

The Integration of Law and Virtue: Obedience in Aquinas's Moral Theology

The recent recovery of the Aristotelian/Thomistic notion of virtue is generally seen as the antithesis of a legalistic approach to morality. As a result, the importance and role of law tend to be ignored by virtue ethicists, while related concepts such as duty and obedience get little attention. The author seeks to demonstrate the central significance of law, and a certain primacy of the virtue of obedience, in Aquinas's understanding of a specifically Christian virtue ethics.

I. Background

Much work has been done in recent years to show that the focus of the moral theory of the Christian tradition up through the high middle ages, culminating in St. Thomas Aquinas, was not law and duty, but virtue and grace.¹ Virtue ethicists have in the last couple of decades made an overwhelming case that Aquinas's morality is fundamentally concerned with virtue. This has been a very valuable recovery of part of the Christian tradition, for virtue is a central part of any adequate moral system.

However, many virtue ethicists seem to overlook both the important place of law, duty, obedience, and the like, and the significant role they play for Aquinas's moral theology. Because of the polemics involved in countering the heavy emphasis on law in casuistry, they tend to speak of virtue over and against law.² Too often those working for the recovery of

1. See especially Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. St. Mary Thomas Noble, OP (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).
2. Maria Carl, "Law, Virtue, and Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Theory," *Thomist*, 61 (1997): "[T]here is a tendency in many recent rereadings to downplay, criticize, or repudiate particular elements in Aquinas's moral theory ... that are legalistic, universal, and deductivist" (426). Carl provides a well-articulated and well-argued analysis of how natural law is integral to even Aquinas's understanding of virtue, especially prudence, which has received so much attention in the last couple of decades. She does not, however, as fully integrate virtue and law as I think needs to be done, leaving law in the end as little more than a means to virtue. For a few examples of the downplaying of natural law in Aquinas, see such authors as Daniel Mark Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence: Virtue and Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas and Implications for Modern Ethics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); "Natural law ... contains no guidance for our conduct" (100); Alan Donagan, "Teleology and Consistency in Theories of Morality as Natural Law", in Anthony N. Perovitch, Jr. (ed.), *Reflections on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999): "Any true moral theory must, like Aristotle's, be eudaimonistic, and primarily concerned with virtue rather than law" (109); and Jean Porter, *Moral Action and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1995): "Thomas Aquinas explicitly rejects the claim that some kinds of actions are wrong because they are forbidden by God, arguing to the contrary that certain kinds of actions are forbidden by God because they are harmful in some way" (52).

virtue ethics see law only as a means to the development of virtue – an important help along the road, pointing in the right direction – rather than more essentially and integrally related. Maria Carl, for example, who actually criticises the virtue ethicists' tendency to downplay or utterly disregard law; she claims that law and virtue exist in a dialectical interchange, and in the end relegates law to a subservient role.³ Such a subordination of law to virtue seems to me to be not only insufficient in itself, but a misunderstanding of the majority of the ancient and medieval Christian tradition, Aquinas in particular.

II. Introduction

In order to begin to address the above misunderstanding, this paper will explore just one part of the thought of one person. My aim is to examine Aquinas's understanding of obedience, particularly obedience to God, in order to show that for him law⁴ is not something superfluous or instrumental, but rather plays an essential role in the Christian moral life. Other aspects of his moral theology could be investigated to make the same point, as could a number of other thinkers, but I must leave such discussions for future consideration.

I will show that Aquinas holds that one aim of law is to put the subject into right relation to the ruler, which means that to follow the law is to enter into right relation to God (and His secondary authorities). Perfection is only had when one stands in the proper relationship with God, and therefore following the law is essential to human perfection. Obedience is the virtue by which a subject is properly related to those who have authority over him, and thus obedience is needed for and ordered to the fulfilment of the law as its end. The centrality of obedience for Aquinas only makes sense when one understands it as he did, as a perfection of man which frees and enlivens him, not as a heavy, drudgerous, heteronomous burden that must be put up with. The latter tends to be the modern conception of obedience. Kant's morality of duty without incli-

3. Carl writes: 'the acts that the natural law commands are the acts that generate the habits of virtue; and since the virtues in turn dispose to the same good actions, as qualified above, the perfection of the virtues denotes that the agent also fulfils the precepts of the natural law' (442), but then immediately continues with: 'The fundamental relationship between the natural law and the virtues, then, is twofold: The subject matter or content of the precepts – what they are about – is virtuous actions, and the end or final cause of the precepts is virtuous dispositions. Thus, while the natural law is ontologically prior to virtue in the order of generation as cause to effect, virtue is teleologically prior to law as final cause to that which is *for the sake of the final cause*. ... Law is God's means of instruction about the good' (442), emphasis mine.

4. Throughout this paper I will be using the term 'law' to refer primarily to the natural law, though much of what is said will also apply to human law. Similarly, my use of 'obedience' will refer primarily to obedience to God as the promulgator of natural law (cf. STh I-II, q. 91, a. 2), though many aspects of this paper will also apply to obedience to human authorities.

nation has negatively impacted contemporary understandings of obedience such that, when we think of law, duty, and obedience, we conceive of them as opposed to inclination, love, joy, and happiness. In order to understand the essence of obedience, and its essential place in the Christian life, we need to see that there is no opposition between it, love and freedom.

Obedience, for Aquinas, is an act of religion, an act of worship whereby we sacrificially offer our whole selves to God in loving service. So important is this sacrifice of obedience that Aquinas says that it, not prudence, is the highest natural virtue. Even more to the point, Aquinas argues that obedience, like charity, is the form of all meritorious acts. That is, even though there may be many virtues informing a given act, if one of them is not obedience then the act cannot be meritorious, and is therefore imperfect. To emphasise further the importance of obedience, Aquinas argues that it is the virtue, which, with a few exceptions, ingrafts all the other virtues into the soul. Therefore, because obedience always has reference to law, the moral life – particularly the Christian moral life – cannot flourish without continuously keeping in mind the law of God.

III. Virtue Ordered to Law

Maria Carl is on the right track when she says that ‘the perfection of the virtues denotes that the agent also fulfills the precepts of the natural law’.⁵ She recognises that there is an ordering of virtue to law in that virtue disposes the agent to fulfil the law. But, for her, this effect of virtue exists only insofar as the law is first the pointer to virtue. In other words, virtue only disposes the agent to fulfil the law because the law is first ordered to the development of virtue, so that as one develops virtue, it just so happens that one is also that much closer to fulfilling what the law requires. Carl does not take the further step of saying that virtue can actually be for the sake of keeping the law. It is not enough to hold that virtue disposes one to keep the law as a secondary effect. One of the purposes of virtue, one of its actual ends, and one of the things to which it is ordered is to make one able to follow the law more perfectly. Such an end is certainly not the only end of virtue, but it is a real and true end, something to which the virtue of a person is ordered. In other words, one should cultivate the virtues not only because they are human perfections, but also because they allow one to better keep the law.

Though such a claim probably sounds radical, the key to seeing its truth lies simply in reconsidering the rather flat notion of law that is prevalent today. Thomas does not consider law to be some sort of abstract principle, but a relational reality, something which puts the subject into

5. Carl, 442.

right relation to the ruler.⁶ Thus, to say that virtue has the fulfilment of the law as an end is to say that virtue is ultimately ordered to placing man into correct relation to God, which is man's fulfilment and perfection. Following the law is not something to be done mindlessly or simply out of duty, nor is it to be done simply because one recognises a good *habitus* that it aims at developing. The law is to be followed because God is our Lord and He has commanded it, and one's proper relation to God requires submission to Him. This does not mean that human persons are simply to obey God's commands, in the sense of mindlessly subordinating themselves to Him. Obedience, for Thomas, is a virtue, and as such requires the full engagement of the person, intellect, will, and passions. This means that one who is most fully obedient grasps the intrinsic intelligibility of the law and willingly follows it, because he sees that it directs him to goodness, and also because he willingly submits himself to God as his Lord. To make morality an either-or proposition – either the moral life is about self-perfection or about obedience to God – is to cut it in half and mistake a part for the whole.

Aquinas gets at just this point when he asks the question whether or not all are subject to the law.⁷ He distinguishes two ways in which one might be said to be subject to the law. In the first way, as one who comes under the law, that is, as one who is under its power and governed by it. In the second way, as one who is coerced by its power. Understood in the first way, all men, good and wicked alike, are subject to the divine law. But understood in the second way, not all are subject to the law, but only the wicked, for they do not will to do what the law requires of them and are thus coerced by it to act in a way that they do not of themselves will to act. Since the will of the good person, however, is in harmony with the law, he is not coerced by it; he is not forced by the law to act against his will since he already wills to do what the law commands him to do. Nonetheless, he is still subject to the law in the first way, for he falls under its power. In other words, if he were to stop willing the good in accordance with the law, he would immediately fall under the law's coercive power. Thus, he is both free and commanded at once, and Aquinas sees no contradiction therein. This is made even more clear in the reply to the third objection, wherein Aquinas explains that, though a sovereign is not subject to the law's coercive power, since one cannot be coerced by oneself, nonetheless he is still subject to the law's directive force of *his own free will*. Freedom and obedience are not opposed, but necessarily exist simultaneously in all good subjects.

6. *Summa Theologica* I-II, q. 92, a. 1. All English quotations of the *Summa Theologica* (hereafter STh) are taken from the translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948), reprinted (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981). This translation is generally the most literal English translation and so generally the most helpful for those already familiar with St. Thomas's language and thought. All Latin quotations of the *Summa Theologica* are taken from the version published by Typographia Forzani et S., Rome, 1894.

7. STh I-II, q. 96, a. 5.

Though Aquinas does not make much of the point that virtue is ordered to the fulfillment of law, it is nonetheless clear that it is a component of his moral theory. In the *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 92, a. 1, Thomas asks whether an effect of law is to make men good. To show the affirmative, he argues that law is given in order to develop virtue in man and that virtue in turn is that which makes its subject good, from which it follows that law has the goodness of the governed as an effect. In this we see that he thinks that law is ordered to virtue, but in arguing this position, he also claims the converse. In arguing that law is given in order to develop virtue in man he appeals to what he recognises as the fundamental basis of law, the relationship of the governed to the governor: 'the virtue of any being that is a subject consists in its being well subordinated to that by which it is regulated.'⁸ For example, the virtue of the appetite is in its proper subordination to reason. Therefore: 'The virtue of every subject consists in his being well subjected to his ruler. ... But every law aims at being obeyed by those who are subject to it. Consequently, it is evident that the proper effect of law is to lead its subjects to their proper virtue.'⁹ In other words, the virtue of man consists in his being in right relation to his ruler, that is, subject to the law, and thereby to the maker of the law, who is ultimately God.¹⁰ Human virtue, and therefore human perfection, consists in standing in right relation to God, which includes being subject to Him through His laws. Thus, human perfection includes within it subjection to God's law, and therefore the development of virtue must have as one of its purposes to make one a good subject, a good obeyer of God's Law. In this way virtue is ordered to the fulfillment of law as to an end.

IV. Obedience as the End of Law

It is important at this point also to develop the central idea of the second premise of the argument quoted above: 'Every law aims at being obeyed by those who are subject to it.'¹¹ Law, for Aquinas, has a certain inner, dynamic orientation towards being obeyed. The immediate end that every law calls for is its own fulfillment, the submission of the ruled to the command of the law. This idea must not, however, be divorced from Aquinas's wider vision already noted above, namely that law relates the subject not simply to an impersonal command dissociated from anything else, but to the *ruler*. Thus, to say that law aims at being obeyed is to say that law aims at the right relation of ruled to ruler, which, at the

8. *STh* I-II, q. 92, a. 1: 'Cuiuslibet autem subditi virtus est, ut bene subdatur ei, a quo gubernatur.'

9. *Ibid.*: 'Virtus cuiuslibet subiecti est, ut bene subiiciatur principanti ... ad hoc autem ordinatur unaqueque lex, ut obediatur ei a subditis; unde manifestum est, quod hoc sit proprium legis, inducere subiectos ad propriam ipsorum virtutem.'

10. Cf. *STh* I-II, q. 93, a. 3.

11. *STh* I-II, q. 92, a. 1.

very least, includes the recognition of the ruler's authority and obedience in light of that. This point cannot be underscored enough: the purpose of the obedience aimed at by law is the right relation of subject to ruler, a relation which, when properly ordered, is not restrictive in the least, but *perfecting* of the person.

This is precisely where virtue and law are intimately intertwined: the obedience to law, as a characteristic of right relation and right order, is itself a virtue. This virtue, however, is not developed unless one is truly obedient, truly subject to the ruler in his laws. One can only be fully in right relation when he has developed the virtue of obedience. Law, therefore, is ordered, on the one hand, to the obedience of its particular precepts, and on the other, to the virtue of obedience itself, which is developed by those acts and without which one cannot fully and perfectly obey the law. Without the virtue of obedience, one cannot completely fulfill the very command itself, for an act is only perfectly done when done with the proper virtue. But, on the other hand, in order first to develop and then continue to live out the virtue of obedience, one must obey the law, as such by subjecting oneself to the ruler. Thus, if one is to keep the law, one must necessarily develop the virtue of obedience as something essential to its full and perfect observance. Similarly, if one is to develop and live out the virtue of obedience one must keep the law, for that is the proper act of the virtue of obedience. Each involves the other; they cannot be separated. The law is ordered to the development of the virtue of obedience and the virtue of obedience is ordered to the fulfillment of the law.

V. Obedience as the Highest Natural Virtue

Thomas thinks that law and obedience are so important for living a good life that he argues that obedience is the highest natural virtue. We should begin by noting that Thomas says that 'the proper object of obedience is a precept, and this proceeds from another's will. Wherefore, obedience makes a man's will prompt in fulfilling the will of another, namely the maker of the precept.'¹² Obedience has as its proper object a precept, or a law, but only insofar as such a law is the expression of the will of the lawmaker. It is the ruler, and specifically his will, which lies always in the background and provides the foundation for law and obedience. Obedience is always with respect to another person who stands in a relation of authority to the subject. The precept itself is the proper object of obedience, but it has binding power only insofar as it is the expression of the will of one who has authority.¹³ The foundation underpinning law

12. *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 2, ad 3: 'Proprium autem obiectum obedientiae est praecipium; quod quidem ex alterius voluntate procedit; unde obedientia reddit promptum hominis voluntatem ad implendam voluntatem alterius, scilicet praecipientis.'

13. See Thomas's definition of law, wherein authority is a key element: 'an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care [and therefore authority] of the community, and promulgated' (*STh* I-II, q. 90, a. 4).

and obedience is the interrelations of persons: since persons are communal beings they have certain relations to one another which put some in authority over others for the sake of the common good. The archetype of such a relation is that of man and God, in which the relation of authority is founded on the ontological difference between the two.

In his discussion of obedience in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas asks whether obedience is the greatest of the virtues.¹⁴ Absolutely speaking, he answers, it is not, since the greatest virtues are the theological virtues, the greatest of which is charity. But among the moral virtues, Thomas says that obedience is the greatest, since it spurns the greatest created good, one's will, in order to adhere to God.¹⁵ Just as the greater sacrifice is that which offers the greater oblation, so too the greater virtue is that which adheres to God in the fuller way through the 'offering' of the greater object. In obedience one's very will is offered to God and placed in subjection to Him. The will is the faculty by which the person governs himself, and by offering the governor, one also offers the whole of what is governed. Thus, one's whole being is offered to God, through wilful submission to Him.¹⁶ No one can make a greater offering than that of his very own being. Therefore, obedience, by which one offers one's whole self to God under the aspect of the submission of one's will to His Will, must be the greatest of virtues.

What then of charity? Thomas here makes an important distinction. The highest virtue, he says, absolutely speaking, is that by which we most fully and strongly adhere to God in Himself, which is what the theological virtues, especially charity, are ordered to explicitly and without qualification. The natural virtues are also ordered to the adherence to God, but more through the spurning of that which is not God: Thus they are not as high as the theological virtues because they are not ordered to God without qualification; they are ordered to Him only through some negation of created things. Therefore, Thomas argues, it is only among the natural virtues, all of which spurn something in order to adhere to God, that obedience is highest, since in comparison with the supernatural virtues obedience is not as fully, directly, and immediately ordered to God.

VI. Obedience as the Form of Perfectly Virtuous Acts

Aquinas's acknowledgment of the importance of obedience does not, however, end with the recognition of it as the highest natural virtue. He

14. STh II-II, q. 104, a. 3.

15. *Ibid.*

16. See also Aquinas's tract on *The Religious State, the Episcopate, and the Priestly Office*, trans. F. J. Procter, OP (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), where he discusses certain aspects of obedience in greater detail than in the *Summa*. See pp. 45 and 52 for his argument that obedience is the offering of one's whole self to God.

goes on to note that obedience is in some way an element in all virtuous acts, even those of charity. Just as charity must inform all of the virtues in order for them to be perfect, so too, obedience must inform all of the acts of virtue if they are to be perfect and meritorious: 'wherefore any other acts of virtue are meritorious before God through being performed out of obedience to God's will.'¹⁷ Obedience to God, for Aquinas, is something which must be present in all of our actions, if they are to be perfect. In other words, a perfect act of virtue must have direct reference to God and be done out of subjection to Him. Every perfectly virtuous act must be informed by obedience, just as it must be informed by charity. If even the greatest of all the species of acts, martyrdom, must be informed by both obedience and charity, as Aquinas says it must, then all other species of acts must also, for all the species of a genus partake of the greatest in that genus.¹⁸ Aquinas explains further that obedience must enter into every perfectly virtuous act because charity itself cannot exist apart from obedience, as will be shown later.

1. A Misunderstanding of Obedience Corrected

In order to make sense of this, it is necessary to further examine what obedience means for Aquinas. It is not something in any way opposed to charity, as if, when one acts out of obedience to God, one cannot at the same time be acting out of love.¹⁹ We tend to conceive of obedience as something drudgerous, difficult, grudging, and contrary to one's real desires, whereas love is thought of as proceeding from an inner motivation of superabundance to the joyful outpouring of oneself for the sake of the other. Such an opposition is not, however, Thomas's conception. For him, obedience is not necessarily something drudgerous and contrary to one's own inclinations, though he recognises that it seems to be. He argues that, as far as *outward appearances* go, obedience seems to diminish in agreeable matters in which one tends to the fulfilment of the precept of one's own accord.²⁰ That is, when one is commanded to do something that he already desires and wills to do, it would seem that he is not really acting out of obedience, but simply out of himself. Conversely, obedience seems to be present only when we act in conformity to a command *only* because of the command and for the sake of the command, which only

17. *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 3: 'For were one to suffer even martyrdom, or to give all one's goods to the poor, unless one directed these things to the fulfilment of the divine will, which pertains to obedience, they could not be meritorious.' [Nān si quis etiam martirium sustineret, vel omnia sua pauperibus erogaret, nisi haec ordinaret ad implementationem divinae voluntatis, quod directe ad obedientiam pertinet, meritoria esse non possent.:]

18. *STh* I, q. 2, a. 3, the fourth way.

19. Cf. *STh* II-II, q. 4, a. 3, ad 3.

20. *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 2.

occurs when we don't really want to perform the action of our own accord.²¹

Such a notion of obedience, however, is only a partial one, based on a certain superficial examination. Thomas writes that

according to the judgment of God, who searches the heart, it may happen that even in agreeable matters obedience, while holding its own, is nonetheless praiseworthy, provided the will of him that obeys tend no less devotedly to the fulfillment of the precept.²²

In other words, obedience takes place not only when one doesn't want to act according to some precept yet does so anyway, but also when one actually desires and wills the action on one's own. Since obedience consists in the intentional conforming of one's will to the precept – and thereby to the will of the maker of the precept – it can occur in both agreeable and disagreeable matters. One can just as well obey in pleasant and self-willed matters as in difficult and undesired ones, because the single requirement of obedience is the subjection of oneself to the will of the maker of the precept. Human actions can have a variety of motivations, and Aquinas's claim is simply that a person can will the action of his own accord as well as on account of the law. There is no contradiction in willing both.

Therefore, one can will at one and the same time to do something because it is good *and* because God commands it. Aquinas holds that no

21. This is Kant's idea of duty, which has so greatly influenced modern conceptions that we have a difficult time thinking about duty, law, obedience, and the like in any way but as restrictive and burdensome, though Kant is by no means the only thinker who has thought this; the previous couple of centuries before him prepared the ground for his definitive formulation. He argues in *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Thomas K. Abbot (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice, 1949) that only actions done from a motive of duty are of any moral worth, which, for him, means that there can be no inclination toward the action. So much is this the case that only the action of the man who 'wishes for death, and yet preserves his life without loving it – not from inclination or fear, but from duty' (15) is of any moral worth. For a good explanation of Kant's position and a critique thereof, see Lawrence M. Hinman, 'On Purity of Moral Motives: A Critique of Kant's Account of the Emotions and Acting for the Sake of Duty', in *Monist*, 66 (1983), 249-67. For an overview of Aquinas's thought on the same issue, see Richard K. Mansfield, 'Antecedent Passion and the Moral Quality of Human Acts According to St. Thomas', in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 71 (1999), 221-31, and Judith Barad, 'Aquinas on the Role of Emotion in Moral Judgment and Activity', in *The Thomist*, 55 (1991), 397-413. It is also worth noting that Philip Stratton-Lake in his recent book *Kant, Duty and Moral Worth* (London: Routledge, 2000) argues that Kant did not actually think that there had to be no inclination to a given action in order for it to be of moral worth, but just used those types of examples because only then is it clear that the real motive is duty (pp. 93-94). Nonetheless, the traditional understanding of Kant is that the motive of duty excludes that of inclination, and this opposition between duty and inclination has been a factor in negatively colouring modern conceptions of law, duty and obedience.

22. *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 2, ad 3: 'Potesť contingere, quod etiam in prosperis obedientia aliquid de suo habens non propter hoc sit minus laudabilis: si scilicet propria voluntas obedientis non minus devote tendat ad impletionem praecepti.'

act is perfect unless one of its motivations is in fact to do what God wills, that is, to obey His precepts. For example, though a man may desire quite ardently of himself to remain faithful to his wife or maintain charitable relations with everyone, he can still do so out of submission to God's will, by willing such submission as part of his action. In this way all actions can be informed by obedience and still be perfectly free and loving.

This becomes clear when Aquinas poses the question as to whether or not Christ died out of obedience.²³ The second objection claims that obedience involves compulsion under necessity, whereas Christ died freely and voluntarily. Thomas answers this by distinguishing between the necessity that obedience implies with regard to that which is commanded, and the freedom that it implies with regard to the fulfilling of the command. What exactly this means is difficult to grasp, but the point to note here is that Aquinas is trying to explain how a certain necessity attaches to one under obedience, but that it does so without necessarily hindering the subject's freedom in any way, for it is always up to him whether or not to fulfill the command, and how readily to do so. The third objection draws a similar opposition, this time between obedience and charity. Thomas once again answers by reuniting what was pulled apart: Christ was charitable out of obedience to the Father who required both of Him, and He was obedient out of love. The two interpenetrate one another in the death of Christ – in fact, throughout His whole life – as they should in the lives of all who follow in Christ's footsteps.

Even more to the point, acts of obedience in which one acts grudgingly are not perfect acts of obedience. Only when one obeys willfully, promptly, readily, and joyfully, is one fully obeying. Not only is the concept of obedience as an act of great difficulty incorrect, but it turns obedience on its head: Obedience is most fully itself only when one's will is so fully informed by it that one obeys with ease and joy. It is a mark of the virtues, for Aquinas, that they inform all aspects of one's being, including the appetites, passions, desires, and even the will. To treat obedience as a struggle is to reduce it to a quasi-virtue, like continence.²⁴ When one fully has the virtue of obedience, the struggle ceases and one is able to subject oneself to God readily, presumably because one has come to the state in which he wills of himself what God wills.

It is also important to understand that for Aquinas obedience to God is an act of religion, for it proceeds from reverence for God, paying

23. *STh* III, q. 47, a. 2.

24. In *STh* II-II, q. 155, a. 1, Aquinas explains how continence, unlike temperance, informs only the will, leaving the concupiscible appetites untouched. Therefore, it is only a quasi-virtue, a mixture between virtue and lack of virtue. Because continence fails to reach all levels of a person's being, it fails to reach the full stature of being a virtue, for a true virtue brings right order even to the sensitive appetite, such that one no longer even desires things that one should not, and so one can will the good promptly, easily and joyfully.

worship and honour to Him.²⁵ Obedience, above all else, characterises the life of those in religious orders, a life which is ordered to most completely living out the virtue of religion.²⁶ This is the case because obedience, which is vowed by those in the religious life, is that by which one offers the greatest sacrifice to God, namely, one's whole self, thereby paying Him the greatest honour. Obedience, therefore, is a type of worship of God, for by obedience to God one bows before Him in all things, offering one's very self as a holy sacrifice to Him.²⁷ The virtue of obedience to God, involves an attitude which places God first and foremost in all things, an attitude in which one is ready to follow the will of God as soon as it is known. It is good to seek the good and strive to perfect and rightly order oneself, even without explicit reference to God, but not nearly as good as the same act performed also in obedience, for obedience makes the performance into an act of worship, which is more perfect, for 'it is more meritorious to worship God, than to order ourselves rightly.'²⁸ Understanding this helps one to see obedience as a free act of the person, proceeding from within, rather than imposed from without, and therefore personal, dignifying, joyful and loving rather than wearisome, drudgerous, slavish, and oppressive.

2. *Obedience as Characteristic of Friendship*

Only when one's actions are imbued with both love and obedience is it possible for one to be the perfect friend of God and simultaneously His perfect subject, both of which are essential to the Christian life. Friends want to do what their friends want them to do, for such co-willing is a means of union. The more perfect the friendship, the more conformed are the wills of the friends. Even when it may be difficult at times, a true friend still strives to conform his will to the will of his friend. If friendship is truly present, even difficult and painful actions will have a certain joy attached to them because love is the animating principle.²⁹ One loves

25. *STh II-II*, q. 104, a. 3, ad 1. It is worth noting that Aquinas thinks that even obedience to creaturely persons is in some way part of the virtue of religion. Obedience, for Aquinas, falls under the virtue of observance, the virtue by which honour is paid to men who have a superior dignity (*STh II-II*, q. 102, a. 1). However, he notes that depending on whom one is obeying, obedience falls under different virtues (*STh II-II*, q. 104, a. 3, ad 1), so he could just as easily have put obedience directly under the virtue of religion or piety. The only reason he seems to put it under observance is for the sake of good order; since he first needs to discuss religion, piety, and observance in general before he can fully consider obedience, which pertains to all three in different ways. Much of Aquinas' discussion of obedience to God in the *Summa* falls under his discussion of vows, which will be examined later in this paper.

26. Aquinas, *Religious State*, 49-50, and *STh II-II*, q. 186, a. 8.

27. Aquinas, *Religious State*, 45-6, 49-50. For a fuller account of the deeply religious nature of obedience, even to a creature, see Bernard Leeening, *The Mysticism of Obedience* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1964).

28. *Ibid.*, 60.

29. *STh II-II*, q. 4, a. 3, ad 3.

one's friend and wills to be united and conformed to him, and therefore undertakes even the most arduous tasks for the sake of the friend. The act of selflessly subjecting oneself to one's friend for the sake of accomplishing his will is a kind of obedience. Obedience is therefore a means of willfully cooperating with God as His collaborator by freely appropriating His will to oneself in order to accomplish His will in all things. As is the case with all the virtues, living the virtue of obedience at the beginning of its development is painful, but when perfected it should be spontaneous, delightful, energising, invigorating, and freeing. Obedience is perfecting of the person and in no way opposed to freedom or love.³⁰

In Aquinas's discussion of obedience in the *Summa*, we have seen that he says that charity is the virtue by which we perfectly adhere to God in Himself, by which we enter into an intimate relationship with Him. Obedience is not out of place in such a relationship when understood as explained above. In the same passage, Thomas quotes 1 John 2:5: 'He that keepeth [God's] word, in him in very deed the charity of God is perfected' and follows it with the explanation: 'and this because friends have the same likes and dislikes.'³¹ He introduces friendship at this point, puzzling as it may be at first glance, precisely because he understands obedience to be something pertaining to the most perfect human relation, namely friendship. Friends will the same things, since that is part of what it means to be conformed and united to one another. No two human wills, however, are perfectly conformed, and thus friends strive to become ever more perfectly conformed to one another. Such continuous growing in likeness to one another happens through willing what the other wants you to will for the common good of you both, which is precisely what Aquinas means by obedience. Thus, obedience is involved in a certain way even in earthly friendships, in which the persons are on an equal footing insofar as they have the same nature. Much more, then, should that be the case in man's friendship with God, who has absolute authority over man. Obedience, thus understood, is an essential virtue for entering into friendship with another, especially God.

30. Cf. STh II-II, q. 186, a. 5, ad 5; Felix D. Duffey, *With Anxious Care* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1961), offers a good discussion of the perfecting character of obedience on pp. 71-82. See also Columba Cary-Elwes's summary and defence of Aquinas in *Law, Liberty and Love: A Study in Christian Obedience* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1950), 22-23, 147-163; Yves R. Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1962), 143, 148-56; James R. Tracy, *Obedience, Freedom and Personality Development* (Rome, 1966), especially pp. 49-57; and Marcelino Irigui, *Freedom and Obedience in Evangelical Perspective* (Alwaye, India: Pontifical Institute of Theology and Philosophy, 1974).

31. STh II-II, q. 104, a. 3: 'Et hoc ideo est quia amicitia facit idem velle, et nolle.' Though this phrase is accurately translated with 'likes and dislikes', it should be noted that *velle* and *nolle* usually have reference to the will, which is why Thomas's explanation of the quoted Scripture passage makes sense: friends want and will the same things.

VII. Obedience as the Ingraftor of Virtues

Thomas draws another conclusion from the above quotation from 1 John. He says that ‘charity ... cannot exist apart from obedience.’³² Only in keeping God’s word, Scripture says, is it possible for the love of God to be perfected in us. This relationship between love and obedience can be understood better by looking at what Thomas writes a little later. To the question whether obedience is the greatest virtue, he raises the objection that, according to Pope Gregory the Great, obedience ‘is the only virtue that ingrafts virtues in the soul and protects them when ingrafted’, and that since the cause is greater than the effect, obedience must be greater than all the other virtues. Thomas responds by first noting that ‘all acts of virtue, in so far as they come under a precept, belong to obedience’ and in this way ‘obedience is said to ingraft and protect all virtues.’³³ The essential point that Thomas is getting at, and will flesh out more fully in what follows, is a distinction between a virtue itself, and an act of virtue. All acts of virtue can be considered under the aspect of a precept, and in that respect they are instilled, developed, and preserved in a person through obedience. By obeying God in performing good deeds, one begins to develop specific virtues, and by continuing in that obedience, one preserves those virtues.

More to the point, however, is that Thomas wants to say that it is not simply by doing virtuous acts that we develop and preserve virtue, though that is certainly the case. Rather, it is specifically by doing them *in obedience to God* that they are developed and preserved. Considered only under the aspect of self-perfection and movement towards the good, virtues in man have a certain instability. But when there is the force of a precept that obliges one to perform certain acts of virtue, in conjunction with the subjective appropriation and motivation toward the good, the virtues are fully ingrafted and preserved. When obedience is present, one submits to the command by eagerly grasping the commanded action and making it one’s own out of love and reverence for the commander. In so doing one brings more of himself to bear on the action and thereby more solidly roots in the soul the virtue out of which one is acting.

This is not to say that anything that goes by the name of obedience ingrafts the virtues so fully. If one follows a law simply because one is forced to obey it, then such obedience does a poor job of ingrafting virtue. Such forced ‘obedience’ is not a virtue, but only the external appearance of virtue, for the virtue of obedience makes one’s *will* prompt in fulfilling the commands of the superior. Struggling obedience may be the starting point for the Christian journey, but as the *virtue* of obedience begins to

32. STh II-II, q. 104, a. 3: ‘Caritas ... sine obedientia esse non potest.’

33. *Ibid.*, ad 2 [emphasis mine]: ‘Ad obedientiam pertinent omnes actus virtutum, prout sunt in precepto ... intantum dicitur, quod obedientia omnes virtutes menti inserit, et custodit.’

develop, one's actions take on a whole new character. One does not shed the skin of obedience as he advances in the Christian life and begins to obey the law out of himself. Rather, obedience is deepened and developed so that it becomes a law written on the heart. This is the point at which virtuous acts become no longer drudgerous, but joyful and desired for their own sake. As we already saw earlier, Thomas does not say that obedience then becomes obsolete; rather it is then that obedience can take on its fullest character, for it is then that we can tend to the fulfilment of the Will of God with the most devotion, which is a more perfect obedience than the difficult obedience at the beginning of the moral life.³⁴

1. Vows and Obedience

The idea that obedience ingrafts, informs, perfects, and preserves the other virtues is made evident in Thomas's discussion of vows. He asks the question whether it is advantageous to take vows, and answers that: 'By vowing we fix our wills immovably on that which it is advantageous to do. Hence it is advantageous to take vows.'³⁵ In other words, one advances better towards the state of perfection and better develops virtues in himself, when he does so under the obligation imposed by a vow, for he thereby more surely and resolutely fixes his will on the good. Such a vow confirms and establishes the will in its orientation to some good and thereby, so to speak, grasps the good in question and implants it in the soul. A vow adheres the soul to the good in a manner that cannot be achieved otherwise. Thus, the goods and virtues aimed at in taking vows are ingrafted and preserved through the obligation imposed by the vow. Only if this is the case does it make sense for Aquinas to claim that 'the state of perfection requires an obligation to whatever belongs to perfection: and this obligation consists in binding oneself to God by means of a vow.'³⁶ It is better and more perfect to be ordered to the good by means of obligation than to be 'free' in a void of unconnectedness to choose the good or not.³⁷ This in no way opposes true freedom to laws, vows, and other obliging forces, for, as was said above, one can and should still freely choose to comply with one's obligations.

Thomas is clear, then, that *the Christian life is more perfect when obligation is involved*. If one only determines oneself towards a specific created good, considered simply as a good, something partially perfecting and ful-

34. *STh II-II*, q. 104, a. 2, ad 3.

35. *STh II-II*, q. 88, a. 4: '... vovendo voluntatem nostram immobiliter firmamus ad id, quod expedit facere; et ideo expediens est vovere' (translation amended).

36. *STh II-II*, q. 186, a. 6: 'Ad statum autem perfectionis requiritur obligatio ad ea quae sunt perfectionis; quae quidem Deo fit per votum.'

37. I recognise that there are a myriad of issues involved in the understanding of what true freedom is, and how freedom relates to obligation, but unfortunately the scope of this paper does not permit a more detailed discussion thereof. I refer the reader to discussion by Pinckaers in chapters 14-16 of *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, op. cit.

who gives the fruit only."⁴¹ By vowing or by performing one's acts under the aspect of obedience one not only does the virtuous deed itself, but performs also the virtuous acts of obedience and religion. In obedience, one gives not only one's action to God, but one offers to Him one's very being, the tree from which the action springs as the fruit. This idea is closely related to Aquinas's view of obedience as a part of the virtue of religion, for by it one offers oneself to God. Obligation is essentially relational and religious in character.

2. *The Priority of the Theological Virtues*

Returning now to the discussion of how obedience ingrafts the other virtues, we need to examine the rest of Thomas's reply to the objection from Gregory the Great, where he makes an important qualification. By distinguishing between virtue and the acts of virtue, Aquinas is able to say that obedience ingrafts and protects all the virtues in *their acts*, and is in that respect the greatest of virtues. But it does not follow, he says, that obedience is thereby the greatest virtue absolutely speaking, nor that it ingrafts all the virtues without qualification. If Thomas were to say that, he would be ignoring two fundamental truths of the Catholic faith. First, he would be leaving the supernatural virtues out of the picture, virtues which are given and preserved by God in His pure gratuity, apart from any obedience on the part of man. Secondly, he would be ignoring the primacy and priority of grace, for we do not first put ourselves in relation to God as subjects, but He first reveals Himself as our Creator, Lord, and Father.

With respect to the second, Thomas says:

If there be any virtue whose object is naturally prior to the precept, that virtue is said to be naturally prior to obedience. Such a virtue is faith, whereby we come to know the sublime nature of divine authority, by reason of which the power to command is competent to God.⁴²

We cannot be obedient to God, properly speaking, until we know that He exists and that He has the authority which requires our obedience. One can obey God indirectly by following the natural law, but only when God reveals Himself can one obey God *qua* God. The virtue by which we come to such knowledge of God is faith. Therefore, faith, considered

41. *STh II-II*, q. 88, a. 6: 'ille qui voverit aliquid, et facit, plus se Deo subicit, quam ille qui solum facit ... sicut plus daret homini qui daret ei arborem cum fructibus, quam qui daret ei fructus tantum ...'

42. *STh II-II*, q. 104, a. 3, ad 2: 'Si aliqua virtus sit, cuius objectum sit naturaliter prius, quam praeceptum, illa virtus dicitur naturaliter prior, quam obedientia, ut patet de fide, per quam nobis divinae auctoritatis sublimitas innotescit, ex qua competit ei potestas praecipuendi.'

filling of one's being, one does not live the Christian life as perfectly as if one does the same acts but also under the aspect of obedience to some obliging force, especially God, to whom all obliging forces have reference. A vow is an obliging force that is originally self-imposed, whereas a law is an obliging force imposed by another, but both conduce to the perfection of Christian life. This helps explain why Thomas can say that obedience ingrafts and protects all virtues, for it is through the virtue of obedience that one most perfectly fixes his will on the good. Such an adherence of the will to the good does not lessen freedom, but perfects it, as Thomas is careful to point out.³⁸ The very nature of freedom is to fix itself on something, to choose and to commit, for freedom would be useless if it hung uncommittedly in a void. Obedience, therefore, is in no way contrary to the 'freedom for excellence' commonly associated with virtue-theory, but is in fact its protector and guarantor.³⁹ It would therefore be a fundamental mistake to conceive of the moral life as something essentially or primarily unrelated to law and obligation. The mistake of casuistry and duty-based ethics is not that they say what is untrue, but that they leave out or greatly diminish the place of an equally important and essential part of the moral life.

If this is not enough to convince one of the importance of obedience, and therefore law, Thomas says further in his discussion of vows that 'the works of the other moral virtues ... are better and more meritorious, if they be done in fulfilment of a vow, since thus they belong to the divine worship, *being like sacrifices to God*.'⁴⁰ It is not yet perfect to do acts of virtue simply or primarily because one sees them as attaining to the good and perfecting of oneself. There must be the element of relation to God, an element which tends to be lost when law is seen as little more than a means by which poor fallen reason can come to know what is fulfilling of human nature. Law is more than a means for helping one to act rightly and develop the virtues. Standing under obligation, of which vows and laws are two types, puts one and one's acts into right relation with God, whereby all acts can be 'like sacrifices to Him.'

Aquinas furthers this same point when he continues: 'He that vows something and does it, subjects himself to God more than he that only does it ... just as he gives more who gives the tree with its fruit, than he

38. *STh II-II*, q. 88, a. 4, ad 1: 'Even as one's liberty is not lessened by one being unable to sin, so, too, the necessity resulting from a will firmly fixed to good does not lessen the liberty, as instanced in God and the blessed.' [*Sicut non posse peccare non diminit libertatem; ita etiam necessitas firmitatis voluntatis in bonum non diminit libertatem; ut patet in Deo, et in beatis.*']

39. 'Freedom for excellence' is the phrase used by Pinckaers to describe the notion of freedom contained in the Christian tradition before Nominalism, in which freedom is understood as the power to pursue perfection and is thus ordered and directed in significant ways, as opposed to an idea of freedom as un hindered, unrestrained, and undirected choice.

40. *STh II-II*, q. 88, a. 6 [Emphasis mine]: 'Et ideo opera aliarum virtutum moralium ... sunt meliora, et magis meritoria, si fiant ex voto; quia sic iam pertinent ad divinum cultum, quasi quaedam Dei sacrificia.'

simply as a virtue, is prior to and greater than obedience. There is an initial priority of faith, without the first gift of which we could not even arrive at obedience to God, properly speaking.

This does not mean, however, that after the initial gift there is not any sort of dialectical process between faith and obedience. Once the infused gift of faith is given, it necessarily leads to acts of love and obedience, acts whereby the gift of faith itself is implanted even more deeply in the soul. Once we have the initial gift of the knowledge of the existence of God and its corresponding assent of faith in Him and personal commitment to Him, we can then deepen our faith through believing out of obedience to God's command that we should have faith in Him. In this way all acts of faith can be informed by obedience, as they are by charity, which gives man the dignity of being a cause like God and a co-operator with Him. The gift and virtue of faith is absolutely prior to obedience, but immediately following upon that gift should be an act of the obedience of faith.⁴³ This is similar to the way in which there is a dialectical exchange between act and potency, for there must be an initial priority of act for the dialectic to even begin. Perfect faith cannot exist without obedience, and perfect obedience to God cannot exist without faith, but an initial gift of faith must come first, for it reveals, among other things, the very object of obedience. Thus, faith is both temporally and logically prior to obedience to God.

The second exception that Thomas raises to the general rule that obedience has a certain precedence over all the other virtues, is that God can infuse virtues into the soul apart from any obedience on the side of the creature, in fact, apart from any act of virtue at all. Therefore, 'neither in point of time nor by nature' is obedience prior to the infused virtues.⁴⁴ Because God can immediately and directly instill in us whatever virtues He wills, virtues can as a matter of fact come to exist in us before any act of obedience. They are prior to obedience in that they can exist without it, and thus obedience is not the ingratfor of virtues absolutely speaking. At this point, however, an important distinction which we have already observed in Thomas's thought needs to be more carefully drawn out.

Though Aquinas does not here elaborate and make explicit the distinction between virtues in themselves and acts of virtue, he seems to expect his readers to pick up on the point simply in his use of the terms. He says that every act of virtue is meritorious by being performed out of obedience, that obedience must inform all acts of virtue, as must charity, and that all acts of virtue belong to obedience, insofar as they come under a precept.⁴⁵ For these reasons, Thomas thinks that acts of obedience have

43. In the various references to obedience throughout the *Summa*, Aquinas regularly quotes part of Rom. 1:5: '... to bring about the obedience of faith ...' in which obedience and faith are inextricably linked. He understands faith and obedience, as all the virtues, to be intrinsically interconnected.

44. *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 3, ad 2.

45. Cf. *STh* II-II, q. 4, a. 7, ad 3.

a certain precedence over all other acts of virtue, and because the acts flow from the virtue, this gives the virtue of obedience a priority over other virtues, insofar as it is a principle of action. But obedience does not have precedence over all virtues absolutely, for the two reasons just discussed. Considered simply as virtues, the precedence falls on the side of the theological virtues; but considered in their acts, there is a certain precedence on the side of obedience, for it is only obedience that fully ingrafts virtues through informing the acts of those virtues with a solidity, stability and depth that they do not otherwise have.

Because Aquinas understands grace to build upon and transform nature, it is not hard to see why he does not stop after considering the infusion of the supernatural virtues into the soul. The supernatural virtues are not simply given to one and then left to be. They must come to permeate one's whole being, to inform everything that one thinks, says, feels, does, and is; they must become connatural, so integrated into one's being that it is as if they were part of one's very nature.⁴⁶ Such a process only happens over time through practicing the proper acts of the infused virtue. Obedience, which, Aquinas says, always exists in reference to a law, is a necessary element in every perfect act of virtue. Therefore, all acts of virtue should be done 'in fulfillment of the divine will, which pertains to obedience',⁴⁷ and thus explicitly in order to fulfill the law.

VIII. Conclusion

It should be clear from all that has been said above that for Aquinas law, duty, obligation, obedience, and the like are an essential part of the Christian life. Though Thomas's focus is certainly on the virtues, as has been rightly pointed out by many of his commentators in recent years, he in no way conceives of virtue as opposed to law. Neither does he subordinate one to the other by making law simply the means to virtue. Both are essential for the Christian life, since both draw out certain aspects of it, which would be missing were one to focus exclusively on one or the other. The idea of law captures more the aspect in Christian morality of submission to God, conformity to Him, and right relation to Him, whereas the idea of virtue captures more the aspect of intrinsic human perfection. To put it another way, the idea of law captures more the aspect of absolute dependence on God, whereas the idea of virtue captures more the aspect of the rightful autonomy of man.

Both ideas, however, considered in their totality, contain the primary aspect of the other: true law is always ordered to human perfection, and true virtue is always a conformity and subjection to God. We need to keep both constantly before us if we're to avoid a skewed perception and

46. Cf. *STh II-II*, q. 45, a. 2.

47. *STh II-II*, q. 104, a. 3: 'ad impletionem divinae voluntatis, quod directe ad obedientiam pertinet.'

actualisation of the Christian moral life. Without virtue, law tends to become pharisaic; but without law, virtue tends to become self-absorbed. We must aim to perform every one of our actions out of obedience to God and submission to His Will, and at the same time for the sake of the good at hand and for the sake of our own actualisations and fulfilment. To ignore either of these aspects, therefore, would result in a morality that is fundamentally insufficient. Only by fully integrating them can we achieve a Christian morality powerfully alive and flourishing.⁴⁸

48. I am indebted to Chad Engelland, Vincent Twomey, and the anonymous ITQ referees for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

