

THE ROLE OF HABITUS IN ST. THOMAS' S MORAL THOUGHT

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A central issue for moral thought is the formation of moral character. In a moral philosophy like St. Thomas's for which virtue is a key concept this issue assumes critical importance. A good deal of the recent discussion of St. Thomas's ethics has focused on virtue, which, to be sure, is a salutary in light of an unfortunate history of "legalistic" exegeses of the Thomistic texts. Nevertheless, the moral psychology which underlies St. Thomas's virtue ethics has not attracted much attention. In this paper I shall attempt to remedy this oversight by examining the notion of habitus. My inspiration in this endeavour is Yves Simon's book Moral Virtue, which argues that habitus should be understood as embodying a certain purposiveness or "objective necessity".¹ In his writings on the theological virtue of charity, Jacques Maritain appears to support Simon on this point.² Thus my aim in the subsequent pages is to show that for St. Thomas habitus imparts a focus or direction to our moral actions. My exposition of this position will have three parts: (1) a general discussion of habitus, emphasizing its directive or purposive character; (ii) an examination of the part habitus plays in the inculcation of moral virtue; and (iii) a discussion of Maritain's suggestion that virtuous habitus is brought to full perfection through the infusion of charity.

(1)

Much of the misunderstanding that surrounds the Thomistic use of habitus arises from its translation (in English) as "habit".³ To be sure, the habits individuals acquire become "second nature," a point St. Thomas wishes to capture by introducing the concept of habitus.⁴ Moreover, he also asserts that habitus is a quality of the soul that arises from performing the same act repeatedly.⁵ It is of course true that acts performed habitually occur without reflection and, in some instances, involuntarily. It is also true that such acts are reinforced by repeated performances. So one may have to struggle against what he believes to be bad habit, e.g., smoking, because a personal history of smoking has resulted in a compulsion to smoke. Thus the constraints habits impose upon a person often limit his freedom of action; that is, they impose upon the agent a "subjective necessity," as it were.⁶ But for St. Thomas many of the acts that arise from habitus, as, for example, virtuous acts, are characterized by voluntariness.⁷ Furthermore, St. Thomas writes about "habits infused by God into man,"⁸ which suggests a certain receptivity on the part of the agent. Given these points, then, it appears that habitus cannot be understood simply as mere habit; but if this is so, how does the exegete of St. Thomas explain why habitus is so often interpreted as mere habit?

The answer to the aforementioned question is found S.T. I-II q.49 a.3 and S.T. I-II q.54 a.1 where St. Thomas mentions two kinds of habitus: (i) habitus in relation to nature [habitus in ordine ad naturam rei]; (ii) habitus in relation to act [habitus in ordine ad actum].⁹ In his discussion of virtue later in Prima Secundae, he indicates that this distinction derives from a more fundamental distinction, viz., that between power in

reference to being [potentia ad esse] and power in reference to act [potentia ad agere].¹⁰ St. Thomas holds that the former pertains to the body whereas the latter pertains to the soul. Accordingly, habitus in relation to nature concerns the powers of the body while habitus in relation to act pertains to the powers of the soul.¹¹ Thus habitus in relation to nature includes, for instance, health and beauty. We may also include in this group unreflective habits, or what St. Thomas has termed "acts of man" [hominis actiones].¹² Habitus in relation to act, on the other hand, embraces human actions, and human actions, according to St. Thomas, are characterized by voluntariness.

However, St. Thomas also suggests that the dispositions habitus in relation to nature established in the body serve as pre-conditions for the inculcation of habitus in relation to act. Before the latter, which has as its province the will, can be efficacious, the body, which is the instrument of the will, must be suitably disposed. Consider the case of driving a car. Being able to drive a car properly requires certain physical skills. A person must have good eye-motor coordination, reflexes, etc. These physical skills are acquired through training, and their exercise is, for the most part, habitual. Such physical skills yield reflexive acts, i.e., "acts of man," which have their basis in habitus in relation to nature because they occur without any prior deliberation.

But learning how to drive, or learning any other complex skill for that matter, requires the guidance of reason. The development of driving skills, for instance, is directed toward gaining familiarity with the rules of the road, e.g., stopping at stop-signs. A person must understand and know how to apply the rules of the road. So after he acquires a set of pertinent physical skills, he engages in a series of more intellectual activities the point

of which is to subordinate his appetitive faculty to the direction of reason. If all goes well, the habitus in relation to act a person has acquired yields a so-called "operative habitus" [habitus operativus],¹³ which inclines him toward the successful performance of certain acts. In our example these would be acts characterized by intelligent adherence to the rules of the road.

Thus a person who has learned a skill, say, driving, practices it almost by "second nature" because he has acquired a certain familiarity with the particular methods the skill involves. So a good driver knows how to stop his vehicle properly, how to lane change safely, etc. The skills he has learned allow him to perform these activities with a degree of certitude, but the certitude a person acquires in obtaining a skill like driving differs importantly from discursive certainty, e.g., one's certainty that 2+2=4. For St. Thomas, the latter provides certitude secundum quid, or certitude in respect to the subject because the certainty resides in the mind of the possessor. This kind of certainty is characteristic of demonstrative reasoning. The certainty imparted by a skill, however, yields certitude simpliciter or certitude in the absolute sense, since the practice of the skill is the cause of certainty.¹⁴ In this instance, certitude is acquired through experience, rather than through the exercise of reason.

Habitus provides certitude simpliciter since the object of habitus, viz., the act to be performed, is the cause of certitude, in the sense that a person achieves certitude simpliciter through the repeated performance of specific actions, just as driver perfects his skills through the sedulous practice of his skills. For example, a poor driver who finds himself in a situation that demands excellent driving skills, he will be uncertain about how

to perform the actions the situation requires because he is unable to integrate all of his driving skills. Good drivers, on the other hand, always act with certainty because their familiarity with the practices of good driving assures them of the correctness of their actions. But even among the skillful there are important differences as, for instance, between those who have acquired a skill recently and those who have spent a lifetime practicing it. For in the case of the latter, knowing how to act properly yields certainty simpliciter because these individuals are well-practiced in the skill and hence less likely to err in making decisions.

Performing a complex skill repeatedly enables a person to integrate its various components so that each contributes to the overall effectiveness of the skill. To the extent that a skill is effective, one has certainly simpliciter in its performance. But since the certainty simpliciter characteristic of habitus is present only in as much as one is inclined to practice a skill, the intensity of one's certitude depends upon the strength of this inclination, and this, in turn depends upon how well a person is able to integrate the components of the skill. But one who is successful in this endeavour acquires a certain readiness and stability in the performance of even a complex skill because, through the integration of its various elements, the skill obtained has a distinct focus, i.e., its effective performance. Hence the certainty established by habitus yields settled dispositions of character - dispositions that have become, to use Thomistic terms, "connatural" to a person.¹⁵

(2)

For St. Thomas, the most notable example of habitus is virtue, which he defines in De Virtutibus in Comuni as the "perfection of a power" (potentiae complementum)¹⁶. Later, in the same work, he asserts that "virtue makes its possessor and his action good."¹⁷ While these remarks clearly express his claim that an act which is good is 'perfective' of the agent, they do not explain the sense in which this is so. To clarify this point, we must turn to the analysis of habitus presented in the previous section. Habitus informs a power by imparting directiveness to it, a view evident in St. Thomas's suggestion that habitus is operative, *i.e.*, results in action. Accordingly, to the extent that habitus is suitable to the purposive character of rational nature, it enables agents to further the specifically rational aspects of their character, *viz.*, "human goods," such as knowledge and friendship, and therefore is to be considered virtuous.

To be sure, St. Thomas maintains that there are two kinds of virtue: intellectual virtues which govern reason and moral virtues which govern appetite. The latter, the concern of morality, deal specifically with the proper direction of the will. However, he also notes that a habitus which resides in the appetitive power is formally ordained to the good and, consequently, "possesses the nature of virtue in a most eminent sense."¹⁸ But "[t]hose habits which neither inhere in nor depend on the appetitive part can, indeed, be materially ordered to the good, but not formally, under the aspect of goodness."¹⁹ St. Thomas's conclusion is that these are to be considered "virtues to a certain extent, although not in as proper a sense as the other type of habit (moral virtue)."¹⁹ Hence, given

the importance St. Thomas places on moral virtue, my examination of virtuous habitus will focus exclusively on this kind of virtue.

With the inculcation of moral virtue, one acquires certain stable tendencies to perform acts which are "good and fitting and properly in accord with reason."²⁰ But St. Thomas is careful to mention that in addition to resulting in good action, virtue also makes the agent good. That is, virtues, as elements of the human good, are 'constituted' from the repeated performance of moral acts. The resulting habitus orients a person toward the good found in the moral action, with the consequence that the pertinent value becomes a part of a person's character. So performing, say, acts of kindness directs a person toward the human good of friendship while at the same time inculcating in his character highly desirable qualities like steadfastness and loyalty which are essential for maintaining friendships. St. Thomas's contention is that virtuous action "perfects" the agent's character and thus impart certainty simpliciter to his moral undertakings, so that these are performed uniformly and with readiness and delight.²² In a virtuous character, then, the habitus of virtue enables the agent to develop his rational nature by inclining him, as it were, toward some type of human good. So "as justice inclines one to the good which is equality in those things which men share in their community life with one another; temperance inclines one to the good which assists in restraining oneself in concupiscible pleasure; and similarly for each of the other virtues."²³ The presence of virtuous habitus thus yields the responsiveness to goodness which is the hallmark of a virtuous character.

Nevertheless St. Thomas also points out that moral virtue cannot respond properly to a human good unless the agent can judge whether or not an act is suitable to the

development of his rational nature. This determination is the purview of prudence, which ascertains the morality of human acts by judging whether they are in fact conducive to reason.²⁴ More significantly, however, the directiveness habitus provides a person's character is founded on the judgment of prudence. In acquiring virtue, a person "internalizes" the value which the good promoted by the virtue embodies. Accordingly, the internalization of value that accompanies the acquisition of virtue shapes a person's character in such a way that his moral judgment and evaluation become focused on the human good which the virtue promotes. He acquires a more perspicacious grasp of moral situations, in that he becomes able to relate various aspects of a specific moral situation to the relevant human good. For example, a person who is successful in establishing and maintaining friendship, i.e., who has acquired the human good of friendship, is better able to resolve conflicts between friends because he has a greater understanding of what friendship consists in. So *virtus habitus*, as with *habitus* generally, is "integrative" in the sense that it refers the various facets of a moral situation to the human good in question, directing them, as it were, as means to an end.

(3)

It is unquestionably true, then, that virtuous *habitus* has an important part to play in St. Thomas's moral philosophy, but the kind of virtuous *habitus* we have been considering thus far, *viz.*, moral virtue, is, in St. Thomas's moral thought, an imperfect form of virtue. As Maritain notes, he distinguishes between two types of moral virtue, perfect and imperfect.²⁵ St. Thomas asserts that the latter consists simply in an inclination to do good.

However, he adds that "[I]f we take the moral virtues in this way, they are not connected: since we find men, who, by natural temperament or by being accustomed, are prompt in doing deeds of liberality, but are not prompt in doing deeds of chastity."²⁶ Perfect moral virtue, on the other hand, "inclines us to do a good deed well" [*bonum opus bene agendum*].²⁷ Therefore, "if we take moral virtues in this way, we must say that they are connected[...]"²⁸ St. Thomas's contention in this text is that while the imperfect moral virtues incline a person toward the good, they do not exist in the state of *habitus*. Commenting on this point, Maritain adds that the imperfect virtues "enable us to do certain good things, but they do not enable us to live well, (i.e. [to lead] the good life)."²⁹

For St. Thomas, the aim of the good life is union with God in the Beatific Vision. A person receives this end through the presence of the theological virtue of charity, which imparts a supernatural orientation to his practice of moral virtue. The result is that the moral virtues he has acquired himself become perfect virtues through the infusion of divine grace. The "infused" or perfect virtues have the same subject as the acquired or imperfect virtues -- acquired and infused courage, for example, have bold action as their subject -- but the two kinds of virtue differ on the form or nature of their acts. Even though both have a mean, the mean of infused moral virtue is the divine law while that of acquired moral virtue is right reason. But St. Thomas points out that since an act of virtue gets its form from its end, and since God or the *Summum Bonum* is the final end of all virtuous acts, charity is the "form of the virtues" (*forma virtutum*), in that "it directs the acts of all the other virtues to this end."³⁰ So while the *habitus* of moral virtue directs a person

toward a particular human good, the habitus of charity, the habitus which underwrites the infused moral virtues, directs him toward his final end, the Summum Bonum.

St. Thomas's claim that charity is the "form of the virtues" suggests that charity connects the moral virtues by ordering them toward a person's supernatural end, just as (acquired) moral virtues order the various elements of human action toward a particular human good. As St. Thomas writes, "since each thing is ordered to reach its end by some operation, and since the means must be in some manner proportionate to the end, of necessity there must be in man certain perfections whereby he may be ordered to his supernatural end [...]." ³¹ And later, in the same text, he adds that "man is endowed by God with certain infused virtues which perfect him in the ordering of his actions to their end, which is eternal life." ³² Thus, for St. Thomas the habitus of charity orders a person's pursuit of specific human good so that the pursuit of his good contributes to the attainment of his final end. The habitus of charity, therefore, brings together or integrates the moral virtues by directing them toward God.

The orientation toward God which results from the infusion of charity is of course an effect of divine grace, since God Himself is the cause of the habitus of charity. But because God always works in cooperation with His rational creatures, the inculcation of this habitus involves the active agency the recipient's will and reason. That is, one may accept divine grace, specifically the habitus of charity, and encourage it to flourish within himself, or one may freely reject it. The perfective role of charity, then, exhibits voluntariness. But this is true of habitus generally. For St. Thomas, habitus develops a person's powers, whether on the natural plane (as with the moral virtues) or on the

supernatural plane (as with charity and the other theological virtues) by focusing these powers on a good. It is indeed true that St. Thomas also mentions vicious habitus or vice, but this should be considered a parody of habitus. While the Marquis de Sade may have planned and deliberated about his perversions, his actions were nevertheless sinful because they corrupted (rather than perfected) his human nature. Genuine habitus, contrastingly, is directed toward the good of a person. Understood in this manner, St. Thomas's doctrine of habitus is inseparable from his theory of virtue and thus is an essential part of his moral philosophy.

NOTES

1. Simon, Yves Moral Virtue, edited by Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986) pp. 55-60.
2. Maritain, Jacques Science and Wisdom, translated by Bernard Wall, (London: The Centenary Press, 1940), pp. 145-154.
3. On this point, see Simon Moral Virtue, pp. 58-59.
4. Thus: A determined inclination to it [an object] is established in them so that this disposition, once received, is as it were a sort of form which tends, as nature would, to one thing. It is on this count that custom or habit is said to be a second nature. [...et firmatur in eis inclinatio determinate in illud, ita quod ista dispositio superinducta, est quasi quaedam forma per modum naturae tendens in unum. Et propter hoc dicitur, quod consuetudo est altera natura.] De Virtutibus in Communi a. 9 c. English translations of texts from De Virtutibus in Communi are taken from St. Thomas Aquinas on The Virtues translated by John Reid O.P. (Providence, R.I.: The Providence College Press, 1951).
5. ST q. 53 a. 2. c.
6. See Simon Moral Virtue, pp. 58-59.
7. ST I-II q. 50 a. 4.
8. Respondeo [...] aliqui habitus homini a Deo infundatur ST I-II q. 51 a. 4 c English translations of texts from the Summa Theologiae are from Summa Theologica translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947).

9. Est enim de ratione habitus ut importet habitudinem quandam in ordine ad naturam rei, secundum quod convenit vel non convenit [...] Sed sunt quidam habitus qui etiam ex parte subiecti in quo sunt, primo et principaliter important ordinem ad actum. ST I-II 1.49. a.3 c.
10. Unde, cum duplex sit potentia, scilicet potentia ad esse et potentia ad agere [...] ST I-II q. 55 a. 2 c.
11. ST I-II 1.50 a.1 c.
12. Si quae autem aliae actiones homini convenient, possunt dici quidem hominis actiones [...] ST I-II 1.1 a.1 c.
13. ST I-II 1.55 a.2 c.
14. St. Thomas distinguishes between two kinds of certitude in the following text: Certitude has two aspects: the one depends on its cause (ex causa certitudinis); whatever has a certain cause is itself more certain [...] The other aspect of certitude depends on its possessor (certitudo ex parte subiecti); for anyone what is more certain is what his mind penetrates more fully. (Primo modo, dicendum est quod certitudo potest considerari dupliciter. Uno modo, ex causa certitudinis et sic dicitur esse certius quod habet certiore causam [...] Allo modo potest considerari certitudo ex parte subiecti, et sic dicitur esse certius quod plenius consequitur intellectus hominis. ST II-II q. 4 a. 8 c.) And commenting on the certitude of faith, he writes: Since, however, a thing is judged simply with regard to its cause, but relatively with respect to a disposition on the part of the subject, it follows that faith is more certain simply [simpliciter], while the others (wisdom, science, and

- understanding) are more certain relatively, i.e., for us [secundum quid]. (Sed quia unumquoque iudicatur simpliciter quidem secundum causam suam, secundum autem dispositionem quae ex parte subjecti est iudicatur secundum quid, inde est quod fides est simpliciter certior, sed alia sunt certiora secundum quid. scilicet quoad nos. Ibi dem.).
15. On connaturality, see ST II-II 1.45 a.2 c.
 16. Respondeo. Dicendum, quod virtus secundum sui nominis rationem, potentiae complementum designat. De Virtutibus in Communi. a.1 c.
 17. Inde est quod virtus bonum facit habentem, et opus eius reddit bonum [...] Ibi dem.
 18. Illi igitur habitus qui vel sunt in parte appetitiva, vel a parte appetitiva dependent, ordinantur formaliter ad bonum; under potissime habent rationem virtutes. De Virtutibus in Communi a.7 c.
 19. Illi vero habitus qui nec sunt in appetitiva parte, nec ab eadem dependent, possunt quidem ordinari materialiter in id quod est bonum, non tamen formaliter sub rationi boni [...] ibi dem.
 20. Unde et possunt aliquo modo dici virtutes, non tamen ita proprie sicut primi habitus. Ibi dem.
 21. Nam virtus ordinatur ad actum bonum, qui est actus debitus et ordinatus secundum rationem. De Virtutibus in Communi a.2 c.
 22. De Virtutibus in Communi a.1 c.

23. [...] sicut iustitia facit inclinationem in bonum quod est aequalitas pertinentium ad communicationem vitae; temperantia in bonum quod est refrenari a concupiscentiis; et sic de singulis virtutibus. De Virtutibus in Communi a.6 c.
24. ST I-II 1. 57 a.4 c. and ST I-II q.57 a.5 c.
25. Maritain, Science and Wisdom, p. 147-150.
26. Et hoc modo accipiendo virtutes morales, non sunt connexae: videmus enim aliquem ex naturali complexione, vel ex aliqua consuetudine, esse promptum ad opera liberalitatis, qui tamen non est promptus ad opera castitatis. ST I-II q.65 a.1 c.
27. Perfecta autem virtus moralis est habitus inclinans in bonum opus bene agendum. Ibi dem.
28. Et sic accipiendo virtutes morales, dicendum est eas connexas esse [...] Ibi dem.
29. Maritain Science and Wisdom, p. 150.
30. Unde oportet quod in moralibus id quod dat actui ordinem ad finem det ei et formam. Manifestum est autem secundum praedicta, quod per caritatem ordinatur actus omnium aliarum virtutum ad ultimum finem. Et secundum hoc ipsa dat formam actibus omnium aliarum virtutum. Et pro tanto dicitur esse forma virtutum, nam et ipsae virtutes dicuntur in ordine ad actus formatas. ST II-II q.23 a.8 c.
31. Et quia unumquodque ordinatur ad finem per operationem aliquam; et ea quae sunt ad finem, oportet esse aliquam finem proportionata; necessarium est esse aliquas hominis perfectiones quibus ordinetur ad finem supernaturalem [...] De Virtutibus in Communi a.10 c.

32. [...] ita ex divine influentia consequitur homo, praeter praemissa supernaturalia principle, aliquas virtutes infuses, quibus perficitur ad operations ordinandas in finem vitae aeternae. Ibidem.