

Zeitschrift:	Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie = Revue philosophique et théologique de Fribourg = Rivista filosofica e teologica di Friburgo = Review of philosophy and theology of Fribourg
Band:	59 (2012)
Heft:	1
Artikel:	Aquinas on The Graceless Unbeliever
Autor:	Anderson, Justin M.
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-760552

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 24.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Aquinas on The Graceless Unbeliever

Over the last half of century contemporary moral philosophers have become smitten with the virtues. Those thinkers once believed to be inherently hostile to a virtue focused understanding of ethics, have been revamped and represented as, if not champions of the virtuous life, at least worthy protagonists of such a life. At first glance, Thomas Aquinas seems to be such a thinker. Long thought to have been a champion of natural law and Christian revelation, of late Aquinas has been refit for the early 21st century. This is a curious thing, and certainly not one I wish to debate or question here. The Thomistic scholarship of the last 30 years has revealed a side of Thomas which always seemed to escape our view. Perhaps due to Aquinas's theology being reflected in his conception of the virtues, of late some have taken a particular interest in his understanding of, what has become called, the issue of «pagan virtue». ¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, T.H. Irwin, Bonnie Kent, Brian Shanley, and Thomas Osborne among others have all sounded off on the topic.² In this paper I will address yet another side of Aquinas which cast doubts on the optimism³ often presented by the

¹ Herein, I consider the phrase «pagan virtue» to be synonymous with «unbeliever's virtue». It is immediately apparent that Thomas himself rarely refers directly to «pagan virtue». Nevertheless, following suite with his time, Thomas does address the story of Gregory the Great's efficacious prayers for the pagan Emperor Trajan. It was customary for scholars to comment on this story while supplying the understanding of how and why this was or was not the case. Cf. (I *Super Sent.* d. 43, q. 2, a. 2, ad. 5); (IV *Super Sent.* d. 45, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 1, ad. 5); (*De Veritate* q. 6, a. 6, ad sc. 4); (*STh IIIa*, suppl., q. 71, a. 5, ad. 5). For studies on this legend, cf. WHATLEY, Gordon: *The Uses of Hagiography. The Legend of Pope Gregory and the Emporer Trajan in the Middle Ages*, in: Viator 15 (1984) 25–63; COLISH, Marcia: *The Virtuous Pagan. Dante and the Christian Tradition*, in: CAFERRO, William/FISHER, Duncan (eds.): *The Unbounded Community: Papers in Christian Ecumenism in Honor of Jaroslav Pelikan*. New York, NY: Garland Publishing 1996, 43–89.

² Cf. MACINTYRE, Alasdair: *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988. KENT, Bonnie: *Moral Provincialism*, in: *Religious Studies* 30 (1994) 269–285. IRWIN, T.H.: *Splendid Vices: Augustine For and Against Pagan Virtue*, in: *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8 (1999) 105–127. SHANLEY, Brian: *Aquinas on Pagan Virtue*, in: *The Thomist* 63 (1999) 553–577. OSBORNE, Thomas: *The Augustinianism of Thomas Aquinas's Moral Theory*, in: *The Thomist* 67 (2003) 279–305. OSBORNE, Thomas: *Perfect and Imperfect Virtues in Aquinas*, in: *The Thomist* 71 (2007) 39–64.

³ While terms like optimistic and pessimistic are relative, I do not wish to compare herein Aquinas to his contemporaries. For on such a comparison it very well maybe the fact he is more optimistic. Instead, I simply intend to argue that there are other considerations to his thought which render him more pessimistic than he has been presented in the recently literature on this question. Nor is this kind of endeavor the same thing as «bracketing» Aquinas's theological context. There is a difference between the kind of virtue discussed in Aquinas's consideration of pagan virtue and the virtue a theologically bracketing

recent literature's presentation of Aquinas's understanding of «the virtuous pagan». What is presented in contemporary scholarship on this issue is correct, but its incompleteness issues from its omission of three pessimistic factors concerning Thomas's conception of the moral life. These factors issue from a full appreciation of the effects of original sin in the life of the unbeliever.

The essay is divided into two major sections. The first section ask questions, the answers to which will constitute the standard account of Aquinas's view of pagan virtue. The second section argues that this standard account fails by omitting aspects like Aquinas's variations in moral psychology of the human agent and the negative effects of a postlapsarian moral psychology regarding the unbeliever's perseverance in a virtuous life.

Who is the virtuous pagan for Thomas, and what are his views about this individual and his acts? The answer to these questions, especially the second, will help distill three essential conditions which must be present for any particular pagan act to count as issuing from an authentic virtue. These conditions are all either explicit or implicit in the standard account. Finally, I close my examination of the standard account by inquiring into *why* pagan virtue must always be considered with an asterisk: *why* it can never be virtue itself. Taking the *who*, *what*, and *why* together constitutes my reading of the standard account. The second section then turns to considerations of the unbeliever's perseverance in a virtuous life given the postlapsarian human condition. These considerations yield a more clairvoyant perspective of the necessary pessimism Aquinas took in regard to the overall life of the virtuous pagan. Finally, I draw the conclusion that if Aquinas has reasons to be optimistic about the virtuous life of the unbeliever – and I think he does – it is not on account of his conception of virtue, but instead is due to his understanding of God's gifts. Consequently, I conclude, it makes little sense to discuss Thomas Aquinas's conception of pagan virtue as a purely philosophical issue.

SECTION I: THE STANDARD ACCOUNT

With virtues, but without grace

The later writings of Aquinas have at least two explicit remarks about the impossibility of anything to exist utterly independent from God.⁴ Whether

Thomist may wish to champion. I do not wish to suggest they are the same thing. Instead, I simply wish to make mention of what kind of virtue Aquinas himself foresaw as possible without grace. This requires, in some sense, taking him on his own theological terms. Indeed, the very term «pagan virtue» or even Thomas's own *virtutes secundum quid*, by definition, can be understood to implicate his theological context.

⁴ (*STh IaIIae* 109, 1, c); (*Super Ioannem* XV, lect. 1). For an insightful article of Thomas's commentary on this passage of St. John's Gospel and his ontological link the issue of

nature or grace, all is ultimately from God without rival. Part of the difficulty, therefore, of sorting through issues like nature and grace in Aquinas is the consequential difficulty of knowing who precisely the «pagan» of «pagan virtue» might be. Aquinas's story of creation as a Word-dependent reality and his account of the infused virtues must both be rejected. However, the confusion of all good things, even those possessed by the pagans, does raise the question, «On such a theological understanding, who could be accounted as “without grace” for Thomas?» Who is his pagan?

What I have been calling «pagan» is usually rendered in the Latin as *infidelis*. Pagan, here, denotes «unbeliever». However, the unbelief of this pagan is divided into two species, both deprived of the gift of faith.⁵

«I respond to that saying that “unbelief” may be taken in two ways: in one way, according to pure negation, as a man is called an “unbeliever” merely from the fact that he does not have faith. In another way, one can understand “unbelief” as opposition to faith, namely because someone refuses to hear the faith, or disdains it, according to Isaiah 53:1, “Who has believed our report?” And it is this that completes the notion of unbelief...»⁶

This, then, is the pagan for Aquinas: the one who, while being a creature of God and constantly sustained in his existence by God, nevertheless, does not have faith, for whatever reason, in Jesus Christ. The most «complete» pagan is the unbeliever who knows of Christ, understands his offer of salvation, and yet still rejects him. In these, averred Aquinas the theologian, there can still be authentic virtue.

existence: MANSISI, Guy: «Without Me You Can Do Nothing»: *St. Thomas with and without St. Augustine on John 15:5*, in: DUAPHINAIS, Michael/DAVID, Barry/LEVERING, Matthew (eds.): *Aquinas the Augustinian*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press (2007) 159–180.

5 It should be noted that here Aquinas does not define the «pagan» of «pagan virtue» according to the gift of charity, but the gift of faith. This leaves a conceptual space to discuss the moral goodness of the baptized Christian who is living without charity, but with an unformed habit of faith or hope. I follow much of the recent literature in leaving this agent aside.

6 (*STh IIaIIae q. 10, 1, c.*) Thomas continued to remark in article 5 of the same question that there are different species of unbelief: that of the pagan (rejecting the faith before accepting it), the Jew (rejecting the faith after accepting the figure of truth), or the heretic (rejecting the faith in the full manifestation of truth). Following this it is possible, then, to distinguish between non-believer (the first person) and unbeliever (the second person). I do not pursue this distinction further however.

All English language citations from Thomas Aquinas are my translation from the Latin quotations. For the Latin version used cf. AQUINATIS, Sancti Thomae: *Summae theologiae (Opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita 4-12)*. Romae: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide 1888–1906.

The Essential Texts & the Necessary Conditions for Pagan Virtue

The *Summa Theologiae* is the place to find Thomas's more mature and complete answer regarding various issues. Most contemporary authors discussing Aquinas's notion of «pagan virtue» largely limit themselves to this work, and it must be said without too much violation of his understanding.

The question of pagan virtue emerges in various places, but most commentators resort to at least three: twice in the *Prima Secundae*, and again once in the *Secunda Secundae*.⁷

In Question 63 of the *Prima Secundae* Thomas examined the causes of virtue: nature, habituation, and infusion by God.⁸ His final answer is predictable: virtues can be had through habituation, but these virtues are not the ones which move us toward the good as defined by the divine rule, but only that good defined by human reason. Hence, the virtuous pagan can be considered virtuous, but that virtue will always fall short of the perfection of virtue. The emphasis, therefore, in this particular article is on the measure of goodness taken into account when judging some act to issue from a virtue or not.

The second standard reference is made to Thomas's *Prima Secundae* treatment of the connection of virtues.⁹ In his second article he introduces for the first time the difference between «perfect virtues» (*virtutes perfectae*) and «imperfect virtues» (*virtutes imperfectae*).¹⁰ As both Shanley and Osborne indicate one must be careful of how this imperfect virtue is used, for Aquinas employs the phrase in different senses. Based on the reasoning of (IaIIae q. 63, a. 2) it is possible to speak of an imperfect virtue as any virtue which fails to direct the agent towards his supernatural destiny. However, Question 65's mention of imperfect virtue demonstrates that Aquinas also employs the concept to describe the difference between a

⁷ Others, such as Thomas Osborne, have also addressed the issue via Aquinas's passage at (*STh IIaIIae* q. 10, a. 4). Cf. OSBORNE, T.: *The Augustinianism of Thomas Aquinas's Moral Theory*, 295sq. I have ignored this passage for the present, but not completely. Most properly, like the passage of the *Super Sententia*, this article inquires about acts, not virtuous habits. The two articles differ in the response Aquinas gives. The earlier *Super Sententia* treatment reveals, albeit in compact form, his metaphysics of goodness. The *Summa Theologiae* passage alludes to this same treatment, but also treats of it more fully in another place rendering (*STh IIaIIae* q. 10, a. 4) mostly about the act and only alluding to things more clearly stated in other places.

⁸ (*STh IaIIae*, q. 63, a. 2).

⁹ (*STh IaIIae*, q. 65, a. 2).

¹⁰ As Lottin pointed out in his work on the history of the topic, this distinction between perfect and imperfect virtues seems to have been fairly new at Thomas's time. All indications show that it was first introduced by Phillip the Chancellor, the teacher of Albert the Great. cf. LOTTIN, Odon: *Les Vertus Morales Acquise : Sont-elles de vraies vertus? La réponse des théologiens de Pierre Abélard à saint Thomas d'Aquin*, in: *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 20 (1953) 13–39.

natural virtue and an acquired virtue. It can also be employed to highlight the difference between imperfect acquired virtue and perfect acquired virtue.¹¹ One might consider the perfect virtues to be virtues *simpliciter* and only refer to the virtues infused by God, while the imperfect virtues are considered virtues *secundum quid* and can refer to either virtues obtained by nature or habituation. Concerning this sense of imperfect virtues, Aquinas points to the principle difference being the presence of charity, that God-given principle which inclines the agent not only to *some* end, but to his ultimate end.¹²

Aquinas had long held, that charity is such a difference maker in the life of the moral agent by inclining him to his ultimate end. While pagan virtue is true or authentic virtue, it is not, nor can it ever be, perfect virtue. Virtue which is alone given by God and with the infusion of charity can be called perfect virtue without qualification. The presence of this virtue of charity is directly related to the orientation towards the ultimate end. It is that supernatural habit which inclines the agent to his ultimate end, the vision of God. Therefore, without this divine gift one is only inclined, at best, by the natural or acquired moral virtues to some particular end. Therefore, in the human agent devoid of the inclination provided by charity, it may occur that the human agent is at the mercy of his moral habits (virtuous or not). He has only the help of the acquired virtue of justice to help him discern between these sometimes varying and rival inclinations arising from the concupiscent and irascible part of the soul. The charity-endowed agent, on the other hand, is guided by a good inclination towards his ultimate, supernatural end.

Witnessing Thomas's answer accruing such a debt to the presence of the virtue of charity, it should come as no surprise that we find his final treatment of pagan virtue during his *Secunda Secundae* exposition on charity. The treatment constitutes his most developed. While the treatment in the *Prima Secundae* rendered a clearer understanding about why pagan virtue is «imperfect virtue», Aquinas's treatment in the *Secunda Secundae* explains, in a fuller way, what appeared as merely an aspect in earlier discussions: how the «pagan end» can be incorporated into the ultimate end of each and every human agent. Aquinas had shown pagan virtue to be imperfect. According to 13th century standards, that was the easy part. Now he needed to successfully argue how pagan virtue can still be true and

¹¹ See both Aquinas's discussion in (*Quaestiones Disputatae de Virtutibus* q. 5, a. 2, c.) as well as Thomas Osborne's helpful classification, which includes comments on the same classification throughout the Thomistic tradition. OSBORNE, T.: *Perfect and Imperfect Virtues*, 51sq. See also William Mattison III's contesting Osborne's interpretation concerning the necessity of charity for perfect acquired virtue. Cf. MATTISON, W.C.: *Thomas's Categorizations of Virtue: Historical Background and Contemporary Significance*, in: *The Thomist* 74 (2010) 189–235, here 234sq.

¹² (*STh IaIIae* q.65, a.2, c.)

authentic virtue: how the pursuit of pagan ends can be reconciled with the last and ultimate end of man.¹³

Since every virtue is ordered to a good and such a good has the nature of an end, then to speak of virtue one must look to its end. Thomas lays out a taxonomy of various kinds of virtue. His principle of division in this taxonomy is that nothing can be accounted «good» unless either it is the good end itself or it is related to that good end. By this dividing principle, he can arrange every human end into an order aimed at the ultimate end.

«Therefore, just as the end is twofold, one ultimate and the other proximate, so too is the good twofold, indeed one ultimate and the other proximate and particular.»¹⁴

After describing this twofold end, Thomas places on center stage the relationship for which his principle of goodness allows.

«However, man's secondary and, as it were, particular good can be twofold: one is truly good, because, as it is in itself, it is ordainable to the principal good, which is the ultimate end. The other, however, is an apparent and not true good, because it leads us away from the final good.»¹⁵

This end which «can be directed to the principle good» becomes a crucial condition for the unbeliever's authentic virtue. Aquinas commented on what it means to have an end that is ordainable to the ultimate end performed by an unbeliever.¹⁶ It is the actions of an unbeliever qua unbeliever that are always sinful. If the atheistic, secular humanist clothes the poor in order to oppose the faith by means of demonstrating that one need not be a believer to perform such actions, then this is an action by an unbeliever qua unbeliever.¹⁷ Nevertheless, if that same person performs the same action of clothing the poor without any reference to their personal unbelief, but instead from genuine concern for the needy around them, then

¹³ Again, Thomas had already foreseen and accomplished this in abbreviated form in his *Super Sententia*. Handling the objection that because faith directs us to the end there can be no good act without faith, Thomas replied: «Ad secundum dicendum, quod fides dirigit intentionem in finem ultimum; sed ratio naturalis vel prudentia potest dirigere in aliquem finem proximum: et quia ille finis proximus est ordinabilis in finem ultimum, etiamsi actu non ordinetur, ideo in infidelibus, quorum actus per vim rationis in talem finem diriguntur, possunt aliqui actus esse boni, sed deficientes a perfecta bonitate, secundum quam actus est meritorius.» (II *Sent.* d. 41, q. 1, a. 2, ad. 2) A very similar defense of authentic pagan virtue appears in Thomas's fifth response as well, which argues quite commonsensical that pagans, «...non semper ex infidelitatis errore finem sibi praestitunt, sed aliquando ex vero et recto iudicio rationis...» (II *Sent.* d. 41, q. 1, a. 2, ad. 5).

¹⁴ (STh IIa 23 q.23, a.7, c.).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Cf. Osborne's analysis of this question. OSBORNE, Thomas: *The Threefold Referral of Acts to the Ultimate End in Thomas Aquinas and His Commentators*, in: *Angelicum* 85 (2008) 715–736.

this action may be considered good and that agent virtuous. For, removing the aspect of referring it to an end of unbelief, it now becomes an action at least potentially ordainable to the ultimate, universal and principle good. This action can then be considered, at least, «generically good».

In the end, the standard account correctly concludes that while every action of the unbeliever is not virtuous, pagan virtue itself is authentic yet always imperfect. At this point, I wish to make explicit that which is inchoate in Aquinas's understanding, thereby doing a small part to also advance the standard account. We can abstract from Aquinas's later and clearer statements *three necessary conditions* which must be present if any pagan act is to be counted as virtuous. These conditions are as follows. First, while an act need not be ordered to the ultimate end, it cannot be disordered according to that end. Second, while the virtuous act need not issue from charity, that same act must, nevertheless, still issue from some good principle in the unbeliever. Third, the virtuous act must follow right reason.

The first condition expresses the idea that the act must at least be «order-able» to the ultimate end.¹⁸ This condition is the one most popularly pointed to by the standard account authors I have mentioned above. The other two conditions for true pagan virtue are present in that account more implicitly. The second Thomistic condition posits more than just the thesis that every good act of a pagan must issue from a virtue. If it only argued that, then it could hardly be counted as a condition for the authentic virtue of that unbeliever. The argument would be circular. Instead, the second condition indicates that any good action must issue from something that is good in at least one of the basic ways we can speak of perfection. Indeed, this is part of the reason why any discussion on pagan virtue requires a knowledge of the various ways Aquinas assents to calling something good.¹⁹ The act of the pagan must be capable of being judged as good against at least one of the measures of goodness. Hence, its goodness can come from the good of nature (not completely absent from the unbeliever), or from unformed faith, or from some other good remaining in the unbeliever. Concerning the third condition, it is interesting to note that Aquinas does not affirm that it must conform itself to «prudence», but to «right reason.» This is the case because the unbeliever's authentic posses-

¹⁸ Of the many authors who have written on pagan virtue in Thomas Aquinas I have not found any citation to his treatment of it in his *Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Titum* (1:15). It gives a worthy account of the first of the conditions. Cf. (*Super Epistolam ad Titum* c.1, lect. 4).

¹⁹ (*STh IaIIae* q.18, a. 4).

sion of the virtue of prudence is precisely what is in question. I will return to this point below.²⁰

Unbelievers, then, can be said to have imperfect, true virtue only after considering their virtuous acts in the light of these three necessary conditions. The standard account encompasses not only what Aquinas's answer was, but also gives some of his reasoning behind this willingness to call the actions of unbelievers virtuous.

SECTION II: WHY THIS STANDARD ACCOUNT IS INSUFFICIENT

The Corrupted Natural Sources of Pagan Virtue

I return to the first reply Aquinas made in the *Secunda Secundae* discussed above.

«There can be, however, another charity lacking act, not according to its lack of charity, but according to it having some other gift of God, either faith, or hope, or even his natural good, which is not completely taken away by sin, as stated above. And according to this, an act of someone without charity can indeed be generically good, but not perfectly good, because the due ordination to the ultimate end is missing.»²¹

I have dealt at length concerning the difference in end between the unbeliever's virtue and that of the believer. This issue of «end ordainability» was the first condition for any single pagan act to count as an act of true virtue. It is both the most explicit as well as the most frequently debated condition among contemporary readers of Aquinas. Nevertheless, when discussing the sources of that pagan act, I wish to turn toward considerations surrounding the second condition, which states that pagan virtue must have its source in some good of nature.²² When mentioning this condition, Aquinas specified the theological virtues of faith and hope (present, though, without charity) can suffice for this. Nevertheless, even if these are lacking in the agent, and I will presume for the moment that they are, then he can still derive his source of goodness from some good of nature.²³ Thomas Osborne points us to one such passage where the second

²⁰ To consider the role of pagan, acquired prudence and its normative quality would involve us in something similar to the intriguing question of whether an errant conscience binds its possessors.

²¹ (*STh IIaIIae* q.23, a.7, ad.1). The Leonine edition point the reader to (*STh IIaIIae* q. 10, a. 4) and (*STh IaIIae*, q. 85, a. 2) regarding Aquinas's reference.

²² Thomas consistently mentions this condition in his treatment of pagan virtue in other places. Cf. (*II Sent.* d.41, q.1, a.2, c.); (*STh IaIIae* q.63, a.2, ad.3); (*Super Epistolam ad Titum* c.1, lect. 4).

²³ Indeed, I think it right to assume that these unformed theological virtues are missing. For if we are to investigate «pagan virtue» in Aquinas we want to take it as «pagan» as possible. The one with unformed faith (and hope) can easily be understood to be a believer who

condition is implied. Asking a very similar question of whether every act of the pagan is sin, Aquinas responded.

«I respond to that saying that, as stated above, mortal sin takes away ingratiating grace, but does not wholly corrupt the good of nature. Since, then, unbelief would be a mortal sin, unbelievers indeed lack grace. Nevertheless, some good of nature remains in them. From this it is evident that unbelievers cannot do good works which are from grace, namely meritorious works. Nevertheless, they can, to a certain extent, do those good works for which the good of nature suffices.»²⁴

The standard account begins to unravel however when we inquire what constitutes these goods of nature on which the unbeliever can found his virtue, and it continues to unravel when we identify to what extent these goods suffice as that needed foundation.

Aquinas was specific about what kinds of constitutive capacities of man can be rightly termed «goods of human nature». In the *Prima Secundae* he identified three classes.²⁵ The first class is the principles of which nature is constituted and the properties that come from these principles. I take this class to include the powers of reason and will. A second class of goods of nature includes the natural light of reason²⁶ and the natural inclination towards virtue. The third class is the original justice man and woman had prior to their postlapsarian state. I will focus especially on the second class of goods of nature.

The light of natural reason is that intellectual light belonging naturally to man by which he discerns intellectually knowable things, whether they fall into the domain of the speculative or the practical intellect.²⁷ Aquinas was at pains to mention that this light, which we have naturally, is still a participation in the uncreated, Divine Light.²⁸ As indicated in the famed article on the natural law in the *Prima Secundae*, this same light is that by which we discern between good and evil and, depending on one's reading of that text, this discerning is what pertains (*pertinet*) to the natural law.²⁹ Hence, there is already a very explicit link between the natural law and what happens by the means of the light of natural reason as discerning

has turned from the life of grace. It should be noted that Aquinas must have had a vast variety of «pagans» in mind.

²⁴ (*STh IIaIIae* q. 10, a. 4, c.). Referencing Aquinas «as stated above», the editors of the Leonine edition indicate (*STh IaIIae*, q. 85, a 2, 4).

²⁵ (*STh IaIIae* q. 85, a. 1, c.).

²⁶ The natural light of reason I include in the second class without Aquinas mentioning it explicitly in this passage of the *Prima Secundae*. He would later mention it in the *Secunda Secundae*. Cf. (*STh IIaIIae* q. 110, a. 4, ad. 2). I take its omission in the prior passage due to its not being effected by the Fall of Adam and Eve, which is the purpose of Aquinas's classifications in Question 85 of the *Prima Secundae*.

²⁷ (*STh Ia* q. 84, a. 5, c.).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ (*STh IaIIae* q. 91, a. 2).

practical matters. Indeed, in responding to an objection in (IIaIIae q. 10), Aquinas explained that while faith directs the intention to the supernatural, ultimate end, «...the light of natural reason can direct the intention with respect to a certain connatural good».³⁰ The light of natural reason constitutes at least one of the goods of nature an unbeliever can depend on to become a virtuous agent.

Just as the light of natural reason is a good of nature belonging to man's reason, there exists another good of nature that belongs to his will. The natural inclination to virtue is another good of nature that the unbeliever might depend on to perform authentically virtuous acts.³¹ Indeed, by definition of a human act, it is required that both knowledge and an act of the will to be present.³² If the second condition for pagan virtue is to be met, one might conclude that the unbeliever needs both of these goods of nature to operate virtuously, even if that virtue will only be virtue *secundum quid*. Nevertheless, here the dependability of the natural inclination to virtue must come into question.

On the account I have so far presented, the unbeliever's chances of living a life of virtue – albeit qualified virtue – seem realistically positive. This is some of the reasoning behind the optimism presented in recent scholarship. Nevertheless, while these accounts are both interesting and compelling, their general sin of omission lies in what they do not present.

The reality of sin and of a corrupted human nature is, although not always highlighted in contemporary discussions, something Aquinas took seriously. It may at first seem strange to speak of the categories of mortal and venial sin when addressing the moral life of an unbeliever. Nevertheless, as Brian Shanley indicates, Thomas himself held that mortal sin can refer to an act which is either against the love of God or against the love of neighbor.³³ In this latter sense, we may take serious sin to apply to the unbeliever's moral life as it denotes a serious, inordinate act regarding even that good which can be known by natural, unaided reason.³⁴

Aquinas's full appreciation of the effects of sin on man's nature and character is something particularly missing in the contemporary

³⁰ (*STh* IIaIIae q. 110, a. 4, ad. 2). That the natural light of reason pertains to the good of nature, cf. (II *Super Sent.* d. 28, a. 4, c.) and (III *SCG* c. 162, n. 8). There are many texts referring to the light of natural reason as distinguished from the light of grace and its effects. For example, see (*STh* IaIIae q. 110, a. 3, c.). Cf. (*Super Ioannem* I, lect. 5) where Aquinas comments that all benefit from the natural light of reason.

³¹ As previously pointed out, this is explicitly mentioned as a good of nature. Cf. (*STh* IaIIae q. 85, a. 1, c.).

³² (*STh* IaIIae q. 1, a. 1, c.).

³³ Cf., SHANLEY, B.: *Pagan Virtue*, 557sq. Shanley cites (*STh* IaIIae q. 88, a. 2).

³⁴ Cf. «...properly speaking, sin denotes an inordinate act; even as an act of virtue is an ordinary and due act...» and «...the vice of a thing seems to consist in its not being disposed in a way befitting its nature: hence Augustine says (*De Lib. Arb.* iii): "Whatever is lacking for a thing's natural perfection may be called a vice."» (*STh* IaIIae q. 71, a. 1, s.c.).

anglophone discussion of pagan virtue.³⁵ There are three factors that contribute to Aquinas's answer being less optimistic than is currently presented: the indefinite diminution of man's natural inclination to virtue, the impossibility of persevering long in a state of virtue without grace, and the inability to remove one's serious sins without grace.

In six articles of the *Prima Secundae*, Aquinas delineated carefully between what remains intact, what is diminished, and what is destroyed by human sin.³⁶ Because we wish to consider the virtuous pagan in the best state possible, I will limit, for the time, our consideration to the corrupting effects of original sin, to which every man, woman, and child are subject.³⁷ Only later will I return to consider actual sins added to this original stain.

Sin leaves the body, soul, and the powers of sense, reason, and will all untouched in their natural abilities. We find in several places Aquinas denying that the light of natural reason is effected by sin in itself. On the other hand, the natural inclination to virtue is not completely destroyed by sin.³⁸ Nevertheless, it is diminished by sin.

«But the second good of nature, namely the natural inclination to virtue, is diminished by sin.»³⁹

For the unbeliever to be virtuous he must find his virtue in some good of nature. Thus, determining to what extent Aquinas understood the effects of sin infecting the natural inclination to virtue will give us a better idea of to what extent the virtuous unbeliever is not only a theoretical possibility, but a realistic one too.

The first problem arises in understanding precisely what the natural inclination to virtue is. Shanley mentions that he followed T.C. O'Brien's analysis on the effects of sin.⁴⁰ Perhaps at first surprisingly, O'Brien argues that the natural inclination to virtue is not a distinct reality from the very

³⁵ Both Osborne and Shanley have noted the corrupting influence of sin, but without drawing out the ramifications.

³⁶ (*STh IaIIae* q. 85).

³⁷ (*STh IaIIae* q. 82, a. 4). It is on account of original sin, and this is crucial, that Aquinas understands every human agent to be born in a state of sin.

³⁸ Aquinas discusses this in at least two works dated towards the end of his life. Cf. (*STh IIaIIae* q. 15, a.1, c.) and (*Super Romanos*, I, lect. 15, n. 216). In both places he identifies the turbulence sin causes the operation of the light of natural reason is only accidentally. That is, it is on account of the lower powers «which the human intellect needs in order to understand.» Cf. (*STh IaIIae* q. 82, a. 4).

³⁹ (*STh IaIIae* q. 85, a. 1, c.).

⁴⁰ SHANLEY, B.: *Aquinas on Pagan Virtue*, 577, n. 8. O'Brien was both translator and commentator on this section of the *Summa Theologiae* for the 1962 translation issued by the English Province of the Dominicans. This particular volume (v. 26) contains nine separate appendices on the topic of original sin. Most of my comments are made on the positions O'Brien holds both in his translation and in the ninth appendix. Cf. O'BRIEN, T.C./GILBY, Thomas (eds.): *Original Sin* (1a2æ. 81-85) (= *Summa Theologiae* 26). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006. 154-161.

powers of the rational soul.⁴¹ On this reading, it is of little wonder why, when Aquinas argues that the powers of the rational soul are not diminished by sin, that O'Brien holds that the inclination towards virtue also remains intact, a proposition that at first seems to be directly contrary to Aquinas's statements on the inclination being effected by sin and the natural powers of the soul not. While Aquinas did argue that the powers of the rational soul are untouched by original sin, on what grounds does O'Brien argue that the powers ought not be understood as a separate reality from the inclination itself? O'Brien is succinct here.

«Man is rational by reason of his essential principles, not by something added to them. So the inclination to virtue is not a quality additional to the kind of thing a man is. [...] Nature in its essential principles and in its bent to virtue, then, is not two distinct realities.»⁴²

However, unless this treatment is supplemented, then its linking of the natural inclination to virtue with the rational powers results in a rather positive view of what remains intact after sin regarding the unbeliever's natural inclination towards virtue. Shanley justifiably takes these statements of O'Brien to their natural conclusion in his view of the probability of the unbeliever's virtue.

Yet, here I must pause. For while O'Brien and Shanley articulate what the natural inclination to virtue is, and how it functions prior to actual sin, it seems Aquinas (and O'Brien) give more weight to its disordered state in a postlapsarian agent. Original sin is formally an absence of original justice.⁴³ Even prior to actual sin, Aquinas envisioned the natural capacities of the postlapsarian agent being left to follow their own proper natural inclinations according to the strength in each.

«To the first it must be said that, through the bond of original justice having been dissolved, under which all the powers of the soul were held together in a certain order, each and every power of the soul tends to its own proper movement, and the stronger it is the more vehemently [vehementius] it does so.»⁴⁴

These powers follow their own proper movements with no overall orientation which would have both directed man to virtue's end as well as bound them all together. These powers follow their own individual inclinations, because the principle which united them is absent.⁴⁵ The differences between agents prior to actual sin depend, then, on the natural temperaments of various postlapsarian human beings. Hence, the hope of post-

⁴¹ O'BRIEN, T.C.: *Original Sin*, 156.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ (*STh IaIIae* q. 82, a. 3, c.).

⁴⁴ (*STh IaIIae* q. 82, a. 4, ad. 1).

⁴⁵ (*De Veritate*, q. 25, a. 6, c.).

lapsarian man, even before actual sin effects him, depends on his lot of natural virtue.⁴⁶ Yet, were this an innocuous, neutral pull on the postlapsarian agent, then perhaps we could immediately speak about the benefits of acquired virtue in uniting these natural endowments through the guidance of prudence. At times in the writings of Aquinas, it certainly seems the proper, impetuous sensible powers' movements are yet innocuous. But at other times in his writings he avers that these impetuositys of sensitive powers are not so innocuous. Alluding to St. Paul's letter to the Romans, Aquinas was prone to speak of these lower movements as the rebellion of the flesh against the spirit (*rebellio carnis ad spiritum*).⁴⁷ By this rebellion of his lower powers, the postlapsarian agent is drawn downwards as he is pulled and pushed by opposing tendencies.

«Just as when the harmony of a mixed body is dissolved, the elements tend in contrary directions, and similarly, when the harmony of original justice is dissolved, the various powers of the soul are carried in different ways.»⁴⁸

Hence, what was once the natural inclination to virtue, having been affectively detached from virtue's end by the loss of original justice, becomes a natural condition in which, at best, the postlapsarian agent finds his reason at war with his sensitive appetites.

Nor can this rebellion of the passions be easily quelled. For while his natural light of reason itself is not diminished by sin, Aquinas makes it clear that his reason can easily be dimmed by these same sensitive appetites.⁴⁹ The negative effect of concupiscence on the agent's reason is ignorance, «especially in practical matters».⁵⁰ The agent's sensitive appetites are in rebellion, and his reason is consequentially susceptible to ignorance and difficulty in finding the truth. Compounding this situation is his teaching that the will is also weakened in this rebellion. It is not capable of accomplishing the good even incumbent on him in relation to his connatural ends.⁵¹ For a summary, we have only to look to Aquinas's *Compendium Theologiae*.

⁴⁶ (*STh IaIIae* q. 61, a. 1). This also helps explain why, without the acquired virtue of prudence, man's natural virtues remain untied.

⁴⁷ Cf. (*STh IaIIae*, q. 109, a. 10, ad.3); (*STh IIaIIae* q. 164, a. 1, c.); (*STh IIIa* q. 27, a. 3, arg. 1); (*De Malo* IV, a. 2, ad. 7; a.6, ad. 4; XV, a. 2 ad 7, 8); (*De Virtutibus* I, a. 4, ad. 7, 8); (*Comp. Theo.* c. 192). I am grateful to Andrea Robiglio for drawing my attention to a similar point made by Norman Kretzman on the issue of the supposed Pauline case of akrasia. Cf. KRETZMAN, Norman: *Warring Against the Law of My Mind: Aquinas on Romans 7*, in: MORRIS, Thomas V. (ed.): *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press 1988. 172–195, especially 184sq.

⁴⁸ (*STh IaIIae* q. 82, a. 2, ad. 2). Cf. (*Super Epist. ad Rom.* c. 4, lect. 1.).

⁴⁹ (*STh IaIIae* q. 85, a. 3).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ (*STh IaIIae* q. 109, a. 1, 2).

«Therefore, because of the stated dictum the ordered integrity was completely caused by the subjection of the human will to God. Correspondingly, when the human will was removed from subjection to God, that perfect subjection of the lower powers to reason and of the body to the soul perished. This being the case, it is a consequence that man would have experienced in his lower, sensitive appetite the inordinate movements of concupiscence, anger, and all the other passions. These movements no longer followed the order of reason but greatly rebelled against it, both frequently clouding it and, in a way, disturbing it. This is that rebellion of the flesh against the spirit of which Scripture speaks.»⁵²

Therefore, one must concur with O'Brien's and Shanley's understanding of what the natural inclination to virtue is, and what remains of that natural inclination in a postlapsarian state. However, both before actual sin and after its advent, it seems Aquinas saw that inclination as a far less positive force in the unbeliever's moral life. Once original justice is lost, God as man's proper end is removed. Once man's proper end is removed, the postlapsarian agent is left to his own natural inclinations, his own natural virtues. These postlapsarian, natural inclinations of the various powers are left to their own with all their own impetuosity. All this takes place even prior to rationality and actual sin. The postlapsarian unbeliever stands in an unreliable position even without having committed (or having been affected negatively by) a single actual sin. We might now take these factors into account, for once actual sin is accounted for the situation becomes doubly capricious.

With the advent of actual sin what was once the natural inclination to virtue easily becomes habituated in an alternative direction. Consideration of the actual sin into postlapsarian agent introduces the second pessimistic thought. While man's natural inclination towards virtue can never be destroyed, it can be infinitely diminished (*diminui in infinitum*) by actual sin. As sin is the opposite of virtuous acts, an alteration in the inclination towards virtue's opposite would necessarily mean a change in the inclination towards virtue. Habituation works both ways in the human agent. Just as acts of virtue habituate an agent towards future virtuous acts, so too do sins incline the agent towards future sinful acts.⁵³ Therefore, the root of

⁵² «Quia igitur status predicti tam ordinata integritas tota causabatur ex subiectione humane voluntatis ad Deum, ut dictum est, consequens fuit ut subducta humana voluntate a subiectione divina, deperiret illa perfetta subiectio inferiorum virium ad rationem et corporis ad animam: unde consecutum est ut homo sentiret in inferiori appetitu sensibili concupiscentie et ire et ceterarum passionum inordinatos motus, non secundum ordinem ratio sed magis ei repugnantes, et eam plerumque obnubilantes et quasi pertrahentes. Et hec est pugna carnis ad spiritum de qua Scriptura loquitur.» (*CompTh.* c. 192). The Marietti edition used the phrase «et quasi perturbantes», a lectio facilior that no longer has reason to be maintained. Certainly, the Leonine edition, «et quasi pertrahentes», only adds credence to my point.

⁵³ (*STh IaIIae* q. 85, a. 1, c.).

the naturally good inclination towards virtue is never destroyed, but its path towards fulfillment of that natural inclination can be made *ever-increasingly* more difficult by the placing of obstacles in its way.⁵⁴

«And so, insofar as the lower powers are removed from reason, the more they are corrupt.»⁵⁵

This means that the postlapsarian human agent is not only born into a life without an appetitive inclination towards his end *secundum specialem rationem* which charity would have provided, but that this capricious situation is made exponentially worse with his own personal sins.⁵⁶ Those habits, not ordainable toward the person's ultimate flourishing, train him to become acclimated to those things which lead him continually away from God.⁵⁷

It is possible that Aquinas saw grave choices to be present early in each person's life, believer or not. He comments that upon rationality's first awaking, that person is obliged to attend to their salvation. If one even so much as omits this obligation, then he sins mortally by omission. Hence, to chose not to attend to one's salvation will then be rendered a grave sin, even for the unbeliever.⁵⁸

The natural inclination to virtue is simply the natural function of the faculties of the soul. However, with original justice's absence, that soul's powers seek *their own individual* natural good with all the impetuosity due each of them. This is more pessimistic than the picture often presented. This postlapsarian state of the natural inclination to virtue, then, puts the unbeliever in a position of being radically reliant on his lot of natural virtue. However, when actual sin does effect his life, whether it is his sin or the negative effects of someone else's, then obstacles begin to be placed in the way of him following this natural inclination to virtue. These obstacles

⁵⁴ (*STh IaIIae* q. 85, a. 2, c.).

⁵⁵ (*De Veritate* q. 25, a. 6, c.).

⁵⁶ Of course, this does not mean that the postlapsarian agent would not have *any* appetitive inclination towards his end *secundum communem rationem beatitudinis*. The natural desire for happiness always persists. (*STh IaIIae* q. 5, a. 8).

⁵⁷ (*STh IaIIae* q. 74, a. 3, ad. 2). Aquinas reasserts man's free will while still asserting that man cannot avoid sin forever in his postlapsarian state. He concluded «Et ideo non potest homo vitare omnes huiusmodi motus, propter corruptionem praedictam, sed hoc solum sufficit ad rationem peccati voluntarii, quod possit vitare singulos.»

⁵⁸ Yet, what sense does it make for an unbeliever to commit a sin? Aquinas's language here seems unfit for the discussion. Brian Shanley introduces this topic well. SHANLEY, B.: *Pagan Virtue*, 555. Mortal sin is that sin which breaks man's relationship with God by loss of the infused virtue of charity. However, if an unbeliever does not have this infused virtue through baptism, it is difficult to directly speak of mortal sins of an unbeliever. Shanley rightly points us to Aquinas's distinction between mortal sins which, according to their genus, are contrary to God and those which are contrary to neighbor. (*STh IaIIae* q. 88, q. 2, c.). Certainly the unbeliever can know some things which are contrary to reason. But Aquinas thinks that they cannot avoid everything as will be clear below.

can be infinite and the agent can quickly become trapped in a downward spiral of sin and vice. Unfortunately, every man, woman, and child is born into such capricious state.

However difficult to avoid this downward spiral of vicious asphyxia, nowhere in this pessimistic picture is a denial that the unbeliever can possess authentic virtue. After surveying what powers are at his disposal, Aquinas firmly argued that the unbelieving agent's freedom, ability to know, and natural inclinations were sufficient to lead him to authentic virtue. The standard account has this completely correct. However, when we consider the overall life of this unbeliever, this possibility altogether vanishes.

Perseverance in a Life of Virtue without Grace

A second major cloud appears on the horizon when an all too aware anti-semipelagian Aquinas averred that, without grace, man cannot remain long without mortal sin.

«Similarly too, before the reason of man, in which is mortal sin, is repaired by justifying grace, he can avoid individual mortal sins, and for a time, since it is not necessary that he should be always actually sinning. But it is impossible that he remains for a long time without mortal sin. Hence Gregory says that “a sin not at once taken away by repentance, by its weight drags him down to other sins.”»⁵⁹

In his reasoning Aquinas pointed directly to the rebellion of the sensitive appetite I have been pointing to.

«And the reason for this is because just as the lower appetite ought to be subject to reason, so too should the reason be subject to God, and place in Him the end of its will. Now it is necessary that every human act be regulated by the end, just as by the judgments of the reason ought to be regulated the movement of the lower appetite. Therefore, just as in a lower appetite not totally subject to reason it is impossible that inordinate movements in the sense appetite do not occur, so too in man's reason not existing subject to God, it follows that many disorders occur in his own acts of reason. This is the case since man does not have his heart made firm in God as to unwillingly be separated from Him for the sake of finding any good or avoiding any evil. On account of finding and avoiding many things it happens that man withdraws from God distaining His commandments and thus sins mortally...».⁶⁰

59 (*STh IaIIae q. 109, a. 8, c.*) Gregory's words appear in (*Super Ezech. Hom. xi*). In this article Aquinas again presents the possibilities facing man in all different states: integral nature, postlapsarian with justifying grace, and postlapsarian without the divinely infused habit of charity. I take this last classification to apply to the unbeliever.

60 (*STh IaIIae q. 109, a. 8, c.*).

That man will inevitably fall is due to the ultimate end not being God.⁶¹ Without the intervention of grace, what natural or authentic virtues the unbeliever once possessed will increasingly give way to authentic vices.

In the same article, Aquinas affirmed the optimistic view he is known for asserting, namely that even without grace postlapsarian man can indeed avoid individual mortal sins. Recent scholarship on Thomas's understanding of pagan virtue has remained at the level of whether an unbeliever can have authentic virtue. Authors like Kent, Shanley, and Osborne, although not without their differences, have all confirmed this. I in no way wish to disagree. However, regarding *the perseverance in the virtuous life*, Aquinas's more complete view comes into focus: the unbeliever, bereft of divine charity, cannot persevere long without serious fault. When the issue of perseverance in authentic virtue is tallied with the points noted above (the rebellion of the sensitive appetite, the error his intellect is prone to, the weakness of will, the possible exponential and infinite diminution of his natural inclination of virtue) the realistic possibility of the virtuous unbeliever comes into serious doubt.

The issue of pagan virtue, therefore, is not all Aquinas says about the virtuous pagan. For while his conception of virtue is at least partially accommodating to the first, it is dismal towards the second. Part of the problem is in the questions we are asking. Often the issue of pagan virtue is investigated as whether the one without grace can possess authentic virtue. The answer is clearly yes. However, this is not the complete story. If we were to ask «According to Aquinas, can the one without grace live a virtuous life?», then Aquinas's response will be far less positive. The virtuous unbeliever will eventually succumb to serious sin, and when this happens that trusted natural inclination to virtue will reveal its depravity being unable to right the postlapsarian agent's acts and habits.⁶²

All of this might be nullified if only the unbeliever can turn from his life of vice, even in the slightest. Here Aquinas is unbending. No one can forgive himself.⁶³ The harm done to the moral character of the virtuous

⁶¹ (*Super Epist. ad Heb. c. 10, lect. 3*).

⁶² Thomas illustrates his reasoning with an example at (*STh IaIIae q. 74, a. 3, ad. 2*). In a lengthy reply to an objection which holds, because man cannot avoid this movement, man cannot sin by it. Thomas says, «Ad secundum dicendum quod perpetua corruptio sensualitatis est intelligenda quantum ad fomitem, qui nunquam totaliter tollitur in hac vita, transit enim peccatum originale reatu, et remanet actu. Sed talis corruptio fomitis non impedit quin homo rationabili voluntate possit reprimere singulos motus inordinatos sensualitatis, si praesentiat, puta divertendo cogitationem ad alia. Sed dum homo ad aliud cogitationem divertit, potest etiam circa illud aliquis inordinatus motus insurgere, sicut cum aliquis transfert cogitationem suam a delectabilibus carnis, volens concupiscentiae motus vitare, ad speculationem scientiae, insurgit quandoque aliquis motus inanis gloriae impraeeditatus. Et ideo non potest homo vitare omnes huiusmodi motus, propter corruptionem praedictam, sed hoc solum sufficit ad rationem peccati voluntarii, quod possit vitare singulos.»

⁶³ (*STh IaIIae q. 109, a. 7, c.*).

unbeliever is irreparable. Often when referring to the issue of the unbeliever's virtue one is lead to believe that all salient remarks exist in the tract on the good habits (*IaIIae* q. 55–70) and the tract on the theological virtues (*IIaIIae* q. 1–46). This is true to the extent that the question only refers to the possibility of a good habit of the unbeliever. However, this is not true when one asks the question regarding the possibility of the enduring virtuous character of the unbeliever. To understand this later inquiry, which perhaps is what most think of when they think of pagan virtue, one must wrestle with the passages on the tract on the bad habits, especially the effects of sin on the goods of nature, (*IaIIae* q. 71–89) and the tract on grace (*IIaIIae* q. 109–114). These later sections, as I have tried to demonstrate above, paint a different picture concerning whether the unbeliever devoid of charity can endure long in the state of authentic virtue. Aquinas clearly required that the unbeliever's authentic virtue be built on some «good of nature». However, the corruption of the natural goods of postlapsarian man, especially that of the natural inclination to virtue, reveals the precarious position in which the unbeliever finds himself. Even if a good upbringing is presumed, the actual sins committed by the unbeliever will eventually corrode his natural inclination to virtue.⁶⁴ Aquinas affirms that this corrosion can go on indefinitely. With each sin, therefore, the chances of avoiding the next decrease. Indeed, it will only be a matter of time before small faults become bigger ones as those without grace cannot remain long without mortal sin. When serious sin does come, the unbeliever has no recourse to God, who alone can deliver him. This dynamic of the life of the virtuous unbeliever has not been addressed in recent work on the topic. The impression one is left with from that literature is that Aquinas has a very positive view regarding the life of the virtuous unbeliever. As I have shown above, his position is one far more pessimistic than realized.

Pagan Virtue: Saved by God

Yet even after all this pessimism regarding virtue without grace, one is right to find Aquinas optimistic. But why? I am certainly not suggesting that Aquinas actually viewed the unbeliever as being in such an asphyxial state, slowly losing any trace of moral goodness and calcifying. On the contrary: what I am suggesting is that Aquinas's conception of virtue does not yield the optimistic view he puts forward. I am proposing that his conception of virtue, taken alone, would lead to a rather pessimistic conclusion were it not for his conception of grace. For this reason, the last section of Shanley's article on the theological import of the unbeliever's virtue deserves greater attention. It encourages us to reject a naïve

⁶⁴ Actual sin is that sin voluntarily committed by the agent himself. Counterpoised to this is original sin. (*STh IaIIae* q. 81, a. 1, c.)

dichotomy between the gifts of God and nature.⁶⁵ Aquinas saw the authentic goodness in the virtuous unbeliever's life, not as testament to a life of authentic virtue wholly devoid of God's gifts, but as a product of both the unbeliever's effort and «divine help», though the later element would be unacknowledged by the unbeliever.

By the time Aquinas penned his articles of the *Secunda Pars* both his conception of gratuitous grace (*gratia gratis data*) and ingratiating grace (*gratia gratis faciens*) had undergone shifts. By the latter category, Aquinas understood that supernatural gifts of God, either habitual or actual, given to a rational creature for the purpose of that creature's sanctification.⁶⁶ Into the former category fall other divine gifts, but these are given for the purpose of another's sanctification than the recipient.⁶⁷

However, while various shifts were happening in Aquinas's conception of grace, at least two ways in which God could regularly move the unbeliever to moral goodness appeared to him. First, God influences every human action by what Aquinas called a divine motion (*motio*). Without this divine motion no agent could move.

«Therefore it is clear that just as every bodily motion is reduced to the motion of the heavenly bodies as to the prime mover, so every motion either bodily or spiritual is reduced to the prime mover without qualification, which is God. And so, insofar as some bodily or spiritual nature is posited "perfect", it cannot proceed from its own act, except that it be moved by God. Which this motion is according to the reason of His providence: not according to the necessity of nature, as the bodily motion of the heavens.»⁶⁸

This motion is natural in the sense that it happens for every agent, and that it is needed for natural acts. However, it is something above nature both in its source and insofar as it is dispensed according to divine provi-

⁶⁵ SHANLEY, B.: «Pagan Virtue», 572–577. Of course, the wider discussion of Aquinas's understanding of the relationship between nature and grace has been amply treated. Cf. TORRELL, Jean-Pierre: *Nature et grâce chez Thomas d'Aquin*, in: *Revue Thomiste* 101 (2001) 167–202. In English as: *Nature and Grace in Thomas Aquinas*, in: BONINO, Serge-Thomas (ed.): *Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought*. Ave Maria, Florida: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University (2009) 155–88. It has reappeared again in French: TORRELL, Jean-Pierre: *Nouvelles Recherches Thomasiennes*. Paris: J. Vrin (2008) 99–129. PINCKAERS, Servais: *Nature-surnaturel chez Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, in: FUCHS, Éric/HUNYADI, Mark (éds.): *Ethique et natures*. Genève: Labor et Fides 1992, 19–28. In English as: *Aquinas on Nature and the Supernatural*, in: BERKMAN, John/TITUS, Craig Steven (eds.): *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2005, 359–368.

⁶⁶ «Gratia» in: DEFERRARI, Roy: *A Latin-English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas based on the Summa Theologica and selected passages of his other works*. Boston, Mass: Daughters of St. Paul (1960) 444. The operative habitual form of *gratia gratis faciens* is often referred to today as «sanctifying grace.»

⁶⁷ Examples of such gratuitious graces are the charismatic gifts, such as miracles, prophecy, etc.

⁶⁸ (STh IaIIae q. 109, a. 1, c.).

dence. Thus, the unbelieving yet authentically virtuous agent is the recipient of God's divine motion even to acquire his qualified virtuous state.

Still, this divine motion is not sufficient to bring one to perform acts or live a life of unqualified virtue. For that an actual, prevenient grace is required to prepare the agent to receive ingratiating grace. In Aquinas's mind there is no requirement that this second prevenient grace be given to every human being. It is God's gratuitous gift to give, but it too moves the unbelieving agent to be disposed to be converted.

For two reasons, then, the unbeliever is moved to lead a virtuous life and perseveres in that life of virtue only by certain divine gifts. Nevertheless, neither of these ways require the unbeliever to acknowledge that it is God who has moved him.

As we have seen, without this divine motion moving the agent to the moral good, the unbeliever would soon be condemned to a moral asphyxia. Yet, if we follow Aquinas in presuming God's motion to move unbelievers toward moral goodness, then it seems we are faced with a portrait of an unbeliever whose moral goodness, in a fundamental way, depends on the goodness of God. While at the same time affirming that Aquinas's God is willing to let His influence remain unseen by that unbelieving agent.

According to Aquinas's conception of virtue, the virtuous unbeliever would be left to a moral asphyxia. However, and this is the point, according to Aquinas's conception of divine help the virtuous unbeliever is, while both virtuous and unbelieving, still capable of being the recipient of God's gifts as aiding him in his virtuous life.

The result of this last point leads back to the problem indicated in the first section of the essay. The topic of the pagan virtue is a slippery one precisely because it is so difficult to determine *who* might be the one «without grace» in their moral lives.⁶⁹ For sure, Aquinas recognizes various degrees of those without charity. However, for Thomas the category of the unbeliever is never co-extensive with the category of moral agents without divine gifts. Consequently, two conclusions follow. First, the necessity of God's influence for the moral goodness of the unbeliever indicates that it makes little sense to speak of Aquinas's conception of pagan virtue as if to indicate «virtue without God». The topic of pagan virtue cannot be understood as Aquinas giving his assent to a category of authentic virtue totally separated from God's active help. The second conclusion to be drawn from this essay is that his conception of virtue is not responsible for his optimistic view of the unbeliever's virtue. Thomas

⁶⁹ This in itself is a major question. I am no longer convinced that «pagan virtue» is even a category of thought that Thomists can think about. The way we are asking our questions presumes too much on a modern conception of nature and grace. Furthermore, even if we were correct in doing this we are limited in knowing what is from grace and what is from nature, especially when speaking on behalf of the inner moral life of an unbeliever. Cf. (*STh* IaIIae q. 112, a. 5).

Aquinas's account of divine help is precisely why he can be so pessimistic about postlapsarian man's natural capacities, and, at the same time, be so optimistic about every moral agent's ability to live a morally good life.

«However, it must be considered that men, however evil, are not totally deprived of the gifts of God...»⁷⁰

Abstract

This paper argues against the current presentation of Aquinas's conception of pagan virtue because that conception fails to take into account the full weight of the corruption of the goods of nature on which the virtuous unbeliever must found his good acts. I go on to establish that postlapsarian man is in too capricious a position realistically to maintain a prolonged life of virtue. I conclude that while Aquinas's conception of virtue renders a much more pessimistic picture of the virtuous pagan than recent literature has presented, his reputed theoretical optimism is correct, but is founded on his conception of God's help. Thus, it makes little sense to have a philosophical discussion about Aquinas's notion of pagan virtue, because it is impossible to separate the «gifts of God» from «the unbeliever.»

⁷⁰ (*Super I ad Corinthios I, lect. 3*).

I am grateful to Andrea Robiglio, Carlos Steel, Rudi te Velde, Gerd Van Riel, Richard Taylor, Valérie Cordonier, and Cyril Crawford each of whom, by assisting me with their comments, have only bettered this essay.