings:

*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*, says Jesus. With a single strike, he unveils to them the way and the goal of the way…. *The way*, as we have seen, is Christ. We understand this because *it is through him that we have access to the Father* (Eph. 2:18)…. But this way is not distant from the goal, the one touches the other; that is why Christ adds: *the Truth and the Life*. He is simultaneously the one and the other: the way, according to his humanity; the goal according to his divinity.

*The goal of this way is the culmination of all human desires.* Indeed, man desires two things above all: one that is proper to his nature: to know the truth. The other he shares with everything that is: to remain in being. Now, Christ is the way to arrive at the truth since he is the Truth…. He is also the way to arrive at life since he himself is Life…. Therefore, Christ is designated in himself as the way and the goal. He is the goal because *he is in himself everything that can be the object of desire*: the Truth and the Life.

If, then, you seek your way, pass by way of Christ: He is the Way…. If you wish to know where to go, adhere to Christ: he is the Truth that all of us wish to attain…. If you wish to find a place to rest, adhere to Christ, for he is the Life.42

In this dissertation, I have attempted to show how Aquinas’ presentation of courage depends at its core upon a particular transformation in the existential structure and experience of human nature which depends from the start upon the historical manifestation of Christ’s victory over sin and death. Even in the heart of his treatise on human nature and action, Aquinas cannot prescind from certain Christological claims that are decisive for his understanding of human vulnerability and that thereby impact his entire theory of virtue. He treats all of the various aspects of human nature as reflections

---

of God’s eternal artistry and sovereign ordering of the world, except for our corruption and death. When it comes to death, what is perhaps the most universal feature of human existence, Aquinas treats it as something profoundly unnatural, something that alienates us from, rather than relates us to our Creator. From Aquinas’ point of view, death is a direct sign of our estrangement from God. In answering the question of whether corruption is the result of sin, he repeatedly invokes the words of Wisdom 1:13: “God did not make death.”

The death of the human person, though a natural reflection of our mutability, is now experienced as a profound alienation from the natural world and its Creator.

Alongside this unflinching view, however, Aquinas also maintains that Christ’s death changes the substantive nature of death itself and of the suffering and difficulty that foreshadow it. In this way, the imprint of Christ’s suffering and death is to be found throughout the entirety of his moral vision, inasmuch as Christ’s victory over death conditions the nature and function of the cardinal virtue of courage all the way down. The evil of death no longer represents ultimate loss, but rather an opportunity to be conformed to the person of Christ. In our suffering and death, we grow in virtue by imitating the passion of Christ, which for Aquinas is simultaneously the exemplum of moral perfection and the source of grace by which the supernatural life grows in us.

Christ's satisfaction works its effect in us inasmuch as we are incorporated with Him, as the members with their head.... Now the members must be conformed to their head. Consequently, as Christ first had grace in His soul with bodily passibility, and through the Passion attained to the glory of immortality, so we likewise, who are His members, are freed by His Passion from all debt of punishment, yet so that we first receive in our souls ‘the spirit of adoption of sons’ whereby our names are written down for the inheritance of immortal glory, while we yet have a passible and mortal body: but afterwards, ‘being made conformable’ to the sufferings and death of Christ, we are brought into immortal

43 ST I-II.85.6.
glory, according to the saying of the Apostle (Romans 8:17): ‘And if sons, heirs also: heirs indeed of God, and joint heirs with Christ; yet so if we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified with Him.’

In this way, then, the final perfection of our nature through grace, as attained through an imitation of Christ’s self-emptying love, constitutes a constant and universal source of moral motivation, even amidst the most fearful and tragic of circumstances. This promise is not an arbitrary hope for heavenly reward unrelated to the integral nature of the act itself, but rather it conforms to the pattern of flourishing belonging to a rational being embodied in the material world.

The patience of Christ thus reveals to us what the highest perfection of human nature looks like within a fallen world. If the act of Christian martyrdom is to have a moral motivation appropriate to an act of virtue, it thus must appeal to this Christological form of ultimate perfection. Hence it is my contention that only a theologically informed notion of human flourishing can fully account for the joy motivating the Christian martyr’s willing endurance of death. While from a purely natural point of view, the martyr is confronted with two mutually exclusive modes of flourishing, which force her to exchange one form of goodness for another, from a theological perspective, the martyr pursues a unified good based on the person of Christ, whose death is at the same time a cause of the deepest sorrow and the highest perfection. A theory of virtue rooted in this sort of Christological exemplarism provides the most compelling explanation of the moral motivation of the Christian martyr because it construes the good embraced by the martyr’s death in terms of the goods that she embraces in life. Viewed within the conceptual framework of an exemplarist virtue ethic, the promise of participation in the

\[44\] *ST* III.49.3ad3.
final triumph of Jesus’ resurrection through the imitation of his self-emptying love constitutes a constant and universal source of moral motivation, even amidst the most fearful of circumstances. For the martyr courageously imitates Christ’s death in the hope that she will also share his resurrection. The act of martyrdom thus exemplifies the virtue of courage not only because it withstands the threat of ultimate evil, but more importantly because it effects and gives witness to a graced capacity for participation in the redeeming work of Christ and the friendship with God that that participation makes possible. Hence Aquinas deems it fitting that

Christ's soul at His Resurrection resume the body with its scars. In the first place, for Christ's own glory. For Bede says (on Luke 24:40) that He kept His scars not from inability to heal them, ‘but to wear them as an everlasting trophy of His victory.’ [And so] Augustine says (De Civ. Dei XXII): ‘Perhaps in that kingdom we shall see on the bodies of the Martyrs the traces of the wounds which they bore for Christ's name: because it will not be a deformity, but a dignity in them; and a certain kind of beauty will shine in them, in the body, though not of the body.”

The virtue of courage preserves in the martyr the hope of ultimate perfection by conforming her to the person of Christ, whose union with the Father is at once the cause,
the form and the object of her full and enduring happiness. The martyr finds her own fullness by sharing in Christ’s wounds.

___________. “Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism.” *Mind* 86, pp532—554.


___________. *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, vol. 2. C.I. Litzinger, ed. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964)


___________. *Summa contra gentiles*. Bk III: Providence, Pt 2, chs 89—97, 111—121,147—155. (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975)


Bowerstock, G.W. *Martyrdom and Rome.* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995)


___________________________________________________________ *Plato and the Trial of Socrates* (New York: Routledge, 2004)


Cessario, Romanus, O.P. *Introduction to Moral Theology.* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2001)

___________________________________________________________ *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1991)

Clarke, Norris W. *Explorations in metaphysics: being-God-person.* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1994)

___________________________________________________________ *The one and the many: a contemporary Thomistic metaphysics.* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2001)

___________________________________________________________ *Person and being.* (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ. Press, 1993)

Colaiaco, James. *Socrates against Athens* (New York: Routledge, 2001)


Geach, P.T. *Providence and Evil*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977)

_______, *The Virtues*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977)

Gillon, L.-B. *Christ and Moral Theology* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1967)


Hall, Pamela. *Narrative and the Natural Law: an Interpretation of Thomistic Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1994)


__________, *Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981)


Hibbs, Thomas. *Aquinas, Ethics and Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2007),


MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984)

_________________. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. (Peru, IL: Carus/OpenCourt, 1999)


Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982)


__________. *The Four Cardinal Virtues*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1965)


__________________. *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1995)


_________. Nature as Reason. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005)

_________. Moral Action and Christian Ethics. (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995)


Wetzel, James. *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue.* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992)


______________. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985)

______________. *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981)
Wilson, Emily. *The Death of Socrates* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007)


