

Aquinas on the Virtue of Charity

(Selected by John Rose from the *Summa Theologica*.)

<http://newadvent.org/summa/2062.htm>

II-IIae (Volume 2: Prima Secundae Partis) Question 62. The theological virtues

Question 62, Article 2. Whether the theological virtues are distinct from the intellectual and moral virtues?

[Note from the editor: The Summa has 612 “Questions” divided into a total of 3120 “Articles”, each consisting of a question with answers. Aquinas always starts with “Objections”, statements that oppose the conclusion he intends to establish. He finishes each article by answering the objections.]

Objection 1. It would seem that the theological virtues are not distinct from the moral and intellectual virtues. For the theological virtues, if they be in a human soul, must needs perfect it, either as to the intellective, or as to the appetitive part. Now the virtues which perfect the intellective part are called intellectual; and the virtues which perfect the appetitive part, are called moral. Therefore, the theological virtues are not distinct from the moral and intellectual virtues.

Objection 2. Further, the theological virtues are those which direct us to God. Now, among the intellectual virtues there is one which directs us to God: this is wisdom, which is about Divine things, since it considers the highest cause. Therefore the theological virtues are not distinct from the intellectual virtues.

Objection 3. Further, Augustine (*De Moribus Eccl.* xv) shows how the four cardinal virtues are the “order of love.” Now love is charity, which is a theological virtue. Therefore the moral virtues are not distinct from the theological.

On the contrary, That which is above man’s nature is distinct from that which is according to his nature. But the theological virtues are above man’s nature; while the intellectual and moral virtues are in proportion to his nature, as clearly shown above (Question 58, Article 3). Therefore they are distinct from one another.

I answer that, As stated above (54, 2, ad 1), habits are specifically distinct from one another in respect of the formal difference of their objects. Now the object of the theological virtues is God Himself, Who is the last end of all, as surpassing the knowledge of our reason. On the other hand, the object of the intellectual and moral virtues is something comprehensible to human reason. Wherefore the theological virtues are specifically distinct from the moral and intellectual virtues.

Reply to Objection 1. The intellectual and moral virtues perfect man’s intellect and appetite according to the capacity of human nature; the theological virtues, supernaturally.

Reply to Objection 2. The wisdom which the Philosopher [Aristotle] (*Ethic.* vi, 3,7) reckons as an intellectual virtue, considers Divine things so far as they are open to the research of human reason. *[As in natural theology. — Ed.]* Theological virtue, on the other hand, is about those same things so far as they surpass human reason. *[That is, in Divine revelation. — Ed.]*

Reply to Objection 3. Though charity is love, yet love is not always charity. When, then, it is stated that every virtue is the order of love, this can be understood either of love in the general sense, or of the love of charity. If it be understood of love, commonly so called, then each virtue is stated to be the order of love, in so far as each cardinal virtue requires ordinate emotions; and love is the root and cause of every emotion, as stated above (*[Summa Theologica, Prima Pars, Question] 27, [Article] 4; 28, 6, ad 2; 41, 2, ad 1*). If, however, it be understood of the love of charity, it does not mean that every other virtue is charity essentially; but that all other virtues depend on charity in some way, as we shall show further on (*[Question] 65, A2,5; II-II [Secunda Secundae Pars, Question], 23, 7*).

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II-IIae (Volume 2: Prima Secundae Partis) Question 62. The theological virtues

Question 62, Article 4. Whether faith precedes hope, and hope charity?

Objection 1. It would seem that the order of the theological virtues is not that faith precedes hope, and hope charity. For the root precedes that which grows from it. Now charity is the root of all the

virtues, according to Ephesians 3:17: “Being rooted and founded in charity.” Therefore charity precedes the others.

Objection 2. Further, Augustine says (*De Doctr. Christ.* i): “A man cannot love what he does not believe to exist. But if he believes and loves, by doing good works he ends in hoping.” Therefore it seems that faith precedes charity, and charity hope.

Objection 3. Further, love is the principle of all our emotions, as stated above (2, ad 3). Now hope is a kind of emotion, since it is a passion, as stated above (Question 25, Article 2). Therefore charity, which is love, precedes hope.

On the contrary, The Apostle [Paul] enumerates them thus (1 Corinthians 13:13): “Now there remain faith, hope, charity.”

I answer that, Order is twofold: order of generation, and order of perfection. By order of generation, in respect of which matter precedes form, and the imperfect precedes the perfect, in one same subject faith precedes hope, and hope charity, as to their acts: because habits are all infused together. For the movement of the appetite cannot tend to anything, either by hoping or loving, unless that thing be apprehended by the sense or by the intellect. Now it is by faith that the intellect apprehends the object of hope and love. Hence in the order of generation, faith precedes hope and charity. In like manner a man loves a thing because he apprehends it as his good. Now from the very fact that a man hopes to be able to obtain some good through someone, he looks on the man in whom he hopes as a good of his own. Hence for the very reason that a man hopes in someone, he proceeds to love him: so that in the order of generation, hope precedes charity as regards their respective acts.

But in the order of perfection, charity precedes faith and hope: because both faith and hope are quickened by charity, and receive from charity their full complement as virtues. For thus charity is the mother and the root of all the virtues, inasmuch as it is the form of them all, as we shall state further on (II-II, 23, 8). [Aquinas says in 23, 7 that charity gives shape to all true human goals: “It is possible for an act, without charity, to be generically good, but not perfectly good, because it lacks its due order to the last end.” *The last end supernatural, union with God in Heaven.* — Ed.]

This suffices for the *Reply to the First Objection.*

Reply to Objection 2. Augustine is speaking of that hope whereby a man hopes to obtain bliss through the merits which he has already: this belongs to hope quickened by and following charity. But it is possible for a man before having charity, to hope through merits not already possessed, but which he hopes to possess.

Reply to Objection 3. As stated above (Question 40, Article 7), in treating of the passions, hope regards two things. One as its principal object, viz. the good hoped for. With regard to this, love always precedes hope: for good is never hoped for unless it be desired and loved. Hope also regards the person from whom a man hopes to be able to obtain some good. With regard to this, hope precedes love at first; though afterwards hope is increased by love. Because from the fact that a man thinks that he can obtain a good through someone, he begins to love him: and from the fact that he loves him, he then hopes all the more in him.

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II-IIae (Volume 3: Secunda Secundae Partis) Question 23. Charity, considered in itself

Question 23, Article 2. Whether charity is something created in the soul?

Objection 1. It would seem that charity is not something created in the soul. For Augustine says (*De Trin.* viii, 7): “He that loveth his neighbor, consequently, loveth love itself.” Now God is love. Therefore it follows that he loves God in the first place. [But see the Answer to this Objection. — Ed.] Again he says (*De Trin.* xv, 17): “It was said: God is Charity, even as it was said: God is a Spirit.” Therefore charity is not something created in the soul, but is God Himself.

Objection 2. Further, God is the life of the soul spiritually just as the soul is the life of the body, according to Deuteronomy 30:20: “He is thy life.” Now the soul by itself quickens the body. Therefore God quickens the soul by Himself. But He quickens it by charity, according to 1 John 3:14:

“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.” Therefore God is charity itself.

Objection 3. Further, no created thing is of infinite power; on the contrary every creature is vanity. But charity is not vanity, indeed it is opposed to vanity; and it is of infinite power, since it brings the human soul to the infinite good. Therefore charity is not something created in the soul.

On the contrary, Augustine says (*De Doctr. Christ.* iii, 10): “By charity I mean the movement of the soul towards the enjoyment of God for His own sake.” But a movement of the soul is something created in the soul. Therefore charity is something created in the soul.

I answer that, The Master [Peter Lombard] looks thoroughly into this question in 17 of the First Book [of the *Sentences*], and concludes that charity is not something created in the soul, but is the Holy Ghost Himself dwelling in the mind. Nor does he mean to say that this movement of love whereby we love God is the Holy Ghost Himself, but that this movement is from the Holy Ghost without any intermediary habit, whereas other virtuous acts are from the Holy Ghost by means of the habits of other virtues, for instance the habit of faith or hope or of some other virtue: and this he said on account of the excellence of charity.

But if we consider the matter aright, this would be, on the contrary, detrimental to charity. For when the Holy Ghost moves the human mind the movement of charity does not proceed from this motion in such a way that the human mind be merely moved, without being the principle of this movement, as when a body is moved by some extrinsic motive power. For this is contrary to the nature of a voluntary act, whose principle needs to be in itself, as stated above (I-II, 6, 1): so that it would follow that to love is not a voluntary act, which involves a contradiction, since love, of its very nature, implies an act of the will.

Likewise, neither can it be said that the Holy Ghost moves the will in such a way to the act of loving, as though the will were an instrument, for an instrument, though it be a principle of action, nevertheless has not the power to act or not to act, for then again the act would cease to be voluntary and meritorious, whereas it has been stated above (I-II, 114, 4) that the love of charity is the root of merit: and, given that the will is moved by the Holy Ghost to the act of love, it is necessary that the will also should be the efficient cause of that act.

Now no act is perfectly produced by an active power, unless it be connatural to that power of reason of some form which is the principle of that action. Wherefore God, Who moves all things to their due ends, bestowed on each thing the form whereby it is inclined to the end appointed to it by Him; and in this way He “ordereth all things sweetly” (Wisdom 8:1). But it is evident that the act of charity surpasses the nature of the power of the will, so that, therefore, unless some form be superadded to the natural power, inclining it to the act of love, this same act would be less perfect than the natural acts and the acts of the other powers; nor would it be easy and pleasurable to perform. And this is evidently untrue, since no virtue has such a strong inclination to its act as charity has, nor does any virtue perform its act with so great pleasure. Therefore it is most necessary that, for us to perform the act of charity, there should be in us some habitual form superadded to the natural power, inclining that power to the act of charity, and causing it to act with ease and pleasure.

Reply to Objection 1. The Divine Essence Itself is charity, even as It is wisdom and goodness. Wherefore just as we are said to be good with the goodness which is God, and wise with the wisdom which is God (since the goodness whereby we are formally good is a participation of Divine goodness, and the wisdom whereby we are formally wise, is a share of Divine wisdom), so too, the charity whereby formally we love our neighbor is a participation of Divine charity. For this manner of speaking is common among the Platonists, with whose doctrines Augustine was imbued; and the lack of adverting to this has been to some an occasion of error. [*Particulars can be analogized with universals, as in Plato’s Symposium, but this is not an infallible method.* — Ed.]

Reply to Objection 2. God is effectively the life both of the soul by charity, and of the body by the soul: but formally charity is the life of the soul, even as the soul is the life of the body. Consequently we may conclude from this that just as the soul is immediately united to the body, so is charity to the soul.

Reply to Objection 3. Charity works formally. Now the efficacy of a form depends on the power of the agent, who instills the form, wherefore it is evident that charity is not vanity. But because it produces an infinite effect, since, by justifying the soul, it unites it to God, this proves the infinity of the Divine power, which is the author of charity.

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**II-IIae (Volume 3: Secunda Secundae Partis) Question 23. Charity, considered in itself
Question 23, Article 6. Whether charity is the most excellent of the virtues?**

Objection 1. It would seem that charity is not the most excellent of the virtues. Because the higher power has the higher virtue even as it has a higher operation. Now the intellect is higher than the will, since it directs the will. Therefore, faith, which is in the intellect, is more excellent than charity which is in the will.

Objection 2. Further, the thing by which another works seems the less excellent of the two, even as a servant, by whom his master works, is beneath his master. Now “faith . . . worketh by charity,” according to Galatians 5:6. Therefore faith is more excellent than charity.

Objection 3. Further, that which is by way of addition to another seems to be the more perfect of the two. Now hope seems to be something additional to charity: for the object of charity is good, whereas the object of hope is an arduous good. Therefore hope is more excellent than charity.

On the contrary, It is written (1 Corinthians 13:13): “The greater of these is charity.”

I answer that, Since good, in human acts, depends on their being regulated by the due rule, it must needs be that human virtue, which is a principle of good acts, consists in attaining the rule of human acts. Now the rule of human acts is twofold, as stated above (Article 3), namely, human reason and God: yet God is the first rule, whereby, even human reason must be regulated. Consequently the theological virtues, which consist in attaining this first rule, since their object is God, are more excellent than the moral, or the intellectual virtues, which consist in attaining human reason: and it follows that among the theological virtues themselves, the first place belongs to that which attains God most.

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

Reply to Objection 1. The operation of the intellect is completed by the thing understood being in the intellectual subject, so that the excellence of the intellectual operation is assessed according to the measure of the intellect. On the other hand, the operation of the will and of every appetitive power is completed in the tendency of the appetite towards a thing as its term, wherefore the excellence of the appetitive operation is gauged according to the thing which is the object of the operation. Now those things which are beneath the soul are more excellent in the soul than they are in themselves, because a thing is contained according to the mode of the container (*De Causis* xii). On the other hand, things that are above the soul, are more excellent in themselves than they are in the soul. Consequently it is better to know than to love the things that are beneath us; for which reason the Philosopher [Aristotle] gave the preference to the intellectual virtues over the moral virtues (*Ethic.* x, 7,8): whereas the love of the things that are above us, especially of God, ranks before the knowledge of such things. Therefore charity is more excellent than faith.

Reply to Objection 2. Faith works by love, not instrumentally, as a master by his servant, but as by its proper form: hence the argument does not prove.

Reply to Objection 3. The same good is the object of charity and of hope: but charity implies union with that good, whereas hope implies distance therefrom. Hence charity does not regard that good as being arduous, as hope does, since what is already united has not the character of arduous: and this shows that charity is more perfect than hope.