

QUESTION 55

The Essence of a Virtue

Next we have to consider habits in a specific way (*in speciali*). And since, as has been explained (q. 54, a. 3), habits are distinguished by *good* and *bad*, we will first talk about good habits, i.e., the virtues (questions 55-67) and the other things adjoined to them, viz., the gifts, the beatitudes, and the fruits (questions 68-70); and, second, we will talk about bad habits, viz., vices and sins (questions 71-89).

As regards the virtues, there are five things to consider: first, the essence of virtue (question 55); second, the subject of virtue (question 56); third, the division of the virtues (questions 57-62); fourth, the cause of virtue (question 63); and, fifth, certain properties of the virtues (questions 64-67).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Is a human virtue a habit? (2) Is a human virtue a habit ordered toward operation (*habitus operativus*)? (3) Is a human virtue a good habit? (4) What is the definition of *virtue*?

Article 1

Is a human virtue a habit?

It seems that a human virtue is not a habit:

Objection 1: As *De Caelo* 1 says, virtue (*virtus*) is “the limit of a power (*ultimum potentiae*).” But the limit (*ultimum*) of any given thing is traced back to the genus of which it is the limit, in the way that a point is traced back to the genus *line*. Therefore, virtue is traced back to the genus *power* and not to the genus *habit*.

Objection 2: In *De Libero Arbitrio* 2 Augustine says, “A virtue is the good use of free choice (*bonus usus liberi arbitrii*).” But the use of free choice is an act. Therefore, a virtue is an act and not a habit.

Objection 3: We merit with our acts and not with our habits; otherwise, a man would be continuously meriting, even while he was sleeping. But we merit with the virtues. Therefore, the virtues are acts and not habits.

Objection 4: In *De Moribus Ecclesiae* Augustine says, “Virtue is an ordering of love” (*ordo amoris*). And in *83 Quaestiones* he says, “The ordering that is called *virtue* is to enjoy what should be enjoyed and to make use of what should be made use of.” But ‘order’ (*ordo*), i.e., ‘an ordering’ (*ordinatio*), names an act or a relation. Therefore, a virtue is an act or relation and not a habit.

Objection 5: Just as there are human virtues (*virtutes humanae*), so, too, there are natural virtues (*virtutes naturales*). But natural virtues are certain powers and not habits. Therefore, human virtues are not habits, either.

But contrary to this: In the *Categories* the Philosopher claims that scientific knowledge and virtue are habits.

I respond: ‘Virtue’ denominates a certain perfection of power. Now the perfection of any given thing is mainly thought of in relation to its end. But the end is the actualization of a power or potentiality (*potentiae actus*). Hence, a power is said to be perfect to the extent that it is determined to its act.

Now there are certain powers, such as natural active powers, that are in their own right (*secundum seipsas*) determined to their acts. And so natural powers of this sort are called ‘virtues’ in their own right. By contrast, rational powers, which are proper to a man, are not determined to a single act, but are related in an indeterminate way to many acts. But as is clear from what was said above (q. 49, a. 4), they are determined to their acts by habits. And so the human virtues are habits.

Reply to objection 1: Sometimes ‘virtue’ (*virtus*) is used for what the virtue is aimed at (*id ad quod est virtus*), viz., either the virtue’s object or its act; for instance, ‘faith’ is sometimes used for what is believed (*id quod creditur*), sometimes for the very act of believing, and sometimes for the habit itself

by which one believes.

Hence, when a virtue is called ‘the limit of a power’, ‘virtue’ is being taken for the *object* of the virtue; for what the power is ultimately capable of is that with respect to which it is called the thing’s virtue or strength. For instance, if someone is capable of carrying one hundred pounds and no more, then his ‘virtue’ or ‘strength’ is thought of in terms of one hundred pounds and not in terms of sixty pounds.

The objection, however, proceeded as if a virtue were *in its essence (essentialiter)* the limit of a power.

Reply to objection 2: It is by the same sort of reasoning that a virtue is called ‘a good use of free choice’, viz., that the good use of free choice is that toward which a virtue is ordered as toward its proper *act*. For the act of a virtue is nothing other than a good use of free choice.

Reply to objection 3: There are two ways in which we are said to merit ‘with something’:

In one way, with merit itself (*ipso merito*), in the way in which we are said to run with a run (*currere cursu*); and this is the sense in which we merit with our acts.

In the second way, we are said to merit by some principle of meriting, in the way that we are said to run with our power to move; and this is the sense in which we are said to merit with the virtues and habits.

Reply to objection 4: A virtue is called an order or ordering of love (*ordo vel ordinatio amoris*) in the sense that through the virtue the love in us is ordered toward what the virtue aims at (*id ad quod est virtus*).

Reply to objection 5: Natural powers are in their own right (*per se*) determined to one act, but rational powers are not. And so, as has been explained, the two cases are not parallel.

Article 2

Is it part of the concept of a human virtue that it is a habit ordered toward operation?

It seems that it is not part of the concept of a human virtue that it is a habit ordered toward operation (*non sit de ratione virtutis quod sit habitus operativus*):

Objection 1: In *De Tusculanis Quaestionibus* 4 Tully says that a virtue belongs to the soul in the way that health and beauty belong to the body. But health and beauty are not habits ordered toward operation. Therefore, neither is a virtue.

Objection 2: Among natural things one finds that virtue is ordered not only toward *acting (ad agere)* but also toward *being (ad esse)*. For it is clear from the Philosopher in *De Caelo* 1 that some things have the virtue or strength to exist at all times, whereas other things have the virtue or strength to exist for some delimited time and not at all times. But human virtue plays a role in rational beings similar to the role that natural virtue plays in natural things. Therefore, human virtue is likewise ordered not only toward acting but also toward being.

Objection 3: In *Physics* 7 the Philosopher says, “Virtue is the disposition of what is perfect toward the best.” But as Augustine proves in *De Moribus Ecclesiae* 2, the best thing that man needs to be disposed toward by virtue is God Himself, and the soul is disposed toward God by becoming similar to Him (*per assimilationem ad ipsum*). Therefore, it seems that a virtue is a certain quality of the soul in relation to God that makes one similar to Him and that it is not ordered toward an operation. Therefore, a virtue is not a habit ordered toward an operation.

But contrary to this: In *Ethics* 2 the Philosopher says, “The virtue of any given thing is what makes its work good (*quae opus eius bonum reddit*).”

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1), ‘virtue’, by the very meaning of the name, implies a certain perfection of a power. Hence, since there are two kinds of power, viz., power with respect to

being (*potentia ad esse*) and power with respect to *acting* (*potentia ad agere*), the perfection of both sorts of power is called ‘virtue’. However, power with respect to *being* lies on the side of matter, which is being in potentiality, whereas power with respect to *acting* lies on the side of form, which is a principle of acting, since each thing acts insofar as it is actual.

Now in the constitution of a man, the body is like the matter (*sicut materia*), whereas the soul is like the form (*sicut forma*). And as regards the body, man shares it in common with the other animals—and the same holds true of the powers that are common to the soul and the body. It is only those powers that are proper to the soul, viz., the rational powers, that belong to man alone. And so human virtue, which is what we are talking about, cannot belong to the body, but belongs only to that which is proper to the soul. Hence, ‘human virtue’ implies an ordering not toward *being* but instead toward *acting*. And so it is part of the notion of a human virtue that it is a habit ordered toward operation.

Reply to objection 1: The mode of action follows upon the agent’s disposition, since each thing is such that what it does reflects how it is (*unumquodque quale est, talia operatur*). And so since a virtue is a principle of some sort of operation, a disposition that conforms to the virtue has to pre-exist in the agent. Now a virtue makes its operation well-ordered (*ordinatam*). And so a virtue is itself a certain well-ordered disposition in the soul in accord with which the powers of the soul are well-ordered in some way to one another and to what is outside. And this is why a virtue, insofar as it is a fitting disposition of the soul, is similar to health and beauty, which are fitting dispositions of the body. But this does not rule out a virtue’s also being a principle of action (*operationis principium*).

Reply to objection 2: The sort of virtue that has to do with *esse* is not proper to man, but only the virtue that has to do with the works of reason, which are proper to man.

Reply to objection 3: Since God’s substance is His action, the greatest assimilation of man to God is by an operation. Hence, as was explained above (q. 3, a. 2), happiness or beatitude (*felicitas sive beatitudo*), through which a man is maximally conformed to God and which is the end of human life, consists in an operation.

Article 3

Is it part of the concept of a virtue that it is a good habit?

It seems that it is not part of the concept of a virtue that it is a good habit:

Objection 1: Sin is always taken as something bad. But even sin has some virtue or strength (*etiam peccati est aliqua virtus*)—this according to 1 Corinthians 15:56 (“The virtue of sin (*virtus peccati*) is the Law”). Therefore, a virtue is not always a good habit.

Objection 2: A virtue corresponds to a power. But power is related not only to what is good, but also to what is bad—this according to Isaiah 5:22 (“Woe to you who have power to drink wine, and are stout men at drunkenness”). Therefore, a virtue is likewise related both to what is good and also to what is bad.

Objection 3: According to the Apostle in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “Power (*virtus*) is made perfect in weakness.” But weakness is something bad. Therefore, virtue is related not only to what is good, but also to what is bad.

But contrary to this: In *De Moribus Ecclesiae* Augustine says, “No one would doubt that virtue makes the soul the best it can be.” And in *Ethics 2* the Philosopher says, “Virtue is what makes the one who has it good and renders his works good.”

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1), virtue implies the perfection of a power, and so, as *De Caelo 1* puts it, the virtue of any given thing is directed toward the limit (*ultimum*) of which the thing is

capable. Now the limit which each thing is capable of must be good, since everything bad implies some defect. Hence, as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, everything bad is weak. For this reason, it must be the case that the virtue of any given thing is predicated in relation to a good. Hence, human virtue, which is a habit ordered toward operation, is a good habit and productive of good (*boni operativus*).

Reply to objection 1: As with ‘perfect’, so too ‘good’ is used metaphorically in the case of bad things; for instance, as is clear from the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 5, we say of someone that he is a perfect thief or robber, and a good thief or robber. Accordingly, ‘virtue’ is likewise used metaphorically in the case of bad things. And the Law is called ‘the virtue of sin’ insofar as because of the Law sin is occasionally increased and, as it were, reaches its maximal power (*ad maximum suum posse pervenit*).

Reply to objection 2: The badness of drunkenness and excessive drinking consists in its deviating from the order of reason (*consistit in defectu ordinis rationis*). Now it is possible that, in company with the deviation from reason, some lower power should be perfected with respect to what belongs to its genus—even along with its repugnance to and deviation from reason. However, the perfection of this sort of power, when it is accompanied by a deviation from virtue, could not be called a human virtue.

Reply to objection 3: Reason is shown to be more perfect to the extent that it is able to overcome or tolerate the weaknesses of the body and of the lower parts [of the soul]. And so human virtue, which is attributed to reason, is said to be perfected not, to be sure, in the weakness of reason, but rather in the weakness of the body and of the lower parts of the soul.

Article 4

Is the customary definition of virtue correct?

It seems that the customary definition of virtue is incorrect, viz., “A virtue is a good quality of the mind by which one lives uprightly and which no one uses badly and which God works in us without us” (*bona qualitas mentis, qua recte vivitur, qua nullus male utitur, quam Deus in nobis sine nobis operatur*):

Objection 1: Virtue is a man’s goodness, since it is “what makes the one who has it good.” But goodness does not seem to be good, just as whiteness is not white, either. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that virtue is a good quality.

Objection 2: No specific difference is more common than its genus, since it divides the genus. But *good* is more common than *quality*, since *good* is convertible with *being*. Therefore, *good* should not be posited in the definition of *virtue* as a specific difference of *quality*.

Objection 3: As Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 12, “When we begin to run across what is not common to us and the beasts, it pertains to the mind.” But as the Philosopher explains in *Ethics* 3, certain virtues belong even to the non-rational parts [of the soul]. Therefore, not every virtue is a good quality of the mind.

Objection 4: Uprightness (*rectitudo*) seems to belong to justice, and calling someone upright is the same as calling him just. But justice is a species of virtue. Therefore, it is incorrect to posit *upright* in the definition of virtue when it says “by which one lives uprightly.”

Objection 5: When someone is proud of something, he uses it badly. But there are many who are proud of their virtue; for in *Regula* Augustine says, “Pride undermines even good works, that they might perish.” Therefore, it is false that no one uses a virtue badly.

Objection 6: A man is justified through virtue. But in commenting on John 11:15 (“He shall do greater things than these”), Augustine says, “He who created you without you will not justify you without you.” Therefore, it is wrong to say that God works virtue in us without us.

But contrary to this is authority of Augustine, from whose words the above definition is collected,

and mainly from *De Libero Arbitrio* 2.

I respond: The definition in question captures completely the whole nature of virtue. For the complete definition of any given thing is gathered together from its causes, and the definition stated above includes all the causes of virtue.

For the *formal cause* of a virtue, as of anything, is taken from its genus and difference, when it is called ‘a good quality’. For the genus of a virtue is *quality*, whereas the difference is *good*. However, the definition would be more fitting if *habit*, which is a close genus (*genus propinquum*), were used instead of *quality*.

Now, like other accidents, a virtue does not have a *matter-out-of-which* (*materia ex qua*), but it does have a *matter-with-respect-to-which* (*materia circa quam*) and a *matter-in-which* (*materia in qua*), viz., its subject. The matter-with-respect-to-which is the virtue’s object, which could not be posited in the definition under discussion because a virtue is determined to its species by its object, whereas this definition is being assigned to virtue in general. Hence, the subject is posited in the place of the material cause, when it is said that it is a good quality ‘of the mind’.

Now since a virtue is a habit directed toward an operation (*sit habitus operativus*), the *end* of a virtue is the operation itself. But notice that some operative habits are always directed toward what is bad, as is the case with vicious habits. Others, by contrast, are sometimes directed toward what is good and sometimes toward what is bad; for instance, opinion (*opinio*) is related both to what is true and to what is false. On the other hand, virtue is a habit that is always related to what is good. And so, in order to distinguish virtue from those habits that are always related to what is bad, the definition says ‘by which one lives uprightly’, whereas in order to distinguish virtue from those habits that are sometimes related to what is bad, the definition says, ‘which no one uses badly’.

Now the *efficient cause* of infused virtue, which is what is being defined here, is God. For this reason, the definition says ‘which God works in us without us’. And if this part is left out, then the rest of the definition will be common to all virtues, both acquired and infused.

Reply to objection 1: What falls under the intellect in the first place is *being*; this is why we attribute to each thing apprehended by us that it is a being and that, as a result, it is one and good, since *one* and *good* are convertible with *being*. Hence, we say that an essence is a being and is one and is good, and that oneness is a being and is one and is good; and the same holds for goodness. However, there is no place for this in the case of specific forms such as whiteness and health. For it is not the case that everything we apprehend is such that we apprehend it under *white* and *healthy*.

Notice, however, that just as accidents and non-subsistent forms are called beings not because they themselves have *esse* but because something exists *by them*, so, too, they are called good or one not by some other goodness or oneness, but because something is good or one *by them*. So, then, virtue is likewise called good because something is good *by it*.

Reply to objection 2: The good that is posited in the definition of virtue is not the common *good* which is convertible with *being* and which is more extensive than *quality* (*est in plus quam qualitas*), but is instead the good of reason—this according to what Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4: “The good of the soul is to be in accord with reason.”

Reply to objection 3: As *Ethics* 1 says, a virtue can exist in the non-rational part of the soul only insofar as the non-rational part participates in reason. And so reason, or the mind, is the proper subject of a human virtue.

Reply to objection 4: As will become clear below (q. 60, a. 2 and *ST* 2-2, q. 58, a. 8), the uprightness proper to justice is the uprightness that has to do with exterior things which come into man’s use and which are the proper matter of justice. By contrast, the uprightness that implies an ordering to a fitting end and to divine law—which, as was explained above (q. 19, a. 4), is the rule of the human will—is common to every virtue.

Reply to objection 5: It is possible for someone to ‘use virtue badly’ *as an object*—viz., when

someone thinks of virtue in the wrong way, as when he hates virtue or when he is proud of his virtue—but it is not possible to use virtue badly *as a principle of use* in such a way that the act of a virtue would itself be bad.

Reply to objection 6: Infused virtue is caused in us by God without our acting, but not without our consenting. And this is the way to understand the phrase ‘which God works in us without us’. On the other hand, what is done by us is such that God causes it within us but not without our acting. For He operates in every act of will and every act of nature (*ipse operatur in omni voluntate et natura*).