Thomas Aquinas and Positive Psychology:
A Catholic Approach to the Use of the Virtues in Psychology

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Introduction

In this talk,¹ I would like to propose a critical conversation about flourishing and the use of virtue in psychology between two leaders in their respective fields: first, Martin E. P. Seligman, who named and, to a degree, launched the positive psychology movement, and, second, Thomas Aquinas, who is considered a perennial leader in classic Christian virtue theory drawing from biblical and patristic sources on virtue, as well as from classic philosophy. Aquinas is common ground for many Christians—but in a different way than are the Bible (Sacred Scriptures) and the Patristic tradition. In particular, I will present a Catholic view of Aquinas and the sources that Roman Catholics consider to be part of the living tradition and Magisterium that the Holy Spirit continues to use to guide the Church (in spite of moral errs of its particular members).

As a contribution toward a Christian Positive Psychology from this communal (Catholic) perspective, I would like to identify several distinctions in the use of the virtues in psychology. These distinctions will help us to better understand the so-called positive psychology approach (as depicted by Seligman and Christopher Peterson) and a Catholic approach to Christian

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Positive Psychology (inspired by the virtue theory of Thomas Aquinas and his theory of nature and grace).

Instead of starting with a treatment of the virtues per se (as the function of cognitive and affective powers—the material cause of virtue), this approach requires that we appraise first the notions of flourishing (the efficacious/formal and final causes). In fact, I must first address the types of flourishing (happiness and beatitude) in order to situate the moral and graced or normative and theological bases for virtue theory and to answer some ethical queries important for Catholic thinkers who use virtue in psychology. In particular, I will address Aquinas’ notion of flourishing and moral development, as operative in a threefold distinction of virtue as involving: (1) personal dispositions to act (dispositional aspect), (2) types of acts (agentive aspect), and (3) standards for action (normative aspect) – that is, the legal, professional, ethical, and religious models and norms needed for flourishing. These distinctions allow us to go beyond simple function (of the human personal capacities or the material cause of virtue), for we must also attend to the content of virtue (namely, the formal and final aspects needed to understand a Christian view on virtue and vice).

Second, I will situate positive psychology’s notion of flourishing and normativeness in its overall view of the person.

Third, I will analyze differences concerning the use of virtues in psychology based on Positive Psychology’s notion of “integrity” and Aquinas’ view of “the connection of the virtues.”

In conclusion, I will assess some of the strengths and limitations of Aquinas and the positive psychology approach to virtue for consideration as Catholic input toward a Christian Positive Psychology. First, I turn to Aquinas on flourishing, agency, dispositions, and norms.
1. Aquinas: Virtue’s normative, dispositional, agentive contributions to flourishing

Aquinas was an extraordinary medieval thinker (1224-1274) whose rich notion of the virtues and the Christian life continues to be of interest, especially in the contemporary renewal of virtue theory, and to offer a contribution to a Christian positive psychology. I will give a very simple introduction to his philosophical and theological thought on flourishing and the virtues (Torrell, 2005; Pope, 2002).

I would like to assert that Aquinas is not always represented for the full richness of his thought. He is known (1) for his virtue approach in some quarters and (2) for his normative approach (to nature and natural law) in others; at times, (3) for his eudemonic or flourishing perspective on the teleology of moral agency and ethics, and at other times, (4) for his religious accent on divine beatitude, grace, and exemplarity of Jesus Christ in theological, Christian ethics.

Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that only when integrating all of these elements in his larger vision of creation, fall, and redemption (exitus and reditus) does his notion of flourishing and moral development of virtue come clear.

While not uncontroversial among approaches to Christian ethics, Aquinas’ virtue theory merits attention because of its ability to interrelate developmental and normative domains and for its capacity to support a nuanced conversation between faith and religious practices (theology), reason and sapiential practices (philosophy), and measured observations and therapeutic applications (the human sciences, namely, psychology).

How does Aquinas define virtue? Aquinas (ST I-II 55.4) uses a definition of virtue that Lottin (1942-1960) has attributed to St. Augustine: “Virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without
us” (Augustine, 387-395/1993, II.19: PL 32.1268). The last clause refers to infused virtue, that is, to the type of virtue that is informed through God’s gifts of faith, hope, and love. Aquinas (ST I-II, 55.4) defines virtue in general as a good operative disposition (habitus operativus), which involves a firm and stable quality to act morally. His most basic philosophical definition states: “Virtue denotes a determinate perfection of a power” (ST I-II, 56.1).

1.1. The Norm of Flourishing (Beatitude as normative for Christian virtue) Rooted in the teaching of the Book of Genesis (1:27, New Revised Standard Version), human capacity for flourishing and virtue is found in our being created in the image of God. This capacity is manifest in human intelligence, free will, and self-determination (ST I-II, Prologue); that is, the dependent autonomy of human nature, which participates in the divine gift of being created in the image of God, on the one hand, and is limited in another way by the effects of sin, on the other. The image of God flourishes in the human person through the constancy and creativity of virtues, construed as dispositions that fulfill the human person in the partial, complete, and ultimate ways. Aquinas first addresses these differences according to theological and infused virtues, then in terms of the moral (and intellectual) virtues. His (and our) interest is more than a functional one. It does involve the function of the virtues, but it also involves their normative weight (which for the Catholic Christian is Christological and Trinitarian) that is not simply identified with the example of the virtuous person’s bio-psychosocial faculties per se, but in the interplay of the finality, ends, and goods that fulfill at personal and social, natural and graced levels (ST I-II, 1-5). Ultimately, Aquinas’ view of complete and perfect virtue must be understood as a faith- and grace-informed imitation of Christ, who is the divine model and mentor and the primary exemplar of all true and complete virtue.
In order to understand this Catholic approach, we need to be attentive to Aquinas’ treatment of not only how grace informs nature in the order of creation (*ad imaginem Dei*), but also how grace heals and transforms (divinizes) nature after the fall, in the order of redemption. I do not need to convince psychotherapists of the need to highlight “The Fall.” While sin is not directly the cause of all mental disease, the effect of the Fall and the effect of personal sin nevertheless continue to plague human flourishing and mental health (ST I 49.1). The Redemption wrought by Christ offers new sources – graced sources, sacramental sources – for healing and forgiveness that comes through the virtues of faith, hope, and love as St. Paul reminds us (in Rom. 5:15 and 1 Cor. 13) as well as these theological virtues’ influence in all the other virtues in the life of the Spirit (Rom. 8).

The primary referent, for Aquinas’s view of virtue, is the person’s ultimate end, the complete happiness or the beatitude that has God as its *origin, means, and end* (God-Incarnate in Christ, the Gift of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of loving contemplation of God) (ST I-II, 5; II-II, 188.6). Ultimate flourishing as seen in the Beatitudes (ST I-II, 69) serves as the norm for virtue; the vocation of flourishing is to be in accord with divine law, especially the divine law of love (ST I-II, 106-108).

In addition to this final goal, another type of parameter for flourishing and moral development is established by the normativeness due to the human origin (ST I 75-102; I-II 94.2 ; *On Truth*, V.5). In the light of evolutionary sociobiology, this position is anything but uncontroversial. The debate on common nature, ethical value, and psychological normalcy is complex and longstanding. Even in the midst of a multitude of contingencies and disorders (at personal, interpersonal/social and environmental levels), a Catholic Thomist view retains, nonetheless, a non-relativist position. Of Aquinas’ numerous contributions to this ongoing
debate, one is particularly helpful: the distinction between basic nature and second-nature; that is, between the bedrock commonality of human beings-like-us (basic nature) and the diverse developmental pathways that human beings can take (second-nature).

1.2. Agentive Aspects of Virtues: the basis for free and responsible acts

A focus on the virtue psychology of agency, secondly, must address the importance of acts, their consequences, and the nature of freedom.

In Aquinas’ Christian metaphysical virtue approach, the experience of free will (and the free exercise of virtuous acts) cannot be explained by the body alone (material causes), that is, by the person’s genome and neural systems alone). Explaining experiences of free will requires more than phenomenological descriptions as well. It requires formal and final causes (or conditions; Spitzer, 2010) that alone are sufficient to complement the necessary material causes found in the body (brain, genes, environment) and non-conscious processes. On the one hand, free will requires that the human person has a self-moving capacity (formal cause or condition). The Christian perspective, furthermore, recognizes the working of the Holy Spirit through divine grace (in particular acts, such as courage, hope, faith, …). It also involves how the action is shaped (conditioned) by knowledge and by love of God and neighbor (for each Christian explicitly) that the person gains through learning and respecting the Ten Commandments, the teaching in the Gospels (especially the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5-7] and the Beatitudes) and other scriptural moral and spiritual exhortations (especially those of St. Paul’s (paraclesis) found in: Romans 12-15, 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, Colossians 3 and 4, and Ephesians 4 and 5. Galatians 5; Pinckaers, 2006; Sherwin, 2005). Aquinas calls upon St. Paul to remind us that the basic knowledge and love of God is understandable through the law written in each person’s heart (Rom 1-2:14).
On the other hand, this knowledge and love also involves the tendency toward everyday and ultimate flourishing (final cause). For the Christian, the virtue approach will involve being receptive and active in announcing the Kingdom of God, the imitation of Christ, the movement of the Holy Spirit, …

On both these counts (formal and final causality), the human person has the non-invasive capacity to be influenced by divine grace (as understood in a Catholic Christian worldview), without compromising human free will (Schmitz, 2009).

Next, this discussion of human free moral acts, as a basic aspect of human flourishing, requires further considerations of moral character, that is, the agent’s disposition to act virtuously, once again inspired by the norm that aims at flourishing.

1.3. Dispositional aspect of virtues: Character in flourishing.

The general direction of every virtuous and vicious act of each client and therapist has past sources of conditioning, present influences, and future goals. They involve distinct combinations of matter, reason, and disposition (body, intention, and character). That is, they imply not only “what we do” (matter of the act) and “why we do it” (the intention and motivation of the act), but also “who we become through our acts” (the character defined by the acts). Virtuous and vicious acts constitute our moral character and our disposition to act. As John Paul II says in Veritatis Splendor no. 71, while citing Aquinas (ST I-II, 1.3), “Human acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness and evil of the individual who performs them.” They delineate the “profound spiritual traits,” the good and evil characteristics that are engraved in the person who performs them. This is why the dispositional aspect of virtue and vice is of utmost interest for Catholic use of virtue in psychology.
For Aquinas (ST I-II, 51.3, 63.1; 2 Thes 2:13), the dispositional aspect of virtue (or vice) relates to moral development and sanctification (or deification, as the orthodox or theosis as Methodists would say). Such dispositional changes are possible only because we, led by divine grace, can influence and even construct a virtuous character, although neither without effort and assistance nor in abstraction of one’s genome, neurons, and environment.

As an operative habitus or disposition, a virtue is the positive development of a natural human power – various material causes of the body-spiritual soul unity: intellect, will, and emotions/passions according to the basic ordering of its nature (ST I-II, 94.2), even though the fomes peccati constitute a disordered autonomy within these inclinations. Nonetheless, the dispositions toward virtue or vice can be directed (with more or less success) by human reason and divine law or grace (formal causes). Furthermore, virtuous dispositions find sure support from the grace of the Holy Spirit (efficient causes), through whom the human agent moves himself while being moved (ST II-II, 52.2 ad 3)

St. Thomas defines an operative disposition (habitus) as an acquired quality that we change only with great effort (ST I-II, 55.1); such a disposition to act (for justice and respect for the basic dignity of each person, for example) becomes second nature (connaturalis) by internalizing the good in our capacities to know and to love (reason, will, emotion) (ST I-II, 49-54). Dispositions imply some stability, continuity, and flexibility in rational, volitional, or emotional powers. However, they are neither impervious to further change (for better or for worse), nor are they deterministic and mechanical. In order to be considered virtuous, they must be both faithful and creative within the moral and divine law.

Vice also works at the level of the dispositions of emotion, will, and reason. But, in contrast, vice internalizes the simply apparent goods or patent evil that in reality run counter to
human nature and flourishing. For example, the dispositional aspect of evil is found in addictions to substances and in disordered attachments (pornography, adultery, masturbation). Both the acts and dispositions of virtues and vices have normative characteristics; while virtues are in accord with reason and depend on grace for Christ-like consistency, the vices involve a privation of reason that would be due to an act or disposition.

2. Positive Psychology

The positive psychology approach is of particular interest because it has focused contemporary bio-psychosocial research on further dimensions of moral development than are found in exclusivist stage theories (Titus, forthcoming). In order to do so, it has pressed into the service of moral psychology a fuller concept of virtue than that of Jean Piaget (1932) or Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984). In particular, it employs a wide range of virtues, character strengths, and situational themes in order to circumscribe psychological flourishing, moral development, and social well-being. This approach is meta-theoretical. It joins disparate areas of research with disparate terminology under a common concern for positive experience and traits. The result is often less conceptual coherence than found in the religious and philosophical sources that are rooted in evidenced-based observations of lived experience (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidenced-Based Practice, 2006; Gubbins, 2008) and in Biblical revelation and Magisterium, for the Catholic Christian.

2.1. Martin Seligman on Flourishing and Moral Development

Here, I would like to briefly present Martin Seligman’s virtue theory and empirical research on flourishing and moral development. After having started his research career with the topics of helplessness in 1975 and abnormal psychology in 1982, Seligman changed tack to study optimism and hope in the 1990s. In 1998, as the President of the American Psychological
Association (APA), he announced that the moment had come for a radical transformation in the domain of psychology (Fowler, Seligman, & Koocher, 1999). Since then, he has continued to empirically study flourishing and happiness and to establish a taxonomy of good character (2002); he has inspired a vast research project on the virtues (2004—Values in Action Institute), which includes efforts at clinical implications (Peterson & Seligman, 2002; see also Joseph & Linley, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2002, 2007). This positive psychology movement seeks to appropriate the positive conceptual foundation of diverse philosophical and religious traditions on virtues, character traits, and human nature. As a complement to the American Psychiatric Association’s *DSM-IV-TR* (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* in its fourth version-revised, 2000), positive psychology has proposed itself as a *Manual of the Sanities* (2004).

Even if the school of positive psychology was identified as such only in 1998 (fourteen years ago), it has appropriated theory and research from: generative psychology (John Piaget, since the 1930s), humanistic theories (Maslow, 1956; Rogers, 1959), resilience research [since the 1960s, Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (1986); and since the 1970s, Norman Garmezy, Ann Masten, Lois Murphy, Michael Rutter], and studies on excellence, happiness (and subjective well-being), hope, and creativity, and other character traits and virtues that do not cease to fascinate researchers (Snyder, 1994; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) —all in the line of rebutting the negativity of certain medical and psychological models (including that of Sigmund Freud).

As a biopsychosocial perspective, positive psychology sets its focus beyond pathology to understand human development. Instead of seeking simply to relieve symptoms or to make people less unhappy, it seeks to find signs of health, to promote personal flourishing, as well as to prevent pathologies and to cure illnesses. It is unique—in modern psychology—in that it
employs the virtues and character strengths as a generative conceptual base to organize a comprehensive empirical research project.

Peterson, Seligman, and the positive psychology approach have pressed the concept of virtue into the service of theoretical and empirical psychology [and even clinical applications]. In particular, positive psychology focuses on character strengths and virtues that aid human healing, growth, and flourishing, using neurological, cognitive, and evolutionary sciences [as well as on comparative pre-empirical studies]. It offers especially pertinent observations about the functioning and growth of a spectrum of virtues and, according to Martin Seligman, serves as “the social science equivalent of virtue ethics, using the scientific method to inform philosophical pronouncements about the traits of a good person” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 89).

2.2. Virtues in Positive Psychology

In addition to a consensual definition, positive psychology’s treatment of virtues gives for each virtue: (1) a comparative presentation of theoretical traditions (psychological, philosophical, and religious); (2) the findings of empirical studies (assessment and measures of the virtue); (3) a discussion of the development of the virtue with its enabling and inhibiting factors; (4) an analysis of gender and cultural aspects, and finally (5) details on targeted interventions and research to be done in the future.

Peterson and Seligman situate the various aspects of virtues and good character at three levels of abstraction: first, virtue; second, character strengths; and third, situational themes (or practices). These three levels start with the more general and universal and move to the more specific and culturally diverse.
First, the virtues are the core characteristics that have been valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers for millennia. They identify six major virtues: wisdom, courage, (love and) humanity, justice, temperance, and (spirituality and) transcendence. They speculate that individuals are deemed to have good character because they have at least a threshold level of these virtues.

Second, at a more particular level, character strengths are the psychological processes or mechanisms that constitute the virtues. “They are the distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.14). At present, Peterson and Seligman have identified a total of 24 character strengths. These character strengths are important for two reasons. First, they are the basis for defining virtue: “Character strengths are the psychological ingredients—processes and mechanisms—that define the virtues” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). Second, displaying one or two of these strengths within a virtue group designates someone as having a good character.

Third, situational themes are the “specific habits” and their associated practices that lead people to develop and exhibit given character strengths in specific situations. For example, empathy, inclusiveness, and positivity in the workplace are themes bound to flourishing in a particular situation; at a more abstract level, these particular situational themes constitute the character strength of kindness, which falls in the broad virtue class of humanity (and love). Such themes permit and necessitate the study of settings such as workplace, family, school, and so on. These themes and their practices are situation-specific; therefore, they will describe consistently conduct only in a given setting and culture.

This distinction between virtue, character strength, and situational theme helps positive psychology to explain diversity (within interconnection) at different levels and between
sociocultural construals of goodness and flourishing. Positive psychology treats “the relationship of traits to action and the melding of disparate traits [which are] the concerns of modern personality psychology” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 88). Peterson and Seligman assert that “variation exists at the level of themes, less so at the level of character strengths, and not at all at the level of virtues” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 14). In order to understand the specificity of this “rich psychological content and […] explanatory power,” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13) and its potential use in a Catholic Christian approach to psychology and its relationship with philosophical and normative conceptions of virtue, in general, and the virtues, in particular, we need however to ask: Does positive psychology employ a normative anthropology and notion of flourishing as a pre-empirical basis for its use of the virtues?

**2.3. Normative bases for Positive Psychology**

In its analysis of positive subjective experiences (including flourishing) and individual traits, and in addition to positive institutions that enable positive experiences and traits, positive psychology seeks moral references and criteria for good character in two ways: (1) through the nature of virtue and its criteria and (2) through the notion of positive human nature.

First, Peterson and Seligman (2004) ground positive psychology’s classification in a long philosophical tradition concerned with morality explained in terms of virtues. The very first Greek philosophers asked, “what is the good of a person?” This framing of morality led them to examine character in particular virtues. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and others enumerated such virtues, regarding them as the traits of character that make someone a good person. (p. 9-10)

While adopting this pre-empirical moral anthropology of virtue, however, Peterson and Seligman distance the inner motivation of the virtues from moral laws, which they consider as merely external dictates. They critique moral law theory, which they find in ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and social contract and divine command theories. Their psychological venture, as
they say, “needs to downplay prescriptions for the good life (moral laws) and instead emphasize the why and the how of good character,” which are found in the virtues and character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.10). They thus separate the normative from the descriptive.

Seeking to justify and emphasize psychology’s specific competency in the domain of virtue, they employ the work of Lee Yearley (a Thomist by his original training) to identify three related realms of philosophical ethics that constitute a good character. These three realms are:

1- injunctions, commands and prohibitions, for example, the “thou shalt nots” and the occasional “thou shalt” in the Ten Commandments;
2- the virtuous predispositions to act in ways leading to a recognizable human excellence or instance of flourishing (usually hierarchically organized); and
3- the ways of life [or practices] protected by the injunctions and picked out by the virtues.(Yearley, 1990, as cited in Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 85)

Peterson and Seligman note that the second and third realms (virtues as predispositions and related ways of life or practices), while more vague than the first (pre-empirical moral commands), are the expertise of the positive psychology classification project. Although the hierarchy of the virtues is not unambiguous, the virtues continuously attest (1) the need for rationality and choice; (2) the need to reflect upon one’s own dispositions and expression of the major areas of virtue; and (3) the influence of life-commitments and of culture on the development and on the expression of the virtues. Each virtue, in psychological language, is “a property of the whole person and the life that the person leads,” in the words of Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 87). The strength of this moral psychology of virtue theory is its capacity to describe moral motivation and the resolution of psychological conflicts in terms of pertinent virtues; for example, concerning conflicts of partiality, Seligman, not uncontentiously (Pope, 1994; Benedict XV, 2005), claims that resolution comes in recognizing that “we should love our friends and family members (partiality) and be benevolent to people in general (impartiality)” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 88).
This general framework is further concretized by ten criteria used to identify virtues and character traits that must: (1) lead to flourishing by a good life; (2) correspond with moral values; (3) not diminish others; (4) have a non-felicitous opposite; (5) be a character trait or trait-like; (6) be conceptually identifiable; (7) enjoy consensus support; (8) be identifiable in prodigies and (9) in selective absences; and (10) be supported by cultural, institutional, and social practices (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 17-28). These criteria (especially 1 through 4) have an explicit moral dimension.

Although character traits and virtues are plural, Peterson and Seligman make reference to the stability of human nature and the possibility to verify empirically value-based personality traits and virtues. The positive psychology classification thus resists the reductionist positivism of the early twentieth century (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 59). Out of the same Values in Action Institute project (which also founded Peterson and Seligman’s 2004 volume), Linley and Joseph (2004) are even clearer concerning how implicit assumptions about human nature direct the practice of positive psychology; for they also explicitly recognize the restrictive influence of Western liberal individualism on positive psychology’s construal of character strengths, human nature, and society (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 719).

In their boldest affirmation, Peterson and Seligman, for their part, call upon the notion of a “positive human nature” in order to adjudicate moral conflicts and evil desires (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 270). While there are multiple pathways to flourishing, evil is not one of them. They say that those who do evil “are unlikely to thrive because their motives and personality dispositions are incongruent with positive human nature and universal psychological needs” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 269-270). This probabilistic argument makes reference to a positive human nature and a general appeal to value-based virtues. Seligman admits that this
conception of virtue theory does not satisfy the philosopher, though, who argues in support of moral principles, explains what should be done, and must adjudicate between conflicting norms. Peterson and Seligman, in particular, situate their “richer psychological content and greater explanatory power” not at a normative philosophical or theological level, but as a description of character strengths, which they seek to expand by wider notions of virtue and studies of the semblances of virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 88).

3. **Aquinas and Positive Psychology on the Use of the Virtues in Psychology**

(FLOURISHING)

Our main interest in this paper is how Aquinas’ approach, a philosophically and theologically grounded approach to the virtues (a religious virtue anthropology and ethics), bolsters a Christian Positive Psychology. It does so because of its being rooted in Scripture and Magisterium, prayer and sacrament. This is an example where a particular tradition offers a particular community’s richer moral notion of character and flourishing in contrast to the morally thinner (but functionally rich) notion found in Peterson and Seligman’s version of positive psychology (Gubbins, 2008).

In order to demonstrate how Seligman’s positive psychology approach compares to Aquinas’s thought on the use of virtue and on flourishing and moral development, I will first focus on the positive psychologists’ notion of integrity.

3.1. **Peterson and Seligman on Integrity**

Peterson and Seligman (2004) construe the virtue of courage to have four character strengths, which “entail the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition” (p. 199). Integrity is one of the character strengths of courage, and it is of direct interest for
understanding the moral texture and vision of flourishing embodied in the positive psychology approach. Peterson and Seligman (2004) define integrity as:

“a character trait in which people are true to themselves, accurately presenting—privately and publicly—their internal states, intentions, and commitments. Such persons accept and take responsibility for their feelings and behaviors, owning them, as it were, and reaping substantial benefits by doing so.” (p. 249-250)

In a summary definition of integrity, they say that it involves “moral probity and self unity” (p. 250).

In both these definitions of integrity, Peterson and Seligman hold up the ideal of “being true to oneself,” which—in various schools of thought—is at times influenced by individualist biases, either as a transient stage in moral development or as a relativist cultural phenomenon. However, as Charles Taylor has argued in his *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), the moral ideal of being true to oneself need not be identified with debased forms of relativism or an individualism of self-fulfillment. While integrity can have specifically psychological ends (the calming of disruptive emotions or a sense of self unity) and moral ends (constancy in intending and doing the good), our question here is: Does Peterson and Seligman’s notion of integrity avoid the trap of individualism—self-ish flourishing—and the relativist eclipse of moral ends? That is, does it share an anthropology that could be considered congruent with Aquinas’ and be integrated with it? (Is its vision of the person and society commensurate with a Christian Positive Psychology?)

First, as we can see in their definitions of integrity, Peterson and Seligman attempt to connect the emotional and the moral domains. They make ethical references to intentions, commitments, responsibility, feelings, and behavior. Elsewhere, they speculate that feelings of psychological integrity should correlate with behavioral and observer-based measures of honesty and authenticity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 270).
Second, Peterson and Seligman employ the notion of the self to morally evaluate the content of psychological integrity. By recognizing the role of goals, talents, and values in identity and integrity development, they effectively resist theories that construe the self as a mere fiction or a set of evolving images or sentiments (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 250-265). According to them, apparently everyone struggles for greater integrity. Nevertheless, the question of evil poses problems for this concept and human flourishing in general. Attempting to resist a value-free stance, Peterson and Seligman (2004) says that:

From our own perspective, evil people can be authentic; that is, their sense of self can be true to antisocial motives and personality dispositions. However, these people are unlikely to thrive because their motives and personality dispositions are incongruent with positive human nature and universal psychological needs. Still, developing a sense that accurately represents one’s personality may be an important first step in changing the personality – evil people who realize who they have become can then be motivated to become something different. (p. 269-270)

Peterson and Seligman thus move from adjudication about the psychological coherency of function to a normative statement about the content of flourishing. In order to address the problem of evil and of the referent – towards whom one should be true – they distinguish three levels: first, the self (sense of self and its representations); second, one’s personality dispositions and commitments; and third, positive human nature and universal psychological needs. The first two (the self and its historical commitments and embodied dispositions) are based normatively in the third, “positive human nature,” which is the source of norms and fundamental values for Peterson and Seligman (2004) (although, as mentioned earlier, their notion of positive psychology draws these notions from pre-empirical sources) (p. 270).

Furthermore, they make a meta-analysis of studies that measure moral integrity, honesty, and authenticity and the factors that promote or inhibit them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 255-270). The following insights from these studies are of interest for virtue theory in general and Aquinas’s virtue perspective in particular. First, developmental studies since Piaget (1932) have
identified different moral reasoning styles that indicate that tendencies toward increasing honesty and integrity, while increasing during childhood, do not necessarily continue to increase in adolescence (Gallup News Service, 2000, as cited by Peterson & Seligman). This suggests that the development of virtue is not complete with the attainment of a mature level of reasoning. Even though cognitive–developmental theory indicates that higher order abstractions (formal operational thinking) are a crucial factor for integrity, high levels of rational intelligence and university education do not correlate with higher integrity scores (Harter, 1999; Harter and Monsour, 1992, as cited by Peterson & Seligman). This indicates that integrity is determined as much by other factors, namely values and life experience, as by cognitive ability (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 265).

In this regard, studies (such as the Moral Integrity Survey: Olson 1998 cited by Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 262) suggest that a person needs not only reflection upon moral integrity but also felt attraction to it and coherent behavior. This study and others on integrity as the achievement of identity status (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 264-265 cite Waterman, 1999) suggest that an interconnection of moral cognition, affection, and behavior passes through stages, although no singular stage theory seems predominant at present.

Developmental studies have also indicated the significance that role models and cultures play in leading toward either honesty or dishonesty and toward more or less individualist or social notions of authenticity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 265-267). Furthermore, positive psychology (as drawing upon empirical and biological science) has started to correlate neurobiological and environmental conditions “that both promote and prevent authentic self-experience and self-development” with underlying neural integration (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 260).
In sum, the positive psychology notion of integrity promotes the unity of affections, intentions, and commitments that are congruent with “positive human nature and universal psychological needs” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 269). In integrity, taken with positive psychology’s notion of practical wisdom (as a basis for intentions, commitments, and the possibility of all the virtues), we see a rich description of the psychological function of good character and virtue.

3.2. Aquinas on Connecting the Virtues

Aquinas’ philosophical anthropology also recognizes the need for both personal unity (unitas personae) and an interconnection of the character strengths and their principal (or cardinal) virtues (ST III 19.2 ad 4). Without extensive treatment of psychological states and their developmental pathways toward flourishing, Aquinas construes the connection of the virtues normatively inasmuch as each virtue aids to guarantee the excellence of the others. At philosophical and theological levels, Aquinas, along with Aristotle and St. Augustine before him, has argued that the connection of the virtues is the core of a life of excellence, a good and flourishing life aimed at loving contemplation of the divine (ST I-II, 65.1-5).

Aquinas’ ‘Christian positive psychology’ (CPP) sets the theological virtues in a pride of place. Faith, hope, and love, following St. Paul (1 Cor. 13), are the interwoven core of the Christian life; “and the greatest of these is love.” These theological virtues inform the whole life of the Christian, and for Aquinas, they particularly inform the other capacities that are the seats of virtue: the cognitive, volitional, and affective capacities that underlie the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, with their associated virtues.

Classical virtue theory construes the role of practical wisdom or reason as assuring the conscious adjudication and connection of the major areas of human life, inasmuch as practical
reason is necessary for every conscious and free action. But this is not a rationalist vision. Every aspect of virtuous character not only participates in practical reason but also is required for practical reason. We need the virtue strengths of reason, will, emotions – that is, every aspect of virtue is needed for a complete sense of what is true, good, and right in order to adjudicate what promotes personal well-being and social goods. In turn, the major virtues furnish the conditions needed for the proper function of practical reason. Thus, psychological function (promptness, ease, and joy; or at least being freed from distress or compulsivity) gets its moral bearings from virtuous dispositions, as apt means toward fitting ends, including personalized and just interactions with others and an ultimate, divine end. This point about the interconnection of major and associated virtues is intellectually convincing and humanly viable only if the virtues incarnate both mature psychological function and normative content (more than “a threshold” of the virtues constituting a “good character”); for the Christian, this normative content is the Word of God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Aquinas’ developmental theory of the virtues identifies not only a behavior, a goal, or a normative principle but also general intermediate states that practically approach full connection of the virtuous dispositions. It is not all or nothing; virtue or vice (happily or sadly, as the case may be). The goal establishes a set of complete virtues that are properly disposed to participate in the good of well-formed practical reason (ST I-II, 58.1, 58.2; II-II, 47-56). The developmental (and corrective-therapeutic) course involves connecting a virtue-strength (for example, mastering fear through courage) with the other virtues. However, such virtues are imperfectly connected when other capacities are disposed to run at cross-aims with them (e.g. when one masters fear in order to do evil, such as when one controls one’s anxiety about being caught in the act of adultery). Such imperfectly connected virtues that do not yet have the full support of the other
domains of virtue fight one against the other. Thus, the semi-virtue of continence involves both surety of will in effecting a good act (ST II-II, 143) but an inconsistency or conflict at the level of emotions and imagination. That is, it experiences disordered desires (gluttonous, adulterous, envious, or fratricidal desires) that trouble perception, affection, and judgment, while neither subjugating the will nor falsifying judgment.

Aquinas’ teaching on the connection of the virtues makes manifest a normative dimension in three ways (ST I-II, 65.1). First, the acquired virtues are connected directly in the virtue of practical reason, which discurs, adjudicates, and executes the rational mean towards a fitting end (ST I-II 64.2). Second, each specific virtue connects the other virtues indirectly by participating in the good of reason in its own proper way; it thus tends in an orderly fashion to the goods specific to its capacities, as being both disposed to be obedient to reason and as a principle of virtuous action. Third, good general dispositions of the operative faculties also indirectly support any act of virtue by communicating a measure of reason or obeying it as a general strength of reason, will, or emotion.

Furthermore, on a theological level, Aquinas identifies the principal motor for the connection of the infused virtues, namely charity, which, with the virtues of faith and hope, enable the engagement of a theological norm and a grace-empowered level of consistency that is not possible by rational means alone (ST II-II, 24.4-9). Christ is the exemplar, who, through love, moves the agent to doing what is good, in imitation of Christ and the Father (who is perfect; Mt 5:48) in the Holy Spirit who is love (Gal. 5:22).

3.3. Evaluating Seligman and Enriching Aquinas

At this point of our study, I would like to ask: How can Aquinas’ and any other specifically Christian mindset (Christian positive psychology) critically appropriate Seligman’s
insights on integrity and flourishing? In order to answer this question, we need to distinguish the functional, where Seligman and Aquinas have something in common, from the normative, where their competencies differ.

First, Seligman’s approach is specifically descriptive, based on empirical studies (or meta-analyses of such studies), identifying factors that illustrate the functioning and development of virtue-specific situational themes at social, cognitive, volitional, motivational, and neurobiological levels. For example, Seligman’s treatment of integrity can help to explain the connection of the virtues at the level of situational themes or concrete practices that actually habituate this connection. Moral efficacy demands such a psychological basis in acquired virtue that seeks to integrate thought, sentiment, motivation, and behavior as Seligman has described. He also helps to explain how diversity at the situational level (based on personal genetic predispositions, environmental and educational factors, personal commitments, and so on) does not contradict the connection of the major virtues (and character strengths) at higher levels.

Another example of enrichment is found when Seligman explains the phenomenon of the internalization of ends in terms of the psychological efficacy of “authentic goals.” Studies on interiorized goals (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999, as cited in Peterson & Seligman, p. 263) indicate that goal self-concordance predicts enduring investment of effort and greater attainment of goals, which in turn contribute to sustained satisfaction of needs and a sense of global well-being and flourishing. This insight enriches, at a psychological level of function, Aquinas’ understanding of the internalization of moral norms and laws (from a simply external source to an internal, personalized source), and this, as a primary characteristic of moral development and flourishing (Pinckaers, 1998, John Paul II, 1993). This is the pathway that Aquinas finds in the development of charity and the other virtues, where law is at first burdensome and external. Second, its
meaning and sense are progressively internalized in understanding, motivation, and sentiment. Finally, it is expressed in mature internalized commitment, a type of flourishing that avails itself to communal and graced support at acquired and infused levels (ST II-II, 23.1; Pinckaers, 1995).

**Conclusion: Virtue that Interconnects Descriptive Moral Psychology and Christian (Ethical) Positive Psychology**

In conclusion, that the exercise of practical wisdom and theological charity assure the specifically Christian-normative content of acquired and theological (infused) moral development and flourishing, according to Aquinas. He affirms the need for both knowledge and love – cognition and affection that are epitomized in prudence (and justice) on one side and faith and charity, on the other. Such normative adjudication is not practiced in an anthropological vacuum, either free of moral psychology or moral content. Nor is it practiced outside of a worldview and value system. For Aquinas, *prudentia* is not merely a formal virtue, reduced to psychological cognitive function or goodness of the will. Moreover, Aquinas recognizes that Christian-infused prudence seeks to discern norms of divine law as instantiated in right reason and natural law but also as revealed in a community of faith, dependent on Sacred Scripture—the Bible—and the living tradition/Magisterium in a Catholic and Thomist perspective. At both these levels, Aquinas holds the functional and normative domains together by his doctrine of the connection of the virtues and of the mutual dependency of knowledge and love for the acquired virtues and of faith and charity for the infused ones. Aquinas’ moral theory thus covers moral development in a complete fashion, without being exhaustive concerning moral function. That is, Aquinas’s Christian normative ethics as an approach to virtue theory is “more complete” than are his descriptions of the functioning of the virtues and vices. It is particularly at the level of moral psychology and of the description of the development of character strengths and
situational themes or practices that Seligman’s studies of positive psychology bring further light to Aquinas’ understanding of moral development and flourishing.

Aquinas and a robust Christian Positive Psychology can critically appropriate these findings inasmuch as the findings are based in empirical studies that are globally consistent with a Christian (philosophical and theological) view of the human person-in-relationship (created, fallen and redeemed by Jesus Christ). Aquinas and Catholics with him believe that there is a unity of truth in God, even though we may not understand especially practical applications of it. The effects of sin (the Fall) constitute a challenge in our common search to understand the theoretical and practical interdependency of the virtues and the influence of Christian faith, hope and love on the believer and on the Church in their practical lives. Humility and courage are thus needed.

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the need to attend to both moral psychology and Christian normative ethics in order to understand how to use the virtues in psychology, especially in order to understand moral development in a wider notion of ultimate flourishing. Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) particular (secular) style of “morality explained in terms of virtues,” (p. 10) as social science and psychology, is not in and of itself robust enough to satisfy secular ethicists nor to adjudicate in the case of moral conflicts, nor to address the theological dimension, nor to fully ground a Christian Positive Psychology. However, it does not claim to be otherwise, inasmuch as it makes an appeal to philosophical and theological sources for its pre-empirical notions of virtue (and normativity, to which it remains bound). It does contribute significantly to understanding the psychology of moral functioning and to aid specifically normative approaches to virtue theory in understanding acquired flourishing in the form of moral development and integrity. Positive psychology’s empirical studies, such as those of Peterson
and Seligman (as well as Linley and Joseph and their collaborators), bring new insights concerning the function, practices, and motivation of virtues. These studies, however, would have an even greater descriptive scope, if they were to control for the deeper moral content operative in the actually observed virtues, character strengths, and practices that are influenced by the intentionality of particular moral and spiritual construals of the good life. The normative content per se, while arguably the proper domain of philosophical and religious approaches to psychology and ethics (which establish norms on the basis of practical reason and belief / religious authority), needs to be accounted for in empirical studies in order to correlate psychological function and moral content. It is only a clearer notion of moral content and motivation and intention that will aid to explain certain twists of moral psychology, the semblances of virtue, and the diverse pathways of moral development and (pre-theological) human flourishing. This is the future work for communities of faith, and for us in a search of a robust Christian Positive Psychology.

As a post-script, I would like to mention that the academic (and clinical) programs at IPS have fostered a Catholic Christian theoretical and applied approach to the use of virtues in the practice of psychotherapy. A number of dissertation research projects have focused on the use of virtue in psychology and psychotherapy.

- Eric Gudan: (The Practice of the virtue of gratitude as therapeutic for moderate and obsessive depression), “Gratitude-Based Interventions for Treating Ruminative Depression”.
- Leslie Trautman: (Altruism and humility as therapeutic for narcissistic clients) “Virtue as a Support for Psychological Health in the Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorder”.
- Michael Horne: “Video Games and the Formation of Virtue: An Examination of the Content of Video Games and Their Effect on Compassion.”
• Nick Stevens, 2012: “Hope and Courage as Foundational Elements for a Virtue-Based Group Therapy”

Such dissertations are further signs of hope for the fruitful use of a Catholic approach to virtue in psychology.

Thank you for your attention.
References.


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