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# *Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas's Transformation of the Virtue of Courage*

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## I. CHRISTIAN PURPOSES—CHRISTIAN CONTENT? 'BAPTISMAL' TRANSFORMATION IN THE *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*

In Plato's *Republic*, the moral education necessary to live the just life requires a transformation of the learner, a transformation that is both moral and intellectual. The result of the transformation, ideally, is a new understanding of power—one that subverts conventional ideas about power and one that requires nearly a lifetime of moral education to cultivate. When the eye of the soul has been turned toward the Good, Socrates teaches, we see that political power alone is powerless to satisfy our deepest longings; our ambitions for political power are destined for frustration unless they are redirected by philosophical wisdom. Moreover, wisdom teaches that worldly power is just the *appearance* of power; *real* power lies in knowledge of truth.

St. Thomas Aquinas takes his readers on a remarkably similar pedagogical journey in the ethical part of the *Summa Theologiae*;<sup>1</sup> however, there, the transformation required is even more radical, for the learner's goal is to attain not only philosophical wisdom, but Christlikeness.

Aquinas has been called the "baptizer" of Aristotle, given his extensive appropriation of Aristotle's ethics and metaphysics in his own philosophical work. Users of this description often assume that the *Summa Theologiae* supplements an Aristotelian system of philosophy with Aquinas's own Christian theology, while leaving the underlying philosophy largely intact.<sup>2</sup> In this

I would like to thank my colleagues in the philosophy department at Calvin College for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, as well as participants at the Cornell Colloquium in Medieval Philosophy, where I read an earlier version of this essay.

1. In particular, the *prima* and *secunda secundae*. In this article, I concentrate on passages in the treatise on courage in the *secunda secundae*.

2. For explicit use of the term "baptism," see J.-P. Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.:

article, I intend to challenge that view—particularly with respect to the ethical part of the *S.T.*—by taking a renewed look at the difference it makes for his ethics that Aquinas is a Christian theologian. His purpose in writing what he did in this work was to fulfill a specific Christian vocation to preach and teach the truths of the faith.<sup>3</sup> My contention is that this affects the ethical content in a deeper and more transformative way than the usual baptism view might lead us to expect.

In the end, however, this emphasis on Aquinas's moral teaching as intentionally and thoroughly Christian does not demand a rejection of the 'baptism' metaphor so much as a better understanding of it. Baptism, correctly understood, is the beginning of a process of regeneration—the old self dying with Christ and rising to a new life in him—a radical personal transformation through the inner working of the Holy Spirit. For Aquinas, I will argue, the moral life is essentially about sanctification: our cooperation with the inner transformation of the person accomplished through grace.<sup>4</sup>

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Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 238, including the reference in fn. 45. F. C. Copleston also uses the term in *Aquinas: An Introduction to the Life and Work of the Great Medieval Thinker* (London and New York: Penguin, 1955), p. 67. E. Gilson, in his *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), mentions this type of view in his discussion of Aquinas (p. 366). Sullivan and Pannier also give one recent articulation of the view in "Getting a Grip on the Philosophies of Thomas Aquinas: A Defense of Systematic Reconstruction" in *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001): 50–60. For my purposes here, I will not take into account how my arguments would have to be nuanced to address all the variations of the general position I want to challenge.

3. For a fuller defense of this claim, see Leonard Boyle, "The Setting of the *Summa theologiae* of Saint Thomas," in *Facing History: A Different Thomas Aquinas* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Federation Internationale des Instituts d'Etudes Medievales, 2002); also Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. Murray and O'Connor (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), pp. 22–25. My purpose here is to show that Aquinas's sense of vocation (expressed in both *summae*: see the Prologue to the *Summa theologiae* and *SCG I.2.2*), was more than a mere prefatory comment in the *Summa theologiae*, but also shapes its order, structure, and specific content. Aquinas's own reasons for writing are found in the Prologue to the *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *S.T.*):

Because the doctor of the catholic truth ought not only to teach the proficient, but also to instruct beginners (according to the Apostle: "As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink, not meat" (I Cor. 3:1–2)), we purpose in this book to treat of whatever belongs to the Christian religion, in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners. . . .

(All translations of the *S.T.* are from the Benziger Brothers, Inc. [N.Y., 1948] edition, as reprinted by Christian Classics, 1981. I have only altered the translation slightly, to update archaic phrases and to reflect the inclusive sense of *homo*.)

4. For a more general and theological consideration of these themes, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., *Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), esp. pp. 16, 107, 112–13 *inter alia*.

This places the infused moral virtues (those given by grace, not acquired by practice) and especially the theological virtue of charity, at the heart of his ethics—which is, not coincidentally, exactly where he placed it.<sup>5</sup> The treatise on charity (*caritas*) is the conceptual and structural centerpiece of the entire extensive treatment of the virtues in particular (the first 170 questions of *S.T.* II-II). It is placed after the other two theological virtues that direct us toward it, but before practical wisdom (*prudentia*), as the source from which the rest of the moral life and its virtues spring. Aquinas states repeatedly that charity is the “root and mother,” that is, form and principle, of all the other virtues<sup>6</sup> and that virtue in its true and perfect form is not possible without charity.<sup>7</sup>

Getting the baptism metaphor right—that is, understanding the moral life as involving a transformation of the self, or in the apostle Paul’s words “putting on Christ” (Gal. 3:27)—also makes room specifically for the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in effecting the reformation of the soul.<sup>8</sup> Christ’s role includes not only the Eucharistic sacrifice but also his function as a role model and perfect example of the virtues in the Gospel accounts. In the prologue to the *tertia pars*, Aquinas says of Christ, “our Savior the Lord Jesus Christ . . . showed unto us *in His own Person* the way of truth. . . .”<sup>9</sup> The Holy Spirit’s role includes bestowing various “gifts” (Is. 11: 2–3) and “fruits” (Gal. 6:22–23), which are additional graces further disposing us to the work of God in us.<sup>10</sup> The goal of the ethical life, on this reading of *S.T.*, is nothing short of being transformed by grace to become more and more like God himself, especially as he is made known in Christ (see I-II 62, 1; Gal. 2:20, 2 Pet. 1:4). The question we will be concerned with here is how much of the larger purpose and structure of the *Summa Theologiae* informs the more detailed discussions of particular virtues throughout the *secunda pars*.

5. The virtues infused by grace are not acquired by habituation, in contrast to Aristotle’s account of virtue and moral education in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The infused virtues are habits that are initially caused by grace (“infused” by divine initiative), rather than habits acquired by repeated actions of a certain sort. All of the cardinal virtues have an infused and an acquired form (*S.T.* I-II 65, 2 and 3), although some parts of virtues, like patience and perseverance, have only an infused form. Infused virtues dispose to certain acts; these acts in turn strengthen the virtue in the agent. So the maintenance of the virtue, but not its initial acquisition, is in the agent’s power (see *S.T.* I-II 51, 4 and *S.T.* I-II 63; *Q. Disp. de Virtutibus in Communi*. 10, ad 19; hereafter *QDVC*). Thus infused virtues can be had in degrees of perfection and are not to be confused with the perfected form of the virtues had only by the blessed (*S.T.* I-II 61, 5). We will discuss the effects of infused virtues on the passions later in this article.

6. *S.T.* I-II 62, 4; *S.T.* II-II 23, 8; *inter alia*.

7. *S.T.* II-II 23, 7.

8. All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.

9. My emphasis.

10. *S.T.* I-II 68, 70.

In the rest of this article, therefore, I offer a case study: Aquinas's treatise on courage,<sup>11</sup> one of the four cardinal virtues.<sup>12</sup> Courage, or *fortitudo*—so named from the Latin *fortis* (strong)—is the virtue most directly concerned with power and vulnerability, strength, and weakness. What is the view of strength that the example of Christ teaches? Further, how does Aquinas's instruction on the virtue of courage draw on Christ's example to transform our conception of what a courageous person will be like?

The answers to these questions will show that, as much as Aquinas relies on Aristotle's work, his Christian commitments do not merely add theological frosting to an Aristotelian philosophical cake. As illustrated by this case (among others), it is more helpful to think of them as yeast worked through dough, or, as Aquinas himself did, in terms of Christ's first miracle: changing water into wine.<sup>13</sup> I will argue that the type and striking degree of transformation that this virtue undergoes is best understood in light of Aquinas's Christian understanding of the moral life. Specifically, his choice to give the act of martyrdom precedence over the paradigm of military heroism as the exemplar act of courage reflects his commitment to taking Christ—especially in his act of sacrificial love on the cross—as the model of virtue, thereby departing radically from alternative ideals of courage found in both ancient Greek and contemporary culture.

I will first consider the relationship of charity to courage, as well as Aquinas's choice of endurance, and particularly the endurance of the martyr, as the chief act of courage. I will then consider two objections to making martyrdom the paradigmatic act of the virtue of courage: one that challenges its precedence over the paradigm of military heroism, and a second that challenges its status as an act of virtue altogether on account of its difficulty.

## II. CARITAS, COURAGE, AND ENDURANCE: THE END, THE VIRTUE, AND THE ACT

### Charity

Aquinas's treatment of courage occurs in the *secunda secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*, where he discusses the three theological virtues of faith, hope,

11. *S.T.* II-II 123–40.

12. *S.T.* I-II 61, *S.T.* II-II 123, 11, *D. Q. de Virtutibus Cardinalibus*, art. 1.

13. *In Boethium de Trinitate*, II.3 ad 5: "So those who use the works of the philosophers in sacred doctrine, by bringing them into the service of faith, do not mix water with wine, but rather change water into wine." I owe the reference to Joseph Owens, C. Ss. R., "Aristotle and Aquinas" in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Kretzmann and Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 44, n. 9; and E. Gilson's *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, p. 366, n. 90.

and charity, and then the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage (or fortitude), and temperance. As background for our examination of courage, we should note one main point about charity (the love the Apostle Paul sings of in 1 Cor. 13) from the previous treatises. As a virtue, charity's basic act is to unite human beings in friendship with God.<sup>14</sup> As the principal and most excellent<sup>15</sup> theological virtue, charity is the grounding motive and *sine qua non* for all the cardinal virtues in their most perfect expression.<sup>16</sup> Charity's only source, and therefore the infused cardinal virtue's ultimate source, is the direct work of the Holy Spirit:

Now since charity surpasses the proportion of human nature, as stated above (art. 2) it depends, not on any natural virtue, but on the sole grace of the Holy Ghost who infuses charity. Wherefore the quantity of charity depends neither on the condition of nature nor on the capacity of natural virtue, but only on the will of the Holy Ghost Who "divides" his gifts "according as He will." Hence the Apostle says, "To everyone of us is given grace according to the measure of the giving of Christ" (Eph. 4:7).<sup>17</sup>

Charity's role as source, end, and commanding virtue is essential for understanding the nature of courage. In a given action, the two work together this way: the cardinal virtue functions as the "eliciting" virtue, and, as such, is responsible for the proximate motive and end of the act. Charity, however, functions as the "commanding" virtue, setting the ultimate motive and end of the action.<sup>18</sup> Hence, courage might elicit an act of enduring death when

14. *S.T. II-II 23, 1 and 2.* Aquinas consistently uses the language of "participation in the divine" to describe the friendship of charity.

15. *S.T. II-II 23, 6:* "Now that which is of itself always ranks before that which is by another. But faith and hope attain God indeed insofar as we derive from Him the knowledge of truth or the acquisition of good, whereas charity attains God Himself that it may rest in Him, but not that something may accrue to us from Him. Hence charity is more excellent than faith or hope, and consequently, than all the other virtues, just as prudence, which by itself attains reason, is more excellent than the other moral virtues, which attain reason insofar as it appoints the mean in human operations or passions."

16. *S.T. II-II 23, 7:* "It is evident that true virtue *simpliciter* is that which is directed to a human being's principal good . . . and in this way no true virtue is possible without charity"; however, "If we take virtue as being ordered to some particular end, then we may speak of virtue being where there is no charity. . . . If . . . [a] particular good be a true good, for instance the welfare of the state, or the like, it will indeed be a true virtue, imperfect however, unless it be referred to the final and perfect good. Accordingly no strictly true virtue is possible without charity."

17. *S.T. II-II 24, 3.*

18. *S.T. II-II 124, 2 ad 2:* "Charity inclines one to the act of martyrdom, as its first and chief motive cause, being the virtue commanding it, whereas fortitude inclines thereto as being its proper motive cause, being the virtue that elicits it." For the more general claim, see also *S.T. II-II 23, 8*, where charity is described as the efficient cause, foundation and root, end and commander of all the other virtues.

reason requires this, but the action should be characterized primarily as aiming at some good that one's death safeguards, not as aiming at death, as if this were in itself a good end. To see courage as merely requiring facing death stalwartly would be to miss its main point. Aquinas writes, "endurance of death is not praiseworthy in itself, but only insofar as it is directed to some good consisting in an act of virtue, such as faith or the love of God, so that this act of virtue, being the end, is better."<sup>19</sup> (His mention of faith and charity as virtues to which courage is directed here is, as we will see later, not accidental.) The goodness of courage consists in the "firmness itself, whereby we do not yield to the contraries that hinder us *from achieving [a given] good*."<sup>20</sup> Thus, in its most perfect form, courage points beyond itself both to charity as its source and to charity's end as its goal.

## Courage

On Aquinas's account, courage belongs to the category of virtues that "remov[e] obstacles to the establishment of [the] rectitude [of reason] in human affairs."<sup>21</sup> Its function is to safeguard and protect the good, not directly to realize it. Specifically, its job is to remove obstacles in our passions (or emotions) that withdraw us from what reason commands "on account of some difficulty that presents itself."<sup>22</sup> Hence Aquinas locates it in the irascible part of the sensitive appetite.<sup>23</sup>

As a virtue,<sup>24</sup> courage is strength of the soul, not some kind of special bodily strength.<sup>25</sup> While not privileging bodily strength over strength of soul, Aristotle's notion of bravery seems to include the former, since he rules out death at sea as an occasion of courage on the grounds that "we act like brave people on occasions *when we can use our strength*, or when it is fine to be killed; and neither of these is true when we perish on the sea."<sup>26</sup> For Aquinas, on the other hand, even in cases where the source of the difficulty might be a bodily weakness, it is the strength of the soul in enduring or resisting evil that is essential to the virtue of courage.<sup>27</sup>

19. *S.T.* II-II 124, 3.

20. *S.T.* II-II 124, 2 ad 1; my emphasis.

21. *S.T.* II-II 123, 1.

22. *S.T.* II-II 123, 1.

23. *S.T.* I-II 56, 4 sc and 61, 2.

24. That is, a *habitus* of the soul (see *S.T.* I-II 55, 4).

25. *S.T.* II-II 123, 1. Similarities between them likely account for the shared name of these two traits (*S.T.* II-II 123, 1 and ad 2).

26. *N.E.* iii.6, 1115b5 (trans. T. Irwin); my emphasis.

27. Given that there are many cases where bravery can be mimicked in action (see *S.T.* II-II 123, 1, ad 2), Aquinas also therefore insists that courage, as a virtue of the soul, must consist in more than the external act. The internal condition of the agent, both cognitive and motivational, must be included as an essential aspect of this human act. For example, through ignorance, one can misjudge a situation

Beyond the general description of courage as the soul's firmness or endurance against difficulty, what distinguishes it as a specific virtue with its own particular matter is its firmness in "those things wherein it is most difficult to be firm, namely in certain grave dangers."<sup>28</sup> Its specific target is the greatest danger, that of death.<sup>29</sup> Death is considered the greatest evil, since "it does away with all bodily goods," and love of our own lives is a natural passion,<sup>30</sup> so strong that we will avoid threats to our preservation more than we will seek pleasure.<sup>31</sup> Fear, as a passion of our *sensitive* appetite and thus part of our *animal* nature, is a natural response to death, which is a threat to us precisely as *embodied* rational animals. As such, being alive is a condition of our enjoying and attaining all other goods in this life; death is the greatest evil because it occasions the loss of every other earthly good. Thus, death also causes the greatest fear.<sup>32</sup>

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as being one of difficulty when it is not or *vice versa*. Or, acts can be done out of passion (such as a burst of anger or frustration), without the full guidance of reason, and these can masquerade as cases of courage as well. Or, again, if the act is done for an evil end (e.g., out of pride), it cannot qualify as an act of genuine *virtue* at all; hence it could only be an act of pseudo-courage. Thus concentrating on the external act alone is not sufficient, because it will fail to distinguish these cases from acts of true courage, and will therefore be inadequate for purposes of one's own moral formation, choosing one's role models, and moral evaluation.

Because Aristotle is interested in distinguishing true courage from its simulacra, he tries to identify certain observable or behavioral cues to the internal differences between cases. Usually, these are more accurately discerned over a period of time, rather than being obvious in a single act.

28. S.T. II-II 123, 2.

29. S.T. II-II 123, 2; 123, 4, ad 1 and 2.

30. S.T. II-II 123, 4 ad 2; 126, 1; also S.T. I-II 29, 1. This passion is shared not only with other animals but is fundamental to all substances: "In human beings there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which they have in common with all other substances, inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature. By reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law" (S.T. I-II 94, 2).

31. On this point he draws on both Augustine, *83 Questions*, Q. 36 (quoted in S.T. II-II 123, 11) and Aristotle, *N.E.* iii.9, 1117a35. It is important for the truth of this claim to distinguish between merely risky behavior, often engaged in for the thrill, and acts that are morally necessary despite also being mortally threatening.

32. Aquinas is clearly comparing fear of death to other fears *which are obstacles to virtue*. So fear of sinning might be a greater fear and one that anticipates the loss of a greater good, but it is not one that needs to be *overcome* by the virtue of courage (or indeed, any virtue). Indeed, "the fear of the Lord" is numbered among the gifts of the Holy Spirit (S.T. I-II 68). Aquinas consistently makes recommendations for virtuous practice that take seriously our natural embodied state (for example, in worship: S.T. II-II 81, 7). As Pieper (*The Four Cardinal Virtues*, [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966], chap. 3) and Alasdair MacIntyre (*Dependent Rational Animals* [Chicago, IL: Open Court Press, 1999]) note, certain virtues, courage among them, are necessary because of our bodily vulnerability to injury and death.



Nevertheless, Aquinas points out, some fears need to be faced in order to hold to the good of reason, especially when fear prompts one to do something evil (that is, something contrary to the good toward which reason has directed us). Bodily harm cannot be the ultimate deterrent to carrying out a good end, nor an excuse to pursue a bad one, because the human good includes more than just bodily well-being:

Now we should hold firmly to the good of reason against every evil whatsoever, since no bodily good is equivalent to the good of reason. Hence courage of soul must be that which binds the will firmly to the good of reason in face of the greatest evils.<sup>33</sup>

Some goods must never be acted against or sacrificed for the sake of bodily goods, regardless of the consequences to our own physical well-being (that is, one should never choose to sin in order to avoid pain).<sup>34</sup>

Courage's subject is the dangers of death; although, not all sorts of life-threatening situations suffice: Aquinas limits his scope to cases where death is faced or risked *for the sake of* some good a person is pursuing or upholding. For example, he rules out "the dangers of death arising out of sickness, storms at sea, attacks from robbers, and the like, [because these] do not seem to come to one through one's pursuing some good."<sup>35</sup> Braving a battle situation when this is necessary to defend the common good, on the other hand, is the paradigmatic context of courage's operation. He includes upholding the good by fighting in "general combat" *and also* in "private [or] . . . singular combat," where an individual alone puts his or her life on the line.

Facing death in this way involves fear; however, reference to the good end is essential, for, Aquinas explains, "fear is born of love."<sup>36</sup> He is here drawing on his moral psychology in the treatise on the passions, where he argues that:

There is no other passion of the soul that does not presuppose love of some kind. The reason is that every other passion of the soul implies either movement towards something or rest in something. Now every movement . . . arises from some connaturality or suitability to that thing; and in this does love consist.<sup>37</sup>

33. *S.T.* II-II 123, 4. The complete hierarchy of goods Aquinas has in mind is, from highest to lowest: the Divine good, spiritual goods (goods of the soul), bodily goods, and finally, external goods.

34. Aquinas's view here stands in striking contrast to contemporary American culture's view of physical pain and suffering as the ultimate evil to be avoided at all costs. I would speculate that the loss of a conception of spiritual goods and their worth is at the root of this view.

35. *S.T.* II-II 123, 5.

36. *S.T.* II-II 123, 4 ad 2; quoting Augustine.

37. *S.T.* I-II 27, 4.

Put simply, fear is a derivative emotion. Our love for something makes us fearful when it is threatened, lest we lose it. The loss and fear are greatest in cases involving a good that is loved naturally by everyone, such as one's own bodily life.<sup>38</sup> Yet, love for some good can motivate risking great loss, while also acknowledging the loss *as a loss*, even if of a lesser good. So, while love of the lesser good of bodily life causes fear, love of a greater good helps one face it, and even overcome it.

Of the situations where we face death to protect a greater good, Aquinas identifies the act most fully embodying courage as *martyrdom*.<sup>39</sup> Martyrdom is a case of "singular combat," as described above. Adding the case of "single combat" is a strategic move in transforming what would otherwise look like a very Aristotelian account of this virtue so far, for it includes martyrdom in the list of acts covered by the definition, that is, acts of standing firm in situations of life-threatening person-to-person confrontation ("battle"), whereas Aristotle meant the definition to cover acts of bravery in traditional military confrontations. By not specifying the good aimed at, but merely describing it as greater than bodily life, he also leaves open a further distinction between military courage and martyrdom on the basis of their ends. I will return to why Aquinas chooses martyrdom, why this strategic move is not merely *ad hoc*, and what its significance is in a moment.

Courage not only concerns fear, but also the passion of daring. Its task is to hold fear in check, so that it does not interfere with or prevent our pursuit of a worthy good, and to "moderate" daring, so that we are properly cautious with the good of our own life. *Timor* (fear) is the passion that needs moderating in the act of avoiding or bearing with a difficulty or danger; Aquinas calls this act "endurance." *Audacia* (daring) is the passion that needs moderating in the act of attacking some evil or obstacle in one's path; this act is aptly named "aggression." Fear moves us to withdraw from dangers, and daring prompts us to strike out against them; each passion can interfere with reason's command.

Courage, Aquinas says, is principally exemplified in the restraint of fear, and here he agrees with Aristotle that "courage is more concerned to allay fear than to moderate daring."<sup>40</sup> Why? The danger faced, explains Aquinas, usually serves "by its very nature to check daring, but to increase fear."<sup>41</sup> Yet, if fear is the main passion courage moderates, then endurance—bearing with difficulty and standing fast against danger—must be its chief act, for "to endure follows the repression of fear," which enables us to "stand immovable in the midst of dangers."<sup>42</sup>

38. *S.T.* II-II 123, 4 ad 2.

39. *S.T.* II-II 123, 5 ad 1.

40. *S.T.* II-II 123, 6; *N.E.* iii.9, 1117a30.

41. *S.T.* II-II 123, 6.

42. *S.T.* II-II 123, 6.

Endurance also earns this status as courage's "principal" act on account of its greater difficulty. Aquinas typically singles out virtues on the basis of their concern with a 'root' emotion (*concupiscentia* or fear) because these often coincide with areas of special difficulty or temptation. Thus, temperance is concerned with the desire for pleasure, but particularly the pleasure of touch (and taste) since the tactile senses are the most basic to us (as a species of animal) and have the strongest pull, given their immediate relation to preservation of both self and species. Similarly, courage concerns fear: not just any fear, but the fear related to the greatest injury—death—which, as directly opposed to that strong basic inclination to self-preservation, thus occasions the greatest difficulties for steadfastness.<sup>43</sup>

Aquinas offers three reasons to support his contention that endurance is more difficult. (I will return to these in more detail later.) First, he says, endurance implies an attack upon oneself by someone stronger, while aggression usually implies considering oneself the stronger, and "it is more difficult to contend with a stronger [opponent] than with a weaker [one]."<sup>44</sup>

The second reason is that endurance faces a present danger, whereas aggression typically involves an anticipated, and therefore future, difficulty. Further, it is harder to stand against a real and present danger than to face a danger that has not yet come. The best of intentions falter in the difficulties of the moment. Acts of endurance require a deeper exertion and test of commitment as the burdens with which they contend are already palpable and inescapable; the discouragement and pain faced there are real, not merely foreseen. Aquinas does not deny that anticipatory fear of the unknown can be difficult to handle as well, and a measure of daring to counterbalance it is necessary. Aggressive action, however, has a natural confidence built into its attitude; it is forward-looking and anticipatory, still hopeful and proactive.

Finally, Aquinas reasons that endurance implies a longer stretch of time when danger must be faced than aggression, which often involves a quick strike, and concludes that "it is more difficult to remain unmoved for a long time, than to be moved suddenly to something arduous."<sup>45</sup> Endurance's trials characteristically wear us down over the long haul, and this increases their difficulty. Aquinas thus concludes that endurance better exemplifies courage's characteristic operation, to "cleav[e] *fortissime* to good" in the face of the dangers of death.

43. Josef Pieper, in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, notes that "The ultimate injury, the deepest injury, is death. And even those injuries which are not fatal are prefigurations of death. . . . Every injury is fatal in its intention. . . . Thus . . . all fortitude stands in the presence of death. Fortitude is basically readiness to die" (p. 117).

44. *S.T.* II-II 123, 6 ad 1.

45. *S.T.* II-II 123, 6 ad 1.

## Martyrdom

I will now examine Aquinas's choice of martyrdom as the principal or quintessential act of courage. Courage requires an act of endurance in some kind of confrontational situation where death (the greatest bodily evil) is faced as the result of holding to or pursuing some good end. Endurance amounts to standing firm and fast against fear, that 'instinct' to flee in order to protect and preserve oneself. How does martyrdom fit this description better than any other act?

Courage aids people in withstanding and curbing the fears that come with realizing the good. The good of human beings (*qua* rational creatures) is to be and live in conformity with reason, and reason's aim and good is truth.<sup>46</sup> Hence, the martyr must be one who stands firm for the cause of truth (and its manifestation, justice) against threats of death.<sup>47</sup> More specifically, the truth and justice for which martyrdom stands firm is "Divine justice, which is through faith in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:22)"<sup>48</sup>:

[M]artyrs are so called as being witnesses, because by suffering in body they bear witness to the truth; not indeed any truth, but to the truth which is in accordance with godliness, and was made known to us by Christ. . . . Now this truth is the truth of faith.<sup>49</sup>

The truth of other sciences has no connection with the worship of the Godhead: hence it is not called truth according to godliness, and consequently the confession thereof cannot be said to be the direct cause of martyrdom.<sup>50</sup>

Martyrdom, on Aquinas's conception of it, is essentially linked to the theological virtue of faith as its "direct cause," the virtue that holds to the "truth which is in accordance with godliness . . . made known to us by Christ."<sup>51</sup> It is a testimony, literally a witness (Greek *martus*), in action as much as in word, to Truth—that is to Christ (Jn. 14:6)—the one who is known as Truth and who made it known in his life as well as his teaching. As such, martyrdom is modeled on Christ's own witness, the one who "showed unto

46. *S.T. I-II* 2, 8 and *I-II* 79, 11 especially ad 2; see also Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, p. 9.

47. *S.T. II-II* 124, 1.

48. *S.T. II-II* 124, 5 ad 1.

49. *S.T. II-II* 124, 5.

50. *S.T. II-II* 124, 5 ad 2.

51. On faith: "Because the things which are of faith surpass human reason, hence they do not come to human knowledge, unless God reveal them. . . . [S]ince human beings, by assenting to matters of faith, are raised above their nature, this must needs accrue to them from some supernatural principle moving them inwardly; and this is God. Therefore faith, as regards the assent which is the chief act of faith, is from God moving human beings inwardly by grace" (*S.T. II-II* 6, 1).

us in His own Person the way of truth.”<sup>52</sup> Truth is a person, and our love for truth thus entails a relationship. Christ died for love of us; the martyr’s witness mirrors back that act of love and loyalty. For the martyr to uphold this truth—the final and most perfect end of our rational nature, embodied in and modeled by Christ—is therefore to stand for the integrity of both the ultimate human good and the Divine good together.

The notion of a good end plays a key role here again, since courage works by curbing fear so that it does not hinder our pursuing and standing firm in a good end. We recall Aquinas’s earlier statement that

the endurance of death is not praiseworthy in itself, but only insofar as it is directed to some good consisting in an act of virtue, *such as faith or the love of God*, so that this act of virtue, being the end, is better.<sup>53</sup>

The most loved (and desirable) end enables the greatest sacrifice since only a highly valuable item is worth protecting whatever the cost to lesser goods:

our love for a thing is proved to be so much the greater, according as that which we despise for its sake is more dear to us, or that which we choose to suffer for its sake is more odious.<sup>54</sup>

Christ is thus both the end and the model of virtue: “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). Charity, or friendship with God himself, is the love that enables the martyr to stand firm.

Its aim at the highest or greatest of goods thus explains why martyrdom can withstand the greatest fear we have as embodied rational creatures—the fear of death. “[I]t is evident,” he says, “that of all the goods of the present life human beings love life itself most, and on the other hand they hate death more than anything, especially when it is accompanied by the pains of bodily torment.”<sup>55</sup> Only love of a good higher than bodily life can trump fear of death.<sup>56</sup> Because the act is rooted in faith and charity, the martyr has that kind of love. Martyrdom models in a concrete act both sacrificial love and the right ordering of goods, teaching that even the highest human goods (even those sometimes worth dying for) are not ultimate.

Fear of bodily harm, and especially death, are certainly present for the martyr, since a martyr is by definition one who *relinquishes his or her life* for the

52. *S.T.* IIIa, Prologue.

53. *S.T.* II-II 124, 3; my emphasis.

54. *S.T.* II-II 124, 3.

55. *S.T.* II-II 124, 3.

56. This is assuming the proper use of reason, of course (ruling out the reckless abandon of the drunkard, for example).

sake of the truth (of faith). Aquinas states clearly in article 4 that no lesser sacrifice will qualify:

As long as we retain the life of the body we do not show by our actions that we despise all things relating to the body [for the sake of a higher spiritual goods]. . . . For human beings typically despise both their family and their possessions, and even suffer bodily pain, rather than lose life.<sup>57</sup>

Aquinas argues here on the grounds that death is the ultimate and final test of one's conviction; anything less will fail to prove one's single-minded devotion to the good at stake over all other goods. As such it does involve sacrificing the greatest bodily good—one's life. Aquinas is also intentionally modeling martyrdom on Christ's sacrifice on the cross as the exemplar of courageous action. That act teaches us that love is not only greater than suffering, but also sometimes requires it. Like its divine exemplar, Aquinas characterizes martyrdom as an occasion when death must be suffered, and not merely risked or faced.

To summarize, martyrdom faces the worst harm (death) and, as a result, the greatest degree of hindering passion (fear). It can do so because it cleaves to nothing less than the greatest good (the Truth that is Christ). Therefore, martyrdom is the act that chiefly exemplifies courage and captures its essential nature.

We have seen in this section how God is the final end of this virtue and the principle of its act through charity. I will demonstrate later how God also gives both the means to acquire the virtue and its characteristic delight in operation.

### III. ENDURANCE VERSUS AGGRESSION: WHY NOT THE MILITARY MODEL?

At this point, one might wonder, are there not other good (or just) causes that require the sacrifice of one's life, which necessitate facing death and its attendant fears? Throughout history, ideally courageous acts were and are typically acts of military daring: the soldiers who receive medals for their courage are those who, for example, went back into heavy fire to rescue wounded comrades, or who were the first to lead a line of attack against the enemy for an important position when the odds looked overwhelmingly against their success. All of Aristotle's examples of courage, both true and false, follow the military model of facing death on the battlefield.<sup>58</sup>

57. *S.T.* II-II 124, 4.

58. Aristotle's own military paradigm is complicated and hard to categorize: while bravery is explicitly concerned with the fear of death in war, he consistently

These exemplars of bravery in military action are inspiring and noble, without a doubt. Why should these cases be lesser examples of courage than martyrdom, which seems to be a more passive and resigned *reaction* to threats from others, in contrast with these other courageous *acts* to combat great evils and protect great goods? If we are looking for an *action* that best embodies courage, why settle for this apparently passive model, especially in our age, when doing is valued more highly than (and almost to the eclipse of) suffering? As a further consideration, Aquinas defines the type of death courage faces as “the danger of death *in battle*,” which makes the military paradigm look even more plausible as a candidate for the act that best embodies this virtue.<sup>59</sup>

### Different Degrees of Difficulty from the Passions

Aquinas’s answer centers on his earlier distinction between endurance and aggression as the two acts of courage in *S.T. II-II 123, 6*, titled “Whether endurance is the chief act of courage.” Just as the danger of death, being the greatest evil, is therefore the most difficult to face and stand firm against, so in choosing between an act of aggression (the military paradigm) and an act of endurance (the martyrdom paradigm), the standard by which the two are judged is the level of difficulty. Aquinas has argued that endurance is more difficult than aggression because it involves a threat perceived as stronger than oneself (rather than weaker), as present (rather than future), and as usually requiring a longer period of resistance and overcoming of fear (rather than a short and sudden action).

We might, however, have good reason to object to his answer here. It is easy to imagine cases in which acts of aggression (expressing the passion of daring) appear to be more difficult: for example, in which there is an attack against a present evil, an attack against a threat that is stronger or an opponent who has the upper hand, or an attack that lasts longer than some cases of endurance. Take, for example, the case of the battle for the Alamo: it was a fight to the death against a stronger, presently invading enemy, and it took a long time for the last man to die fighting and the fort to fall. Why should we think of martyrdom as the exemplar act of courage when the criteria seem equally to support acts of aggression like this one? The generalization about difficulty does not seem to support Aquinas’s choice.

The answer, I think, is to be found by backtracking into the treatise on the passions, as the resources found there explain Aquinas’s reasoning

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describes the brave person as “standing firm,” which sounds more like endurance than attack. And yet brave persons are also described as “eager when in action” (*N.E. 1116a10*) and as “full of emotion” that “cooperates” with their act (*N.E. 116b25–1117a5*), giving their acts more affinity with an act of aggression than endurance.

59. *S.T. II-II 123, 5*; my emphasis.

better than the arguments presented in the treatise on courage in defense of martyrdom. Further, the arguments for martyrdom presuppose the moral psychology there and are more convincing against that background.

The irascible part of the sensitive appetite, the part of the soul that courage perfects, “incites” us to stand against or strike out against evils that prompt a normal aversion/withdrawal response. Both endurance and aggression counteract (in different ways) this aversion/withdrawal response, and the passions operating in each act (namely, fear and daring) share as their object a future evil that causes us difficulty or presents some kind of threat.

To understand the structure of the passions operative here, it is helpful to compare fear and daring with two parallel passions in the irascible appetite—hope and despair. As fear and daring have as their object a future evil that is difficult to avoid, hope and despair have as their object a future good that is difficult to obtain. In both pairs of irascible passions, the key difference between the two emotional responses is the *possibility* of attaining one’s end (to avoid the future evil in the one case, to attain the future good in the other). In the case of hope, the future good is perceived as difficult but possible to attain; while in the case of despair, the future good is so difficult as to be rendered on attainable (hence despair’s link to inactivity and sloth). Similarly, according to Aquinas’s moral psychology, in the case of daring, the future evil, while presenting some difficulty, is possible to avoid, while in the case of fear, the future evil is difficult and not possible (or very unlikely so) to avoid. To clarify, I have provided a table outling this point:<sup>60</sup>

Passion	Object			
Daring	Future	Evil	Difficult to avoid	Possible to avoid
Fear	Future	Evil	Difficult to avoid	Impossible to avoid, or nearly so
Hope	Future	Good	Difficult to obtain	Possible to obtain
Despair	Future	Good	Difficult to obtain	Impossible to obtain, or nearly so

In fact, when Aquinas describes fear in the treatise on the passions, he consistently emphasizes that fear is the natural emotional response when evil cannot be escaped, when no resistance to and no ‘fixing’ of the problem is possible. For example, in *S.T.* II-II 41, 2, the future evil that fear faces

60. Hope, despair, fear and daring are treated in *S.T.* I-II 40–45. Aquinas explicitly contrasts fear and daring (and distinguishes them from hope) at *S.T.* I-II 45, 1 and 2 and II-II 123, 3 ad 3.



is described as “irresistible,” and in ad 3, the evil is “arduous” to the point of being “almost unavoidable.” In *S.T. I-II 42, 6*, Aquinas mentions as an “intensifying circumstance” the case where the evil is increased by being “long-lasting,” “ever-lasting,” or having “no remedy.” Fear increases correspondingly in these cases precisely *because* the evil can neither be fixed or avoided but must also be suffered for a protracted period of time. Moreover, evils that appear to be “near at hand” rather than distant also seem less likely to be avoided; fear thus increases proportionately. This is why death is rarely feared by the young.

One reason fear’s object is not possible to avoid, according to the treatise on the passions, is that it is inflicted by a cause which is both outside the agent’s control and stronger than the agent. As Aquinas states in *S.T. I-II 42, 3 ad 3*, the cause of fear is something *not* subject to our power and our will, and we lack the power to easily “repulse a threatening evil” because we are weak compared to the power of the inflictor of harm.<sup>61</sup> “Fear regards a future evil which surpasses the power of the one who fears, so that it is irresistible.”<sup>62</sup> Even if we still have the power to contend in these cases, he says, we do not have enough power to ensure victory.<sup>63</sup> The power imbalance and the resulting inability to protect oneself or avoid harm cause fear. Our helplessness and vulnerability make difficulty overwhelming and escape impossible.

Daring, on the other hand, strikes out against the threat precisely in those cases in which we judge that we are able to overcome it. It has the same object as fear, yet the opposite reaction (striking out instead of shrinking back) precisely because of that possibility. As Aquinas puts it, “daring turns on threatened danger because of its own victory over that same danger”;<sup>64</sup> “daring,” unlike fear, “implies safety.”<sup>65</sup> Daring thus presupposes hope, hope “that the means of safety are nigh.”<sup>66</sup> As Aquinas notes, this includes the theological virtue of hope:

[H]ope that leads to daring is roused by those things that make us reckon victory as possible. Such things regard either our own power, as bodily strength, experience of dangers, abundance of wealth, and the like; *or they regard the powers of others*, such as having a great number of friends or any other means of help, *especially if we trust in Divine assistance.*<sup>67</sup>

61. *S.T. I-II 43, 2.*

62. *S.T. I-II 41, 4.*

63. *S.T. I-II 41, 4 ad 3.* Note the applicability to the Alamo case: according to Aquinas’s criteria, that case better qualifies as an act of endurance than aggression.

64. *S.T. I-II 45, 1.*

65. *S.T. I-II 45, 1 ad 3.*

66. *S.T. I-II 45, 3*, quoting Aristotle, *Rhet.* ii.5.

67. *S.T. I-II 45, 3*; my emphasis.

Ultimately, the martyr's triumph over difficulty and evil will have more to do with divine assistance than one's own power.

The passion of daring has a combination of good and evil as its object—hope for victory over adversity and a threat that is difficult to overcome. If the balance of good and evil shifts, daring fades with it: “If, therefore, so much difficulty be added to the danger that it overcomes hope, the movement of daring does not ensue, but fails.”<sup>68</sup> When this happens, one's reaction turns to fear, and is no longer one of daring.

With this background in mind, we return to Aquinas's reasons for privileging martyrdom (an act of endurance; standing fast against fear) as being of greater difficulty than military heroism (an act of aggression; striking out with daring). How does the treatise on the passions bolster his case?

In acts of aggression (military heroism), there is a sense in which the agent still has some control over the situation: he acts because he believes he has sufficient power to establish or protect the good; to that extent, the agent still trusts his own power to overcome the threat. This act, as one of daring, comes with the belief that it is possible to avoid or conquer the evil that threatens. In an act of endurance (martyrdom), the agent faces death upon pain of renouncing or betraying the truth, and, *given the end*, she is powerless to evade the threat: there is no way to escape or minimize the danger short of renouncing her end altogether, given that the power imbalance is tilted against her. Her fear signals that her control over the safeguarding or protecting of her own life is gone. The only means of resisting the evil is to stand fast and not give way while undergoing it.<sup>69</sup>

Aquinas also argues that endurance's evil is present, while aggression's evil remains a future one. Does he conceive of aggression as though the soldier is sitting in a foxhole deliberating upon his options of attack, while the martyr is already on the rack? What would happen to the rankings of difficulty if we pictured the soldier already running through enemy fire to rescue fallen comrades, and the martyr sitting in the prison cell deliberating upon whether to renounce faith or face execution the next day? Given our insights from the treatise on the passions, I think the main point behind the present/future distinction is that the one who acts aggressively from daring acts with the presumption that the evil can still be warded off, that it need *never* become present. The martyr, of course, cannot and does not. The martyr's evil *will* and *does* become present (inevitably) because she *cannot*

68. S.T. I-II 45, 4 ad 2.

69. Notice that it is the protection of her own life that she forfeits. Aquinas's definition of courage does not require that we sacrifice the lives of others, especially those for whose well being we are responsible. Courage *serves* justice; it does not undermine its demands. Rather, he is thinking of situations when the only remaining way to preserve the integrity of the self and one's relationships to others (human or divine) is to lay down one's life.

keep it at arms' length; the martyr's stronger opponent sets the terms of what will come and when. Likewise, the evil might be endured for a longer duration, because the opponent determines the length of its infliction, and the martyr is powerless to ward it off. In both respects, the difference stems from the fact that the one who endures is acting from a position of weakness.

Hence the time considerations Aquinas mentions simply serve to make more concrete the differences between acts of fear and daring (recall the chart, above): daring assumes that one has the ability to overcome or evade the evil that threatens; fear acknowledges that one does not. Even if we compare the two acts at the point when the martyr's and the military hero's evils are *both* future, there remains the fact that in an act of daring (or aggression), while it may risk death, is rooted in hope of eventual escape or victory. There is a sense in which the soldier's aim and efforts are directed at still trying to avoid death, while the martyr must face and accept it.

Similarly, the abovementioned fact that the soldier is active (able to initiate action) rather than forced into a position of suffering implies that this agent is in a position of greater control over both the situation generally and his own physical well-being. It is a common experience that, in the face of dangers and threats of pain, an increasing sense of helplessness or *loss of control* over one's situation—including the length of time one must suffer—correlatively increases one's fear.<sup>70</sup> Military courage thus has physical and psychological resources to draw upon which the martyr lacks in her act of enduring fear and evil. So, while military courage's aggressive act can still say "My strength can overpower you," the martyr's says only, "The truth will stand even when I fall."

As mentioned earlier in our discussion of the definition of courage, military courage (going back to such Homeric heroes as Achilles) still relies to some extent on physical strength, but martyrdom is left in complete vulnerability, even to the point of death.<sup>71</sup> Its position of suffering and helplessness requires increased strength of soul—and this is the heart of courage. *Precisely by virtue of her position of greater weakness*, the martyr must exercise greater inner strength in order to overcome the greater difficulty occasioned by her fear and outer weakness.

Martyrdom remains an act exemplifying endurance because it is a case where vulnerability is at its maximum and all control over one's life is

70. This has been observed and documented among those with terminal illnesses that render them unable to care for themselves. See, for example, those cited in "A Severe Mercy in Oregon" *Christianity Today* 43 (1999), p. 66 ff. It is also a commonplace for women giving birth, as any recent pregnancy and labor advice book will attest.

71. We recall also Aristotle's disqualification of death at sea as an act of courage on these grounds at *N.E.* iii.6, 1115b5.

lost (save giving up on the good at stake).<sup>72</sup> Thus Pieper concludes, when comparing aggression and endurance, that for Aquinas

the true ‘position’ of courage is that extremely perilous situation described above, in which to suffer and endure is objectively the only remaining possibility of resistance, and it is in this situation that courage primarily and ultimately proves its genuine character.<sup>73</sup>

### Other Passions: Cooperation or Conflict?

As a further consideration, Aquinas explains that the act of aggression could have the added help of anger in its performance. It is not the case that anger is the motivating cause of the action: reason’s direction and the will’s cooperation are both necessary and sufficient for that task; rather, “the act of aggression . . . employs anger rather than the other passions, since it belongs to anger to strike at the cause of sorrow, so that it directly cooperates with courage in attacking.”<sup>74</sup> Anger, which seeks to avenge injustice and injury,<sup>75</sup> is thus a useful aid in carrying out an act of aggression and gives it greater ease, even if the act could also be done without its help.<sup>76</sup> Aquinas describes anger’s role as being an “instrument” of the will, much like parts of the body and their strength are instrumental in executing our intentions.<sup>77</sup>

On the contrary, endurance is an act that requires the opposite response of an *active* strike against the threat, namely, steadfastness in suffering. Anger’s ability to “strike at the cause of sorrow” is out of place in the act of martyrdom. Endurance is an act which is done *without* the cooperation of a supporting passion:

Whereas courage . . . has two acts, namely endurance and aggression, it employs anger, *not for the act of endurance, because reason itself performs this act, but for the act of aggression . . .*<sup>78</sup>

72. Or forfeited. Given the paradigm here (Christ’s sacrifice on the cross) we need to keep open the possibility that the martyr is unwilling (rather than unable, strictly speaking) to use force or exercise strength. She might be unwilling, for example, when the use of force against the threat would compromise her integrity or her fidelity to her end, that is, by substituting lower for higher goods in her action. That is to say, she is unable to do so *without compromising her moral character*. Here, the position of weakness is not simply a matter of lacking brute strength and available resources, but refusing to use them on occasions when their use would be self-defeating or inappropriate.

73. Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 128.

74. *S.T.* II-II 123, 10 ad 3.

75. *S.T.* I-II 46, 2.

76. *S.T.* II-II 123, 10 ad 2.

77. *S.T.* II-II 123, 10 ad 2.

78. *S.T.* II-II 123, 10 ad 3; my emphasis.

Anger is of no help in the act of endurance:

Daring and anger do not cooperate with courage in the act of endurance, wherein its steadfastness is chiefly commended; for it is by that act that the brave person curbs fear, which is a principal passion, as stated above.<sup>79</sup> (*S.T.* I-II, 25, 4)

Without the aid of a passion working to support reason, martyrdom, as an act of endurance, is again more difficult.<sup>80</sup>

While all acts of courage must deal with fear as an obstacle, another passion that typically accompanies endurance is sorrow.<sup>81</sup> Like fear and unlike anger, this passion is one *against* which endurance must prevail, rather than one that supports and upholds an agent's virtuous resolve. Sorrow—our emotional reaction to a present evil<sup>82</sup>—“by its very nature gives way to the thing that hurts,”<sup>83</sup> while endurance's task is to withstand the pain or danger and *not* give way. The virtue and the passion of sorrow work against each other in the act of endurance; by contrast, courage and anger mutually reinforce each other in the act of aggression. Endurance thus contends not only with an evil that threatens from outside, but also with an internal threat; the martyr must do battle against her own emotions as well as with an opponent. The martyr fights on two fronts at once, while the aggressor makes use of emotion as an internal ally against his external foe. This is another reason why endurance makes claim to being the paramount exemplar of a courageous act on account of greater difficulty.

## Different Ends

Although Aquinas notes that acts of endurance (of which martyrdom is paradigmatic) are more difficult than acts of aggression, there is a more important and invariable reason why martyrdom, and not military action,

79. *S.T.* II-II 123, 11 ad 1.

80. Aristotle distinguishes the brave person from the person who fights from emotion, not by a difference in emotion, but in a difference in the role emotion plays: for the brave person, emotion “cooperates” with their act and is “most eager to run and face dangers,” but it does not ultimately motivate the act, since the brave person acts for the sake of the fine. One needs to act not from feeling only, but from “decision and the goal.” See the whole passage from *N.E.* iii.8, 1116b25–1117a5. The key here is that emotion cooperates with bravery, according to Aristotle, and his descriptions of ‘emotional’ bravery (which, he says, is closest to the genuine virtue) appear to follow the aggression model.

81. *S.T.* II-II 123, 10, ad 3.

82. And like fear, one inflicted by a stronger power (*S.T.* I-II 36, 4).

83. *S.T.* II-II 123, 10, ad 3; I-II 37, 4.

is Aquinas's choice among acts best embodying courage. The reason is that the end at stake is a higher end, a greater good. As Aquinas puts it,

Two things must be considered in the act of courage. One is the good wherein the brave person is strengthened, and this is the end of courage; the other is the firmness itself, whereby a person does not yield to the contraries that hinder her from achieving that good, and in this consists the essence of courage.<sup>84</sup>

He quotes Augustine as saying, "Courage is love bearing all things readily for the sake of the object beloved,"<sup>85</sup> and adds later that the greater the object loved the more that is worth sacrificing for it (to reiterate):

our love for a thing is proved to be so much the greater, according as that which we despise for its sake is more dear to us, or that which we choose to suffer for its sake is more odious.<sup>86</sup>

We have just considered how the difference in the difficulty of resisting evil tends to rank martyrdom higher than military actions given the endurance/aggression distinction. On the second point, the good for sake of which one acts, how do the two compare?

Acts of military courage can have as their goal a wide range of goods: a just cause, the prevention of suffering, the protection of human life or freedom, friendship with one's comrades in arms, loyalty to one's country and its ideals, and so on. Some of these goods are bodily goods, some are common goods or even spiritual goods, such as freedom or friendship. Yet Aquinas categorizes these goods under the heading of "human justice" and the virtue "safeguarding" them "civic courage." In the case of martyrdom, as we have seen earlier, charity commands the act elicited immediately by courage.<sup>87</sup> This is "gratuitous courage" (whose cause is not human action but the infusion of divine grace), and it is defined by having as its end "Divine justice," which is a higher good than justice achieved within human interactions. He says in *S. T. II-II 124, 5, ad 3*, "The good of one's country is paramount among human goods," and thus it is noble to give one's life (the good of the individual) for the sake of, for example, temporal peace or a just cause (a common good); "yet the Divine good, which is the *proper* cause of martyrdom, is of more account than human good."<sup>88</sup>

84. *S. T. II-II 124, 2, ad 1.*

85. *S. T. II-II 123, 4, obj. 1.*

86. *S. T. II-II 124, 3.*

87. *S. T. II-II 124, 3.*

88. My emphasis. Martyrdom would not count as martyrdom properly speaking without this end, although Aquinas does make room for analogous cases in *S. T. II-II 124, 5 ad 3*, in which human goods are referred to God. Aquinas never mentions the possibility of an act of aggression being ordered to the divine good; although

Aquinas's ordering of goods implies that a martyr would give up even a spiritual, common good (for example, friendship or family)—in the event that it would be necessary—for the sake of a still higher good, the good of obedience and faithfulness to Christ. In this thought we hear echoes again of Christ's own example, in which faithful obedience unto death also cost him friendship and family.<sup>89</sup> To say it in another way, the kind of courageous action one is able to perform in the limit case is a function of what one ultimately loves most; the martyr thus can withstand the greatest fear and make the greatest sacrifice because she clings to the highest possible good. Thus courage in its most exemplary form is rooted in charity, love of God himself.

To summarize, then: from both the degree of difficulty and the ranking of ends, Aquinas can conclude that martyrdom more appropriately deserves the name of the act which best captures the highest expression of courage. Martyrdom gains its position of "chief act" of courage on account of its difficulty, given its position of greater weakness with respect to the threat and its adverse relation to the emotions. Moreover, it is aimed at the highest of goods, since love of God is a more noble cause than the highest of human goods.

When Aquinas described courage itself, he defined this virtue's essential task as "remov[ing] any obstacle that withdraws the will from following the reason."<sup>90</sup> He identified fear as the cause of withdrawal from the good, and fear's object as evil, particularly evils that involve difficulty or danger.<sup>91</sup> Both the military paradigm and the martyrdom paradigm fit this description; however, martyrdom, not military action, demonstrates how courage

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such cases seem imaginable, and perhaps even actual (in the Old Testament wars for the Promised Land, for example). It may be telling, however, that there are no New Testament cases and no example from the life of Christ, that is, no direct evidence of its permissibility in the era of the giving of the New Law—the Holy Spirit—which is the immediate cause of the infusion of charity. This leads me to believe that Aquinas may have thought this sort of case is impossible, although he gives no argument for that conclusion.

89. Cf. Matt. 8:18–22, Matt. 12:46–50, and Matt. 26:47–56, also John 6:60. Could Aquinas also be recalling his experience of leaving family loyalties behind upon joining the Order of Preachers, as his own *imitatio Christi* (although accounts differ as to how radical a break this amounted to (cf. Torrell, vol. 1, pp. 8–12; Weisheipl, pp. 26–36; as an interesting aside, see also S.T. II-II 101, 4 ad 4 "Whether the duties of piety towards one's parents should be set aside for the sake of religion?")?

I do not mean (nor does Aquinas) to imply that these goods will always conflict or will always require a choice between them. The point here is that, in the case that they do or might, one's ultimate loyalties must be to something higher. It echoes Augustine's main point in *Civ. Dei*. XIX.xvii.

90. S.T. II-II 123, 3.

91. See 123, 3, ad 2: "Dangers and toils do not withdraw the will from the course of reason, except insofar as they are an object of fear."

operates when fear is most difficult to curb or control, and the good at stake is the highest at which one can aim. In *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, Josef Pieper summarizes this point:

The essence of courage is neither attack nor self-confidence nor wrath, but endurance and patience. Not because (and this cannot be sufficiently stressed) patience and endurance are in themselves better and more perfect than attack and self-confidence, but because, in the world as it is constituted, it is only the supreme test, which leaves no other possibility of resistance than endurance, that the inmost and deepest strength of [a person] reveals itself. Power is so manifestly of the very structure of the world that endurance, not wrathful attack, is the ultimately decisive test of actual courage, which, essentially, is nothing else than to love and to realize that which is good, in the face of injury or death, and undeterred by any spirit of compromise.<sup>92</sup>

#### IV. CHALLENGING MARTYRDOM'S STATUS AS A PARADIGM OF VIRTUE

##### Restricting the Range of Virtue?

If we find Aquinas's arguments so far acceptable, now that we understand the psychology behind them, we might yet encounter objections to the choice of martyrdom as courage's chief or exemplary act. The first objection is to making martyrdom a *paradigm* act, and the second, as a paradigm act of *virtue*. I will consider the first briefly, and the second in more detail.

First, choosing martyrdom, an act as rare as it is exemplary, may make Aquinas's account of courage look like just one more case of the preoccupation of moral theorists with unusual, and often highly imaginative and improbable cases that have only a tenuous relation to the more common problems facing ordinary agents trying to live the moral life. This objection carries more weight if we read Aquinas as advantageously framing the moral life primarily in terms of everyday virtues *in contrast to* more esoteric contemporary "hard-case" or dilemma-based approaches to ethics. Further, this objection strikes at the heart of Aquinas's own mission and purpose in writing the *Summa Theologiae*, and especially the ethical part of the *Summa*: to offer beginners in the faith instruction for moral formation in Christlikeness.<sup>93</sup> If the exemplar he offers here is too far removed from ordinary experience and too remote a possibility for imitation to be feasible, then it is not clear how instructive it will actually be.

92. Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, pp. 130–31.

93. See Leonard Boyle, "The Setting of the *Summa theologiae* of Saint Thomas."



In reply, I think the opposite is true: holding on to the military paradigm actually narrows the range of the virtue more than the martyrdom paradigm. The main point of making martyrdom the paradigm is to show that courage can be expressed as much or more in suffering as it can in striking out against a threat. The military paradigm has, until very recently, been restricted to males and even further restricted to those males who meet certain requirements for ability and physical strength.<sup>94</sup> To make martyrdom the model to follow allows anyone who is able to suffer to echo this supreme example of courage in their own lives, and leaves physical power, with its attendant gender and age limitations, out of the picture. Anyone who is weak, vulnerable, or unable or unwilling to use force is a candidate for practicing this virtue—including women, children, the elderly, the economically and socially disempowered, and even the disabled. In this way, the implications for Aquinas's transformation of this Aristotelian virtue are radical in ways Aristotle would neither have dreamed of nor approved. Courage's essential character is to trust Christ when he says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

As fallen and vulnerable human beings in a world marred by sin and death, the endurance of suffering is necessary for all of us, and the exemplar act of courage here is an answer to the question (not asked often enough by contemporary citizens of the first world), "What is left for me to do when my own strength is exhausted, my burdens can't be lightened, or my problems can't be fixed?" It also necessarily raises the morally crucial question, "What is worth suffering for?" Moreover, for Aquinas's own students, as for us, the moral life as the process of sanctification—intentionally becoming more and more like Christ—requires the death of the old self and the coming to birth of the new, dying *with* Christ and *like* Christ in order also to rise with him. So martyrdom, in an analogical but no less important sense, is a task for all of those who claim Christ as their own.<sup>95</sup>

In conclusion, rather than narrowing the virtue, Aquinas's version of courage actually opens up the range of possible practitioners, in a way that

94. Contemporary American films contain thousands of examples of heroes exemplifying this moral ideal, all but a handful of whom are virile males. And the classic American hero, probably even more so than his ancient Greek counterpart, embodies the ideal of courage not only as physical strength but as the strength to handle things *on his own*, without help from others (e.g., *Die Hard*, *Air Force One*, *Rambo*). Martyrdom, in contrast, seeks to stand fast, but not to stand alone (more on this in the last section). See also Cessario's (mostly undeveloped) comment that for Aquinas, the virtues are relational, pp. 20–21, my "Aquinas's Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence," *Faith and Philosophy* 21:2 (April 2004), and MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals*, chap. 10.

95. See the Apostle Paul's words in Phil. 3:7–11.

breaks from both Aristotelian and contemporary ideals, and in a way that is consistent with his own pedagogical purposes in the *S.T.*<sup>96</sup>

## Facility, Pleasure, and Virtue

There is, however, a further serious objection to martyrdom as a paradigm act of courage that we need to consider. It is serious because it poses a challenge to martyrdom's very status as an act of *virtue*. When we consider the lack of happiness and ease that attend opportunities to exercise courage in the act of martyrdom, this act looks less and less like a genuine act of virtue, since both Aquinas and Aristotle understand virtuous activity—as constitutive of human flourishing—to be performable with both a certain ease (or facility) and delight.<sup>97</sup> However, Aquinas states frequently that the martyr experiences difficulty, pain, and sorrow in death.

So regarding martyrdom's status as an act expressing *virtue*, we may wonder about the degree of *difficulty* still present in the act even for the martyr who (presumably) has mature or highly perfected virtue. Recall that, when comparing courage's two acts, endurance and aggression, Aquinas argued that endurance was the greater act of courage because it has a greater degree of difficulty inherent in it. But this inherent difficulty itself now creates a problem. When we think about the prospect of death, no matter how steadfast and committed to reason's good we are, the difficulty for us—as *embodied* rational creatures—of acting on that commitment never quite fades away. This means that not only will martyrdom lack ease, but also that courage's operation will naturally lack its characteristic accompanying delight or pleasure.<sup>98</sup> Why then, does the pleasure that comes with the ease of doing something that is connatural to us seem to escape even the most mature virtuous agents in this act of courage?<sup>99</sup> It seems to make sense that this would disqualify martyrdom as a true act of virtue.

Considering this problem in *S.T.* II-II 123, 8, Aquinas begins by identifying the two types of pleasure or pain that can be associated with an act of virtue: physical pleasure and pain, and spiritual *delight* and *sorrow*.<sup>100</sup>

96. Although I do not make this point here, I have argued elsewhere that the usefulness of an exemplar is not limited to its direct imitability; an ideal can teach in other ways as well—see chap. 2.1.1 and chap. 5 of my *Virtues in Action* (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2000).

97. See *N.E.*i.8 1099b10–20; ii.3 1104b5; x.5 1176a10 ff., and also Aquinas's *QDVC* a. 9 ad 13: “before acquiring the habit of virtue a person does not do the works of virtue as the virtuous person does, namely, promptly and without doubt and with pleasure and easily.”

98. Especially since there is no way to practice this act repeatedly; no training of the passions by habituation, at least for this limit case, is possible.

99. See the treatise on the passions *inter alia*: *S.T.* I-II 27, 1; 29, 1.

100. *S.T.* I-II 35, 2. Sorrow and delight are the spiritual analogues of physical pain and pleasure.

Delight is the pleasure of the soul that accompanies any act that is in accord with one's nature (which includes virtue, as it is a sort of "second nature"); it is an approval of and satisfaction in this state of order and integrity of the self.<sup>101</sup> Physical or bodily pleasure, by contrast, is that which ordinarily comes through the sense of touch.

In an act of courage, as Aquinas has explained it, one faces the threat of physical suffering and even death. These dangers and difficulties typically cause bodily pain, without any countervailing bodily pleasure, even if one's fear can be withstood. Aquinas is unflinchingly honest about the phenomenology of this act when he says, "Now the sensible pain of the body makes one insensible to the spiritual delight of virtue. . . ." This is due in large part to the fact that we are bodily beings:

[S]ince bodily pain is more sensible [than the delight of virtue], and the sensitive apprehension is more in evidence to us, it follows that spiritual pleasure in the end of virtue fades away, so to speak, in the presence of great bodily pain.<sup>102</sup>

In ordinary circumstances, the bodily pain will feel strong enough to obscure the spiritual pleasure taken in the act, even if it is not sufficient to deter one from acting bravely. Thus, Aquinas quotes Aristotle approvingly: "it is not necessary for a brave man to delight so as to perceive his delight, but it suffices for him not to be sad."<sup>103</sup>

If bodily pain were not enough, brave acts in which one sacrifices the good of one's very life require—along with the sacrifice of a natural bodily good—the additional sacrifice of losing the necessary condition for many further virtuous actions, friendships, or relationships. This aspect of the harm and difficulty of acts of courage causes *spiritual sorrow*. The brave agent acknowledges regretfully and with pain the loss of these opportunities for spiritual good, along with the bodily pain suffered.

As a result, the balance appears to fall even further to the side of pain and sorrow, and further away from the ease and pleasure one takes in virtuous deeds. Nevertheless, if the good of virtue were not somehow recognized, despite fear and pain, as the greater and therefore more choiceworthy good,

101. In a normal act of virtue, the virtuous agent takes a natural delight in the act. This delight accompanies or is part of the activity itself—it is *not* the result of thinking about the act and congratulating oneself on one's achievement.

102. *S.T.* II-II 123, 8 ad 3. Sometimes it sounds as though the natural operation of the reason in choosing and commanding the good lacks its accompanying pleasure altogether: "The vehemence of the action or passion of one power hinders the action of another power: wherefore the pain in one's senses hinders the mind of the brave person from feeling delight in its proper operation" (*S.T.* II-II 123, 8 ad 1).

103. *N.E.* ii, 3 and iii, 9; cited by Aquinas in *S.T.* II-II 123, 8 and in a.10, ad 15 of the *QDVC*. I have left the masculine pronoun here because it is more faithful to Aristotle's original intent.

and if this recognition of the greater good did not include a deep appreciation for that end as genuinely better, no acts of courage would be chosen or performed. As Aquinas puts it, “the delight of virtue overcomes spiritual sorrow, inasmuch as a person prefers the good of virtue to the life of the body and to whatever belongs to it.”<sup>104</sup> So, “in the brave person, spiritual sorrow is overcome by the delight of virtue.”<sup>105</sup> Therefore, even if the brave person is overwhelmed by bodily pain, the balance of spiritual pleasure (delight in this act of virtue as good for its own sake) over spiritual pain (sorrow at the loss of spiritual goods made possible by continued life) favors the act of virtue. In the body of the article, Aquinas insists that although “the sensible pain of the body makes one insensible to the spiritual delight of virtue. . . . Yet the virtue of courage prevents the reason from being entirely overcome by bodily pain” so that one does not fail to act bravely or persevere in one’s act.<sup>106</sup>

Love for the greater good of virtue is still present to enable the agent’s choice, even if difficulty outweighs delight during the actual performance.<sup>107</sup> The act thus remains choiceworthy on account of the end even if the activity itself is not pleasant. Here, Aquinas is simply following Aristotle’s position.<sup>108</sup>

Even if Aquinas can get the balance of pleasure and pain to work out right (and just barely at that), however, we might still object that courage, one of the virtues on which the whole moral life hinges, seems to involve so much difficulty and so little delight.<sup>109</sup> Naming martyrdom as our exemplar act of courage only heightens this problem, for how could this act, painful as it is, have the ease and pleasure of a quasi-natural operation for anyone? This objection’s force is further exacerbated by the fact that such great endurance is surely only possible for the mature and perfected virtuous agent, the one for whom virtue has become second nature and thus the one who is *most* likely to take delight in the operations of virtue.

Aquinas takes his explanation one step further in his *Disputed Question on the Virtues in General*, article 10 (“Whether there are any infused virtues in human beings”). In this passage, he addresses the different efficient

104. *S.T.* II-II 123, 8.

105. *S.T.* II-II 123, 8 ad 3.

106. *S.T.* II-II 123, 8. My emphasis.

107. The act of courage will always be “painful by its nature” (123, 8 ad 2)—for all bodily beings (as humans are) the loss of life is a natural evil; nevertheless, says Aquinas, even though the pain is more strongly felt, the agent is not deterred from the good end he has in sight. The act itself is naturally painful, but the agent still takes delight in the *end* achieved, (123, 8 ad 2), and, as we saw earlier, it is love of the end that ultimately motivates the act.

108. *N.E.* iii.9, 1117b15.

109. “A virtue is called cardinal, meaning principal, because the other virtues are based on it much as a door swings on its hinges” (the Latin *cardo*, *cardinis* means “hinge”) *QDVC*, a.12, ad 24.

causes of virtue in human agents and explains how different causes entail differences in virtues' operations and their attendant delight, using the distinction between acquired and infused virtue.

With acquired virtue, through long practice and conditioning, we can cultivate habits of the emotional part of our nature (the sensitive appetite) as well as of the reason and will. This process of habituation yields well-trained passions that then cooperate with the commands of reason and the choices of the will. This cooperation or harmony among the internal motive principles of the human person accounts for the natural facility and pleasure typical of acts performed by the mature virtuous agent. Both Aquinas and Aristotle maintain this account of virtue's acquisition and subsequent operation. Aquinas's account diverges from Aristotle's, however, through the addition of infused virtue.

Aquinas believes that grace is an efficient cause of virtue in addition to practical training in acts of virtue, so that the moral agent can acquire a virtue from a supernatural (divine) power. The agent can thus attain in some measure a level of virtue that is beyond her own natural ability to cultivate. On Aquinas's account, these virtues are infused by grace, as opposed to being acquired by human effort and practice, in order that we might be disposed to our ultimate end "which exceeds the proportion of human nature."<sup>110</sup>

Acquired and infused virtues each work in different ways to help us stand firm in virtue when passions threaten to undermine us. This difference is a direct result of their mode of acquisition. Acquired virtues are caused by repeated acts of virtue—habituation. This means that acquiring this kind of virtue is largely within our control. The deliberate work of acting according to virtue, when this is repeated over time, serves to train (educate or redirect) the appetitive side of our nature itself, rather than merely altering the force of its effect on us with respect to action. The change reorients the appetite toward goods identified by reason, rather than the goods toward which the sensitive appetite taken by itself would tend. The resulting harmony between the parts of the soul must be reinforced just as carefully as it was cultivated. As one progresses in virtue, the presence of counterpassions gradually fades away.

Acquired virtue has the effect that the attacks of concupiscence are felt less. This effect results from the causality of acquired virtue; by the frequent acts by which one grows accustomed to virtue, one gradually grows unaccustomed to obey one's [concupiscible] passions and begins to resist them. From this it follows that one senses their attacks the less.<sup>111</sup>

110. *S.T.* II-II 51, 2 and 4; 55, 4.

111. *QDVC*, a.10, ad 14.

The glaringly obvious difficulty here for martyrdom is that it is not a repeatable act, so no habituation in actually facing the fear that comes with undergoing death is possible. The best one might do is practice acts that require great pain and sacrifice, but even these are not likely to be common enough in everyday life to afford the requisite education of the appetite, even if they come closer to the state desired.<sup>112</sup>

Infused virtues, on the other hand, are not acquired by long practice, and they are not the result of repeated actions on our part. They are given to us by grace, by which we acquire a power that is in some sense above our own (even though, strictly speaking, it is the agent herself who still acts from an intrinsic motive principle). Because we acquire these virtues *without* the training and practice that accompanies acquired virtue, our passions have not been accordingly educated, reoriented, and reshaped to respond to reason. Their direction remains unchanged. What changes, then, with the acquisition of infused virtue, is the *effect* of those passions: we still feel their pull, but their ability to weaken our resolve is undercut by the virtue. Acquiring and possessing the virtue therefore strengthens our defenses, rather than diminishing the opposing desires. “Infused virtue is of value in that, even though the passions be felt, still they in no way gain control. For infused virtue effects that we in no way obey the desires of sin.”<sup>113</sup> After receiving the virtue by infusion, we can, by repeatedly acting from it, strengthen and increase the habit in the same way we would an acquired virtue.<sup>114</sup>

Aquinas continues, in *QDVC* a. 10, ad 15, by addressing the delight and difficulty in the performance of virtuous acts:

Because infused virtue does not at once always remove the stings of the passions, as acquired virtue does, for this reason it does not in the beginning operate with much delight. This does not destroy the nature of virtue, because at times it is sufficient for virtue that it work without sadness, nor is it required that it work with pleasure, because of the severe attacks [from opposing passions] that are experienced. Thus, in the *Ethics*, the Philosopher says that it is enough that the courageous man act without sadness.<sup>115</sup>

So at ad 14 of article 10 in the above-mentioned disputed question, he notes that the effect of both acquired and infused virtues is to control

112. As an additional caveat, Pieper quotes several Church Fathers warning Christians that martyrdom is not to be sought after (*The Four Cardinal Virtues*, pp. 118–19). Aquinas says intemperance is more curable than cowardice on these grounds, as well (*S.T. II-II* 142, 3 ad 2).

113. *QDVC*, a. 10, ad 14.

114. *S.T. I-II* 51, 4 ad 3, but see also *QDVC* art. 11 *resp.*

115. The sadness mentioned here is not meant to exclude the passion of sorrow altogether (see *S.T. I-II* 59, 3), but rather to indicate regret or dissatisfaction with the good of virtue itself which was chosen.

contrary passions to the extent that an agent can prevail amidst struggle, but not avoid struggle altogether:

The passions that incline us towards evil are not completely suppressed by either acquired or infused virtue, unless it be in an extraordinary and miraculous manner. For the struggle . . . remains, even after moral virtue is had. . . . However, these passions are subdued by both acquired and infused [virtue], to the extent that a person is not violently disturbed by them.

This means that in the case of martyrdom, the exemplar act of courage, we have two possibilities. First, the practiced moral agent should be considered virtuous as long as fear of death and other passions contrary to reason are not strong enough to disrupt sight of the good at stake or perseverance in virtuous action, even if there is no delight taken in the act itself (acquired virtue).<sup>116</sup> Or, secondly, the moral agent could be struggling against passion to the point of dangerous weakness; however, with the additional help of divine grace, the agent gains the strength to overcome this weakness and persevere nonetheless (infused virtue). In both cases, we note that the moral agent remains at a point where passions conflicting with reason are still present and have some force, although in neither case will the virtuous agent be overcome by these passions or allow them enough force to override commitment to the good as determined by reason. In both cases, then, the martyr's act still looks more like a case of continence or self-control than full-fledged virtue.

It would be reasonable simply to conclude that, even in Aquinas's paradigm act of courage, we should expect to find a moral agent struggling to some extent against opposing internal motive forces. The agent is not a picture of complete integrity or harmony—at least not in this life. In conceding this, Aquinas might simply be offering a realistic picture of the moral life: even for those mature in virtue, too much good has to be sacrificed and too much good is at stake for agents to experience harmony of passion in this sort of act. It is only to be expected that the persons of mature virtue will feel this loss fully, especially since they truly appreciate what is being relinquished, even if they are not swayed from their good end. In fact, Aquinas explicitly argues elsewhere (based on Christ's own example) that sorrow is compatible with moral virtue as long as sorrow is not felt over virtue itself, but is rather directed at appropriate objects and moderated according to reason.<sup>117</sup>

116. We have mentioned earlier the problem of the impossibility of full habituation here, and so the training of the passions must remain incomplete, even if the agent has acquired some diminishment of fear.

117. *S.T. I-II* 59, 3.

Were this the end of his answer, Aquinas would evidently share Aristotle's ideal of the perfectly virtuous person—whose internal harmony and the integral working of whose powers of body and soul create delight in acts of virtue and remove internal obstacles to performing virtuous actions—while not overestimating the present achievability of that ideal.<sup>118</sup> This would hold true of both the virtues acquired by human practice *and* those infused by divine grace. While Aristotle and Aquinas can agree that delight in this case comes from the achievement of the end and not the virtuous act itself,<sup>119</sup> it is also notable that by making *perfect* beatitude our ultimate end,<sup>120</sup> Aquinas has set the bar higher than Aristotle, which gives him even more reason to deny the present achievability of perfect virtue and the pleasure that accompanies it.<sup>121</sup> Still, if this were the extent of Aquinas's argument, it would also appear that he is conceding the objection rather than answering it.

Strikingly, however, this is *not* the end of Aquinas's account. He concludes in *S.T.* II-II 123, 8, that grace also works on some occasions to effect the *pleasurable operation* of virtue.<sup>122</sup> According to Aquinas, in these cases,

the sensible pain of the body does make one insensible to the spiritual delight of virtue, *except for the copious assistance of God's grace, which has more strength to raise the soul to the Divine things in which it delights, than bodily pains have to afflict it.*<sup>123</sup>

118. See *S.T.* I-II 61, 5: "Whether the cardinal virtues are fittingly divided into social virtues, perfecting, perfect and exemplar virtues?"

119. *S.T.* II-II 123, 8; *N.E.* iii.9 1117b15.

120. *S.T.* I-II 1–5.

121. Although on the subject of the ultimate end, Aquinas makes much of Aristotle's comment at *N.E.* x.7, 1177b25–1178a where he urges us to strive to be immortal and divine insofar as we can.

122. "Joy" is numbered among the fruits of the Holy Spirit, gifts that Aquinas describes giving sweetness to acts which have reached a certain perfection, as the [fully ripened] fruit on a tree is sweet (*S.T.* I-II 70, 1); hence he quotes Ambrose as saying: "virtuous deeds . . . 'refresh those that have them, with a holy and genuine delight'." It is also an interior effect of the principle act of charity (*S.T.* II-II 28).

123. My emphasis. In *Christians Among the Virtues* (pp. 160–61), Hauerwas and Pinches also allude to this point, but defend it by conflating the virtue of gratuitous courage and the gift of the Holy Spirit that is also named fortitude. While the martyr might indeed have both virtue and gift, Aquinas credits the gift (*S.T.* II-II 139) and not the virtue with the following effect: "Yet furthermore our minds may be moved by the Holy Spirit, in order that we may attain the end of each work begun, and avoid whatever perils may threaten. This surpasses human nature: for sometimes it is not in our power to attain the end of our work or to avoid evils or dangers, since these may happen to overwhelm us in death. But the Holy Spirit works this in us, by bringing us to everlasting life, which is the end of all good deeds and the release from all perils. A certain confidence of this is infused into the mind by the Holy Spirit Who expels any fear of the contrary. It is in this sense that fortitude is reckoned a gift of the Holy Spirit."



The bodily pain and difficulty of the act, while no way minimized by Aquinas, do not finally undermine its status as an act of virtue. Unlike Aristotle, he need not concede that acts of mature virtue will, in fact, lack the characteristic accompanying pleasure. Again, however, this is emphatically not because of a *human* ability to overcome pain, difficulty, and fear, but rather because *God* can raise the martyr to a delight greater than her greatest pain. In the end, therefore, martyrdom counts as a virtue because divinely-given delight has the power to trump all other passions.<sup>124</sup> Grace-given love and divine power is at the root of this virtue and its highest act, and grace-given delight is the fruit of the martyr's faithfulness.<sup>125</sup>

Aquinas's reliance on grace is no abruptly *ad hoc* solution here. From the beginning, he defined courage as being informed by and directed toward charity, as an infused virtue.<sup>126</sup> In the first question on charity in *S. T. II-II*, Aquinas describes charity's principle and its effect:

It is evident that the act of charity surpasses the nature of the power of the will, so that, therefore, unless some form be superadded to the natural power, inclining it to the act of love, this same act would be less perfect than the natural acts and the acts of the other powers; nor would it be easy and pleasurable to perform. And this is evidently untrue, since no virtue has such a strong inclination to its act as charity has, *nor does any virtue perform its act with such great pleasure*. Therefore it most necessary that, for us to perform the act of charity, there should be in us some habitual form superadded to the natural power, inclining that power to the act of charity, *and causing it to act with ease and pleasure*.<sup>127</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that for Aquinas, the chief act of courage is not essentially about one's *own* strength to overcome evil as much as the divine gift of power to "cling to what is good" (Rom. 12:9). Further, because courage has already been directly linked to faith and charity in Aquinas's account, it is only fitting that hope in divine assistance be an essential part of this

124. Aquinas alludes to this possibility in *DQVC* a.10, ad 14: "The passions that incline us toward evil are not completely suppressed by either acquired or infused virtue, *unless it be in an extraordinary and miraculous manner*" (my emphasis).

125. One might wonder how Christ's example as the highest model and paragon of virtue (outlined in section I of this essay) fits this triumphant conclusion. After all, as Aquinas himself points out, Christ's death was one of great suffering and sorrow, even if he was perfected in all the virtues (*S. T. II-II* 59, 3: "Christ was perfect in virtue. But there was sorrow in him, for he said: 'My soul is sorrowful even unto death' [Matt. 26:38].") To this we can simply answer that there is this significant disanalogy between Christ's act and the martyr's: while they both suffer and die as a result of persecution for the truth of faith, Christ's act also necessarily involved being forsaken by God and taking the punishment for sin upon himself and the martyr's obedience does not.

126. In particular, "martyrdom is an act of charity as commanding, and of fortitude as eliciting" (*S. T. II-II* 124, 2 ad 2).

127. *S. T. II-II* 23, 2; my emphasis.

virtue as well. As Aquinas writes in *S.T. II-II 17, 1* (on the theological virtue of hope),

insofar as we hope for anything as being possible to us by means of the Divine assistance, our hope attains God Himself, on Whose help it leans [both as its efficient and final cause].

As mentioned previously in the treatise on the passions, hope is properly so-called when we hope in ourselves and our own power. This sort of hope the martyr does not have; neither her own power nor pleasure prove adequate. Rather, the martyr has what Aquinas calls in *S.T. I-II 40, 2*, “expectation”—she “awaits that which one hopes to get by another’s help.” The martyr looks not only to the future good to be attained but also to the one *by whose help* it can be achieved. Although all confidence, daring, and hope *based on our own power* are gone, they are not simply discarded. Rather, they are transformed and reinstated in the form of hope and daring *based on the power of God*. This new kind of power is made perfect in weakness, for both the martyr’s act of remaining steadfast in her end and doing it *well*—with facility and delight—are a gift from another.

Again, the fit of this last theological virtue with the exemplar act of courage reinforces the theme that the courage of the martyr is not about human power or achievement, but about proper dependence on God as a source of strength and the end to which we direct and dedicate our lives. Aquinas’s account brings us to the conclusion that courage’s highest expression is fidelity to truth, empowered by charity, and graced with the delight that only God can give.

### CONCLUSION: A NEW SOURCE OF STRENGTH, A NEW FORM OF COURAGE

On Aquinas’s account of this virtue, martyrdom fits best as its paradigm act. By this choice of paradigm, he underscores the way that the virtues of faith, hope, and charity inform courage, and the way grace infuses virtue and produces a joy that can overcome even the greatest fear and sorrow this world has to offer. Martyrdom, as the exemplar act of courage, is best suited to illustrate the features of this virtue so as to counter any mistaken conceptions of courage—those relying solely on *human* power and control—that ancient and modern ideals alike might tempt us to hold.

Aquinas’s choice of martyrdom as his paradigm introduces new dimensions of courage and redefines the standard elements of other portraits. His paradigm introduces a new understanding of power, one that resists the world’s eager use of force and offers grace-filled possibilities for human beings precisely in their vulnerability and weakness. Aquinas’s portrait of

courage supplies new dimensions of love to counteract fear, and transforms the basis of hope and daring from human heroics to a relationship of humble dependence on divine assistance. In doing so, it also opens up this virtue to an entirely new range of practitioners. The infant in the baptismal waters is a fitting picture of human frailness and trust before the gift of divine grace and power, and captures the essential point of Aquinas's baptismal transformation of courage. By modeling courage on the example of Christ's own suffering and steadfast witness, Aquinas directs our moral gaze beyond the limits of human life and power to a life in which virtue and happiness are perfected by a power that is both beyond us and yet can become our own.