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# The Virtue of Humility: Interpreting the *Summa Theologiae*'s 'Minimalist Approach'

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## Abstract

This paper argues, in response to scholarly criticism, that Thomas Aquinas's account of the virtue of humility in the *Summa Theologiae* does not undermine the importance of humility in the Christian moral life. While the *Summa*'s classification of humility as a 'potential part' of temperance, which results from Thomas's reliance on classical sources, has been blamed for this work's perceived belittling of humility, an understanding of the *Summa*'s overall scope and Aquinas's system of organizing virtues therein helps demonstrate that this categorization does not imply a lesser significance of humility either than other virtues in the *Summa* or than humility as treated in his Bible commentaries. Furthermore, even if the *Summa*'s structure creates limited space for an extensive discourse on humility, the establishment of humility's reciprocity with magnanimity and absolute contradiction of pride leave no doubts as to the magnitude of this virtue. Thus, the 'humble' portrayal of humility in the *Summa* not only adequately but aptly expresses this uniquely Christian virtue, capturing the way it disposes human beings to 'creaturely' reverence before the Creator, and invites a more holistic understanding of Aquinas's virtue ranking in the *Secunda Secundae*.

**Keywords:** Aquinas; Aristotle; Cicero; humility; Stoic; structure of the *Summa*; *Summa Theologiae*; virtue

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, Pope Francis has accentuated the importance of humility as a keynote of his pontificate; the pope has called it 'the golden rule for Christians', 'the only way that leads us to God' and thus 'to the essentials of life, to its truest meaning, to the most trustworthy reason for why life is truly worth living'.<sup>1,2</sup> Francis's whole papacy, marked by a theme of pastoral simplicity, has fostered a great sensibility among modern Catholics of humility's place as a fundamental virtue that should characterize the Christian life.

<sup>1</sup>Pope Francis, 'The golden rule of humility', Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 8 April 2013. By *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 16, 17 April 2013.

<sup>2</sup>Jim Fair, 'Pope Francis: "Humility Is the Only Way That Leads Us to God"', General Audience Catechesis: The Birth of Jesus', *Exaudi Catholic News*, 24 December 2021.

Perhaps following from this heightened awareness of and interest in the value of humility, the specific treatment that Thomas Aquinas gives this virtue in the *Summa Theologiae* has lately been a source of scholarly dispute. In this text, humility is addressed primarily in q.161 of the *Secunda Secundae*; not listed as a primary virtue, it is named only a ‘potential part’ of modesty, beneath the umbrella of temperance. Some critics have negatively interpreted this placement under temperance, where it receives such little attention, as effectively conveying a reduction in the status of a crucial virtue by the *Summa Theologiae*.

This perceived diminishment is seen to stem from the fact that in this work Aquinas relies on a variety of disparate Greek and Roman authors, including Aristotle, Pseudo-Andronius, Macrobius, and Cicero – a tradition with no natural place for humility – in addition to Augustine, other Church fathers, and medieval theologians.<sup>3</sup> It is from this tradition that Aquinas’s use of the cardinal virtues to organize the moral life flows, setting up both the divisions between types of virtue (e.g., intellectual from moral and those that concern ‘passions’ from those that concern ‘operations’) and the form by which all the virtues are connected. That humility takes up relatively little of the *Summa*’s expansive coverage appears to be a natural consequence of this system. Yet, herein I will argue that by the nature of Thomas’s method of classifying virtues in the *Summa*, an overtly minimalist treatment of any particular virtue does not equate to that virtue’s lesser importance. Furthermore, when the treatment of humility specifically is approached in light of the *Summa*’s theology of creation – in which humility is given the subtle but tremendous role of antithesis to pride – and its portrayal of humility’s cooperation with high-mindedness, it seems apparent that the label of ‘potential part’ of temperance does not de-value humility within this work. Drawn though it may be from a non-Christian philosophical background, the structure Aquinas follows enables the *Summa* to chart efficiently, and in detail, what it looks like to live well in each area of a human being’s complex nature. Humility need not be moved from its place as a potential part of temperance to duly convey its meaning at the heart of the Christian moral life. Finally, this understanding of Aquinas’s structure for the virtues casts light not only on humility’s role but how one approaches all such subordinated virtues in the *Summa*.

## 2. Humility in the *Summa* and its potential problems

Aquinas defines humility as the virtue which ‘regards chiefly the subjection of man to God, for Whose sake he humbles himself by subjecting himself to others’.<sup>4</sup> Humility for Aquinas appears first and foremost to be about reverence. Aquinas deems it a necessary characteristic of a prayerful man, ‘because he recognizes his neediness’, and intimately concerned with one’s personal relationship to God.<sup>5</sup> Yet by nature of its entailed right relationship to God, humility also necessarily includes a social dimension, since ‘we must not only revere God in Himself, but also that which is His in each one’.<sup>6</sup> Humility extends that reverence for God to our fellow human beings, to the extent that each of

<sup>3</sup>Thomas M. Osborne, *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 67.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 161, a. 1, ad. 5: *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, at New Advent, [www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org). Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.

<sup>5</sup>ST II-II, q.83, a. 15.

<sup>6</sup>ST II-II, q.161, a. 3, ad 1.

our neighbors has something of God in his person. Yet lest this *habitus* (disposition) to rightly esteem the gifts of God in others over our own be misconstrued as a slavish attitude, whereby the ‘humble’ person allows himself to be walked over in the name of subjection to his neighbor, Aquinas cautions, ‘humility observes the rule of right reason whereby a man has true self-esteem’.<sup>7</sup> Real humility never entails putting oneself down falsely; it always finds its root in the truth, and by it, man is able to recognize his own limitations so that he can lean completely on God’s help instead of his own strength.<sup>8</sup> In keeping us from striving inordinately after greatness on earth, humility forms a ‘disposition to man’s untrammelled access to spiritual and divine goods’.<sup>9</sup> By removing the obstacle of pride, it enables submission to the truths of faith; in a sense, humility can even be said to precede faith (accidentally) and joins that theological virtue in the title, ‘foundation of the spiritual edifice’.<sup>10</sup>

While a multitude of scholars have praised Aquinas’s account of humility in the *Summa* as ‘exemplary’ for its treatment ‘more compelling (and eminently more humble) than modern and post-modern approaches’, others are far from satisfied.<sup>11</sup> In ‘Exalting the Meek Virtue of Humility in Aquinas’, Sheryl Overmyer argues that ‘Thomas’ treatment of humility is actually too modest’.<sup>12</sup> Overmyer sees in the ‘small irony’ by which ‘out of the 512 questions of his incomplete *Summa Theologiae*, he devoted only one to the topic’ a sign that the *Summa* ‘gives short shrift to humility’.<sup>13</sup> Considering the obvious importance Aquinas ascribes to humility in his biblical commentaries, Overmyer is concerned at the *Summa*’s comparative dearth on this virtue, concluding affectionately, ‘although the *Summa* may have not given the virtue of humility its due, the act of writing the *Summa* is itself an act of humility’.<sup>14</sup> That Overmyer credits Aquinas’s sacrifice of a potential university career to put together a beginners’ theology book as the aspect of this work which comes closest to doing humility justice speaks volumes of her disappointment with its material content.

The main problem, as Overmyer sees it, consists not only in the plain lack of coverage on humility but in its location in the *Secunda Secundae* – ‘within the twenty-eight questions on temperance’.<sup>15</sup> By its framing as a ‘merely potential part of temperance ... under the subordinate virtue of modesty’, the power of humility appears lessened, and its relevance minimized on every count:

This magnificent reversal of expectations means that humility suffers a lowly place in the Thomistic hierarchy. Humility is a virtue of the concupiscible appetite, not of reason. Humility regulates one’s interior disposition – it does not contribute directly to the common good. It moderates and restrains activity – it does not strengthen and encourage activity like magnanimity does. Since it is

<sup>7</sup>ST II-II.162.3 ad 2.

<sup>8</sup>ST II-II.161.2 ad 2.

<sup>9</sup>ST II-II.161.5 ad 4.

<sup>10</sup>ST II-II.161.5 ad 2.

<sup>11</sup>Sheryl Overmyer, ‘Exalting the meek virtue of humility in Aquinas’, *Heythrop Journal*, 56 (2015), 650.

<sup>12</sup>Overmyer, ‘Exalting the Meek Virtue of Humility in Aquinas’, p. 651.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Overmyer, p. 661.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

less excellent than the theological virtues, humility does not have the last end as its object.<sup>16</sup>

This treatment strikes Overmyer as especially problematic in light of Thomas's abundant treatment of humility in other commentaries, sermons, and prayers. For example, his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, on the Gospel of John, and on the Apostles' Creed* all depict 'another aspect of humility that seems to be missing in Thomas' portrait of humility in the *Summa*: that humility is a foundation for Christians' spiritual edifice grounded in Christ'.<sup>17</sup> Overmyer calls these works Thomas's 'actual treatment' of humility, in which he relies on a host of biblical sources that allow him to clearly portray the centrality of the virtue in Scripture and Tradition, because they emphasize the root of humility in the cross of Christ; meanwhile, in the *Summa*, 'Thomas' preoccupation with Christ's teaching and Christ's example of humility can be lost'.<sup>18</sup> Although 'what little Thomas does say in the *Summa* is helpful insofar as he provides the seeds for a more robust account of humility', the virtue's treatment remains insufficient 'without the assistance of his other writing'.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the *Summa* does not entirely neglect to speak about humility in relation to Christ; it names humility, along with meekness and charity, as one of those virtues 'especially resplendent in Christ's Passion', chiefly through which 'Our Lord Himself wished us to be conformed to Him'.<sup>20</sup> But, it is worth pausing to consider that Aquinas would likely have agreed with Overmyer on this point: if taken primarily for a source on humility, the *Summa* is bound to disappoint.

Aquinas began putting together the *Summa Theologiae* in the 1260s for the purpose of instructing friars of the Dominican order in the fundamentals of Catholic theology. This project came about in response to a local and timely need for a revival of intellectual rigor and zeal for the study of sacred Scripture among the Dominicans that would reinvigorate their preaching, in accordance with the Dominican charism. Tasked with creating the curriculum for a new center of studies at Santa Sabina, Aquinas composed (though he did not complete) what he intended to be a summary of the Church's doctrine, meant to educate theologians at an introductory level for the purpose of aiding their preaching.<sup>21</sup>

Based on this origin story, the *Summa* is not a comprehensive analysis of virtue or any single tenet of the faith. Rather, the *Summa* offers a systematic understanding of the Christian moral life, outlining the basic blueprint for the direction of the human person in light of his created purpose toward his true and final end. In the assessment of Jean-Pierre Torrell, Aquinas aimed to create a manual that by painstaking arrangement of doctrinal topics and questions would provide students with 'an organic synthesis that would permit them to grasp internal links and coherence' of material, contextualizing each subject within the overarching meaning of their faith.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Overmyer, 'Exalting the Meek Virtue of Humility in Aquinas', p. 652.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted above, footnote 14.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>ST I-II.68.1.

<sup>21</sup>Jean-Pierre Torrell, OP, *Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), pp.142-45.

<sup>22</sup>Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, p. 145.

The entire *Summa*'s construction has been seen as reflecting the movement of all creation in *exitus-reditus* (coming from and returning back to God), with the *Secunda Pars* specifically depicting the return of the rational creature to conformity with Jesus Christ the image of God, culminating in true Beatitude as communion with Him.<sup>23</sup> Already an impressive undertaking for a 'beginners' theology textbook', one would hardly expect from the *Summa* more than a cursory overview of any given virtue among the dozens referenced, let alone demand a complete treatment. Based solely on the nature of close-reading analysis inherent to textual commentary, Aquinas's biblical commentaries would indeed make for more thorough representatives of his view on humility, purposefully interpreting Gospel themes. It seems unreasonable to fault Aquinas's account of this same virtue in the *Summa*, given the whole work's 'humble' foundation, intended target, and much broader overall scope, for being comparatively less comprehensive on a single virtue.

Still, it is fair for Overmyer to be wary of the fact that the specific place given to humility in the *Summa* is based on an overall organization of virtue derived from extra-biblical sources, and in particular, from Stoic and Neoplatonic conceptions.<sup>24</sup> It is commonly recognized that the Christian vision of humility would have been completely radical to classical thought. Aquinas's definition of humility in II-II, q. 161, a. 1, ad. 5 explains why it was disqualified as a virtue for Aristotle. First, humility would have been rejected because virtue for the Philosopher dealt with civic matters, but also because the subjection of one man to another should properly be ordained by law, and to subvert this order would grossly violate the virtue of justice. Thus, as Gregory Pine notes, 'humility ... is practically absent from the writings of Aristotle', mentioned only in terms of an undue humility which manifests as a vice opposed to magnanimity; 'It was abhorrent to the great minds of antiquity that a habit akin to dejection should be esteemed as virtuous'.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Aristotle, from whose list of ten virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* humility is completely absent,<sup>26</sup> Cicero in his *De Inventiones* at least makes some provision for humility in connection with modesty, which itself is a part of temperance.<sup>27</sup> But even the Roman philosopher, whom Aquinas purports to follow in annexing humility to temperance,<sup>28</sup> fails to give the former virtue its own name; Aquinas interprets it as such within the orator's reference to modesty as 'honorable shame'.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, this is far from the Christian understanding of humility's place in the moral edifice, and it makes sense that if Thomas built his account of the virtue largely on this ground, he would have found very little to stand on. Even Servais Pinckaers suggests that the *Summa* may fit a bit too closely the pattern of Greek thought when it comes to humility, commenting that though 'St. Thomas knows perfectly well its importance in Christian tradition', his use of classical philosophical divisions to organize virtues in the *Summa* 'does not always allot to the specifically Christian virtues the

<sup>23</sup>Torrell pp. 151–53.

<sup>24</sup>Osborne, *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup>Gregory Pine, 'Magnanimity and humility according to St. Thomas Aquinas', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, 82 (2019), 263–86.

<sup>26</sup>Osborne, pp. 102–03.

<sup>27</sup>Servais Pinckaers, *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>28</sup>ST II-II.160.2.

<sup>29</sup>Cicero, *De Inventiones*, trans. by C. D. Yonge (London: Bohn, 1853), Book II, section 54.

place they deserve'. Because of this, 'humility ... receives an overly modest position', one which is 'understandable among pagan authors' but unsatisfactory by Christian standards.<sup>30</sup> The pre-Christian philosophical systems, which simply had no place in their worldview for humility as a virtue and which to great extent inform 'the structure and ordering of the *Summa*', are indeed part of the reason for Aquinas's inscribing of humility to temperance.<sup>31</sup> In the sense of the logical progression from a Stoic model of virtue to naming humility a potential part of temperance, Overmyer is justified in claiming, 'the source of the problem seems to be Thomas' own sources'.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Structure of the virtues in the *Summa* and placement of Humility

The *Summa*'s broader structure, according to Thomas Osborne's *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue*, with its question-and-answer format requiring the author to arrive at his own position in response to conflicting opinions, follows Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard in the Scholastic tradition. It also employs the Aristotelian technique of beginning each question with the opinions of thinkers held as sources of wisdom on the given subject and building Aquinas's own inquiry from that entry point.<sup>33</sup> Yet in the *Secunda Secundae*, Thomas prefers to follow 'the mostly non-Aristotelian doctrine ... which Thomas inherits from Plato and the Stoics through the Church fathers' in using the cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude – as the organizing principle for the virtues.<sup>34</sup> Cicero, along with the Stoic-influenced Church fathers, tends to understand virtues as general conditions rather than as distinct habits. Thomas interprets this understanding as representing 'an overflowing of one virtue into another', meaning that the cardinal virtues are connected not only to each other as general conditions but to a multitude of distinct virtues into which the four spill.

Such an overflow from cardinal to a moral virtue, by which 'the temperate person is able to restrain lesser desires precisely because she is able to restrain the desire for bodily pleasure', could plausibly explain how humility fits beneath temperance. But Aquinas prefers to consider virtues as distinct habits, whereby the division between each provides him with this method of organizing the other virtues. This rationale further develops as a systematic division throughout the *Secunda Secundae*, in which 'Thomas assigns every moral virtue to a cardinal virtue as integral, subjective or potential part'.<sup>35</sup> In organizing a variety of virtues as integral, subjective, or potential parts joined to the principal virtues, Aquinas follows in a tradition from the twelfth century, originally rooted in Stoicism.<sup>36</sup> The integral parts refer to the virtues that must be present for the principal virtue to act perfectly.<sup>37</sup> For temperance in the *Summa*, these are shamefacedness and honesty [*honestas*].<sup>38</sup>

The meaning of subjective and potential parts differs slightly across Aquinas's various works. In the *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, the cardinal virtues are considered as a

<sup>30</sup>Pinckaers, *The Pinckaers Reader*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup>Overmyer, 'Exalting the Meek Virtue of Humility', p. 651.

<sup>32</sup>Overmyer, p. 652.

<sup>33</sup>Osborne, pp. 4–5.

<sup>34</sup>Osborne, p. 108.

<sup>35</sup>Osborne, *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue*, p. 116.

<sup>36</sup>Osborne, p. 67.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>ST II-II.143.1.

'whole' which can be distributed to the different virtues which form its constituents, the subjective parts.<sup>39</sup> But in the *Summa*, Aquinas uses 'subjective part' to distinguish a virtue of more limited matter than the genus cardinal virtue to which it is assigned.<sup>40</sup> The subjective parts of temperance are those associated with the genus – related to bodily pleasure – and differing from each other not by species but by the matter each concerns, 'namely food, drink, sexual pleasure, and the pleasure surrounding the sexual act'.<sup>41</sup> The potential parts of a virtue name additional virtues allied with or subordinate to the given cardinal virtue; these parts share the character of the virtue in question, yet do not fully correspond to it. Rather, the potential parts 'somehow are joined to the virtue by sharing in its matter or having an order to its proper act'.<sup>42</sup> The potential parts of temperance are continence, humility, meekness (or mildness), and modesty.<sup>43</sup> Because humility shares with temperance a common mode, the moderation of desires, it falls into the category of a potential part of temperance, even though it does not satisfy the formal definition of temperance. By this classification, humility belongs to the cardinal virtue which is technically the lowest among the four. The concupiscible appetite, which temperance perfects, is less 'great' simply [*maior ... simpliciter*] than the irascible, perfected by fortitude. Needless to say, both are lesser [*minor*] than the rational appetite, perfected by justice, and reason itself, perfected by prudence, the preeminent cardinal virtue.<sup>44</sup>

#### 4. A solution through Justice or Charity?

Using Aquinas's biblical commentaries as models, Overmyer suggests that a solution to the appearance of unimportance resulting from this account is to attach humility to justice or charity, rather than to temperance and modesty. However, within the context of the *Summa*, neither adjustment could occur without breaking the cohesive structure by which it organizes virtue.

Humility could not be re-assigned to justice simply because it is a more 'prestigious' virtue, for 'unlike moral virtues that are concerned with the rectitude of the passions, justice is concerned with the action itself'.<sup>45</sup> Because justice perfects the will, which is not 'a subject of passions taken in their narrow sense', it must be considered a virtue not about the passions, but about operations, specifically, 'the operation of rendering another what is his due'.<sup>46</sup> Any virtues associated with justice defined this way must be likewise concerned with the actual operation. Meanwhile, every other moral virtue is about the passions. Therefore, humility could not coherently fall under justice but must be associated with one of the remaining cardinal virtues, either temperance or

<sup>39</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae*, t. 2: *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus cardinalibus*, ed. by E. Odetto (Taurini-Romae: Marietti, 1965), pp. 813–28.

<sup>40</sup>Osborne, pp. 117–18.

<sup>41</sup>Osborne, p. 118.

<sup>42</sup>Osborne, p. 68.

<sup>43</sup>ST II-II.143.1.

<sup>44</sup>ST I-II. 66.4. It should be noted that this is only considering the cardinal virtues in an unqualified manner. Thomas is open to considering the same virtues as greater or lesser in a different order in a certain respect [*secundum quid*].

<sup>45</sup>Osborne, *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue*, p. 99.

<sup>46</sup>Osborne, p. 95.

fortitude.<sup>47</sup> The latter two virtues, being ‘about passions in the proper sense, since they involve bodily changes that are perceived by the senses’, serve to ‘moderate and order such passions’ and affect ‘a mean between two extremes of passion, such as excessive and deficient fear or ... desire for physical pleasure’.<sup>48</sup> Prudence has already been ruled out because it is an intellectual virtue; humility primarily involves the appetites, not the intellect.

This recalls part of Overmyer’s concern, summarized above, that humility is not of reason. However, Aquinas does not consider humility totally unassociated with the intellect just because its subject is the appetite. Besides his constant stipulation that right reason is a prerequisite of every virtue, making prudence in a sense the necessary precursor to all the moral virtues, he recognizes a special link of humility to the intellect when he addresses the question, ‘whether humility has to do with the appetite’.<sup>49</sup> The objections imply that Aquinas can see how humility might be perceived as belonging to the intellect, restraining ‘not the desire of difficult things but the estimate thereof’.<sup>50</sup> While his response explains that humility is still not essentially in the intellect, because the formal object consists not in the knowledge itself but in the application of this knowledge to interior and exterior human acts, it still acknowledges the particularly intellectual aspects of this virtue, stating that a humble man must ‘know his disproportion to that which exceeds his capacity. Hence, knowledge of one’s own deficiency pertains to humility as a rule guiding the appetite’.<sup>51</sup> Aquinas confirms this relationship again in his discussion of St. Benedict’s twelve degrees of humility, asserting that both the appetite which humility essentially involves, ‘in so far as a man restrains the impetuosity of his soul’ and ‘its rule ... in the cognitive faculty, in that we should not deem ourselves to be above what we are’ originate in ‘the reverence we bear to God’.<sup>52</sup> Being linked to the appetites thus need not sever humility from the intellect, as Overmyer suggests Aquinas’s understanding does. Acting out this virtue *requires* an accurate knowledge of reality, specifically regarding oneself and one’s own imperfection, which leads to the recognition of humanity’s proper subjection before God who is perfect. But humility itself takes a further step in accepting and internalizing this knowledge to the extent that a human being’s very desires become proportional to his real lowly position before the Creator. Through this careful distinction, Aquinas shows that humility as a perfection of the appetite in fact facilitates knowledge of all things by enabling a human being to willingly subject his intellect to God, disposing him to clearly interpret the whole structure of the world based on his own finite capabilities and place within it.

As for charity, Aquinas does not provide a clear mechanism for humility’s attachment here because of his focus on organizing by the object of each virtue. For Thomas every ‘human’ virtue is either moral or intellectual; the theological virtues on the other hand are ‘superhuman’, virtues through which humanity participates by grace in the divine life.<sup>53</sup> The object of charity is God Himself, the ultimate end, and one’s neighbor

<sup>47</sup>Osborne, p. 100.

<sup>48</sup>Osborne, p. 94.

<sup>49</sup>ST II-II.161.2.

<sup>50</sup>ST II-II.161.2. ad 2.

<sup>51</sup>ST II-II.161.2.

<sup>52</sup>ST II-II.161.6.

<sup>53</sup>ST I-II. 58. 3 ad 3.



in relation to God.<sup>54</sup> While humility as a moral virtue (from Latin *mos*, meaning way or custom), may be infused to bear a supernatural end, Aquinas asserts that it generally manifests for natural, lesser ends, albeit still good and worthy of pursuit for their own sakes – the common good of the different communities to which people as rational animals belong.<sup>55</sup> Humility's most proper object is neither God nor humanity in relation to God but the restraining of the passion, even though that might be done for the reason of consideration of one's place before God.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, by Thomas's operative system, it belongs properly to temperance, and to temperance as a potential part because of its indirect working mechanism. Charity on the other hand is the most directly ordered of all virtues to union with God.<sup>57</sup> Aquinas does not designate 'parts' at all for theological virtues, and 'the fact that humility is caused by reverence for God does not prevent it from being a part of modesty or temperance' where its mode assigns it.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, there is much more to consider regarding humility's 'relative' connectedness to charity. Indeed, there seems to be some precedent for this in how Aquinas speaks of mercy, which is under charity, but is not without its own connection to the passions; Thomas explicitly says in his work that mercy classifies as a virtue (moral) only when experienced in the passions and coming from the will that follows right reason.<sup>59</sup> The possible implications of mercy's unique position merit far more in-depth reflection, profitable in its own right and for comparison with humility's placement.

## 5. Ranking of virtues in the *Summa*

However, it is important to note that for Aquinas the categorical designation of any given virtue does not equate to its rank – only to its relationship, the mode in which its identifying character trait expresses itself. This means that connection to an apparently lower-tier 'principal' virtue, based on the *Summa*'s Stoic-inspired classification, does not in itself pose a 'problem' for portraying the real value of its integral, subjective, or potential parts. Because the cardinal virtues are more principal does not mean they are the most important, a stipulation which the virtue of humility as well as religion specifically makes evident. Religion is a potential part of justice that nonetheless supersedes by its object in God the other moral virtues. Osborne explains that although neither humility nor religion is a cardinal virtue, and in the organization of the *Summa Theologiae* 'they are subordinated to temperance and justice respectively', it does not follow that Thomas takes them to be less important: 'For Thomas, the schema of the cardinal virtues helps to organize the moral life, but it does not pick out the most significant moral virtues'.<sup>60</sup> His organizational method is designed as a reflection of the order of reason, emphasizing that ethical matters concern objects and that reason determines the mean of moral virtues.<sup>61</sup> Aquinas emphasizes this when

<sup>54</sup>ST II-II. 25. 1.

<sup>55</sup>Osborne, *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue*, 199.

<sup>56</sup>ST II-II. 161. 4.

<sup>57</sup>ST II-II. 23. 3.

<sup>58</sup>ST II-II. 161. 4 ad 1.

<sup>59</sup>ST II-II. 30. 3.

<sup>60</sup>Osborne, *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue*, p. 118–19.

<sup>61</sup>Osborne, p. 198.

he reiterates again and again, in responding to the objections raised, that the virtues are not annexed necessarily by matter or subject but by form. Hence, 'humility is a potential part of temperance, since it is primarily about restraint'; this characteristic movement of humility is what connects it to temperance, and because it does not moderate the desire for bodily pleasure in any species must be a 'potential' part, not integral or subjective.<sup>62</sup> This label simply describes the manner in which humility is joined to its cardinal virtue, and in no way prevents Aquinas from acknowledging humility as prior to temperance, prescinded only by the theological virtues, intellectual virtues, and justice.<sup>63</sup> Within this system of attaching associated virtues, Thomas appears to be far more flexible in his 'ranking' of virtues than he is often given credit for. A similar situation plays out in the *Summa's* treatment of patience, named a quasi-potential part of fortitude despite Thomas's own frank acknowledgement not only that 'fortitude is properly in the irascible, while patience is in the concupiscible faculty' but that patience actually does more than is covered by fortitude, as the virtue which endures any kind of evil as opposed to only the evil of danger of death.<sup>64</sup> Yet the likeness of potential part to principal lies not in subject but in formal mode, in this case bearing up under evils inflicted by others; it is because fortitude is the principal virtue concerning this matter that it ultimately, for Thomas, lays claim to patience.<sup>65</sup> The account of patience is also helpful in understanding what makes a virtue more or less great in the *Summa*; when answering whether patience is the greatest of all virtues, he explains that the greatest virtues are those which directly incline humanity to the greatest good (hence, the pre-eminence of the theological virtues). Patience by this schema is not the greatest because it works by an indirect mechanism, acting as 'a check' on an obstacle to a good that is lesser than, as not specifically and solely concerning, the danger of death.<sup>66</sup>

This logic applies specifically, though not explicitly, to humility's ranking as that which 'after the theological virtues, after the intellectual virtues which regard the reason itself, and after justice, especially legal justice, stands before all others'.<sup>67</sup> Though its mode of operating connects it to temperance in the particular layout of virtues in the *Summa*, humility inclines humanity to God the greatest good, albeit by a backwards, restraining movement of the appetite. Because of its object humility is greater than all the moral virtues except those that are required to order humility's indirect means to this end, namely justice which effects in the will the ordinance of the appetites by reason.<sup>68</sup> In this way, we can see that Overmyer's statement previously quoted, 'since it is less excellent than the theological virtues, humility does not have the last end as its object', inverts Aquinas's reasoning. It is *because* humility does not have the same object as the theological virtues that this moral virtue is not as excellent.<sup>69</sup>

The virtue of honesty [*honestas*], like humility annexed to temperance, provides another example of Thomas's lack of qualms positioning 'higher ranking' virtues

<sup>62</sup>Osborne, p. 118.

<sup>63</sup>ST II-II.161.5.

<sup>64</sup>ST II-II, q.136, ar. 4, ad. 2.

<sup>65</sup>ST II-II, q.136, ar. 4.

<sup>66</sup>ST II-II, q.136, ar. 2.

<sup>67</sup>ST II-II, q.161, ar. 5.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Overmyer, 'Exalting the Meek Virtue of Humility in Aquinas', p. 650.

within cardinal virtues that they technically eclipse. In only the fifth question of the entire *Summa*, Aquinas gives honesty, the *bonum honestum* or ‘virtuous good’, primary place as the very nature of the good, characterizing that which is desirable for its own sake.<sup>70</sup> Later in the *Secunda Secundae*, he calls it spiritual beauty and reiterates that ‘honesty refers to the same thing as virtue’.<sup>71</sup> Yet Aquinas has no difficulty juxtaposing this high praise of honesty with its categorization under temperance; representing ‘the good of reason to which it belongs to moderate and temper evil desires’, honesty is necessary for that principal virtue’s perfection, and thus is named an integral part.<sup>72</sup> As with humility, Aquinas does not base the virtue’s level of import on the same criteria that determines its placement. This pattern indicates that to understand Thomas’s depiction of annexed virtues requires adopting the same mindset, avoiding conflation of their positions with the importance ascribed to them even within the *Summa*. The *Secunda Secundae*’s classification system allows each virtue’s significance to be showcased apart from the principal by which it is labeled.

## 6. Humility’s position in light of Magnanimity and Pride

That the systematic classification of humility does not detract from the *Summa*’s ability to convey the true magnitude of this virtue can be more easily understood by examining its relationship with the virtue of magnanimity. Magnanimity, or high-mindedness, might but for a subtle distinction be lumped together with humility, with both virtues involving the irascible appetite as their subject and hope as proximate matter. Yet, in the *Summa*, magnanimity appears as a part of fortitude instead, mainly because of its differing characteristic movement: impulse, the complementary opposite of humility’s restraint.<sup>73</sup> The use of this tiny nuance to distinguish humility from magnanimity exhibits how Aquinas’s virtue network is constructed not as a ranking by value but through an exacting breakdown of each virtue’s acting mechanism. Furthermore, the precise technical distinctions that this system makes do not act as solid walls isolating one virtue from the others. According to Josef Pieper, ‘nothing lights the way to a proper understanding of humility more tellingly than this: humility and high-mindedness are not only not mutually exclusive, but actually are neighbors and akin ...’.<sup>74</sup> Although the *Summa* defines the two virtues by their contrasting movements, it repeatedly states that magnanimity and humility necessarily present together in the perfected irascible power, arriving at a harmonious mean by the application of the rule of right reason from two different perspectives – man’s awareness of his worthiness and utter unworthiness at the same time.<sup>75</sup> In depicting the unique but essentially cooperative tendencies of humility with magnanimity, the *Summa*’s classification system in fact indicates the grand scope inherent to true humility, which must

<sup>70</sup>ST I, q. 5 ar. 6.

<sup>71</sup>ST II-II, q. 145, ar. 1.

<sup>72</sup>ST II-II, q. 145, ar. 4.

<sup>73</sup>Pine, ‘Magnanimity and Humility According to St. Thomas Aquinas’, p. 279.

<sup>74</sup>Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 189.

<sup>75</sup>Pine, ‘Magnanimity and Humility According to St. Thomas Aquinas’, pp. 283–85.

'be able to bear the inner tension of cohabitation with high-mindedness' that strives for what is noble and honorable.<sup>76</sup>

Besides the intertwined relation of humility to magnanimity, a consideration of the *Summa's* emphasis on the 'creatureliness' proper to humans could render the apparently small write-up beneath temperance what in fact best befits an exultation of humility. Overmyer's claim that 'Thomas' form denies the specifically Christian virtue of humility the place it deserves' undervalues this concept of 'creatureliness' inherent to humility.<sup>77</sup> In 'On Humility', Matthew Levering agrees that Aquinas's commentaries offer a rich theology of humility, which demonstrates its inextricable link to the virtue of *caritas* (charity).<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Levering sees no contradiction between 'the relatively low place of temperance and humility' given in the *Summa* and the virtue's fundamental importance to Aquinas and Christian doctrine in general, asserting, 'this lowliness will mislead only those who do not look for God in what is lowly'.<sup>79</sup> While acknowledging the same concern expressed by Overmyer and other scholars, Levering insists that the deceptively low placement only reinforces the point of humility as man's realization of his own creatureliness, our humanity's complete dependence on God our creator and savior.<sup>80</sup> Through establishing this truthfully moderate awareness of humanity's place in the order of creation, uniquely dignified through creation in God's image and likeness yet always essentially the work of His hands, 'humility enables us to praise the Giver'.<sup>81</sup> To give God joyful thanks and praise is a fundamental expression of humility – acting out, in a way, the essential human vocation – that clearly reflects a connection to temperance and modesty, perhaps better captured in the Latin *modestia*. *Modestia* may also be understood as 'moderation' and refers to the restraint of those 'less vehement' movements (namely, those not concerning physical desires) which humility explicitly concerns.<sup>82</sup>

Levering further argues that the position within temperance is not only appropriate in the 'humble' impression it creates, but because the original sin of pride, which humility counters, is really a vice of spiritual *intemperance*: "'man's first sin consisted in his coveting some spiritual good above his measure", instead of accepting his divinely given measure'.<sup>83</sup> This 'connection between the proper species of intemperance (namely lust) and the sin of idolatrous pride that has so distorted God's creation', which Paul draws in Romans 1, unveils both the rightness of placing humility under temperance, and the considerable weightiness which this placement bestows on humility as the virtue which stands against that vice which marked the fall of Adam and Eve. It shows that the rectification of that spiritual intemperance which leads to lust lies in the practice of humility, exercising restraint of the spirit until it can 'freely "bow before the higher order of things"'.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>76</sup>Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, p. 190.

<sup>77</sup>Overmyer, 'Exalting the Meek Virtue of Humility', p. 652.

<sup>78</sup>Matthew Levering, 'On humility', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 19 (2017), p. 479.

<sup>79</sup>Levering, pp. 473.

<sup>80</sup>Levering, p. 470.

<sup>81</sup>Levering, p. 477.

<sup>82</sup>Pine, 'Magnanimity and Humility According to St. Thomas Aquinas', p. 275.

<sup>83</sup>Levering, 'On Humility', p. 486.

<sup>84</sup>Levering, p. 491.

Framing humility as the antidote to pride necessitates this virtue's centrality in the moral life by making it the virtue which clears the way for divine grace. That pride as a vice has such deep roots in Genesis mirrors the absence of humility as a virtue in pagan and modern philosophy, for it is only 'when the theology of creation is made central to our thinking that we come to see humility as virtuous'.<sup>85</sup> In this vein, Aquinas observes that 'in order for us to receive the infusion of the theological and moral virtues ... the obstacle of pride must be removed'. Since humility 'expels pride ... and makes man submissive and ever open to receive the influx of Divine grace', Aquinas can still maintain the priority of this virtue even though 'our ordering to God is a rational ordering, and so the virtues that pertain to the intellect, as well as the virtue of justice, are in a certain sense prior to humility, which could not function without them'.<sup>86</sup> Levering's insights support a more holistic way of reading the *Secunda Secundae* by which, in the midst of the broader theological context of the *Summa*, humility's association with temperance is not misconstrued as a slight on its important position either in this work or in Aquinas's teaching overall.

## 7. Conclusion

The *Summa's* relegation of humility to a potential part of temperance beneath modesty can be explained with reference to Thomas's organizational system of the virtues, which he develops alongside the virtue lists of Aristotle and a multitude of Stoic and Stoic-influenced philosophical sources. Critics find the classification which results from this system problematic due to its perceived limitation of humility within the *Summa* compared to the value it is assigned elsewhere in the Christian tradition – by Augustine, the monastics, and even Aquinas himself in his biblical commentaries. The concerns of these scholars are legitimate, for the rule of reason which governs the *Summa's* definitions and distinctions precludes any attempt to re-configure humility under the name of a higher virtue such as justice, or charity without qualification. Yet, Thomas's clustering of virtues into parts does not necessarily correlate to the way he expresses their degrees of importance. Accorded this understanding, which is further highlighted by his discussion of humility's congruent relationship to magnanimity (a virtue that animates the will to great deeds) and contrariness to pride (a sin of spiritual intemperance), the *Summa's* humility needs no face-saving refurbishment. Rather, humility's placement in temperance emerges as only fitting for its role in re-orienting man to his proper 'creaturely' attitude of thankful praise before God. Far from diminishing the role of this virtue, the *Summa's* account of humility recalls that essential paradox of the Christian moral life, confounding our modern sensibilities just as it upended those of the ancient world; 'Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted'.<sup>87</sup>

This positive evaluation of humility's placement, hinging primarily around Osborne's key point that categorical designation does not equal rank according to the *Summa's* structure, proposes a change in the way we read the entire *Secunda Secundae*. Taking humility as a paradigm, Aquinas may be far less rigid in his approach than our

<sup>85</sup>Levering, p. 468.

<sup>86</sup>Levering, 'On Humility', p. 479.

<sup>87</sup>Matthew 23:12.

expectations of the highly stratified *Summa* allow. Grouping the moral virtues around cardinal virtues as integral, subjective, and potential parts is not an arbitrary design; it cohesively structures the Christian moral life in a way that builds upon ancient wisdom and accounts for the myriad features and movements of perfected human desire. Yet it is also an organizational tool within which Aquinas is entirely comfortable making distinctions, and maintaining it does not circumscribe him to a one-dimensional expression of any virtue's significance. What other virtues in the *Summa*, seeming buried because of their designation, are truly essential? Perhaps we are the ones, by reading the *Secunda Secundae* without Aquinas's own finesse, who are neglecting an important virtue or failing to do it justice. Humility can provide a model of the careful distinctions that we need to be attuned to for appreciating every virtue or vice in its full portrait, illuminated within – not confined by – the *Summa*'s structure.

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