
PAUL WADELL, C.P. – ON VIRTUE

Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 997–1007. The article on “Virtue” by Paul Wadell, C.P.

The idea of the virtues comes from an understanding of a human being as having a tremendous capacity both for good and for evil. Men and women are creatures who can go to extremes: they can become heroic in goodness, but they can also become tragically depraved. As an approach to the moral and spiritual life, the virtues respect one’s potential to grow in the beauty of goodness, but they also take seriously that there is a promise in one that can be lost. In the Christian moral life, all stand poised between possibilities for greatness or awfulness. It is through the virtues that one grows in the promise of life, and through the vices that one self-destructs. In a Christian schema of the moral and spiritual life, virtues make one godly, and vices, their opposite, make one wicked.

WHAT A VIRTUE IS

A virtue is a characteristic way of behavior which makes both actions and persons good and which also enables one to fulfill the purpose of life. When anyone both possesses and exercises the virtues, that person is brought to the wholeness proper to human nature; conversely, a lack of virtue constitutes a deprived nature and a diminished self. What might this understanding of the virtues entail?

First, it tells us that a virtue is a quality that accrues to a person through repeated activity. Virtues are possessed not externally but internally, for they represent how a person has been characterized by his or her most consistent behavior. Virtues are qualities of character acquired through corresponding actions. For instance, one takes on the character of generosity by practicing generosity; the quality of the behavior eventually becomes a quality of the self. That is why virtues—and vices too—are not ornaments of the self but the deepest expression of the self. Virtues capture what one’s most consistent behavior has made of him or her.

Second, virtues are qualities that change a person. Thomas Aquinas, the foremost proponent of an ethics of virtue in the Catholic moral tradition, speaks of them as bringing about a “modification of a subject” (ST I–II, q. 49, a. 2). Through the virtues one takes on qualities one

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did not have before and loses some qualities one did have: generosity replaces selfishness, courage overcomes timidity or recklessness. Virtues are transformative activities that involve the restructuring of the self. That is why they are central to Christian spirituality. Christianity involves the reconstruction of the self from sinner to saint. That is the work of grace, but it is also the work of virtue. The effect of any habit is a change of self, and through the habits of virtue the self is changed unto goodness.

Third, the change or the modification achieved by virtue is not arbitrary but is measured according to a specific understanding of human excellence. A man or a woman acquires the virtues in order to grow into the fullness of human nature. The power of the virtues is that through the possession and exercise of them persons reach the intended purpose of their lives. The virtues are habits that bring a person to his or her fullest development, and that is why their meaning is derived from whatever good or set of goods represents the highest possible human excellence.

The word for this view of the moral life is *teleological*. It is derived from the Greek *telos*, which means “goal,” “purpose,” or “end.” For instance, in the virtue ethics of both Aristotle and Aquinas, to be human is to have a purpose on which to make good. Aristotle called this the *telos*, or goal, of human nature and argued that one’s authentic humanity is measured in proportion to one’s participation in it. For both Aristotle and Aquinas, this purpose is not arbitrary; in fact, to ignore or neglect it is not just to become something different but to fail at the very thing for which life is given.

In this approach to the moral life, to be human is to be born into the world with something to achieve, namely, the fullness of one’s human nature, and it is through the virtues that one does so. The virtues are precisely the activities that work the changes necessary for growth. Thus the connection between the *telos* and the virtues is that the *telos* represents the goal or purpose of life, whether that is seen as goodness, holiness, or fullness of life with God, and the virtues are the means through which it is achieved. Men and women move to their end through the virtues, but the movement is not a change of place but a change of person, which is why conversion is a fitting name for what the virtues do.

Fourth, the purpose of a virtue is to dispose one to what is best. There is nothing middling about the virtues. They are powers that work for the ultimate enhancement of the person in goodness, which in the Christian life is the achievement of sanctity. Christian virtues work to make everyone a saint, because that reconstruction of the self constitutes everyone’s optimum potential in goodness. That is why the virtues can be called the preeminent humanizing activities. Moral development takes place through the virtues because they are the activities by which the self is reconstituted in its most fitting goodness. Christians call this goodness holiness and see it to be commensurate with one’s fullest possible development. From a Christian perspective, the virtues are humanizing because the virtues are sanctifying.

WHY THE VIRTUES ARE NEEDED



The most basic reason why human beings need the virtues is that they can, through the choices and decisions they make, become something other than human; they can end up with a life they ultimately regret. It would be different if human beings were unswervingly directed to what is best for them, but that is not the case. In this respect, human beings are not like other creatures. For instance, a horse cannot help but be a horse. It can grow, it can become bigger, faster, or stronger, but it cannot choose to be something other than a horse. With human beings it is different. They can choose to become something other than human by the behavior they adopt. Unlike other creatures, they do not by nature have an appropriate relationship to what most befits them. They can develop improperly. They can foster attachments that diminish more than enhance. They know, for example, that they can use their freedom to turn away from God in sin. Thus it is not only the case that everyone needs the virtues to grow but more precisely that they need them to grow in a way that promotes the proper development of themselves. Put differently, if the virtues are needed because there is a gap between who persons are now and who they need to be in order to realize the purpose or goal of their humanity, it is also true that they need the virtues to focus and direct their lives to that which is genuinely best.

No one is determined to what is best; rather, because of free will one can choose to act against what is good or seek the good in the wrong way. Lives can be disordered. Virtues are needed to cultivate an appropriate relationship to all the goods that develop human nature. No one has this relationship to appropriate goods instinctively, because no one by nature is predetermined to any one good instead of others. The human will is pulled in a variety of directions. The virtues recognize the need to develop habits that incline one to whatever is best; otherwise there is nothing to prevent a person from ending up a lifetime away from where he or she ought to be. From a Christian perspective, the virtues are the only guarantee against a wasted life.

This suggests a second reason why the virtues are needed: a human nature wounded by sin needs to be rehabilitated through virtue. There is a realism implicit in any ethic of virtue. Human beings are a mixture of frailties, rebel angels whose tendencies to goodness are impaired by equally powerful tendencies to sin. Traditionally original sin has been the theological concept used to explain not only a diminished capacity for goodness but also all the elements within men and women that work against genuine well-being. The doctrine of original sin accounts for the inner contradiction often experienced between recognition of the good that needs to be done and an inability to do it. The category of original sin captures not only the need for virtue but also how difficult it can be to acquire virtue. With the concept of original sin, the full truth of what it means to live after the Fall is grasped.

Original sin describes the disorder suffered by human nature as a consequence of the loss of original justice. To speak of that state of innocence as original justice means that before sin entered the world, all lived in perfect harmony with God, others, and themselves. In Aquinas's parlance, original justice means that everything was perfectly subjected to God. But sin wrecks the harmony between God, others, and the rest of creation. With the loss of that harmony



comes a disintegration that spreads through every aspect of life. Instead of having a perfectly ordered human nature and universe, human beings and their world are painfully disordered.

Aquinas uses an analogy to health. Prior to the Fall, human nature was perfectly healthy; however, with the fall from grace, that nature became ill. It is not completely infirm, but neither is it completely healthy. That is why Aquinas, following Augustine, speaks of original sin as “a sickness of nature” (ST I–II, q. 82, a. 1). As Aquinas sees it, the effect of original sin on human nature is like living with a low-grade flu. No one is so infirm that he or she cannot do any good, but a weakened human nature makes doing good difficult. Also, it is not just that original sin debilitates one or other dimension of existence, but that with it human nature is infirm throughout. With the loss of both inner and outer harmony, disintegration takes hold. It is experienced through inner turmoil and conflict. It is felt when one lives with a divided heart. And its power is known when a life stands in rebellion against God. As Aquinas says, “Once the harmony of original justice is shattered, the various powers of the soul strain toward conflicting objectives” (ST I–II, q. 82, a. 2).

The corruption of nature through original sin tempers one’s possibility for goodness. A key principle in traditional Catholic moral theology states that “as a thing is, so does it act” (*agere sequitur esse*). A person’s actions flow from his or her nature, but that nature must be taken into account when estimating potential for virtue. Original sin does not completely take away a capacity for virtue, but it does condition it. Aquinas expresses this when he says that “some bent toward disordered activity is a consequence of original sin” (ST I–II, q. 82, a. 1).

Human beings live with conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, they retain a bent toward virtue; on the other hand, they suffer opposing tendencies. Prior to the Fall there was what Aquinas calls a “connatural inclination” to virtue; however, that is no longer the case. There may be tendencies to virtue, but they have to be developed because there are tendencies to vice as well. Human beings are a mixture of tendencies, each of which offsets another. The picture Aquinas gives is of a human nature that needs to be healed, an insight that stands behind his remark that original sin is a “congenital defect” that does not destroy but does diminish capacity for virtue. In short, because nature is infirm, there is a need to develop virtue, but that is both difficult and tenuous.

Virtue works to restore a nature wounded by sin. Traditionally there have been four wounds to nature attributable to sin, each of which corresponds to a dimension of the person (ST I–II, q. 85, a. 3). First, there is the wound of ignorance. This wound represents how one can turn away

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from truth and seek refuge in misunderstanding. Second, there is the wound of malice. This wound settles in the will and describes how one can grow hardened to the good. Third, there is the wound of weakness, which depicts how a person can avoid what is right on account of difficulty or fear. Finally, there is the wound of concupiscence or disordered affection. This impairment of nature represents how one can be so driven by passion as to forget what is genuinely good and lovely. Collectively these four wounds portray how sin debilitates human nature. It affects the desire for truth, it weakens love for the good, it deprives one of the capacity to deal with difficulty or temptation, and it can make one lose one's freedom to pleasure.

Virtue works to heal these wounds to nature, while vice or sin deepens them. Sin increases the diminishment brought to human nature through original sin. That is why the ongoing effect of sin is always further debilitation. If patterns of sinfulness are embraced, the understanding grows darkened, the will becomes hardened, and it is increasingly difficult to be engaged in virtue and to avoid vice. Aquinas gives a more poetic depiction of the cumulative effect of sin when he describes it as a loss of the soul's refulgence (ST I-II, q. 86, a. 1). He says that every sin further stains a soul that has lost its original luster. Aquinas argues that sin, like virtue, is a kind of loving; the difference is that sin is disordered loving. To love anything is to cleave to it as if touching it. If what is loved is truly good and beautiful, then coming in touch with it enhances; that is why virtuous people shine in goodness. Virtue increases the radiance of goodness. What happens with sin is that through a misguided love something is clung to in the wrong way. Such a love does not benefit but diminishes a person. Thus through habits of sinfulness the light of goodness is dulled and can be completely extinguished.

A third reason why the virtues are needed is to overcome vice. The best way to understand the vices is to realize that they are the opposite of virtue in every way but one: like the virtues, they are habits. If virtues are habitual ways of acting by which both actions and persons are perfected, the vices are habits that make both deeds and persons bad. Similarly, if the virtues turn one to what is best, the vices dispose one to what diminishes and destroys. Vices are habits that actively work against virtue. As habits, they are not dormant. As powerful tendencies to corrupting behavior, they will weaken and eventually overcome virtues unless the virtues are vigilantly set against them. Vices grow with the passage of time unless uprooted through the skilled practice of virtue. The image here is of a subject under fire. Everyone is composed of an array of tendencies, many of which conflict. Some strengthen, others are clearly dehumanizing. Vices are habits that dehumanize, and they are hardly inert; indeed, unless acted against and weakened, they will overcome virtues.

For instance, why does it take time and effort to become good? Or more pointedly, why is being good so difficult sometimes? Perhaps one reason why developing virtue is toilsome is that often the cultivation of a good habit requires overcoming a vice. The initial task of virtue is not

so much the doing of good but the healing of a nature wounded by vice. Acquiring virtue involves, if not the uprooting of a particular vice, at least the weakening of a tendency to vice. The moral anthropology of an ethic of virtue argues that virtues come where vices either used to be or readily can be. Justice works against selfishness. Temperance works against debasing behavior. Courage wars with cowardice. Men and women are a blend of conflicting forces. Virtue always has an opposite, either in the form of an already acquired habit or its inclination. Therefore, even as virtue grows, there remains a tension to the moral life; for instance, when one strives to be good, the hold of sin can still be powerfully felt.

The impediments to virtue are especially powerful if they have developed into vices, because vices, like the virtues, are ingrained, characteristic ways of acting. Virtue is acquired by taking on the quality of a good act, such as justice; however, the same is true of a vice. Vices are acquired by taking on the quality of a bad act, such as cruelty, and the longer a vice has characterized a person, the deeper it grows, becoming part of the fabric of the person's personality. This explains why it can be so hard to change bad habits. Like virtues, vices are hardly superficial; rather, they are qualities of the self. Furthermore, if virtues are energies that work for the good, vices are energies too—they simply have an opposite focus. The strategy of vice is to overcome virtue. Vices will not acquiesce meekly to virtue, because, like the virtues, they are entrenched patterns of behavior that struggle to survive. The picture is of a human nature full of complex, conflicting tendencies, each fighting to gain sovereignty over the self.

Virtue must be more vigilant than vice, but what if it is not? What happens if sin becomes habitual? The peril of sin is not so much the evil of particular acts—though that cannot be taken lightly—but that sinning can become a habit. If that occurs, the behavior that should be disdained is found pleasing. Aquinas notes that everyone “chooses readily those things which habit has made congenial” (ST I–II, q. 78, a. 2). When it comes to the good, that is a blessing, but when it comes to sin, it is a danger. Aquinas's point is that all choose according to that with which they have grown comfortable. The odyssey of the Christian life illustrates that it is easy to grow comfortable with sin, so much so that a sinful act may hardly be recognized as such. What is frightening about sinning regularly is that an abhorrence for evil can be eventually lost. It is possible to grow accustomed to certain vices; worse than that, it is even possible to find sin more congenial than virtue. It is a terrible perversion to be corrupted to the point of finding sin more fitting than virtue, but it is possible once an act of sin becomes a habit of sin.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF VIRTUE

Though human beings have a capacity for virtue, that capacity has to be developed. Virtues represent the development of inclinations and tendencies into habits. Like any habit, virtues are acquired through repeated activity. For instance, someone may have a disposition or tendency to patience but not yet have acquired the virtue of patience. A disposition is like an undeveloped virtue. To be disposed to a certain kind of behavior means that one occasionally



practices the behavior, but not regularly or predictably. To do the good by chance but not by habit means that one is not yet virtuous. A person who does an act of justice may not yet have the virtue of justice. To possess a virtue, the good acts one does must flow from the good person one has become.

Habits, then, are different from dispositions. To possess a habit is to be so qualified by a particular way of acting that it is expected of a person. Unlike a tendency or disposition, a habit is a firm and predictable way of acting rooted in a quality of the person. If not developed into habits, inclinations can be lost; however, once dispositions become habits, they are much less likely to be lost, because they are characteristics of the self. For example, though one may be disposed to actions such as kindness, patience, or forgiveness, none is yet a virtue until it becomes so much a part of a person that it is truly a quality of the self; this is precisely why people expect the virtuous to be kind, patient, and forgiving.

Dispositions to virtue develop into habits of virtue by practice. Aquinas says that it is “by similar and repeated activity” that virtues are acquired (ST I–II, q. 51, a. 3). A habit is an expected way of behavior because it captures a correspondence between what one does and who one has become. If something is a habit, it means that repeated activity has made it part of who a person is, which explains why virtue seems to flow from the being of a person and why virtuous people are able to do the good with a certain ease, skill, and delight. There is a unity between their actions and their selves because through repeated activity the quality of the action has become a quality of their character, thus transforming them in a virtue’s particular goodness.

The development of virtue takes time. As a habit, a virtue is not fickle and sporadic but firm and predictable. To possess a habit is to have taken on the quality of a certain kind of behavior so thoroughly that one really has been determined to it. Put more strongly, to be virtuous means that a person has been mastered by goodness, so much so that doing good is second nature. A single action is not enough to produce a virtue, but it begins a process by which one is gradually shaped in the goodness of a virtue. It is one thing to be shaped by that goodness, though, and another to actually possess it. In his treatise on the virtues, Aquinas says that the virtues are possessed only when practicing the good has “eroded the opposing conditions to virtue” and when a person has been so “impressed with the likeness” of a virtue’s goodness that he or she begins to act that way with ease (ST I–II, q. 51, a. 3). Those “opposing conditions” to virtue are many, whether they be vices, personal weaknesses, or conflicting inclinations, and they explain why initially there is a strangeness to doing good. At first there is a clumsiness to being virtuous, because a person is not yet practiced in a virtue’s goodness. Acquiring virtue is a matter of carving in oneself the quality of goodness, but that can take a very long time; in fact, Aquinas says it is like water “hollowing out a rock” (*De Virtutibus*, art. 9).

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The growth of the virtues registers one's history with the good. No one becomes good instantaneously but only little by little. Aquinas captures this reality of the moral and spiritual life when he distinguishes three stages in the growth of virtue. For instance, when focusing on the virtue of charity, he speaks of the virtue of beginners, the virtue of those on their way, and the virtue of those who have finally arrived (ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9). In the first stage ("beginners"), virtue works not directly to do good but to overcome vice. As Aquinas puts it, "To begin with, he must devote himself mainly to withdrawing from sin and resisting the appetites, which drive him in the opposite direction to charity. This is the condition of beginners, who need to nourish and carefully foster charity to prevent its being lost" (ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9). In this first stage of virtue a rehabilitation takes place. A nature weakened by sin tries to grow stronger in the good by rooting out vice. In the second stage ("those on their way"), the energy of virtue is directed to doing good, but the moral life is still seen as a kind of convalescence. In this second stage the person is an apprentice of virtue. He or she learns about the good and progresses in virtue but is not yet a moral virtuoso. The task in the second stage is to live in a way that allows one to be rooted more deeply in a virtue's goodness, though not yet possessing the virtue completely. The third stage of virtue applies to those "who have finally arrived." Aquinas says that in this stage "a man applies himself chiefly to the work of cleaving to God and enjoying him, which is characteristic of the perfect who 'long to depart and to be with Christ'" (ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9).

If virtues can grow, in what way do they grow? Virtues grow not extensively but intensively, which means that they grow not so much in themselves but in the person who possesses them. For instance, how can justice increase? The growth of justice occurs not in the virtue itself but in the degree that a person has the virtue of justice. The growth of any virtue is measured in terms of the qualification of the self by the virtue's goodness. Thus, to talk about the growth of justice is not to suggest that justice grows by justice being added to justice but that justice grows as one becomes more just.

But virtues can also be lost. Just as certain behavior develops virtue, certain behavior weakens virtue. Virtues are primarily lost through the practice of their opposite behavior, the vices. What happens is that the quality of one action, the vice, weakens and gradually uproots the quality of virtue. This is the principal way in which virtue can be destroyed. It will be destroyed if it is acted against by its contrary vice, for then the quality of the virtue is lost, and one is redefined by the quality of the vice. For instance, a person can lose the virtue of justice if he or she makes a habit of selfishness. Similarly, one can lose the virtue of courage if he or she is controlled by the desire to please others, which is a kind of cowardice. At first the virtue will

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only be weakened, but if the vice is practiced continually, the virtue will be destroyed because it cannot endure the quality of the vice.

But virtues can be lost not only by lack of exercise but even, Aquinas hints, by behavior that falls short of the quality of virtue one has already acquired. In other words, if one does not practice a virtue to the degree he or she is capable of doing, it will be weakened. It is not only actions contrary to virtue that weaken it but also actions that fall short of a goodness already there. Virtues have to be practiced in order to be kept, but they also need to be practiced in proportion to one's virtuosity. They must be practiced because they are habits, and habits are activities; the very meaning of a virtue is to act, so not to exercise a virtue is to weaken one's skill in the virtue. But virtue is also diminished, Aquinas suggests, when it is not practiced in proportion to one's possession of it: "If, on the other hand, the strength of the action is proportionally less than the strength of the corresponding habit, then the action does not help the habit to grow stronger but rather prepares for its decay" (ST I-II, q. 52, a. 3).

Perhaps what Aquinas suggests is that mediocrity in the moral and spiritual life is not benign. Everyone has to be vigilant about carelessness in the Christian life, and no one can afford to grow complacent about goodness, because it is not only bad actions that hurt one by weakening virtue but also actions that fall short of the goodness one already has. If being good is a matter of doing good, not being as good as one can be means that the goodness already possessed will be lost. In the moral life, a virtue that is not exercised in proportion to its possession will begin to decay. Therefore no one can afford to take chances with goodness, and no one can ever be too secure in virtue. In an ethic of virtue, complacency is the first stage of deterioration.

THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

Besides the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, the four principal virtues are the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude or courage. As the word *cardinal* (Latin *cardo*, "hinge") suggests, these virtues form the hinge or axis on which the moral life turns. Why are these virtues prominent? First, these are the virtues needed to get through life. Without them a person cannot sustain the journey to the good. If progress is to be made in the moral life, one must be prudent, just, temperate, and courageous; these are the skills needed to navigate successfully all the situations and challenges one can confront.

Second, these are called the cardinal virtues because every virtue, except the theological virtues, is in some way derived from them and in some way manifests them. The cardinal virtues express some aspect or ingredient of every virtue, so that every virtue shows itself in some way as prudence, in some way as justice, in some way as temperance, and in some way as fortitude. The cardinal virtues mark four qualities an act must have if it is to be virtuous. If something is virtuous, it is prudent inasmuch as it is right judgment about what needs to be done; it is just insofar as it does what needs to be done in the way it needs to be done; it is



temperate because it displays the right amount of passion in the doing of good; and it is courageous because it is not deterred by fear or hardship.

The most important cardinal virtue is prudence. Because a virtue is a characteristic way of acting, it is sometimes thought that it refers to rote, mechanical ways of behaving, almost as if virtue overrides any ingenuity or flexibility in human behavior. But that is not so. A virtue is a moral skill that enables a person to fathom in a situation precisely how the good can be done or needs to be done. Ethics is a practical science, dealing with concrete, everyday behavior; however, given the vast array of human situations, it is difficult to predict in advance exactly how the good ought to be done. Rules and principles help, but they cannot always tell how to capture the good. That requires discernment and wisdom, and this is what prudence supplies. Prudence comes first in the formation of every virtuous act because prudence is right judgment about what needs to be done.

There are certain situations in which a literal application of a rule does not allow the good to be achieved as it needs to be achieved. In these instances there is something about the situation that the principle or rule does not adequately address. It is in such moments that the need for prudence is felt. A prudent person is one who sees what a situation demands, who knows that the more concrete and particular a situation becomes, the harder it can be to know what ought to be done. Some discernment is required, and this is what prudence supplies.

Prudence is practical wisdom. It asks, “What shape must the good take in this situation if one is not to fall short of achieving it?” In other words, prudence strives to figure how one must act if he or she is not to misfire in the desire to do good. When in a situation in which there are many possibilities of action, a prudent person discerns what best enables the flourishing of the good. It is a virtue of moral astuteness that helps one to see how the good is fittingly practiced. Not a virtue of caution or restraint, prudence gives ingenuity to love.

Not even charity is enough for the Christian life. It is preeminent and essential, but it is not sufficient. Charity needs to be guided by prudence. In morals, good intentions are not enough. Charity supplies the best of intentions because it is the virtue that directs all one’s behavior toward God; however, a person must also know how to make good on that intention, and that is the work of prudence. A prudent person knows how to find the right means for a good end.

Nonetheless, even though charity needs prudence to bring wisdom and ingenuity to love, prudence, like all the virtues, is at the service of charity. Prudence is moral wisdom with a specific focus. Its interest is knowing how to act so that one can accomplish the basic intention of one’s life, that of growing in friendship with God. Aquinas captures this relationship between prudence and charity when he writes, “Prudence is of good counsel about matters regarding a

man's life in its entirety, and its last end Those only are such who are of good counsel about what concerns the whole of human life" (ST I-II, q. 57, a. 4).

Prudence connects the everyday with the ultimate. It is moral wisdom not only about the particular action before one but also about life taken as a whole. Prudence knows how to make everything one does serve the overall purpose of life, namely, moving more deeply into God. Standing in the service of charity, prudence supplies a special vision. If charity needs the moral acuity of prudence, prudence always has charity in mind. It is not a stodgy virtue, not a virtue of caution or restraint; on the contrary, it reads the everyday in light of the future a Christian wants his or her behavior to achieve.

The second cardinal virtue is justice. If prudence is the ability to know what needs to be done, justice is doing what needs to be done in the way it needs to be done. What distinguishes justice from prudence is that prudence is right judgment about what needs to be done while justice is right action (ST I-II, q. 61, a. 4). Prudence discerns, justice enacts.

The cardinal virtues of fortitude and temperance are related. Both pertain not directly to actions but to impediments to action. Their focus is the emotions, particularly when they make doing good more difficult instead of facilitating the doing of good. For instance, one can be persuaded to turn from the good on account of fear or difficulty. It is in such moments that courage or fortitude is needed to enable one "to be steadfast and not turn away from what is right" (ST I-II, q. 61, a. 2). Sometimes people are tempted to turn away from what is good because of adversity. They suffer setbacks, they are victims of misfortune, they know the scourge of tragedy. There are periods of darkness, times, as Faulkner writes in *The Sound and the Fury*, when "life looks like pieces of a broken mirror." If the Christian life is pictured as a journey to God through love, the importance of courage is clear. As with any journey, the human pilgrimage is speckled with difficulties and moments of deep discouragement. A person needs to know how to continue on through adversity, and this is the skill that courage gives. Aquinas quotes St. Augustine, who said that "courage is 'love readily enduring all for the sake of what is loved'" (ST II-II, q. 123, a. 4). Given the temptation to flee what is right when doing it is threatening or hard, it is not surprising that Aquinas says that "the chief activity of courage is not so much attacking as enduring, or standing one's ground amidst dangers" (ST II-II, q. 123, a. 6). Courage is the virtue by which one perseveres in what one loves and knows to be good

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even when doing so is costly; indeed, Aquinas sees martyrdom as the supreme manifestation of courage.

Like courage, the focus of temperance is the emotions, particularly when they obstruct virtuous behavior. This can happen in two ways. Sometimes the emotions can grow so powerful that they make one rash or careless, but at other times a person can feel so listless as to lack the energy to act at all. As its name suggests, temperance “tempers” the emotions either up or down. If the emotions are too strong, they need to be “tempered down,” or subdued; if they are too weak, they need to be “tempered up,” or aroused. Virtue depends on well-ordered affections, and this is what temperance achieves; it gives the proper expression of feeling to actions. Thus temperance does not suppress the emotions but shapes them into their most appropriate expression, using them to empower virtuous behavior instead of obstructing it. In this sense temperance is like courage inasmuch as both virtues come into play whenever human beings are confronted with something that could “render them unreasonable” (ST II-II, q. 141, a. 2).

There are two parts to temperance: shame and honor or beauty. To speak of shame suggests that there is a nobility to being human beneath which no one should fall. Aquinas captures this when he describes intemperance as a puerile emotion. To be intemperate is to fall beneath the true dignity of a human being. Someone who is puerile has lost control of self and is a slave to the emotions. His or her life is not well-ordered, it is chaotic. An intemperate person is a creature of excess soon to become a creature of compulsion.

Intemperance can be debasing. When one’s emotions are out of control, they govern the person instead of the person governing them. If this occurs, the emotions are not only destructive, they can also bring shame. Some things should not be done because they are repugnant to the nobility human beings have as creatures made in the image of God. A sense of shame is essential in order to appreciate the preciousness of human life. To debase oneself through intemperate behavior is to mock one’s dignity as beloved of God. Aquinas says, “Intemperance is shameful ... for it debases a man and makes him dim. He grovels in pleasures well-described as slavish ... and he sinks from his high rank” (ST II-II, q. 142, a. 4).

To become slaves to the emotions is degrading. Aquinas speaks of intemperance as a “darkening of one’s splendor and beauty” and as a “dulling of one’s true dignity” (ST II-II, q. 142, a. 4). Sensitivity to shame, fear of being dishonored, uneasiness about losing a good reputation are all valuable qualities to have. To be sensitive to shame is to be anxious about possible disgrace, and this is a moral strength. Disgrace should be feared, as well as the loss of a good reputation. All this is part of temperance. A sense of shame is crucial in order to alert a

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person to things that are debasing. Aquinas realizes this when he writes, “Sentiments to shame, when repeated, set up a disposition to avoid disgraceful things” (ST II-II, q. 144, a. 1). This sensitivity to shame, which Aquinas also calls “a healthy fear of being inglorious,” is an extremely valuable moral quality because it protects one from debasing and destructive behavior.

The importance of shame can be grasped if one considers what would happen if a person had no shame. Aquinas says that shame comes from “a horror of dishonor” (ST II-II, q. 144, a. 4). Shame protects a person from thoughtlessly risking integrity; it is a sentry before all that dishonors. What if a sense of shame is lost? The danger of intemperance is that it deadens sensitivity to what is debasing. A single intemperate act may be relatively harmless, but cumulatively it represents a deadening of moral sensitivity. One can grow numb to what is debasing about certain behavior because it has become so much a way of life that it can no longer be seen for what it is. As Aquinas warns, “Accordingly a man may lack a feeling of shame ... because what is really shame-making is not apprehended as such, and accordingly a man sunk in sin may be quite shameless; indeed, far from being shamefaced, he may be brazen about it” (ST II-II, q. 144, a. 4).

The second part of temperance is honor or beauty. What makes anyone honorable is virtue, for honor stems not from possessions or power or fame but from moral excellence (ST II-II, q. 145, a. 1). Similarly, temperance is a virtue of the beautiful because it gives a proper measure or proportion to actions. A virtuous person is one who not only does the good but does it fittingly. For an act to be virtuous, what matters is not simply what is done but how it is done. This is the function of temperance. Temperance shapes behavior into a proper balance of intelligence and passion. With temperance, every moral act is a thing of beauty; even the simplest act of kindness is something beautiful when done with style and grace. There are people whose acts of thoughtfulness, gestures of forgiveness, and everyday kindnesses display graciousness. There is an artistry to virtue, and it comes through temperance. Far from being a virtue that chastises, temperance arranges all the parts of an action so that the entire act, however small, is beautiful and noble.

See also CARDINAL VIRTUES; CONVERSION; DECISION, DECISION-MAKING; EVIL; FAITH; GOODNESS; HOPE; JUSTICE; LOVE; PRAXIS; SIN; VALUE.

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¹ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 997–1007.