
GANZ NOTES

ON PAUL J. WADELL, CP “ON VIRTUE”

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Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 997–1007. This article by PAUL J. WADELL, C.P.

VIRTUE

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 deprived. 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?

Josef Pieper (1965): “Virtue is a “perfected ability” of man as a spiritual person; and justice, fortitude, and temperance, as “abilities” of the whole man, achieve their “perfection” only when they are founded upon prudence, that is to say upon the perfected ability to make right decisions.”¹

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 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.

Something that took me years to recognize is that when we change (our self, our character), when we become a different self, our awareness of reality is also fundamentally changed. Bad habits, or vices, darken our “eye”.

See the short story, “**The Snow Queen**” by **Hans Christian Andersen**. (See my Notes on this text – the first Chapter in that story.)

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.

¹ Pieper, Josef. *Four Cardinal Virtues, The: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Kindle Locations 145-147). University of Notre Dame Press. Kindle Edition.

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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.

This perspective makes clear that a person in *stasis* does not exist, unless one understands *stasis* as “being in steady, predictable, habitual motion” towards an unchanging goal.

It would be different if human beings were unswervingly directed to what is best for them, but that is not the case.

Here I think it is useful to consider the matter of the apple tree in Paradise. What was the reason God planted it there, if its fruits (its purpose) was off-limits, and God had specifically to express a command not to eat of it? It is my conviction is that this prohibition by God of an object immediately perceivable by Adam, and soon his wife Eve, **opened the possibility in human beings of *trust*, but also of *something valuable that one must learn how to seek ... not just to attain and possess.***

Genesis 2: ⁸The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east,^{*} and placed there the man whom he had formed.^e ⁹*Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.^f²

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.

This is an astonishing fact about human persons. *As human beings* we have no ability to become more or less human being, or to transmute into another species. But *as human*

^{*} *Eden, in the east:* the place names in vv. 8–14 are mostly derived from Mesopotamian geography (see note on vv. 10–14). Eden may be the name of a region in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), the term derived from the Sumerian word *eden*, “fertile plain.” A similar-sounding Hebrew word means “delight,” which may lie behind the Greek translation, “The Lord God planted a paradise [= pleasure park] in Eden.” **It should be noted, however, that the garden was not intended as a paradise for the human race, but as a pleasure park for God; the man tended it for God. The story is not about “paradise lost.”**

The garden in the precincts of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem seems to symbolize the garden of God (like gardens in other temples); it is apparently alluded to in Ps 1:3; 80:10; 92:14; Ez 47:7–12; Rev 22:1–2.

^e Is 51:3; Ez 31:9.

^{*} **The second tree, the tree of life, is mentioned here and at the end of the story (3:22, 24). It is identified with Wisdom in Prv 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4, where the pursuit of wisdom gives back to human beings the life that is made inaccessible to them in Gn 3:24. In the new creation described in the Book of Revelation, the tree of life is once again made available to human beings (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19).** *Knowledge of good and evil:* the meaning is disputed. According to some, it signifies moral autonomy, control over morality (symbolized by “good and evil”), which would be inappropriate for mere human beings; the phrase would thus mean refusal to accept the human condition and finite freedom that God gives them. According to others, it is more broadly the knowledge of what is helpful and harmful to humankind, suggesting that the attainment of adult experience and responsibility inevitably means the loss of a life of simple subordination to God.

^f Gn 3:22; Prv 3:18; Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14.

² [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ge 2:8–9.

persons, we do have the ability described here: “we can choose to become something other than human....”

Perhaps what human persons get confused is these two things: (1) by our considerable powers of soul, we have the power to “become”, in a certain way, other people through the love we have for them; we can stand “inside their moccasins and walk around in them”; we can by empathy “know” to some degree what it is like to be that other person; and (2) our temptation to want to become someone, or something, else.

It is worth remembering how the Greek word “hypocrite” derives from the mask a Greek actor would place in front of his or her face, so that we in the audience would “allow” that the actor had now become that other person.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**hypocrite**” – “One who falsely professes to be virtuously or religiously inclined; one who pretends to have feelings or beliefs of a higher order than his real ones; hence generally, a dissembler, pretender.”

Etymology: < Old French *ypo-*, *ipocrite* (modern French *hypocrite*), < ecclesiastical Latin *hypocrita*, < Greek *ὑποκριτής* an actor on the stage, pretender, dissembler, < *ὑποκρίνεσθαι*

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.

It can be helpfully explored here the way God Himself learned about the astonishing depth of depravity He discovered, told in the story about Noah and his family and the Great Flood. God's first and visceral reaction to the depravity of human beings was to wipe them all out, and so did that. But as a result, the story speaks of the way God "came to Himself" and learned to understand that human beings are an enduring mix of motivations, some good and some evil ... and that this will always be the case. Thus, to love them as they are means to love them as they are – "sinners yet called".

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

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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.**

What strikes me in Waddell’s treatment of “sin” and “original sin” is how strongly he exegetes it according to personal sin. He does not (at least not yet in this article) how our human nature is “conditioned” by the social and cultural location inside of which we live and breathe and strive and hope. The “ill health” of human nature that Waddell addresses here is an over-emphasis on the personal soul, if you will, and not enough on the corporate or social or cultural “soul”.

Virtue works to restore a nature wounded by sin.

For example, one might say, and perhaps to achieve a significant and helpful expansion of theological range, that “virtue works to restore culture, and the society that has its meanings and values given it by that culture.”

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).

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First, there is the wound of **ignorance**. This wound represents how one can turn away 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**.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* at “concupiscence” – **CONCUPISCENCE: Human appetites or desires which remain disordered** due to the temporal consequences of original sin, which remain even after Baptism, and which produce an inclination to sin (1264, 1426, 2515).³

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* when discussing Baptism - **1264** Yet certain temporal consequences of sin remain in the baptized, such as suffering, illness, death, and such frailties inherent in life as weaknesses of character, and so on, as well as **an inclination to sin that Tradition calls *concupiscence*, or metaphorically, “the tinder for sin” (*fomes peccati*)**; since concupiscence “is left for us to wrestle with, it cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ.”⁶⁷ Indeed, “an athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.”⁶⁸ (975, 2514; 1426; 405)⁴

John Hastings concerning “concupiscence” – **CONCUPISCENCE**.—C. is intense desire (*concupiscere* intensive of *concupere*), always in a bad sense (so that ‘*evil c.*’ of Col 3:5 is a redundancy in English), and nearly always meaning sexual lust. The Gr. is always **ἐπιθυμία**, a more general word than the Eng. ‘concupiscence.’ The passages are Wis

³ Catholic Church, [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 871–872.

⁶⁷ Council of Trent (1546): DS 1515.

⁶⁸ 2 *Tim* 2:5.

⁴ Catholic Church, [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 322.

Gr. Greek.

Eng. English.

4:12 (RV ‘desire’), Sir 23:5 (RV ‘concupiscence’), Ro 7:8 (RV ‘coveting’), Col 3:5 (RV ‘desire’), 1 Th 4:5 (RV ‘lust’).⁵

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 debilitates⁶ 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.*

Though Wadell’s Thomistic analysis has power to it, and is helpful, it frames the purpose of virtue as *therapeutic* – that which heals a sickened human nature. And so he will oppose the four wounds with the four cardinal/natural virtues. But what gets lost in this way of analyzing virtue is how virtue is perhaps more importantly about the imitation of Christ, the means – the virtues - that ancient and tested wisdom has given us to be able through daily practice to be more and more “in the image and likeness” of God ... and the joy of that *likening through grace*. In other words, we don’t practice virtue because, primarily, we want to get well; rather, **we practice virtue because our gradual becoming more like Christ does in fact bring JOY into our lives and steadies it.**

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**

RV Revised Version NT 1881, OT 1885.

⁵ James Hastings, [“CONCUPISCENCE,”](#) ed. James Hastings et al., *A Dictionary of the Bible: Dealing with Its Language, Literature, and Contents Including the Biblical Theology* (New York; Edinburgh: Charles Scribner’s Sons; T. & T. Clark, 1911–1912), 463.

⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the verb “to debilitate” - **Etymology:** < Latin *dēbilitāt-*, participial stem of *dēbilitāre* to weaken, < *dēbilis* weak.

when he describes it as a loss of the soul's *refulgence*⁷ (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 one then analyzes “vice” as a habit – “a scheme of recurrence” (Lonergan) – then it becomes easier to understand how committing a sin, even a bad one, is not as important as an established habit of sinning in particular ways. It is wrong, and a misuse of our power of judgment, to *assume* that because person sins in a grave way, he or she is proven to have locked into their nature an established habit. It is true that a grave sin committed might reveal a hidden habit; but it is also true that a grave sin committed might reveal a person who was “available” to being persuaded to do something quite awful, and beyond his ever imagining himself or herself doing such a thing. I deeply dislike how we assume so easily as to the existence of an established badness in a person and disregard how human beings regularly do bad things ... and end up genuinely startled that they ever could have done that.

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.**

I like to teach this idea by putting it this way. If I have a bad habit, and I finally get to the point where I do not want that habit to characterize my life any more, then the way to make it go away is *not by putting a stop to the bad habit* ... though it is not wrong, and sometimes exceedingly necessary to stop practicing the habit. No, the way to drive out a

⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**refulgence**” – “The quality or fact of being refulgent; brilliance, **radiance**, lustrousness; splendour, glory; (occasionally) an instance of this.”

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bad habit is to practice – a virtue – that is the vice’s opposite. It is a particular good habit that will dry up, neutralize, and eventually cause to wither away the directly opposed bad habit. **For this reason too it is helpful to begin to consider what exactly is the nature of my particular vice, so that I might then begin to explore what is the precisely opposed virtue ... that I might practice the latter to break the power over me of the former.**

Figuring out what is the virtue that is the direct opposite of a vice is more often than not difficult. For example, my “snacking” behavior at night in my room, which causes me to gain weight over the years is not gluttony. It probably has more to do with my inability to accept the enormous damage to our Jesuit life caused, and perpetuated, by those whom the Society of Jesus entrusted to care for the Order. My “snacking” probably has more to do with the difficulty I have had figuring out how to forgive and to let go – the feeling of the most fundamental betrayal of my life and the gift of it to the Order. Again, it is not always easy to figure out what exactly the vice is, and then to figure out what its opposite virtue is ... that I may practice the latter to drive out my attachment to the former.

In the language of Formal Logic (if it is legitimate to apply a principle of argument to a habit a person practices), it seems to me that a Virtue and its opposite Vice are in *contradictory* relation to each other – the one completely cancels out the other. So a person may be Envious or not Envious – both *cannot* be true statements about the same person, but one of the statements *must* be true. But here emerges the thought: If Envy is the vice, then not-Envious is not the virtue. Rather, Envy is the vice, while, say, Admiration or Gratitude is the virtue that cancels out Envy. For example, if a man is a drunk, then the redeemed or recovering man is not a not-drunk man (this is what alcoholics call a “dry drunk”), he is what AA would call a “recovering alcoholic”; i.e., a person in a highly personal experience of ongoing redemption.

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.

When Wadell notes how “entrenched” vice gets in a person, and “will not acquiesce meekly to virtue”, he captures how vice is always some practice of *self-love*. Vices are not “things” but **the habitual practice of a vicious center of freedom – a vicious person.** *Vices in themselves have only the substance of a temptation*, but a temptation filled with persuasive power. What Vices seek is a free person freely willing to let that Vice become incarnate in himself or herself, giving the Vice a personality, an intelligence ... a cunning.

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.

Notice **the essential shift in the domain of affect** that is required for a Vice to possess a free person. A person, through the practice of a Vice, must train himself or herself to “enjoy”, to grow in “hunger” for the Vice’s malignant fruit (or pleasure).

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**

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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.

Therefore, one of the most striking results of Vice acting powerfully in a person is his or her **failure to feel anymore.** For example, a Drug Dealer may cease to feel any revulsion as he or she watches his or her customer descend into depravity and deep addiction. For example, a person trained by violence video games may eventually fail to feel anymore the horrible void that results in a person when he or she has murdered someone.

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.**

I have never thought of putting it this way: the distinction between a *disposition* and a *virtue*. So, for example, a Jesuit may practice “kindness” to one or two his friends in the community, because he is favorably *disposed* to do so according to pleasure (he prefers and likes his special friends, his clique) or usefulness (what helps him get what he wants from these Jesuits). **This is not virtue, a virtue of kindness, but only a disposition followed when it is useful or pleasurable to him to do so.** A virtue of kindness has achieved the stability of virtue when a Jesuit shows kindness to everyone, and equally, not just to his special buddies.

Habits, then, are different from dispositions.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**disposition**” – “Natural tendency or bent of the mind, esp. in relation to moral or social qualities; mental constitution or temperament; turn of mind.”

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.

It strikes me that a “disposition” is something more rooted in the affect than in the intellect, or better, that **a disposition is a felt attraction to something**, which then seeks the complicity of the intellect to rationalize.

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.

In the realm of Intellect, we speak of a student **learning something by heart**. What we mean is that in respect to that particular object of knowledge a student has “made it his or her own”. In other words, he or she has not just memorized the object of knowledge; rather he or she has understood it and come to a conclusion as to its truth and its value in relation to other values.

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**

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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).

I remember Lonergan referring to the “startling strangeness” a person experiences when finally catching on that what is real is not “already out there now” but something one engages through the integral operations of the unrestricted desire to know. *Intellectual conversion*, as he calls this, is an entrance into “startling strangeness.” What Wadell, CP is talking about here is the “strangeness” associated with *moral conversion*.

The growth of the virtues registers one’s history with the good.

I read somewhere in Lonergan that “history” is not about “everything that happened.” Rather, “history” is the story of reality and those who commit themselves to serve what is real – what is true, and good, and beautiful. The “story” that vice causes to be in the world is **not “history” but “anti-history.”**

No one becomes good instantaneously but only little by little.

I think of how I have given counsel to couples – to one or the other. I recognize how a person can build too much hope on an occasional good act done for the sake of the relationship. This is a mistake. Rather, one must learn how to attend to the *virtue* of her or his fiancé/fiancée – **the steady, reliable practice of a habit that serves the relationship.**

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

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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 God*, 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.

This is an interesting observation. But really what this is about is a habit becoming *second nature*; that is, it is a quality, a strength, a defining characteristic (“mark”, a “note”; a defining aspect of a person’s character) of a person. Think of that famous text in Matthew 25:31-46, where we see reported about those possessed by virtue that they truly are no aware that they were “being good” when they were good, steadily, predictably, and for the least of those among us:

³⁷ **Then the *righteous** will answer him and say,** ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’

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* *The righteous* will be astonished that in caring for the needs of the sufferers they were ministering to the Lord himself. *One of these least brothers of mine*: cf. Mt 10:42.

⁴⁰ⁱAnd the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’⁸

The virtue in the “righteous” is so “second nature” that *they no longer are conscious, or self-conscious, of the good that each of them has become*. I think, but I have yet to understand (as of 27 May 2018), that this is what Aquinas means by the virtue of PRUDENCE – a *kind* of person able, steadily and predictably, to do the good because he or she is good. The ability of every other of the virtues to be such is conditioned by the kind of person who tries to practice the habits that are those virtues in action.

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.

What continues to lack in the way Wadell has talked about Virtue and Vice is the social location of a person, and how that can have such a powerful effect on his or her ability to be virtuous. For example, Wadell talks here about how Virtue gets corrupted by Vice. There is of course value in his approach here. But what he does not explore is how a virtuous person can in a moment of violence, or of betrayal so profound, or in an exposure to wickedness so ugly, that he or she can be shattered, his or her ability to trust in goodness wrecked. The virtuous person, in this case, never chose to practice vices, such that his or her virtue got corrupted. Rather, his or her existence was attacked so powerfully that even his or her best resistance to it was blown away. Thus, in our own times in this country, we have more and more soldiers who have been exposed to most violent and ugly circumstances that they may never be able to be virtuous again, in the way Wadell means it, because their being has been so violated and damaged.

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 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**

ⁱ 10:40, 42.

⁸ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt 25:37–40.

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.*⁹

I know what this means, but I had never formulated this thought that Wadell does, attending to Aquinas; namely, that a virtue weakens if we fail to practice it proportionate to the degree we possess, or are possessed by, the virtue – “in proportion to one's virtuosity.” Very insightful.

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.**

⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**virtuosity**” – “Moral goodness; virtuousness.” I never considered “**virtuosity**” as a synonym for “**virtuousness**”.

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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.

PRUDENCE

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.

JUSTICE

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.**

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FORTITUDE AND TEMPERANCE

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.

FORTITUDE OR COURAGE

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

TEMPERANCE

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**

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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.

I am very uncomfortable with that line: “A sense of shame is essential....” *Shame* is the unmistakable marker of Satan, just as is its absolute opposite JOY is the unmistakable marker of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing “essential” about shame. What *is* essential is the experience of *guilt*, which when not become pathological, is a gift of a good Conscience.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**shame**” (first appearing in English c. 725 CE) – “The painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one's own conduct or circumstances (or in those of others whose honour or disgrace one regards as one's own), or of being in a situation which offends one's sense of modesty or decency.”

What I have noticed is how people have simply merged the meaning of “shame” with “guilt”, such that a parent might say to his or her child – “You ought to be ashamed of yourself!” **When shame is understood as the singular power of Satan to attack the soul, the very identity of a person as a child of God, then for a parent ever to say this to their child is monstrous.** What they should say, and probably mean, is “Why are you not feeling guilt when you should be feeling it?” Or, “What happened to the sting of Conscience when you acted in this unworthy way?”

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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).

That a person can become shame-full is obviously true. This is different than one (righteous) person *shaming* another person – "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" But the existence of shame in a person is beyond his or her ability to *cause* in himself or herself. It is also beyond the ability of a person to cause shame in another person. Why? Because shame is a power to attack the soul of a person, to attack the deepest identity of a person, and only a power far greater than ours can do that. It is the work of Satan to attack in this way, and by that invasion of innermost self, to *shame* a person.

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.

I just really dislike Wadell's (Aquinas'?) approach to this to do with shame. I think it is dangerous to talk in this way. I think it is right to say that we can be redemptively motivated by fear of disgrace or fallen reputation to avoid that which leads to such things. But that is lowest common denominator kind of morality. And furthermore, I have found in my life that good people suffer the loss of good reputation or disgrace not because they themselves preferred to be bad, but because bad people forced this suffering into their lives.

A sense of shame is crucial in order to alert a person to things that are debasing.

I would say, again, it is a sense of *guilt* that is crucial – the "message sent from a good Conscience" to a person getting himself or herself into danger.

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.

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All of this makes me wonder about Wadell's struggle with shame. I just feel him landing way too hard on this point, as if trying to fight his way free of a deep shaming that he has had to struggle with in his life.

However, the reason Wadell may be hitting this "shame" thought so hard is that he sees how our American culture has more and more swept away the significance of the feelings of embarrassment, of guilt, or a wrong done and of others damaged. All of this is towards the achievement in society of "I can do what I want, and you can't upbraid me for anything that I choose. Mind your own business." In this way, Wadell is right to notice the widespread "deadening" of guilt in people, a fundamental loss of contact with Conscience. How true it is that if we ignore the "prick" or "sting" of our good Conscience too often, we dull our ability to have access to the power of our Conscience. I think Josef Pieper would call this the downfall of Prudence.

Ah, I see right below here, Wadell speaks to this very thing that I have just said.

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

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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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¹⁰ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 997–1007.