

**Habit Matters:  
The Bodily Character of the Virtues**

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**1. Why Habits Matter According to Aristotle**

I am a theologian and ethicist. I have never liked the “and” because I think theology done well is a discipline of practical reason. I also do not like to be known as an ethicist. To be so identified invites questions that can drive you mad. For example, some think that if you teach “ethics” you must be able to answer questions such as “Why should I be moral?” That kind of question seems equivalent to the response offered by many when they discover the person they have just met is a minister. Such a discovery often elicits the confession, “I have been meaning to go to church again, but I find that walking in the woods is how I really connect with God.”

This confession is meant to be a challenge to those in the ministry to show why this sensitive soul should go to church. But people who present such challenges fail to understand that any minister who knows what they are about would find any attempt to answer them on their own terms uninteresting. How could you even begin to help someone understand that the god they find in the woods is probably not the God the church worships? In a similar way, I find the question “Why should I be moral?” not only uninteresting but misleading. Any attempt to answer the question cannot help but confirm the presumption that morality is a clearly identifiable set of principles about right or wrong acts.

It took me some years but I finally learned to respond to those who wanted me to convince them of why they should be moral with the question “Do you like to eat?” To ask that question challenges the presumption, a presumption legitimated by Kantian-inspired ethical theory, that a clear distinction can be drawn between ethics and, for example, manners at the dinner table. I also think “Do you like to eat?” is a good response because it reminds my questioner that we are bodily creatures whose desires pull us into the significant engagements that constitute our lives.

Of course “significance” may be a description of those aspects of our lives rightly associated with being moral. In other words, the attempt to distinguish morality from other aspects of our lives may entail judgments about what we take to be significant. I have no objection to such a suggestion as long as those who make it remember that eating is one of the most significant things we do.

I should like to think that the response, “Do you like to eat?”, owes something to my early attempt to develop an account of character that would help us better understand what it

might mean to live well. Character and the Christian Life was published in 1975.<sup>1</sup> I made many mistakes in the book but I had at least begun to grasp that the dualism between body and agency, so characteristic of much of moral theory at the time, could not be sustained if you attended to character and the virtues. Influenced by Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and Ryle I was trying to avoid accounts of agency that presumed that our ability to act requires an account of autonomy or the will that was not bodily determined.

Yet as I acknowledged in the “Introduction” to a later edition of Character and the Christian Life the account of agency I developed in that book, an account I thought necessary to avoid behaviorism, came close to reproducing the dualism between body and agency I was trying to avoid.<sup>2</sup> I had tried to develop an account of agency by presuming that conceptual primitive notion was “action” rather than, as I later learned from MacIntyre’s account in After Virtue, that “intelligible action” not action is the determinative notion if we are to properly understand agency.<sup>3</sup> Though I think that was a step in the right direction I find it interesting that one of the mistakes I did not acknowledge in the 1985 edition of the book, and I think it is a mistake that was implicated in my understanding of agency, was my failure to develop the significance of habit for any account of the virtues.

To be sure I had a brief account of habit in which I tried to suggest that Aristotle and Aquinas had a richer account of habit than the modern relegation of habit to the unreflective aspects of our lives.<sup>4</sup> I even footnoted George Klubertanz still very important book, Habits and Virtues, in which he had drawn on then recent work in psychology to develop an account of habit that distinguished complex from simple habits.<sup>5</sup> But it is still the case that in my early work on character and the virtues I did not develop an account of habit that is surely necessary for an adequate account of the virtues.

At least, such an account is required for anyone who would draw upon the work of Aristotle and Aquinas. For I should like to think that a question such as, “Do you like to eat?” is one Aristotle might have appreciated given the way he explores happiness in Book One of the Nicomachean Ethics. There Aristotle observes, even though many, i.e., those whom he calls the uncultivated, may associate happiness with pleasure, wealth or honor, such goods cannot make us happy because they are so easily lost.<sup>6</sup> To begin by asking someone if they like to eat is a way to remind us that our desire to eat pulls us into life in a manner that we cannot fail to discover there is more to life than eating.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, Character and the Christian Life (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975)

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, Character and the Christian Life (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985)

<sup>3</sup> For my discussion of this issue see the “Introduction” of Character and the Christian Life (1985), pp. xix-xxi.

<sup>4</sup> Hauerwas, Character and the Christian Life, p., 69. Of course that way of stating the problem, that is, how to distinguish the kind of habituation the virtues name from the unreflective aspects of our lives reproduces presumptions that need to be challenged for a proper understanding of habituation. It is no accident that baseball players must “unreflectively” throw and catch the ball numerous times in order to respond “without thinking” to a ball hit to them or to a throw from another fielder. Such habits are skills that make possible complex forms of action that require equally complex retrospective descriptions if we are to say what “happened.”

<sup>5</sup> George Klubertanz, Habits and Virtues: A Philosophical Analysis (New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, translated by Terence Irwin. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), 1095a15-1095b10. Paginations to Aristotle will appear in the text.

<sup>7</sup> I use the language of “pull” to resist the presumption that “habits” are “efficient causes.” For Aristotle and Aquinas we are purposive beings capable of acquiring a history through the acquisition of habits.

It is, therefore, never a question whether we will or will not develop habits and virtues, but what kind of habits and virtues we will develop. We are complex creatures constituted, according to Aristotle, by non-rational as well as rational capacities. The non-rational, however, in some way “shares in reason” just to the extent that the non-rational is capable of being habituated. (1102b15-1103a10) We eat by necessity but how we eat is determined by habits that the necessity of our eating requires if we are to eat as human beings.

For Aristotle our nature requires that we acquire a second nature which is constituted by habits. Habits come, moreover, in all shapes and sizes requiring that we develop some habits that make possible our acquisition of other habits. Aristotle often directed attention to how one learned to ride a horse or wrestle to suggest how through repetition our bodies acquire the habits that make complex activities seem “effortless.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed he not only thought learning to ride or to wrestle to be a good way to begin to acquire habits necessary for the moral life, he thought such activities *were* what taught the young become virtuous.<sup>9</sup>

Aristotle also thought how one becomes proficient in a craft to be quite similar to how one acquires the habits necessary to become a person of virtue. Just as we learn a craft by repetitively producing the same product that was produced when we first were learning the craft, so we become virtuous by performing actions that are virtuous. But the analogy with the crafts can be misleading because the relation between the actions that produce the habits that make us virtuous are constitutive of the habit in the way the product produced by the craftsman is not. (1105a25-35) According to Aristotle like actions produce like virtues, but to determine “likeness” is a complex process that presumes common judgments.

That is why Aristotle argues that legislators must attend to the training of citizens in the virtues by instilling good habits. A good politic, according to Aristotle, must aim through the law to instill in citizens the habits necessary for the development of the virtues. For it is crucial that the young acquire early in their lives the right habits. That they do so is not just very important, but it is all important. It is so because if we fail to acquire the right habits rightly we will have a character that is incapable of acting in a manner that makes us virtuous. (1103b1-25)

Jenifer Herdt observes that Aristotle’s insistence on the significance of early formation of a virtuous person is wrapped in what she characterizes as “the mystery of habituation.”<sup>10</sup> The “mystery”, Herdt identifies, is how the habits a child acquires are at once necessary but not sufficient for their becoming virtuous. For children often learn what they should or should not do for reasons that are not the morally compelling reasons for why they should or should not do what they do. They are, for example, told not to be unkind to their brother or sister because “I said so.”

Herdt observes, however, that the transition from obeying authority to the acquisition of the habits of virtue is aided by our instinctual desire to imitate our elders. She does not think that our instinct for imitation is sufficient to make us virtuous, but by imitating those who act

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<sup>8</sup> For an insightful account of habit as effortless see Samuel Wells, Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), pp. 73-82.

<sup>9</sup> There is obviously a hierarchy that should determine the acquisition of habits in order that we become what we do. How such a hierarchy is to be understood, however, may well vary from one tradition to another. I suspect such a hierarchy in order to be spelled out will require a narrative display.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Herdt, Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 25.

virtuously we can at least begin to acquire the habits that will produce a firm and unchanging character. Such a character is required if we are to be the kind of person who can act in a manner that what we do is not different than what we are.<sup>11</sup>

The problem is how do we make the transition from habits acquired by imitation to the habits necessary for us to be virtuous, that is, habits that are formed by our having chosen what we have done in a manner that a just or temperate person would act. Herdt suggests that if one's desires are to be transformed into those of a virtuous person the person acting must not only act in manner that they not only enjoy what they do but that the enjoyment that accompanies the act is elicited by the love of the one they imitate.<sup>12</sup> I feel quite sure there is great wisdom in Herdt's suggestion that the relations in which the habits are formed make a great deal of difference, but that still does not seem sufficient to understand how the acquisition of habits are sufficient for making the transition to being a person of virtue.<sup>13</sup>

In order to explore how we might think further about the "mystery of habituation" I want to direct our attention to Aquinas's development of Aristotle on habit. I do so because I think Aquinas provides a richer account of the kind of habits necessary for our becoming persons of virtue. Aquinas' understanding of habituation does not "solve" all the questions associated with a stress on the kind of habits necessary for the development of the virtues, but I hope to show that in drawing on Aristotle's work he helps us better understand the process of habituation.

## 2. Aquinas on Habituation

Aquinas develops his account of habit in the appropriately entitled the "Treatise on Habits" in the Prima Secundae of the Summa Theologica.<sup>14</sup> I call attention to the title because the "Treatise on Habits" includes not only Aquinas' account of the habits but also his initial account of the virtues: his understanding of how the virtues are individuated as well as interconnected, the role of the gifts of the Spirit, and the nature of sin and the vices. The latter is particularly important to insure that we not forget that the vices are also habits. That the "Treatise on Habits" includes what in effect is the outline of Aquinas' understanding of the Christian moral life indicates how important habituation was for Aquinas.

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<sup>11</sup> Herdt, p. 26. Aristotle suggests a person who would act in a manner that so acting they become virtuous must act in a manner that they know what they do as well as acting from a "firm and unchanging state." (1105a-10)

<sup>12</sup> Herdt, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> In an essay responding to the Second Edition of The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics entitled, "The Virtue of the Liturgy," Herdt observes that a focus on the virtues does not play a prominent role in most of the essays in the Blackwell Companion. She argues that is appropriate because we have come to recognize that the virtues are not individual achievements but can be sustained only in the context of a community. Accordingly the task of Christian ethics is not to promote a virtue ethic but to show how the virtues are in service to growth in human friendship with God. Therefore the virtues are not ends in themselves but constitutive of the life we are called to live with one another and God. The focus on the liturgy is one way to suggest how an "imaginative grasp of the whole form of life in which one's own activity participates" is required if we are to have the capacity to extrapolate from one situation to another what we must do if we are to act, for example, with courage. Jennifer Herdt, "The Virtue of the Liturgy," The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics, (Second Edition) edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 536-537.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, translated by the Fathers of the English Province. (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1981). Paginations will appear in the text.

Yet it is equally important to recognize that the “Treatise on the Last End” had preceded the “Treatise on Habits.” The “Treatise on the Last End” begins with the claim that man differs from the irrational animals because as creatures who possess will and reason we can be masters of our actions. (I-II, 1) “Mastery” is Aquinas’ description of what it means for us to be able to act in a manner that what we do and who we are is inseparable. It is this ability that enables us to acquire the habits necessary for the virtuous life. Aquinas will distinguish between the intellectual and moral virtues, but it is crucial to note that both the intellectual and moral virtues must be habituated in a manner that they cannot be separated from one another. (I-II, 58, 2)

Aquinas develops his account of our ability to act in a manner such that habits are formed which make us virtuous by introducing a concept unknown to Aristotle, that is, the will. The will is a rational appetite that makes possible our ability to act in a manner that our actions, by being directed by reason, become our own. (I-II, 8, 1) It is extremely important that he not be read, as he is often read, to suggest the will and reason are independent capacities. The exact opposite is the case. For example, in his fine-grained account of what makes an act an act Aquinas observes, “acts of the reason and of the will can be brought to bear on one another, in so far as the reason reasons about willing and, the will wills to reason so that the result is that the act of the reason precedes the act of the will, and conversely. And since the power of the preceding act continues in the act that follows, it happens sometimes that there is an act of the will insofar as it retains in itself something of the act of reason; and conversely, that there is an act of the reason insofar as it retains in itself something of the act of the will.” (I-II, 1)

For Aquinas the will and reason are interdependent because every act of the will is preceded by an act of the intellect, but it is also the case that an act of the intellect is preceded by an act of the will. (I-II, 4, 4, ad2) Accordingly Aquinas does not invite the presumption that habit is the result of the will being tamed by reason. Rather, as Herdt suggests, for Aquinas reason and will are “formed in tandem through habituation; the will must learn to conform reliably to reason’s grasp of the good.”<sup>15</sup> But reason’s grasp of the good depends on the will being disposed to the good through habit.<sup>16</sup>

Aquinas uses the language of the soul but it should be clear, given his account of the will and reason, that the soul and the body are inseparable. The soul names for Aquinas that we are bodies destined by our desires to be befriended by God. Accordingly he understands reason to be rational desire and will to be desiring reason. We are creatures shaped by our desires, desires as basic as our desire to eat, to have a last end. By being so determined we necessarily acquire habits through our actions shaped by our desires.

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<sup>15</sup> Herdt, p. 83. Herdt supports her interpretation by calling attention to I-II, 56, 3.

<sup>16</sup> In his book, *The Soul of the Person: A Contemporary Philosophical Psychology* (Washington, D.C.: 2006), Adrian J. Reimers draws on C.S. Pierce to develop an account of habit, and in particular, the habituation of will and reason through act, quite similar to the my account of Aquinas on will and reason. Reimers emphasizes the bodily character of all action but observes “because the act falls under a general description, it admits of development into or subsumption under a habit. We may say that every act, every purposeful motion is at least a nascent habit. It is precisely because of this that the development of habits is even possible.” (p. 166) Accordingly reasoning itself is a set of habits “by which human beings represent things to themselves as possibly true or false.” (p. 111.) Though the will is infinite in scope it must be habituated if we are to be capable of self-determination. (p. 161) Reimers’s book is a gold mine for anyone who would reflect on these matters.

Aquinas does not think, therefore, we are souls who happen to have a body, nor are we bodies who have a soul. Rather Aquinas thinks we are ensouled bodies.<sup>17</sup> That is why he says that a living body is of a different species than a dead body.<sup>18</sup> (I-II, 18, 5 ad I) Aquinas understands the soul as the animating principle of the body but, following Aristotle, the soul is also the form of the body. Dana Dillon nicely characterizes Aquinas' view this way: "the soul is the principle of life in the body, and the organizing principle or form of the whole person." (I 76, 5)<sup>19</sup>

The significance of our bodies for how we understand the habituation of our desires is particularly evident in Aquinas' account of the role of the passions. Aristotle had suggested that virtue is about pleasure and pain, (1104b15-1105a15) but Aquinas provides an extended account of the passions that enriches what and how pleasure and pain are understood.<sup>20</sup> In the process we are better able to appreciate how the passions at once make the habituation of our bodies not only possible but necessary. For, in the words of Kent Dunnington, habits turn out to be "strategies of desire."<sup>21</sup>

Aquinas provides a more nuanced account of the passions than Aristotle. The passions for Aquinas are movements of the sensitive appetite and are, therefore, to be distinguished from the desires that constitute our animal and rational appetites. Sensitive appetites are quite simply inclinations toward some good that is perceived as pleasant. Aquinas further distinguishes the concupiscible passions from the irascible passions. The passions that "regard

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<sup>17</sup> Fergus Kerr suggests that Aquinas' understanding of the body as the form of the soul is quite close to Wittgenstein's remark in the Philosophical Investigations (2, 152) that "the human body is the best picture of the human soul." See Kerr's, "Work on Oneself: Wittgenstein's Philosophical Psychology" (Arlington, Virginia: The Institute for the Psychological Sciences Press, 2008), p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, without referencing Aquinas, argues "a corpse is not a human body, just because it no longer has the unity of a human body. The unity of a human body is evidenced on the one hand in the coordination of its voluntary and directed movements, in a way in which different series of movements by eye and hand are directed to one and the same end and in the ways in which movement towards a range of different ends is directed, and on the other in the coordination of its nonvoluntary and nonintentional movements. No such teleology, no such directedness, and certainly no voluntariness characterizes the movements of a corpse." "What is a human body?" in Alasdair MacIntyre, The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Dana Dillon, As Soul to Body: The Interior Act of the Will in Thomas Aquinas and the Importance of First-Person Perspective in Accounts of Moral Action (Durham, North Carolina: Ph.D. Dissertation, 2008), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> For the best contemporary treatment of Aquinas' account of the passions see Robert Miner, Thomas Aquinas On the Passions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Miner notes that even though Aquinas dedicates Questions 22-48 of the Prima Secundae of the Summa to the passions his "Treatise on the Passions" remains the most neglected of his corpus. This neglect Miner suggests may well be due to the Kantian reading habits so dominant in our time. See for example John Milbank, "Hume versus Kant: Faith, Reason, and Feeling," Modern Theology, 27, 2 (April, 2011), pp. 276-297. Milbank observes that "Hume broke with rationalism by empirically observing that reflection cannot seriously separate itself from habit and that even the most basic assumed stabilities (substance, the self, causation) depend upon habit and not upon sheer intuited 'givenness'". But he also began to break with empiricism by allowing (albeit in a highly reserved fashion) that, in being slaves to habit, human beings must acknowledge the workings of a natural power that exceeds our capacity to observe it." (p. 281) This issue of Modern Theology consist of papers written for a conference put together by Sarah Coakley dedicated to exploring the role of the passions for our understanding of faith and reason. Other papers from the same conference appear in Faith and Philosophy, 28, 1 (January, 2011). Together these papers are extremely important for the development of issues raised in this paper.

<sup>21</sup> Kent Dunnington, Addiction and Virtue (Downers Grove: Illinois: IVP Press, Forthcoming). Dunnington credits this way of putting the matter to Paul Wadell.

good or evil absolutely, belong to the concupiscible power; for instance, joy, sorrow, love, hatred and such like: whereas those passions which regard good or bad as arduous, through being difficult to obtain or avoid, belong to the irascible faculty; such are daring, fear, hope and the like.” (I-II, 23, 1) The concupiscible and irascible passions are so to speak the engine that pulls the body into engagements by which the acquisition of habits are not only necessary but possible befitting a being who is destined to have a history.<sup>22</sup>

Given his account of the passions we can say to be human for Aquinas is to be a body destined by love. We are created to be creatures of desire for goods known through reason and will making us agents through the acquisition of habits. Aquinas observes that the very word passion “implies that the patient is drawn to that which belongs to the agent.” (I-II, 2) We are moved movers because we are creatures created to be capable of love made evident by our capacity for joy, sorrow and hatred. As beings constituted by such desires, such hopes, means, for example, that courage requires that we will need to be daring given the fears that our loves create. (I-II, 23, 1)

The passions so understood are the condition of the possibility for the habitual perfection of a power.<sup>23</sup> Thus Aquinas contention that the moral virtues such as temperance and courage, that is, the virtues that form the concupiscent and irascible passions, do so by drawing on movements that constitute those passions.<sup>24</sup> (I-II, 59, 5) A claim that may seem too obvious to mention unless one remembers such an understanding of actions that instill the habits necessary for our acquiring the virtues stands in marked contrast with the Stoic contention that the passions are to be if possible suppressed.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the Stoics Aquinas argues that the presence of the passions is a sign of the “intensity of the will” indicating a greater moral goodness than would be the case if the passions were absent. (I-II, 24. 3.)

Aquinas, drawing on Aristotle, describes habit as “a disposition whereby that which is disposed is disposed well or ill, and this, either in regard to itself or in regard to another: thus health is a habit.” (I-II, 49, 1) In particular habits are those qualities that are not easily changed for the very word habit suggests a lastingness that the word disposition does not.<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre put it this way: “Agency is exercised through time. To be an agent is not to engage in a series of discrete, unconnected actions. It is to pursue ends, some closer at hand in time, some more remote, some to be achieved for their own sake, some for the sake of furthering some end, and some for both. And to pass from youth through middle age toward death characteristically involves changes in and revisions of one’s ends. Furthermore the ends that one pursues through sometimes extended periods of time are often not only one’s own, but are ends shared with others, ends to be achieved only through the continuing cooperation of others, ends to be achieved only through the continuing cooperation of others or ends that are constituted by the ongoing participation of others. And so the exercise of the powers of the body through time in the exercise of agency requires a variety of types of engagements with others.” “What is a human body?” p. 100.

<sup>23</sup> Miner, p. 289.

<sup>24</sup> Aquinas observes that the body is ruled by the soul just as the irascible and concupiscible powers are ruled by reason, but he notes that the irascible and concupiscible powers do not obey reason blindly because “they have their own proper movements.” (I-II, 56, 4, ad3)

<sup>25</sup> Martha Nussbaum has argued that the Stoics did not think that all passions are to be eliminated but only those that are “subrational stirrings coming from our animal nature” which can be “cured” by a philosophical therapy. See her *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 366-372.

<sup>26</sup> It would be a fascinating study to compare how William James understands the nature and significance of habit to Aquinas. Some might think James account of habit too “biological” compared to Aquinas, but I hope I have at

enduring quality of habits are the result of their relation to acts which are done in a manner that make the agent good as well as the act good.

Aquinas follows Aristotle suggesting that by like acts like habits are formed. (I-II,50, 1) Aquinas provides, however, an account of actions that enriches Aristotle's understanding of choice and the voluntary. In particular Aquinas introduces the notion of intention which is crucial for him to make clear how the means used to achieve an end are constitutive of the end that is pursued. Thus the "intention of the end is the same movement as the willing of the means." (I-II, 12, 4) The reason this is so important is it helps us see how, at least if we are to act in a manner that our actions form habits that are virtuous, the very description of the act and the character of the agent are mutually implicated. Thus Aquinas argument that "consent" is crucial for an act to be an act, that is, the necessity of a person "to approve and embrace the judgment of their counsel." (I-II, 15, 3)

Our habituation is necessary because our appetitive powers, our desires, are underdetermined. Aquinas observes the will by its very nature is inclined to the good of reason, but because this good is varied in a manner that the will needs to be inclined by habit to some good fixed by reason so that the action may follow more readily. (I-II, 50, 5, ad.3) We are beings who need habituation because as we have seen we are composed of potentiality and act making it necessary to be one thing rather than another. We need habits. God does not.<sup>27</sup>

Habits are the result of repeated actions because the appetitive faculty can oppose the formation of settled dispositions. But a habit can be directed to a good act in two ways. First a person can acquire, for example, the habit of grammar to speak correctly, but grammar does not insure the person will always speak correctly which means they may sometimes be guilty of a barbarism. But a habit in the second sense may confer not only aptness to act, but also the right use of that aptness. Thus the virtue of justice not only gives a person a ready will to do just actions, but also makes them just by their ability to act justly.<sup>28</sup>

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least suggested that habits for Aquinas are rooted at least initially in our most basic desires. I do not think Aquinas would dispute James' understanding of habit "from the physiological point of view" as "but a new pathway of discharge formed in the brain, but which certain incoming currents ever after tend to escape." "Habit" in The Heart of William James, edited by Robert Richardson. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 102. Aquinas would have also been in agreement with James observation that we are born with a tendency to do more things than the ready made arrangements of our nerve-centers can handle thus the need for habits. Aquinas might, however, challenged James suggestion that habit diminishes the conscious attention by which our actions are performed. It all depends on what you might mean by "conscious."

<sup>27</sup> Felix Ravaisson in his extraordinary book, Of Habit (London: Continuum, 2008) provides an account of the metaphysics of habit. Ravaisson's book was written in 1838 in French but only recently translated. That may account for why this important book has been so overlooked. Ravaisson, for example, observes "that habit is not an external necessity of constraint, but a necessity of attraction and desire. It is, indeed, a *law of the limbs*, which follows on from the freedom of the spirit. But this law is a *law of grace*. It is the final cause that increasingly predominates over efficient causality and which absorbs the latter into itself. And at that point, indeed, the end and the principle, the fact and the law, are fused together within necessity." (p. 57) Though the language is foreign to Aquinas I suspect the fundamental intuition to be quite similar to Aquinas' understanding of grace. Later Ravaisson will suggest "Nature lies wholly in desire, and desire, in turn lies in the good that attracts it. In this way the profound words of a profound theologian might be confirmed: 'Nature is prevenient grace'. It is God within us. God hidden solely by being so far within us in this intimate source of ourselves, to whose depths we do not descend.'" (Fenelon), p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> Justice, according to Aquinas, is an operative virtue. He uses that language because justice is not clearly correlative to a passion, but rather suggests the habitual formation of the will. Justice, like friendship, is the



Therefore to have the habits of the second kind means a person not only does the good but is good. Moreover “since virtue is that which makes its possessor good, and his work good likewise, the latter habits are called virtuous simply; because they make the work to be actually good, and the subject good simply.” (I-II, 56, 3) Such is the character of what Aquinas identifies as the acquired moral virtues, that is, the cardinal virtues of courage, temperance, justice, and prudence. These virtues dispose us to act for our end insofar as that end can be known by reason, but we have an ultimate end, friendship with God, that exceeds our nature. (I-II, 51, 4) To be put on the road to that end we need the infused theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

Just as the moral virtues cannot be without prudence and prudence cannot be without the moral virtues it is also true that the acquired moral virtues cannot be fully virtues without charity. Thus Aquinas’ claim that only the infused virtues are perfect since they direct us to our ultimate end, but the acquired virtues are virtues in a restricted sense because they direct us to some particular end. (I-II, 65, 2) Aquinas, therefore, claims that with charity all the virtues are given to us including what he calls the “infused moral virtues.” (I-II, 65, 3) That Aquinas makes this turn may seem to make unclear why he had spent so much time developing his account of habit. Given his account of the infused moral virtues one can only wonder what to make of the acquired moral virtues?<sup>29</sup> Does the introduction of the infused moral virtues make Aquinas’ account of habituation irrelevant?

These are complex matters of interpretation of Aquinas’ understanding of the Christian life. But I think Sheryl Overmyer is right to suggest that Aquinas’ by introducing the infused moral virtues does not leave behind the importance of habit and the acquired virtues. Rather the infused moral virtues lack what only the acquired virtues can supply, that is, the pleasure that comes from acting well.<sup>30</sup> The infused moral virtues, that is, the virtues formed by charity, provide the habits that make us capable of living lives of joy.

John Milbank, in a manner not unlike Overmyer, suggests what Aquinas sees is that our acquired “natural” habits are approximations of supernatural infused habits. All habits in order to be habits require ongoing development, but in order to become a habit the acquired habits must so to speak be made more than they can be on their own by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly “habit as fundamental is only explicable as grace, and that for this reason the grace of eternal life which we receive again through Christ—a supernatural infused habit as Aquinas puts it—is, although superadded, paradoxically the most fundamental ontological reality in the universe: the undying force of life itself.”<sup>31</sup>

To rightly interpret Aquinas on these matters requires that we not forget that he assumes we are always on the way to being virtuous. Thus his favorite metaphor for the moral life is that we are wayfarers who are on a journey of the soul to God. Accordingly the

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qualification of a relation. Such a “qualification” is surely habitual but what the habit qualifies is not clearly named by Aquinas. The “qualification” entails the formation of practical reason but surely more needs to be said.

<sup>29</sup> For a good account of these issues see Bonnie Kent, *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), pp. 24-38.

<sup>30</sup> Sheryl Overmyer, *The Wayfarer’s Way and Two Guides for the Journey: The Summa Theologiae and Piers Plowman* (Durham, North Carolina, 2010), p. 91. Aquinas says “acts produced by an infused habit do not cause a habit, but strengthen the habit already existing, just as medicinal treatment given to a man who is naturally healthy does not cause a healthy condition, but invigorates the health he already has.” (I-II, 51, 4.)

<sup>31</sup> Milbank, “Hume versus Kant,” p. 288.

distinction that most determinatively informs his account of the virtues is that between the imperfect and perfect virtues.<sup>32</sup> That we are “on the way” to being virtuous means, therefore, that though we may have acquired the habits to be, for example, temperate unless those habits are shaped by a more determinative way of life they may be a semblance of virtue rather than the virtue itself.

Aquinas observes, for example, that a miser may appear to be prudent and even have the virtue of temperance. For the miser may think the satisfaction of lust costs too much. But to have the habits of prudence and temperance determined by the fear of losing control of our wealth cannot be what it means to be virtuous. (II-II, 23, 7) Accordingly we must acquire the habits necessary for us to be virtuous in a manner that the virtues “qualify one another by a kind of overflow.” For just as prudence overflows into all the other virtues each of the virtues overflows to the others in a manner that one who can curb their desires for pleasure of touch, which is a very hard thing to do, will also be more able to check his daring in dangers of death so they will not go too far. In this way “temperance is said to be brave, by reason of fortitude overflowing into temperance; in so far, to wit, as he whose mind is strengthened by fortitude against dangers of death, which is a matter of very great difficulty, is more able to remain firm against the onslaught of pleasures.” (I-II, 61, 5)

I am painfully aware that I have not done justice to the complexities of Aquinas’ understanding of how habit is fundamental for any account of how we are drawn by God into a life of beatitude. But hopefully I have at least provided a sufficient account that helps us see that Aquinas would have no reasons to resist what we might learn from the neurosciences about the bodily character of our becoming more than we are through the habituation of our desires. Indeed it seems that recent developments in neurobiology that draw on dual process models of thought and activity may well provide an account quite compatible with Aquinas’ understanding of how our complex habits become “second nature.”<sup>33</sup>

### 3. Putting on Virtue

Kwame Anthony Appiah, however, in Experiment in Ethics calls attention to work in psychology that seems to challenge the approach to the moral life Aristotle and Aquinas represent.<sup>34</sup> He notes that psychologists have called into question what many take to be the core claim of those that make character central to our understanding of morality, that is, that we are consistent in what we do and do not do. Yet psychologists have found that what most of us do is not best accounted for by traits of character but by systematic human tendencies to

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<sup>32</sup> I am in debt to Overmyer for this important interpretative point about Aquinas’ understanding of the virtues.

<sup>33</sup> I am thinking of Michael Spezio’s article, “The Neuroscience of Emotion and Reasoning in Social Contexts: Implications for Moral Theology,” in Modern Theology, 27, 2 (April, 2011), pp. 339-356. That said I am sympathetic to Stephen Mulhall’s argument in the same issue of Modern Theology that suggests that if Wittgenstein is rightly understood then brain sciences may have little to add to the philosophy of mind. For a fascinating account of the work of Gary Lynch, neuroscientist whose research attempts to determine how communication between brain cells work to make memory possible see Terry McDermott, 1 0 1 Theory Drive: A Neuroscientist Quest for Memory (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010). Lynch’s work could be the kind of biology we need to sustain the account of habit I have tried to develop in this paper, but it is equally clear that this kind of research is anything but conclusive.

<sup>34</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, Experiment in Ethics, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 33-72.

respond to situations that no one preciously thought to be crucial. In other words someone who may be honest in one situation will often be reliably dishonest in other situations.<sup>35</sup>

He calls attention to experiments by psychologist such as Alice Isen and Paula Levin who found that if you dropped your papers in a phone booth you were far more likely to have them returned if those who found the papers had just had the good fortune of finding a dime in the coin-return slot. John Darley and Daniel Batson followed up Isen's and Levins's study by showing someone slumped in a doorway under distress was less likely to be helped by seminarians if they were told they were late for an appointment. In a similar kind of experiment Robert Baron and Jill Thomley have shown you are more likely to get change for a dollar outside a fragrant bakery than a dry-goods store.<sup>36</sup>

Such studies, Appiah suggests, challenge the perspective of the virtues, that is, the view that through the acquisition of virtuous habits we can be counted on to act consistent with those habits. In short human beings are just not "built that way." Appiah quotes Owen Flanagan, who he describes as having long worked at the intersection of psychology and moral theory, maxim: "Make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that the character, decision processing, and behavior described are possible, or are perceived to be possible, for creatures like us."<sup>37</sup> Appiah comments by noting that the deep epistemological challenge for a virtue ethic is no actual virtuous people exist.

Appiah, however, does not think this is a decisive challenge to an understanding of the moral life understood as a life of virtue. According to Appiah a life of virtue is good because of what a virtuous person is not because of what they do. So a distinction is possible between having a virtue and being disposed to do the virtuous act over a wide range of circumstances.<sup>38</sup> He thinks, therefore, it is a mistake to think that virtue ethics to be a rival to deontological or consequential approaches to ethics. For a virtue approach is one in response to the question of how we should live our lives rather than a cluster of duties or calculations about what to do in X or Y circumstance.<sup>39</sup>

Needless to say I am deeply sympathetic with Appiah's attempt to defend a virtue perspective, but I find it odd that he seems to have forgotten that the virtues are habits. Of course the habitual character of our lives does not "solve" the problem of our moral inconsistencies. Indeed I should think calling attention to the role of habit should help us better

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<sup>35</sup> Appiah, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Appiah, p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> Appiah, p. 46.

<sup>38</sup> Appiah, p. 61.

<sup>39</sup> Appiah, p. 63. I am extremely sympathetic with Appiah's general approach to ethics and, in particular, the stress on exemplification in his most recent book, The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). He observes he has spent a good deal of his life trying to get his fellow philosophers to recognize the importance of aspects of our lives about which they may take too little notice such as race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and nationality and religion. In particular he thinks honor a crucial topic philosophers have neglected, but honor is crucial for our social identities because it connects our lives. Attending to honor helps us to treat others as we should as well as making the best of our own lives. His book is a series of studies dealing with such matters as the end of dueling, how the binding of women's feet was ended, the suppressing of Atlantic slavery, the recognition of the full humanity of women which turned on the extrapolation of some to discover what honor requires. He argues that we need to reckon with honor because our desire for respect "draws on fundamental tendencies in human psychology. And it is surely better to understand our nature and manage it than to announce that we would rather we were different...or worse, pretend we don't have a nature at all. We may think we have finished with honor, but honor isn't finished with us." p. xix.

understand why we are so often inconsistent. We are inconsistent because we have not sufficiently acquired the habits that make certain decisions non-decisions.

The inconsistencies identified by psychologists would not have made Aristotle or Aquinas rethink their positions. Indeed they would have expected the kind of behaviors identified by the psychologist because they were acutely aware that often we possess the semblance of a virtue rather than the true virtue. That is why Aquinas thought it so important that the virtues are interconnected. It is not enough that we are courageous but we must be courageous in a manner that the temperate person is courageous. If courage determines all our actions we may well live disordered lives. Accordingly the moral life is never finished requiring as it does retrospective judgments about what we may have thought we rightly did but later discover we were self-deceived.

A sobering conclusion but one I think also quite hopeful. For it may be that as creatures who must acquire habits to be able to act we are not thereby condemned to be determined by our past. We dare not forget that hope is also a habit. Hope at once is that which requires the development of habits that makes hope pull us into life. We are hardwired by our bodies to be people of hope. After all, we do like to eat.