THE MORAL VIRTUES
AND THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

Second Edition

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INTRODUCTION
TO THE FIRST EDITION

In order to explicate what Christians believe about the moral life, theological ethics has long employed both the vocabulary and the rhetoric of virtue theory. Arguably, one can discover the substance of a well-developed theology of virtue even in the earliest patristic writers. But a fourth-century Christian apologist, Lactantius, gave the subject of virtue in the Christian life its first embellished treatment in his *Divinae Institutiones*. Of course, justification for this practice derives from the New Testament itself. Even a casual perusal of the Gospels and the writings of the apostles reveals the specificity of Christian teaching on the virtues. In general, the New Testament presents virtue as an interior principle of the moral life which directs the individual’s relationship with God and with neighbor. As such, Christian virtue remains a stable reality, something which firmly establishes in the believer the capacity to accomplish those deeds which are worthy of the Kingdom of God.

To cite but a single example, consider the parable of the wise and foolish maidens (Mt 25:1–13). Jesus compares those ready to welcome the reign of God with five prudent maidens, whose virtuous character primed them even for the unexpected arrival of the bridegroom. The principal point of the parable illustrates the kind of preparedness Jesus expects of his disciples, but the wise or prudent maidens also represent all those who possess the ensemble of
virtues which characterize a complete Christian life. The burning oil lamps which they carry into the wedding feast symbolically portray Christian wisdom, the crown of the other gifts of the Holy Spirit and of the infused moral virtues. This Christian wisdom empowers all those who embrace prudence and the other moral virtues to fulfill the requirements of an integral and holy life. At the same time, the wise maidens present themselves as both qualified and eager to enter into the company of Christ. As a biblical symbol, the marriage feast represents beatitude, the definitive embrace of divine love for the creature, which constitutes the final perfection that Christian belief and practice achieve in each one of us.

The New Testament authors may use the term “virtue” sparingly, but, as in so many similar cases, the substance of the concept pervades their moral teaching. Moreover, ample documentation exists to show that some of the earliest moral instruction in the Church uses the language of virtue. In fact, St. Augustine spoke about the virtue of Christ himself as the principal support of the believer’s whole life. This justifies his confidence when, commenting on the verse of the psalm, “My mouth is filled with thy praise, and with thy glory all the day” (Ps 71:8), St. Augustine asks: “What does it mean ‘all the day’?” He gives this reply: “It means without interruption: In good times, because Christ consoles us; in bad times, because he corrects us; before we came to be, because Christ made us; as long as we exist, because he has given us salvation; when we sin, because Christ ignores it; when we are converted, because Christ urges it; when we shall have endured, because Christ crowns our perseverance.” Clearly, St. Augustine understood the controlling truth of the Christian religion, namely, that our lives find fulfillment only by following the rhythm which Christ himself establishes.

This book provides a general introduction to the study of the Christian moral virtues. It is a practical book, which purports to help the interested reader establish the rhythm of Christ-centered virtue in his or her own life.
By and large, Christians are accustomed to examine their conscience by referring to the Decalogue and, for Roman Catholics, to the commandments of the Church. Contemporary debate about the principles of moral theology, the role of an ecclesiastical Magisterium, the prerogatives of personal conscience, and other matters have surely altered the manner in which the believer undertakes this examination of conscience. Even though revisionism interprets rules differently from the procedure endorsed by preconciliar casuistry, revisionist moral theology still remains rule-centered. Because neither casuistry nor revisionism figure largely in the present study, this book represents a fresh approach to theological ethics. The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics illustrates a moral life based on the traditional virtues of Christian literature and instruction, such as a St. Augustine would have taught to those under his pastoral care.

Obedience to divine and ecclesiastical precepts holds an important place in the history and practice of moral theology. This book, however, seeks to retrieve an alternative convention. Surely the pastoral directions of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) go a long way to explain why such a retrieval remains both necessary and urgent. A theology of moral virtue represents a long-standing tradition in the Christian Church. The schoolmen of the Middle Ages, inspired by patristic texts and aided by classical philosophy, developed different models to explain the dynamics of the moral virtues. But the voluntarist emphases associated with the via moderna and the harvest of late medieval theology cut short the development of this paradigm. Because it stresses a narrow view of will power as the principal cause of moral action, a voluntarist perspective favors norms and precepts as the preferred subject matter for ethical discourse. Thus, from the Renaissance until the middle of this century, moral legalism predominated in both Roman Catholic and reformed circles. Few people are accustomed then to think about their moral lives in terms of the cultivation of virtue.
Nevertheless, the tradition enumerates seven primary virtues which comprise the substance of an authentic Christian life: faith, hope, and charity, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. First of all, Christian doctrine considers the theological or divine virtues. Since their exercise relates the believer directly to God, these virtues of faith, hope, and charity occupy a principal place in Christian living. Strictly speaking, no human analogues exist for the theological virtues; only the justifying power of the Holy Spirit causes them to come about in the believer. About these virtues, St. Paul testifies: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:12, 13). Since the theological virtues comprise a distinct area of theological investigation, they figure only indirectly in the present study.

Many theologians recognize that the theological virtues alone, even with charity, cannot sufficiently inform the believer with what is required to act properly in every situation. This explains why the Christian tradition also incorporates the moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. These cardinal virtues, as they are called, provide the focal points for at least fifty other allied and auxiliary virtues. Altogether these moral virtues constitute the substance of a happy life, that is, a life which embodies every quality required for a complete and flourishing human existence. In other terms, the moral virtues embrace as their proper matter all the ordinary and extraordinary affairs which comprise an ethical life.

During the last decade, philosophical work on the moral virtues advanced considerably. But Christian faith necessarily changes the way one considers virtue. This text aims at an evaluation of the moral virtues from the standpoint of Christian belief. Theological ethics simply mean the moral teaching of the New Testament as developed within the interpretive tradition of the Christian Church. At certain
moments throughout its history, the Magisterium of the Church has given specific direction to this development. And while dogmatic issues usually draw the most attention from historians of doctrine, the Church has always claimed that her teaching authority extends to matters which pertain to the actual practice of the Christian life as well. “For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself.”

Of course, it would be impossible to consider in a single volume every virtue which one or another Christian author has treated during the course of nearly two millennia. The interpretive tradition on morals and the moral virtues comprises too vast a field for such an undertaking. Nor does the present volume aspire even to take up explicitly each of the cardinal moral virtues. Josef Pieper’s classic *Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, 1965) admirably accomplishes that task. Rather, this book presents a general theory of the virtues which holds good for any particular moral virtue; it explains how the virtues work in our everyday lives. And since the inquiry considers the moral virtues principally within the context of the Christian life, this requires that the chapters address certain theological issues. In brief, this book talks about how the moral virtues perform within a life of Christian faith animated by charity, and so fulfills the Council’s wish that moral theology “should show the nobility of the Christian vocation of the faithful, and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world.”

Although the theology of the virtues presented in this volume draws upon many resources, the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas remains a central influence. In the thirteenth century, Aquinas distinguished himself by developing a moral theology of the virtues. The *secunda pars*, which contains his treatise on the virtues and theological
ethics, makes up the largest section of his three-part *Summa theologiae*. Moreover, on the basis of a large sampling of texts, the *secunda secundae*, a synopsis of vices and virtues, accounts for a higher percentage of extant manuscripts than any other single section of Aquinas’s celebrated textbook for beginners. This gives some idea of the great interest which his treatise on the virtues held for the students and scholars of medieval Europe. The moral virtues provided Aquinas with a way to talk about a distinctively Christian teaching, namely, the universal call to holiness and beatitude. In the final analysis, Aquinas understands the practice of virtue as nothing less than the full realization of evangelical glory in this life. He held that the theology of the virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the beatitudes, and the fruits of Spirit together form a single instruction on Christian perfection. Among other goals, the following pages help introduce the reader to the principal elements of this original synthesis of theological ethics.

The book comprises six chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the actual place which the moral virtues and virtue theory hold in contemporary theological ethics. Because the recent renewal of interest in the virtues originated largely among Anglo-American philosophers, the chapter first presents a brief survey of current work in philosophical ethics. Secondly, the chapter ponders the special conditions which Christian revelation imposes on the study of the virtues. This discussion leads to a consideration of realist moral theology. Indeed a leitmotif of the present work includes a conception of moral theology which depends principally on realist philosophy. In other words, moral theology must first of all recognize “the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself” as so many reflections of God’s purposes and designs for the world—what Aquinas calls the Eternal Law. Likewise, although moral realism accords to human persons the highest dignity in the created order, it reserves to God the
highest dignity simply speaking. Therefore, realist moral theology makes divine wisdom, not human reason, the ultimate measure of created morality, so that while right reason plays an important role in the development of a virtue-centered life, rationalizations about human conduct do not. Finally, in order to place a correct emphasis on the important matter of human autonomy, the chapter closes with a reflection on the dynamics of divine grace as they operate within the structure of our human psychology. Because I share St. Augustine’s optimism about what the grace of Christ can accomplish in the life of an individual, I prefer to give an unequivocal priority to the workings of divine grace in those matters which pertain to eternal salvation, especially the moral life.

The second chapter treats a topic at once more specific and technical, namely, the theme of habitus. Aristotle bequeathed the concept to Western theology when he spoke about hexis and character in the Nicomachean Ethics. Subsequently, Aquinas and the schoolmen produced a richly developed instruction on this important element of human psychology. Virtue falls within the genus of habitus. The Thomist tradition, in particular, established a theological context for habitus, relating it at once to the kenosis of Christ and the metaphysics of created potency and act. After defining the precise nature of a habitus, chapter two explains the relationship between habitus and free choice. A description of how habitus operate as well as their principal characteristics completes the introductory material for the study of the virtues.

Since it presents a definition of moral virtue, chapter three brings the discussion to its focal point. First of all, the chapter considers the particular features of theological ethics which provide the framework for a general theory of the moral virtues. Because we define the moral virtues as good, operative habitus, it remains incumbent upon the moral realist to explain the term of the operation which virtue renders prompt, easy, and joyful. For the Christian
believer, there exists but one ultimate goal, namely, that beatitude to which Christ welcomes the wise virgins. But our movement towards that beatitude requires the attainment of those created goods which human life needs for its proper perfection. In order to show how the moral virtues both perfect nature and ready us for beatitude, the chapter considers the exact nature of a moral virtue and the important elements of its definition. Chapter three then explores the different capacities of the human person which are capable of virtuous development: the intellect, the rational appetite, and the sense appetites. The question of virtue and emotion raises important issues in several fields of scientific inquiry. In an attempt to cast some light on matters oftentimes gravely misunderstood, I weigh some of the implications which Christian belief holds for those who experience the tugs and the pulls of disordered emotions. In short, moral realism shares St. Augustine’s convictions concerning the rhythm of Christian life: it is Christ who overlooks sin, it is Christ who urges our conversion, and it is Christ who faithfully rewards perseverance in doing good.

The fourth chapter examines the central role which the virtue of prudence plays in the moral life. Until recently, the establishment of casuistry so disformed the moral topography that few, if any, Christian believers comprehended the necessity of prudence for shaping the moral life. Even now when most persons think of prudence, they associate the virtue with circumspection, foresight, or a kind of sharp intuition about how to proceed with the affairs of everyday life. Ordinarily, Christians consider conscience a far more important factor in the moral life than the virtue of prudence. As a result, we experience today a considerable amount of intellectual cacophony when theologians advance certain views which concern the “rights” of an individual’s conscience. At the same time, we also witness the reaction which occurs when the Holy Father and the bishops rightly insist that the ordinary Magisterium of the
Church suffices for that religious submission of heart and mind required of the Christian faithful in moral matters. Such a state of affairs reflects ill on the unity which should exist within the Church of Christ. The virtue of prudence, on the other hand, supposes compatibility between freedom and authority.

Accordingly, chapter four explains that moral realism respects legitimate authority, i.e., the lawmaker, as an appropriate exponent of right reason. The virtue of prudence ensures that there exists between the intelligence of the moral agent and the truth of the moral law an authentic and intrinsic conformity. Moreover, this conformity alone avoids the conflicts which otherwise arise when the self-reliant individual judges the pronouncements of legitimate moral authority unrealistic and, therefore, considers exemption from them justifiable. The fourth chapter also elaborates how the intellectual virtue of prudence informs the other moral virtues so that the intellectual and affective movements of an individual resolve into a harmonized pattern of virtuous action. The unitive function of prudence characterizes moral realism as a unique and distinctive system of theological ethics. The chapter closes with an analysis of a prudential act and its three principal moments, namely, counsel, judgment, and command. To sum up, Christian prudence ensures that we act in conformity with the directives of right reason. While these find their principal historical exposition in Christian moral wisdom and the magisterial tradition of the Church, the designs and providence of the Eternal Law remain the unmeasured measure of the virtuous conduct which prudence imperates.

The fifth chapter turns our attention to the question of the development of the virtues. Of course, growth in virtue provides the opportunity for a range of different specialists to deliberate questions which pertain to human maturation and development. The perspective of this chapter remains strictly theological, even if Christian theology traditionally considers both the acquired and infused virtues. First of all,
then, chapter five examines the way in which theologians speak about what causes the acquired virtues to develop in a given individual. But the chapter is mainly concerned about growth in virtue as the work of divine grace. The dynamic interplay which exists between the exercise of the acquired and the enjoyment of the infused virtues furnishes moral realism with a distinctive theory concerning the development of the virtuous life. In general, contemporary theologians prefer to consider only the infused virtues, that is, those qualities of Christian life which function in the believer actively united with Christ. On the other hand, some ethical autonomists even question whether any specifically Christian virtues exist. But moral realism recognizes both the givens of human psychology and, at the same time, the special prerogatives which belong to those who enjoy the benefit of divine friendship. Because the matter bears such great importance for pastoral ministry, the discussion in chapter five provides some of the most important distinctions and clarifications which a study of the moral virtues and theological ethics can provide for those who accept the Gospel.

The sixth and final chapter treats the principal characteristics which accompany the development of the virtues in an individual. Discussion of these properties, such as the mean, the connection, and the equality of the moral virtues, approximate teachings found in non-Christian authors, but these same topics also illustrate theses on the moral virtues held by patristic authors, whose Christian exegesis makes a difference in the interpretation of these well-established themes. A Christian view of the characteristics of the virtuous life includes the testimony which derives from the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. In this context, the chapter also considers the celebrated adage that virtue abides in the middle—*virtus in medio stat*. All in all, the chapter offers an account of everyday examples which demonstrate how one who prac-
tices the moral virtues thereby develops a complete life in the Holy Spirit.

To sum up, the six chapters which comprise this volume on the moral virtues exhibit a specific order: First, an introduction to the present state of virtue theory in contemporary theology; second, technical information on the classical category for virtue, *habitus*; third, the definition of a moral virtue and the description of how it benefits our psychological capacities; fourth, the preeminent case of prudence and its unitive function in the moral life; fifth, discussion about what causes the moral virtues to grow according to nature and grace; and, sixth, the distinctive characteristics which accompany the life of virtue. The reader who studies this text will be ready to make a detailed examination of any one of the moral virtues. Like so many students of theological ethics in the past have done, one might choose, for example, to rummage through the *secunda pars* of Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*. More importantly, however, the book aims to introduce a view of the moral life which encourages the Christian believer to exercise the kind of moral vigilance which Jesus counsels in the parable of the wise and foolish maidens: “Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Mt 25:11–13). St. Augustine puts further perspective on the need for this vigilance when he insists: “What if virtue leads us to a happy life, I would rather regard virtue as nothing at all, unless it also led to the highest love of God.”  

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