

## Aquinas, Custom, and the Coexistence of Infused and Acquired Cardinal Virtues

William C. Mattison III

THE LAST DECADE HAS SEEN A STRIKING amount of scholarship devoted to the question of the relationship between the infused and acquired virtues, with a focus on the thought of St. Thomas. More specifically, there is lively debate over whether or not those in a state of grace who possess the infused virtues can possess also the acquired virtues.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it may be the case that there has never been more sustained and in-depth scholarly attention to this issue, evident also in this volume of the *Journal of Moral Theology*.<sup>2</sup> This scholarship is replete with practical examples, which not only function as rhetorically effective, but also demonstrate the everyday relevance of this rather technical debate. My purpose in this essay is to contribute to that debate by calling into question a common assumption concerning one such practical example. In the example of a person with the infused virtues who loses them, it is assumed that any consistent good actions that persist after the loss of infused virtue

---

<sup>1</sup> For an article that takes on this question directly and surveys prior scholarship addressing it, see William C. Mattison III “Can Christians Possess the Acquired Virtues?” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 558-585. For scholarship in the past decade addressing this question directly, see Angela Knobel, “Can Aquinas’s Infused and Acquired Virtues Coexist in the Christian Life?” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 23 (2010): 381-96, “Two Theories of Christian Virtue,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2010): 599-618, and “Relating Aquinas’ Acquired and Infused Virtues: Some Problematic Texts,” *Nova et Vetera* 9, no. 2 (2011): 411-431; David Decosimo, “More to Love: Ends, Ordering, and the Compatibility of Acquired and Infused Virtues,” in *The Virtuous Life: Thomas Aquinas on the Theological Nature of Moral Virtues*, ed. Harm Goris and Henk Schoot (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 47-72 and *Ethics as a Work of Charity: Thomas Aquinas and Pagan Virtue* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2014), 190-197; Andrew Pinsent, “Who’s Afraid of the Infused Virtues? Dispositional Infusion, Human and Divine,” in *The Virtuous Life: Thomas Aquinas on the Theological Nature of Moral Virtues*, ed. Harm Goris and Henk Schoot (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 73-96; and Nicholas Austin, S.J., *Aquinas on Virtue: A Causal Reading* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> I support this claim in a forthcoming article on the ramifications of Thomas’s thought on dead faith for this debate. See William C. Mattison III, “Revisiting the Relationship Between the Infused and Acquired Cardinal Virtues: Lessons from Thomas Aquinas on Dead Faith,” *Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics* 16 (2019): 11-24. In this volume of the *Journal of Moral Theology*, I am obviously in conversation with the essays by Jean Porter and Angela Knobel.

are due to the possession of acquired virtue. I will question this assumption by offering a Thomistic account of “custom” as an alternate explanation for persistent good activity after the loss of infused virtue.

My task here is to show why it may be the case that the person who loses infused virtue might *not* possess acquired virtue even while consistently performing acts that seem good from an observer’s perspective. At question is the source of the stability of the disposition to such good acts. While I have no stake in denying it is ever possible for one who loses infused virtue to attain acquired virtue after having committed mortal sin (though I admit I find it hard to imagine this happening, at least initially), what I do propose here is that there is another possible explanation for the consistent good acts of one who loses infused virtue. That source is what Thomas calls *consuetudo*, or custom. Thomas frequently discusses custom (as well as natural temperament) as a possible source of stable activity akin to a habit, yet importantly lacking certain features of a habit. Therefore, this paper is actually less about the relationship between acquired and infused virtues directly, although its conclusions relate to that debate. It is rather an inquiry into the ways that those human capacities amenable to habituation may be variously stably disposed toward activity. It turns out that the two most important sources of stability for a human person’s natural or supernatural virtue, namely, prudence or charity respectively, are not the only sources of stability. We are wrong to assume, simply on the basis of consistent observably good action, the presence of prudence in the absence of charity. In other words, in the case of one who has lost infused virtue, ongoing persistent good action need not be the result of acquired virtue connected by prudence. There are other sources of stable activity, and *consuetudo* is one of them, one far too neglected in moral theology.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows I proceed in three sections. In Section One, I review the recent debate over the relationship between acquired and infused virtue in order to identify points of agreement and disagreement among participants and also to situate the case at hand. In Section Two, I offer an account of custom situated within Thomas’s distinction between habits and dispositions. Thomas speaks of nature and custom as possible causes of stable dispositions, and such dispositions can be part of the development of habits properly so-called or exist as distinct from proper habits. I examine the relationship between habits

---

<sup>3</sup> I want to recognize that my claim here that one who loses infused virtue might not subsequently possess connected acquired virtue is *not* an endorsement of the claim, evidenced recently in the work of Tom Osborne, that connected virtue is only possible in the context of infused virtue (see Thomas Osborne, Jr., “The Augustinianism of Thomas Aquinas’s Moral Theory,” *The Thomist* 67 [2003]: 279-305). I do not think that is true. There presumably can be cases where there is connected acquired virtue in the absence of infused virtue, and yet there has not been the recent loss of infused virtue. This latter case with the recent loss of infused virtue is the one addressed here.

and the dispositions Thomas calls customs to prepare for the final section. Section Three applies the analysis of Section Two to the case of the person who loses infused virtue and posits custom as an explanation for such a person's stable good actions. It first examines how accustomization is involved in the loss of acquired virtue, and second examines the dynamics particular to the loss of infused virtue. This article's account of custom has broader ramifications for a comprehensive Thomistic account of habit and even for a Thomistic account of education. Yet it also has clear ramifications for recent debate on the relationship between the acquired and infused cardinal virtues, and these are noted in the conclusion.

#### **BACKGROUND ON THE CURRENT DEBATE<sup>4</sup>**

It would help at the outset to offer a brief sketch of the abovementioned recent debate on the possibility of acquired cardinal virtue in the Christian. All participants agree on the following. It is possible for people to possess virtues, variously called by St. Thomas "acquired," "natural," "political," or "social" virtues, which enable one to act in a manner oriented toward and indeed constitutive of natural human flourishing as one's last end.<sup>5</sup> There are a host of such moral and intellectual virtues, but they are typified by the cardinal virtues, which for St. Thomas "cover" all natural virtue in a sense.<sup>6</sup> Thus this debate is not about the possibility of pagan virtue; all in this debate affirm its possibility.<sup>7</sup> All participants also agree that through God's grace people are oriented toward supernatural happiness as last end, and God

---

<sup>4</sup> This summary of recent debate draws on Mattison, "Revisiting the Relationship Between the Infused and Acquired Cardinal Virtues," 16-18.

<sup>5</sup> For more on these four terms as functional equivalents, and Thomas's various categorizations of virtue more broadly, see William C. Mattison III, "Thomas' Categorizations of Virtue: Historical Background and Contemporary Significance," *The Thomist* 74 (2010): 189-235.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas often distinguishes, on the basis of object, the theological virtues from the "moral and intellectual" virtues. Thus, scholars commonly speak of the theological virtue vs. moral virtue distinction in Thomas, which is accurate. But since in Thomas's work "moral" virtue is at times distinguished from the theological virtue, and at other times distinguished from intellectual virtue (e.g., ST I-II q. 58), "cardinal" virtue is used here in reference to the moral virtues that are distinguished from the theological virtues. This terminological practice is not only adopted in certain contemporary scholarship (e.g., Michael Sherwin, "Infused Virtue and the Effects of Acquired Vice: A Test Case for the Thomistic Theory on the Infused Cardinal Virtues," *The Thomist* 73 [2009]: 29-52), but also employed by Thomas himself at times (e.g., ST I-II, q. 61) due to his claim that the four cardinal virtues "cover," in a sense, all moral virtues (ST I-II q. 61, a. 1 & 2).

<sup>7</sup> For a helpful entry into the topic, which is also part of a thread of scholarly debate on "pagan virtue," see Brian Shanley, "Aquinas on Pagan Virtue" *The Thomist* 63 (1999): 553-77. Shanley responds there to Bonnie Kent's "Moral Provincialism," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 269-85, which is itself a response to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre on virtue in Thomas and Augustine, especially his *Whose Justice? Which*

gives graced virtues to enable action oriented toward that end. Such virtues are infused. They include the theological virtues, which have God as their object (ST I-II q. 62, a. 1). They also include the infused cardinal virtues, which incline people to act well with regard to the material activities common to both acquired and infused cardinal virtues, but in the case of infused virtues in a manner specified by reference to the supernatural end and the concomitant divine rule (ST I-II q. 63, a. 3 & 4). All agree on this account of virtue thus far.

The question is whether or not a person, oriented toward supernatural happiness by God's grace, and who therefore possesses the theological and infused cardinal virtues, also possesses the acquired cardinal virtues. It is a yes or no question and thus there are two sides, though some recent work has helpfully identified significant differences within at least one of the sides.<sup>8</sup> These sides go by various names. On the one hand, there are a set of positions which claim that a Christian can indeed possess both acquired and infused cardinal virtues. This group of positions is coined "coexistence" (by Knobel) or "compatibilist" (by DeCosimo). I will use Knobel's "coexistence" here. On the other side there is a set of positions that all claim that a person with the infused virtues cannot possess the acquired cardinal virtues. This group of positions is called the "transformational" by Knobel or "incompatibilist" by Decosimo. I will again use Knobel's term, transformational. Some members of this camp claim that should a person's natural capacities be qualified by acquired cardinal virtues but then receive the grace of God and its concomitant qualities called infused virtues, say, at conversion, then the specification of the natural powers by those qualities called virtues would be "transformed" or re-qualified toward the supernatural end.<sup>9</sup>

Those who hold the coexistence position commonly raise the following concern. All in this debate agree that people who live lives

---

*Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). Shanley in turn is responded to by Osborne, "The Augustinianism of Thomas Aquinas's Moral Theory." Osborne is responded to by Angela McKay, "Prudence and Acquired Moral Virtue," *The Thomist* 69 (2005): 535-55, to which Osborne replies again in "Perfect and Imperfect Virtues," *The Thomist* 71 (2007): 39-64. Knobel makes further contributions to the debate in both "Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2011): 339-354, and "Ends and Virtues," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (2014): 105-117. For a recent monograph treatment of the question see DeCosimo's *Ethics as a Work of Charity*.

<sup>8</sup> For excellent treatments of the different ways that each position may be held, see Knobel, "Can the Infused and Acquired Virtues Coexist," "Two Theories of Christian Virtue," and especially "Relating Aquinas' Acquired and Infused Virtues: Some Problematic Texts." The differences in these arguments on either side are quite significant. However, in the end the question at hand is indeed a yes or no question.

<sup>9</sup> For an example of this, see Mattison, "Can Christians Possess the Acquired Virtues?" 560 and 584.

ordered toward supernatural happiness with God can cease to live toward that end. In the Catholic tradition, this is called mortal sin. When this occurs, one no longer possesses the virtue of charity, which is friendship with God that orients all virtuous activity toward that supernatural end of friendship with God. One also ceases to possess infused cardinal virtues which are informed by charity. But presumably the person who had, say, infused temperance by which she lived while in friendship with God, will not immediately become a glutton, or unchaste. To this point all agree. The question then is how might we describe how such a person exercises her natural abilities? Is she rightly said to possess the virtue of temperance? If so, it would of course be acquired temperance. Does that mean the acquired temperance was there all along, “underneath,” if you will, the infused temperance?<sup>10</sup> This would be a claim in support of the coexistence position. Or would the loss of charity somehow engender the acquired temperance? This is one possible explanation of the case at hand that could be offered by proponents of the transformational position, since a person would possess either acquired or infused virtue but not both at the same time. Such an explanation is a seeming weakness of the transformational position, since it certainly would seem odd if a mortal sin were to cause the acquisition of a previously unpossessed virtue.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of the person who loses charity and the corresponding infused cardinal virtues, two assumptions are made. First, the person can quite possibly continue to perform consistent good actions, say, of temperance. Second, those consistent good actions indicate the existence of an acquired virtue of temperance in that person. The first assumption is not questioned here, but the second one is. What if the person who loses the infused cardinal virtues does not possess acquired temperance, even as he consistently performs actions that are acts of temperance? The following section draws on the thought of Aquinas to delineate just such a source of consistent human activity, namely custom. I claim that a person may possess a disposition to consistent action, even quite stable such action, which is nonetheless not a habit properly understood, and therefore not a virtue. Thomas’s thought on custom offers just such an explanation.

---

<sup>10</sup> Such a hypothesis could also be used to explain the inverse case of one with the infused virtues (including temperance) who nonetheless struggles with excessive desire for and consumption of food or drink. Should such a person grow more temperate, one explanation is that they obtain acquired temperance, alongside or “co-existing” with the already possessed infused temperance. For an example of an analysis of this very case, see Sherwin, “Infused Virtue and the Effects of Acquired Vice.”

<sup>11</sup> For reasons that Thomas himself acknowledges in his treatment of dead faith, neither of these alternatives are attractive. His most direct treatment of this issue can be found at ST II-II q. 4, a. 4. For treatment of this text see Mattison, “Revisiting the Relationship Between the Infused and Acquired Cardinal Virtues,” 21-25.

## DISPOSITIONS, HABITS, AND THE PLACE OF CUSTOM

This section will have to prescind from a robust account of habit in Thomas's thought, and provide only what is necessary to outline Thomas's understanding of custom and its relationship to habits.<sup>12</sup> Thomas claims that habits are qualities. That is, they are not human capacities themselves, but rather qualifications of those capacities toward specified types of action (See ST I-II q. 49, a. 1). Not all human capacities require habituation. Some capacities are ordered to only one specific type of activity (e.g., digestive powers). Others have the specificity of their activity provided entirely externally (e.g., the exterior senses). Yet others, while activated by interaction "from the outside," are underdetermined in how they are actualized.<sup>13</sup> These capacities are perfected in their actualization by being further qualified, or specified, toward more particular types of actions. That qualification, a (more or less) stable specification of activity toward which the capacity is disposed, is not innately part of the natural capacity, but becomes a "second nature" feature (qualification) of the capacity. Though such a quality is not innate (hence "second" nature), it is so much a part of the human person that action—even when prompted by interaction with the external environment—is one's own as caused by this internal principle. Such action is said to be "natural" (or "connatural") to the person since one's capacities have been specified toward such action (hence second "nature"). Habits are one type of such qualification of habituate-able human capacities. They are exemplary forms of qualification, since they are stable specifications of a person's capacities, where that specification is provided by human reason.<sup>14</sup>

It is in the context of explaining how habits are qualities that Thomas distinguishes between habit and disposition. When the qualification or specification of a capacity is very stable (*difficile mobile*), the capacity can be said to be qualified by a habit rather than a mere disposition.<sup>15</sup> Whence that stability? A power is stably habituated

---

<sup>12</sup> For such an account of habit, see the first two chapters of my forthcoming (tentatively titled) *Aquinas on Habit, the Last End, and Graced Virtue*. David Decosimo offers a very illustrative treatment of habit in *Ethics as a Work of Charity*, 73-105. See a more recent treatment in Austin, *Aquinas on Virtue*, 27-34.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas's most complete treatment of this is found at "On the cardinal virtues" (*De virtutibus cardinalibus*), a. 1. See also ST I-II q. 49, a. 4.

<sup>14</sup> How the infused virtues operate in a continuous yet different manner is addressed below.

<sup>15</sup> There is also a sense in which disposition refers to any such qualification, whether stable or not. In this sense "disposition" is a genus term and includes "habits" which are more stable types of dispositions. But in the sense referenced here, habits are distinct from dispositions. For both of these uses see ST I-II q. 49, a. 2, ad 3. There is extensive secondary scholarship on the relationship between dispositions and habits. For a helpful review of it, see Andrew Whitmore, *Dispositions and Habits in the Work of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 2018). David Decosimo's work on this is also insightful and largely endorsed here,

when the cause of its specification is *immobile* rather than *transmutabile*.<sup>16</sup> For examples of habits with *causae immobiles*, Thomas adduces sciences and virtues. For examples of dispositions with *causae transmutabiles*, he adduces sickness and health. Scholars recognize that in this context the *causa immobile* of habits should be understood as the rational soul.<sup>17</sup> Such habits may of course entail bodily changes and activities of the person that are shared in common with animals (i.e., the sensitive soul), but the *causa immobile* which grants stability is the rational soul.<sup>18</sup> For acquired virtues that *immobile* (rather than *transmutabile*) cause is practical reason.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas therefore claims that human habits are paradigmatically caused by one's rational powers providing the specification of the underdetermined capacity. If they lack specification by one's rational powers, they lack something of the proper "notion" (*ratio*) of a habit.<sup>20</sup> Yet Thomas also recognizes there can be other causes of "habits." I use scare quotes because at times Thomas can be rather imprecise or non-technical in his use of that term. Despite having carefully distinguished habits from dispositions by the *causa immobile* (one's rational capacities) entailed in the former and not the latter, at times Thomas examines various causes of habits and includes causes that alone do not render habits properly understood.<sup>21</sup> In his most complete list of

---

see his *Ethics as a Work of Charity*, 75-97. Robert Miner also offers a penetrating treatment of habit and disposition in his "Aquinas on *Habitus*," in *A History of Habit*, ed. Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 67-87, 68-71.

<sup>16</sup> These terms are from ST I-II q. 49, q. 2, ad 3. They are left in the Latin because they are commonly translated as "unchangeable" and "changeable," which is misleading, since even the *causa immobile* and certainly the habit caused by it are indeed changeable, even if such habits are more stable than dispositions caused by a *causa transmutabile*.

<sup>17</sup> See Whitmore, *Habits and Dispositions*, 97-98. See also Decosimo, *Ethics as a Work of Charity*, 82-84, 87-94.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas recognizes there are problems with equating stability with *causa immobile*. On the one hand, there can be dispositions caused by reason that are not (yet?) held stably, as with the beginner in virtue or science. These dispositions can be properly called such, rather than habits, since though they do have a *causa immobile*, they do not possess stability. Conversely, there can be dispositions without *causae immobiles* which nonetheless are relatively quite stable. They are still called dispositions because their *causae transmutabiles* render them only accidentally stable. For excellent treatments, see Whitmore, *Habits and Dispositions*, 96-97; Decosimo, *Ethics as a Work of Charity*, 89-90; and, Miner, "Aquinas on *Habitus*," 69.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, a habit need not be a virtue, as vices are also habits. So, what qualifies a disposition as a habit is not necessary the virtue prudence (*right* practical reasoning), but the specification of the acts of the power by practical reasoning.

<sup>20</sup> See term *ratio* of a habit in ST I-II q. 50, a. 3 ad 2. Again, as noted below, the human rational powers can, in the case of the infused virtues, be elevated by grace.

<sup>21</sup> The dynamic is similar to his usage of virtue. Despite having a very precise and technical understanding of virtue, at times he will describe various levels of "virtue" and include types that do not properly match the meaning of virtue, such as a natural

causes of “habits,” in the context of describing what can lead to virtue being greater in one person than another, Thomas includes four such causes: greater habituation (*assuetudinem*), a better natural disposition (*dispositionem naturae*), a more discerning judgment of reason, or a greater gift of grace (ST I-II q. 66, a. 1).<sup>22</sup> Yet only the last two are causes of habits properly so called. In fact, the first two are adduced by Thomas as causes of “habits” that are not properly habits. For instance, in his treatment of the connectivity of the virtues, Thomas claims:

Moral virtue may be considered either as perfect or imperfect. An imperfect moral virtue, temperance for instance, or fortitude, is nothing but an inclination in us to do some kind of good deed, whether such inclination be in us by nature [*a natura*] or by habituation [*ex assuetudine*]. If we take the moral virtues in this way, they are not connected: since we find men who, by natural temperament [*ex naturali complexione*] or custom [*ex aliqua consuetudine*], are prompt in doing deeds of liberality, but not prompt in doing deeds of chastity (ST I-II q. 65, a.1).

Therefore, like one’s natural temperament, custom can be a cause of (even a relatively stable) disposition to action that is stable enough to be akin to a habit, but not properly a habit.<sup>23</sup>

Before continuing to explore how a disposition from custom arises, it would help to pause to examine the meaning of custom. “Custom” is a tricky topic in general, and no less tricky in the thought of Aquinas. The Angelic Doctor himself recognizes two distinct meanings for custom.<sup>24</sup> One recent author translates the first meaning as “practice,” i.e.,

---

inclination to virtuous acts or even the miser’s frugality. See ST I-II q. 65, a. 1 and *De virt.* a. 2 for examples of Thomas using the term “virtue” for a natural inclination to virtue (mentioning custom in ST I-II q. 65, a. 1). See ST II-II q. 23, a. 7 for varying usage, initially calling the miser’s frugality virtue, but then saying it is actually counterfeit virtue.

<sup>22</sup> The use of *assuetudinem* here rather than *consuetudinem* raises the question of how these two terms are related. As seen in the following longer quotation, they are commonly used synonymously; in the context of this inquiry, that rough equation of the terms suffices. See ST I-II q. 65, a. 1 for their equation by Thomas.

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted here in the context of the term “imperfect” that Thomas claims habits properly understood are necessary for a person’s perfection. See ST I-II q. 49, a. 4, as well as *De virt.* a. 1. Something is lacking if a human power amenable to habituation is “only” accustomed rather than habituated. I take Thomas’s claim on the “necessity” of habit to mean necessary for full rational operation, not as literally necessary in the sense of unable to be without, since he clearly affirms the possibility of “imperfect” virtues as in this text. I am grateful to Jean Porter for this point.

<sup>24</sup> See ST I-II q. 58, a. 1 where he addresses custom in the context of the meaning of the Latin term *mos* (or the Greek term *ethos*).

some sustained activity on the part of a person, quite commonly communally mediated, that presumably has intelligible purpose.<sup>25</sup> Thomas' own example in this text is the practice of circumcision as prescribed in the old law. The second meaning is a "natural or quasi natural inclination to do some action," as can even be found in (non-human) animals. Thus, while the first sense describes persistent activity that can lead to a disposition, the second describes a disposition in a person (or even animals). These two senses seem to correspond to contemporary usage. We speak of the customs of a people (such as Native American customs) or a person (his daily custom of visiting the coffee shop). We also speak of custom as a disposition held by a person, as when we say "he has a custom of doing..." or, "she is accustomed to ...." The point for our purposes is that Thomas uses the term custom to speak of a disposition to action in a person, though of course, such a disposition results from repeated activity. In fact, at times he uses language that is strikingly similar to his language of habit. On repeated occasions across his *corpus* Thomas claims that custom is "second nature."<sup>26</sup> As one contemporary scholar notes, "Both *habitus* and *consuetudo* are regularly described as a second nature that becomes virtually inalterable over time, and both can be used positively or negatively."<sup>27</sup>

We may wonder what exactly is happening when a disposition is caused in a human person not by natural temperament but by repeated activity, and yet which is not a proper habit. In one key text, Thomas uses the example of animals to describe this dynamic. He claims that we can admit the existence of "habits" (really dispositions) in animals, citing Augustine's reference to the process of accustoming in brutes.

By man's reason, brutes are disposed by a sort of custom to do things in this or that way, so in this sense, to a certain extent, we can admit the existence of habits in dumb animals: wherefore Augustine says... "We find the most untamed beasts, deterred by fear of pain, from that wherein they took the keenest pleasure; and when this has

---

<sup>25</sup> See A. Leo White, "Instinct and Custom," *The Thomist* 66, no. 4 (2002): 577-605, at 601, n. 82. There is a ready connection here to Alasdair MacIntyre's renowned concept of practice. Such a connection is the first of many nods in this chapter to the communal nature of habituation.

<sup>26</sup> See *de ver.* 24,10, citing Cicero as a source. See also ST I-II q. 56, a. 5 on the subject of virtue. See also repeated affirmations of this in the articles on the causes of virtue, *De virt.* aa. 8-10.

<sup>27</sup> See Katharine Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public 1150-1400* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 46, on the use of habit in medieval period. Granting the stability of "second nature," "virtually inalterable" is a little too strong for either *habitus* or *consuetudo*.

become a custom in them, we say that they are tame and gentle” (ST I-II q. 50, a. 3, ad 2).<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting that Aquinas uses (in his own voice) the term “habit” for this dynamic when Augustine himself uses “custom.” Nonetheless, the fact that this is an example of an extended and non-precise use of “habit” is indicated in the very next line, where Thomas claims:

But the habit is incomplete, as to the use of the will, for they [animals] have not that power of using or of refraining, which seems to belong to the notion of habit [*ad rationem habitus*]: and therefore, properly speaking, there are no habits in animals (ST I-II, q. 50, a. 3 ad 2).

There are stable dispositions in animals caused by repeated activity, but such customs lack the use of rational capacities and therefore do not attain to the notion (*ratio*) of habit properly understood.

We might rightly ask at this point if the dynamic described here with regard to animals is the same as can occur in human persons. In another key text on custom, Thomas claims it can indeed.<sup>29</sup> Inquiring as to whether the human person’s sensory powers of apprehension can be habituated, Aquinas again uses the term “habit” initially broadly to say that there can be “habits” in such capacities. Here he deploys Aristotle, who also equates custom with “second nature”:

In the interior sensitive powers of apprehension, there are some habits. And this is made clear principally from what the Philosopher says (*De memoria* ii) that “in remembering one thing after another, what is at work is custom, which is a second nature.” Now a habit of custom [*habitus consuetudinalis*] is nothing other than a condition [*habitudo*] acquired by custom [*per consuetudinem*], which is like unto nature (ST I-II q. 56, a. 5).<sup>30</sup>

This may be surprising given that Thomas consistently concludes that the sensory powers of apprehension are not subjects of habits properly understood (ST I-II q. 50, a. 3 and q. 56, a. 5). And indeed, in the very

---

<sup>28</sup> For more on this see White, “Instinct and Custom,” 601: “While insisting in the *Summa Theologiae* that brutes cannot, strictly speaking, acquire habits (because habit is a function of choice), he grants that reason can modify the dispositions found in animals inasmuch as human trainers can establish custom within them.”

<sup>29</sup> As noted by White, “Instinct and Custom,” 600: “Custom is the component of human experience that humans and brutes have in common.”

<sup>30</sup> This translation draws on the English Dominicans translation as offered at [dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/index.html](http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/index.html). Yet there are some modifications, including importantly “condition” for *habitudo*. This latter Latin term is used surprisingly infrequently in Thomas’s treatments of habit and virtue, suggesting it is not to be equated with *habitus*. Yet, the English Dominicans translate it as “habit” here, which defies both the context of this text, as well as the more common choice to translate it with the English “aptitude.”

next line, Thomas qualifies this broad and imprecise use of “habits” by using Cicero to give a precise definition of virtue (and by extension habit):

Wherefore Tully says of virtue in his *Rhetoric* that “it is a habit like a second nature in accord with reason.” Yet, in man, that which he acquires by custom in his memory and other sensitive powers of apprehension, is not a habit properly so called, but something annexed to the habits of the intellective faculty, as stated above (ST I-II q. 56, a. 5).<sup>31</sup>

This is perhaps the most direct distinction between custom and habit in Thomas’s work, in his own voice and buttressed by Aristotle and Cicero.<sup>32</sup> “Accustoming” leads to what seems like a habit since a human capacity becomes stably specified, and thus second nature. However, as Augustine had affirmed above and as Thomas affirms in distinguishing dispositions from custom (and nature) from habits, in the absence of specification by reason, such dispositions from custom are not habits in the proper sense.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, custom may be understood as the repeated activity that leads to a stable disposition (though not proper habit) toward specific activity. Thomas uses “custom” to refer both to the repeated activity leading to the disposition (which might be called “accustomization”) and to the disposition itself, even at times calling custom “second nature.” It is possible for a person to possess a custom, a disposition from repeated activity, that is not a habit in the proper sense since the stable specification of the natural capacity’s activity is not provided by human reason as *causa immobile*.

---

<sup>31</sup> This translation also draws on the English Dominicans translation as offered at [dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/index.html](http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/index.html), yet it modifies that by changing the odd choice of “by use” for *ex consuetudine* to “by custom.”

<sup>32</sup> It is puzzling why Bonnie Kent fails to see the reasoning behind this distinction in Aquinas. She says, “Thomas’ distinction between habit and custom seems rather strained—and, from the perspective of ancient philosophy, hopelessly misguided.” See her “Habits and Virtues,” in *Aquinas on Virtue*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 116-130, 120.

<sup>33</sup> To make this point crystal clear, Thomas goes on in the lines that follow to reiterate that habits are not found in the sensory apprehensive powers, but they are preparations (*preparatoriae*) for virtues in the rational powers. See ST I-II q. 56, a. 5. For more on the way that the sensory apprehensive capacities “are in a certain sense” said to be habituated, but not properly so, see ST I-II q. 50, q. 3, ad 3. There he says “in the interior sensitive powers of apprehension are able to be posited certain habits [*aliqui habitus*], according to which man has facility of memory, thought [*cogitativus*], or imagination: wherefore also the Philosopher says...that ‘custom [*consuetudo*] conduces much to a good memory....’” It is noteworthy, especially for treatments of the habituation of the passions, that Thomas notes the amenability of the interior senses, including the crucial cogitative power, to accustoming.

Before turning to the following section, mention of how custom is distinguished from reason-specified habit invites a word or two on the place of “accustoming” in the formation of reason-specified habits. The question might be put this way. Since a disposition from custom and a habit specified by reason are distinguishable such that one could have custom without a habit, does a custom *become* a habit when one attains a habit properly understood? Or does one lose a custom once one attains a habit? Or does one develop a habit alongside or “on top of” the disposition from custom?<sup>34</sup>

This is where Thomas’s thought on formation in habit (hopefully virtue as good habit) can be deployed in service to a broader Thomistic theory of education, a task obviously beyond the scope of this essay. For an example of how the issue of the role of custom in the development of habit relates to that topic, consider the recent book *Imagining an English Reading Public, 1150-1400*, where English literature scholar Katharine Breen explores the topic of habit as it relates to formation and education in the Middle Ages. She has a clear grasp of the distinction between custom and habit, and the distinct yet ideally complementary role for each in the endeavor of education and formation. At one point she claims, “In this context, it is not unusual for writers to suggest that a good *consuetudo* is a kind of substrate from which a good *habitus* can develop.”<sup>35</sup> She goes on to say with reference to Aristotle that “habits...build on the good *consuetudines* that are acquired in youth...”<sup>36</sup> Indeed she explains how for one medieval thinker growth in virtue entails movement from natural disposition (for which she uses the term *mores*) to custom, to habit.<sup>37</sup> She describes the (medieval and thus male) process of education in a manner that perfectly captures the role of custom:

Even though virtuous *habitus* are by definition rational, they do not derive directly from abstract principles. Instead they are developed by carefully encouraging young boys’ good *mores* until they establish

---

<sup>34</sup> Though this may seem a nod toward the next section’s application of Thomas’ thought on custom to the debate over the relationship between acquired and infused virtues, it must be noted that the question addressed here is *not* about the relationship between different habits (such as acquired and infused virtues) in the same natural capacity toward acts with the same material object. Rather, the question addressed here concerns the relationship between dispositions whose specification is caused by the accustomization of the sensory powers on the one hand and habits properly understood as specified by reason on the other hand.

<sup>35</sup> Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public*, 48. The “context” she references in Aquinas’s thought, particularly ST I-II q. 56, a. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public*, 64-65, emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> At this particular point she relies on Engelbert of Admost (1250-1331), though Thomas’s references to both natural temperament and custom earlier in this section indicate this as relevant for his thought as well.

good *consuetudines*. Later, once they are of age to exercise their rational powers and systematically relate them to their actions, these customs will gradually become *habitus*. Though the good actions prompted by *consuetudo* may not be discernibly different from the virtuous actions of full-blown *habitus*, they reflect different internal states. The habitual action is virtuous because it combines the stability of second nature with the order of right reason.<sup>38</sup>

A full Thomistic account of formation in virtue and its pertinence for a broader account of education cannot be undertaken here. Hopefully Breen's work indicates the importance of custom in developing habits, especially for children but surely also in adult persons who continue to gain or strengthen habits. What is directly relevant here in Breen's work are her underdeveloped comments about the transition from custom to habit. She uses phrases like custom being a "substrate from which" good habits develop, and later says customs gradually "become" habits. What more should be said here in service to the following section's application of Thomas's thought on custom to the case of one who loses infused virtue and yet persists in the performance of observably good acts? Two comments are offered here.

First, it is essential to recall a point made early in this section, that habits are not substances in themselves, but rather qualifications of natural capacities. Therefore, what persists in the process of formation is the natural capacity, whose qualification, i.e. (more or less stable) specification, can change (e.g., from disposition to habit; from vice to virtue, etc.). Thomas makes this point, interestingly enough in his treatment of growth of infused virtue, in a style uncommon to him, namely, in the form of a warning not to make a mistake on this point:

Many make mistakes about *forms* by treating them as if they were substances. This seems to happen because forms are described by using nouns, just as substances are, albeit abstract nouns, such as whiteness or virtue (*De virt.* a. 11).

Yet forms such as whiteness and virtue are not substances but rather qualities of substances. As he says later in that same article, "Charity and the other infused virtues...do not give their subject its being as a substance, as the substantial forms do."<sup>39</sup> He goes on to say:

---

<sup>38</sup> Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public*, 48. Though Breen is examining the role of custom in medieval thought on habit in general, she relies on Aquinas at this point in her argument (and for roughly half her chapter on the medievals), particularly ST I-II q. 56, a. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Decosimo grasps this point well in *Ethics as a Work of Charity*, where he claims that the capacity qualified by the habit is not only raw material but already possesses "direction or inclination," albeit "insufficiently determined" and thus requiring the further specification and especially stability of habit. He is correct to emphasize that

Just as being belongs not to a form but to a subject by means of a form, so too the process of coming into being (which concludes with there being a form) does not belong to the form, but to the subject (*De virt.* a. 11).<sup>40</sup>

When we talk about habits such as virtues, we are actually talking about people's natural capacities. The attainment of a disposition or habit is a qualification, a (more or less stable) specification, of a subject's capacity toward a certain sort of activity.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, "a form is said to come into being not because it itself comes into being, but because something comes to be it: namely when a subject is brought from capacity to actualization" (*De virt.* a. 11). Although it is not inaccurate to say that one gains a habit such as temperance, it is less misleading to say that one's sensory appetites become temperate.<sup>42</sup>

What has any of this to do with the relationship between dispositions and habits in the process of formation in habit? Development of a habit is best understood not as gaining an additional substance, but rather having one's capacities become stably specified through practical reasoning. If those capacities are not (yet?) stably specified by a habit, it is the same capacities that are (in principle less stably) specified by dispositions from nature and/or custom. Thus, Breen might have spoken more precisely had she said that one's capacities qualified by custom become qualified by habit, rather than that a custom "becomes" a habit.

This raises the second point about the ongoing relationship between the formal specification provided by a disposition like custom (or nature) and the formal specification provided by reasoning. Do these forms each persist as distinct entities, operating in conjunction with each other? Put differently, does the sort of specification (of sensory powers) provided by custom persist in the sort of specification (of rational powers) provided by habit? Since we are talking about the

---

"habit does not *cause* appetitive power to desire food—that desire, instead, is what habit works upon, shapes, and perfects" (87).

<sup>40</sup> See also Thomas's more brief treatment of this in the *Summa theologiae*. When addressing increase in habits, he claims "This distinction is not to be understood as implying that the form has a being outside its matter or subject..." (ST I-II q. 52, a. 1).

<sup>41</sup> Conversely, the loss of a virtue is a dis-qualification, or perhaps more likely re-qualification.

<sup>42</sup> This point is actually important in discussions of the relationship between acquired and infused virtue. Proponents of coexistence rightly stress the need for continuity in the non-graced and graced virtuous life. But they mistakenly assume that acquired virtue provides such continuity, whereas it is the person's (natural) capacity—qualified in one way by acquired virtue but a different way by infused virtue—that provides such continuity.

relationship between the sensory powers (of apprehension and appetite) and the rational powers (of apprehension and appetite) in the human person, we would benefit from consulting Thomas's position on the so-called plurality of forms debate in the Middle Ages. An in-depth examination of the context of and various positions in this debate is well beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>43</sup> The basic issue was how to account for the fact that the human person has several different levels of capacities, which reflect the human person's continuity with yet also distinction from other creatures. Medieval (influenced by Aristotle) referenced the various "souls" of the person, namely, nutritive (in common with plants), sensory (in common with animals), and rational (distinct to persons). The question at hand was how to describe the ongoing presence of all of these in a human person, yet in a unified manner. While some medieval affirmed a "plurality of forms" (i.e., souls) in the human person to explain activities on those various levels, Thomas endorsed a "unicity of form" position whereby the human person possess just one (rational) soul, which "contains" or we might say "includes" the activities of the "lower" forms. Thomas thought this position crucial, among other reasons, to maintain the unity of the human person.<sup>44</sup>

What is the relevance of this position for the relationship between habit and custom? Thomas claims that habits properly understood require the rational powers of the human person. His description of customs, dispositions arising from repeated action as distinct from habit, indicates that the specification of such capacities occurs at the level of the sensory soul. Therefore, any Thomistic account of how custom and habit operate together, if you will, should be compatible with Thomas's thought on the relationship between "souls" in the plurality of forms debate. Given that Thomas claims the human person's sensory powers are not a separate soul from the rational soul, but are "contained" by or included in the person's rational soul as source of unity, it is reasonable to assume that same understanding of the relationship between rational and sensory powers in a habit with both rational and

---

<sup>43</sup> For a helpful introduction to this medieval debate, see Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 194-195. For its relevance to virtue, see Bonnie Kent, *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 214-215.

<sup>44</sup> For Thomas's treatment of this issue see ST I q. 76, a. 3. There he claims: "Thus the intellectual soul contains virtually whatever belongs to the sensitive soul of brute animals, and to the nutritive souls of plants. Therefore, as a surface which is of a pentagonal shape is not tetragonal by one shape, and pentagonal by another—since a tetragonal shape would be superfluous as contained in the pentagonal—so neither is Socrates a man by one soul and animal by another; but by one and the same soul he is both animal and man." In addition to the unity of the person, another reason Thomas endorses this position is the fact that activities of one "soul" can impede another.

sensory aspects. How does this relate to formation (or de-formation) in virtue?

Breen uses the term “substrate” to describe the sensory aspects of capacity specification characterizing a custom disposition, namely, the connaturalization of the sensory powers to certain paradigmatic acts of the capacity at hand. The term is used to claim that such aspects persist in the presence of habit of that same capacity. I take “substrate” to indicate the persistence of such characteristic features of custom in a habit, even while such features of custom are not only distinguishable from, but even possible without, the specification by reason characterizing a habit. I do not take “substrate” as a claim that these distinguishable features are two separate dispositions even while existing together. Such a position would contradict Thomas’s more unified account of the person and her various capacities as evident in his position on the unicity of forms.<sup>45</sup>

The distinction between dispositions caused by custom and habits caused by reason suffers great neglect in contemporary moral theological scholarship on virtue in Aquinas. A possible reason for that neglect is that when the formative processes of repeated activity are functioning well, they lead not only to “mere” custom but also to proper habits. In other words, repeated (generally communally mediated) activity leads one’s natural habituate-able capacities to be stably specified not only by the “customization” of one’s non-rational powers such as the interior senses (memory, imagination, etc.) but also by the more stable specification provided by one’s practical reasoning. Though we can “get used to” (i.e., become accustomed to) activities in a manner that does not engage our rational abilities, normally the process of repeated activity will specify not only one’s sensory capacities but also one’s rational capacities. In the same way that one’s natural temperament is not complete virtue (or vice) even as virtue properly understood “includes,” if you will, such innately provided sources of specification of a person’s natural capacities, so too is mere custom or accustoming not complete virtue (or vice) even as virtue properly understood entails the dynamics of accustomization. Since the social practices called customs commonly bring about dispositions called customs as part of the more complete process of formation of properly human habits, it is easy to neglect this distinct role for custom or the possibility of it existing before or without a proper habit.

---

<sup>45</sup>Not all of Breen’s comments on custom are endorsed here. Though at one point she claims custom can function positively or negatively, in general she reads medievals as regarding custom generally as negative (and *habitus* as positive.) See Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public*, 49. She also has a rather classist understanding of custom (for the “untutored,” “ordinary” people) as distinct from habit (which “marks a spiritual elite”). See *Imagining an English Reading Public*, 47-48 and 65. For critical examination of Breen on other points, see, for example, Miner, “Aquinas on *Habitus*,” 80.

These last two technical points concerning habit—namely, that habits are qualities not substantial forms, and that the human person has one rational soul under which other “souls” of the person such as the sensory soul are united—may seem to have driven us far afield. But they have actually completed this section’s analysis of Thomas’s thought on custom in a way that sets the stage for the final section’s application of that thought to the case prompting this essay. For it may be the case that customs and habits do not operate together. In fact, the case prompting this essay is one where there may be custom without habit. But this brief foray into the relationship between custom and habit in the processes leading toward formation in habit helps illuminate what occurs when they do not operate together.

To conclude, Thomas explains with great precision how human capacities able to be habituated can be qualified by dispositions or habits. His common examples of dispositions are natural temperament and custom. Ideally these causal influences, akin to what we commonly reference as “nature and nurture,” are taken up in a process of formation that culminates in full-blown habits properly understood. Yet dispositions by custom (as by nature) are possible without the stable specification provided by practical reasoning. This leads us back to the case which prompts this essay.

#### **CUSTOM AND THE PERSON WHO LOSES INFUSED VIRTUE**

The relevance of custom for the case this essay addresses should hopefully now be evident. I am suggesting that the person who loses infused virtue and yet who afterwards consistently performs observably good actions and thus seems to possess a habit in the fullest sense (which would of course have to be an acquired virtue) may in actuality possess a disposition to good action, a disposition from custom. To speak colloquially, the person has “gotten used to” acting in the manner formerly specified by the *causa immobile* of infused virtue. In this case the custom would not be part of a developmental process in childhood toward the possession of true virtue, but rather a regression, the residue of a previously possessed habit. What is lost is the *causa immobile* specifying the activities. In this case of infused virtue, the *causa immobile* would be grace, and its habitual possession in the virtue of charity along with the other infused virtues such as faith and infused prudence. What is left is the accustoming of one’s capacities toward acts that no longer retain their former intelligibility, or we might say “rationale,” even as they are observably the same and seem to retain the stability of “second nature.”<sup>46</sup> To make this case I will

---

<sup>46</sup> Though this is particularly evident in acts of the sensitive appetite from the accustomization of sensory apprehensive capacities like imagination and memory and especially the cogitative power, there does seem to be a sort of customization even in acts of the will, which obviously in this case would not be perfectly rational. One

first examine the (tougher) case of acquired virtue to determine if residual “customs” toward actions observably similar to those previously specified by the virtue could (not as) stably continue after the loss of acquired virtue. Second, I turn to dynamics particular to infused virtue, which only increase the plausibility of custom playing the role suggested here.

*Custom Dispositions “After” Acquired Virtue?*

Before examining the case at hand, which concerns infused virtue, it would help to explore whether or not it is feasible that residual dispositions from custom could remain in a person after the loss of acquired virtue. Thomas grants that it is possible for a person to cease to possess an acquired virtue.<sup>47</sup> When that happens, presumably over repeated acts or even simply the cessation of virtuous acts, at some point one’s capacity is no longer qualified by the virtue, understood as a habit in the proper sense. When this occurs, is that natural capacity previously qualified by the virtue now qualified in any way? Thomas claims that *any* action disposes a capacity (*De virt. a. 9 ad 11*). It could create a (presumably initially very unstable) disposition or strengthen or weaken an existing one. But once a natural capacity is active, any action impacts its qualification. The question is: once a capacity is qualified by a habit (virtue or vice) due to stable specification by practical reasoning, can it ever be only qualified by a disposition and not a habit properly understood?<sup>48</sup> Consider two possibilities.

First, one could cease to possess that acquired virtue and immediately begin to possess a contrary vice. Since it is practical reasoning that stably specifies a habit (virtue or vice) properly understood, presumably this could occur in a situation where there is a reasoned, principled repudiation of the virtue and comparably reasoned, principled taking up of the vice. Of course, since it is one’s same practical reasoning that specifies the manifold virtues (ST I-II q. 65, a. 1), this would mean that all those natural capacities would need to be (imme-

---

might think of someone who has grown up or otherwise became accustomed to always telling the truth, or taking care of those in need, or performing courteous acts, and continuing to do so even after the loss of specification by a *causa immobile* such as right practical reasoning or charity. Despite the will’s status as “rational appetite,” it, too, relies on processes of habituation toward paradigmatic acts. For more on this dynamic in the will, including in children, see Jean Porter, *The Perfection of Desire: Habit, Reason and Virtue in Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2018), 117-122.

<sup>47</sup> For Thomas’s account of the corruption or diminishment of habits, including by cessation of action, see ST I-II q. 53, a. 1-3.

<sup>48</sup> Recall this topic addressed above (n. 28) as to the “necessity” of habit in a person. As will be clear in the second possibility below (with reliance on ST I-II q. 51, a. 3), I take Thomas to mean that habits are necessary for fully human (rational) functioning, though not necessary in the sense that one is “unable to be without” them.

diately, it would seem) re-stably specified by one's (now wrong) practical reasoning into vices.<sup>49</sup> Note that this account assumes that once a person has possessed habits properly understood, they can no longer *not* possess habits properly understood, though of course they can change from virtue to vice (or the other way around). This position is based on the assumption that practical reasoning, once present to stably specify one's capacities, can never *not* stably specify one's capacities, though how it does so may change.

Second, it could also be the case that a person's habituate-able capacities might cease to be qualified by a virtue understood as a habit in the proper sense and yet not be immediately stably specified by (contrary) practical reasoning so as to be qualified right away by a vice understood as a habit in the proper sense. There could be an interim period (whose length of time could vary) before the specification of vice is stabilized, or before the return to the virtue, where the person's capacities are disposed but not habituated.<sup>50</sup> Note the claim here is *not* that in such an interim period one does not act out of practical reasoning, but rather that in such a period, one's natural capacities are not stably specified as habits. If this were the case, how would one's practical reasoning be operative? I see two possibilities. Perhaps one's reasoning is confused and unable to provide stable specification, as it vacillates between different goods. Or, perhaps one's reasoning is more coherent, but the appetitive powers "lag." Indeed, as to the (im)possibility of forming an acquired habit in one act, Thomas claims:

Reason cannot entirely overcome the appetitive power in one act: because the appetitive power is inclined variously, and to many things; while the reason judges in a single act, which should be willed in regard to various aspects and circumstances. (ST I-II q. 51, a. 3).

Thomas claims that reason "gradually expels contrary dispositions," eventually "overcoming it entirely," so as to "impress its likeness on it" (ST I-II q. 51, a. 3). Presumably those existing "contrary dispositions" could be caused by nature or custom on the path toward growth in virtue, as discussed earlier. Yet, surely, they could also be caused by former habits properly understood, in which the stable specification

---

<sup>49</sup> The claim that vices entail the stable specification of one's capacities by practical reasoning that is vitiated, which Thomas endorses, is not the same as the claim that sins of vices are connected, which Thomas denies. See ST I-II q. 73, a. 1.

<sup>50</sup> It must be granted that for a person with experience in life, a capacity will never not be qualified by a habit or disposition, since Thomas claims that even one act disposes (though obviously need not engender a habit in the proper sense) a person (*De virt.* a. 9 ad 11). Furthermore, given the dispositional impact of activity from a capacity, presumably one will never fall back simply to natural temperament as the sole cause of disposition, even as the force of natural temperament may continue to persist solely *qua* disposition in the capacity qualified by custom even if not reason.

was provided by the rational powers as *causa immobile* in a manner unified with “lower” sensory powers that were “accustomed” in accord with that virtue. Remove or change the *causa immobile*, and at the very least the corresponding dispositions formed in the sensory powers, which previously existed as part of the habit properly understood as “taken up” by the rational powers, will remain residually in a manner disjointed from one’s practical reasoning until “impressed” by practical reasoning in its new specificity (or return to its former specificity). And if one’s practical reasoning itself remains confused or uncertain, all the longer until the capacities with those residual dispositions are re-qualified. Therefore, even in the case of acquired virtue, if we grant that virtue can be lost, then it is possible to possess dispositions to actions characteristic of the lost virtue even after the loss of stable specification provided by one’s practical reasoning, assuming one’s practical reasoning need not (at least in every case) immediately specify one’s habituate-able capacities in a contrary manner.<sup>51</sup> In such a case, a person would be inclined to such actions by a custom disposition rather than a habit properly understood.

#### *Custom Dispositions After the Loss of Infused Virtue*

If residual dispositions toward acts characteristic of an *acquired* virtue are possible after the loss of such virtue as a habit properly understood, this is all the more possible in the case of the loss of *infused* virtue. For the infused virtues, charity rather than prudence (or more precisely, the grace-informed charitable will rather than prudent practical reasoning) provides the *causa immobile*, giving the virtue its *ratio*.<sup>52</sup> The function of charity in serving as form of the virtues is distinct from the role of prudence. Charity orients a person toward supernatural happiness, an end not accessible, let alone attainable, without God’s grace. Charity brings with it the infused cardinal virtues, so this is not to say that infused prudence does not function in the person in a state of grace in a manner comparable to acquired prudence. And the believer’s intellect is also qualified by faith in a manner that is also crucial for the life of grace including the activity of charity.<sup>53</sup> Yet neither infused prudence nor faith, but rather charity, provides the *ratio* of the infused moral virtues. It is the clinging to God in friendship (i.e., charity) which provides the *ratio* of the infused moral virtues.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Once again, this is granting that once one possesses a habit, one need *not* always have one’s natural capacities qualified by habits as distinct from dispositions.

<sup>52</sup> It also provides the source of connectivity, although that topic is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>53</sup> For an excellent account of the interplay between charity and faith, see Michael Sherwin, *By Knowledge and by Love* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> Thomas claims that it is fitting for an intellectual virtue such as prudence to inform the virtues in moral matters when the matters at hand are lower than the human person,

From this feature of infused virtue, several differences from acquired virtue result. For instance, even while charity is possessed, the infused virtues are compatible with contrary dispositions in a manner unlike the acquired virtues (ST I-II q. 65, a. 3, ad 2),<sup>55</sup> since the supernatural end to which charity orients is beyond the capacity of even charity-informed faith and infused prudence in a way that does not pertain to acquired prudence.<sup>56</sup> This “stretching” of human capacities beyond their natural ability not only renders possible the persistence of contrary dispositions but also renders necessary God’s actual grace in all acts of infused virtue. It is the possession of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (themselves habits) that render a person amenable to movement by this actual grace (*auxilium*), which Thomas calls the *instinctus* of the Holy Spirit.<sup>57</sup> This dynamic is not relevant to the case that prompts this essay, since our case concerns ongoing good acts after the loss of infused virtue. But if there can be a disjointedness in one’s sensory dispositions while possessing infused virtue, it is not at all surprising that there can be comparable (though opposite) disjointedness at the loss of infused virtue.

More relevant for this essay, unlike acquired virtues, infused virtues can be all together lost through one mortal sin, since such a sin ruptures friendship with God resulting in the loss of charity and therefore the infused virtues with charity as their form. This is precisely

---

yet it is fitting for an appetitive virtue of the will such as charity to inform the virtues in theological matters “when the matters in question higher on the scale than the person understanding them” (*De virt.* a. 3 ad 13).

<sup>55</sup> It is noteworthy that in this very text, though without using the word, Thomas speaks of dispositions from repeated acts that are not proper habits. In a case opposite to the one addressed here, he claims that one who gains the infused virtues may still experience contrary dispositions “remaining from previous acts.” The Latin phrase *aliquas dispositiones contrarias ex praecedentibus actibus relictas* more strongly indicates that these contrary dispositions are “left behind” or “residual” from prior acts (*relictas*). Note that in three of the four places where Thomas treats causes of habits, including both dispositions that arise from accustomization and proper habits stably specified by reason, the term he uses for such a cause is *ex actibus*. See III *Sent* d. 33, q. 1, a. 2, qa. 1; *De virt.* a. 9; ST I-II q. 51, a. 2. For Thomas’s most lengthy treatment of the compatibility of contrary dispositions with infused virtues (and even contrary passions to acquired virtues), see *De virt.* a. 10, ad 14-16.

<sup>56</sup> This is one reason for Thomas’s well-known claim that infused prudence provides what is necessary for salvation, see ST II-II q. 47, a. 14, ad 1. Infused prudence can of course orient to a broader realm of activities beyond those necessary for salvation, and indeed does so as one grows in the spiritual life, and of course as infused prudence comes to fruition in the blessed in heaven.

<sup>57</sup> For an outstanding treatment of the types of grace at work in the infused virtues and gifts, see John Meinert’s *The Love of God Poured Out: Grace and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in St. Thomas Aquinas* (Steubenville: Emmaus, 2018). For Aquinas’s increased use of *instinctus* in the context of his thought on the gifts, see James Stroud, “*Instinctus* and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit: Explaining the Development in St. Thomas’s Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 8, Special Issue 2 (2019): 60-79.

what happens in the case at hand. In the life of grace, one can possess the infused moral virtues in a manner that leads to connatural (really con-supernatural) acts of infused moral virtue.<sup>58</sup> Let us assume in this case that the person animated by grace is not beset with contrary dispositions. But with the departure of the clinging in friendship toward the supernatural end provided by charity, if a person continues to perform acts that are observably good, what informs one's capacities in such activities? By definition it cannot be the *causa immobile* of the infused virtues. Yet the stability suggests some *causa immobile*. I will consider two such possible *causae immobiles* before positing the possibility of another cause, which will obviously be custom.

What *causa immobile* could stably specify one's post-infused virtue activity? Obviously, it would have to be practical reasoning, not grace. Consider two ways that could occur. First, one's practical reason could stably specify one's capacities toward some pernicious end. One could turn to pleasure or money or regard one's self as one's final end, such that any stable activities of one's capacities such as eating and drinking are now given their intelligibility as directed toward that evil end. The consistent observably good acts would actually be pernicious, even as they appear the same as the person's acts formerly animated by charity. One thinks here of the miser's seeming frugality or the hypocrites' prayer, fasting, and almsgiving in Matthew 6, all of which are actually vicious. In such cases the person who loses infused virtue, and thus the *causa immobile* of his acts, substitutes another *causa immobile*, namely, vicious practical reasoning oriented toward money or one's own fame or glory. In such a case, the ongoing seemingly good acts would be in actuality acts of new stably specified habit, now vice. This seems quite possible, and I have no stake in denying that this indeed occurs.

Second, I suppose it is conceivable that one who loses infused virtue could reject friendship with God outright and seek (merely) natural human flourishing, such that the ensuing stable good actions are those of the acquired virtues. As noted above I will not address this in depth here, since the burden of this essay is not disproving its possibility but rather identifying an alternate explanation for observably good consistent action after the loss of infused virtue. But given Christian commitments about the relationship between nature and grace, I find it hard to imagine a situation where one casts off friendship with God to then seek genuine natural human flourishing, given that one's activities toward such natural flourishing would have to be stably specified by right practical reasoning. For instance, consider one who commits a mortal sin (say, adultery) and yet continues to eat and drink "well." Though acquired virtue is compatible with a contrary act (such as

---

<sup>58</sup> Such acts would be enabled by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, necessary for salvation and infused with charity.

adultery, which is contrary to justice) in a manner that infused virtue is not, consider what it would have to look like to possess acquired virtue in this situation. One would have to choose an act incompatible with friendship with God (adultery), and then immediately have one's capacities re-specified stably through practical reasoning such that they are ordered toward natural human flourishing rather than supernatural friendship with God. Such a wholesale re-orientation of one's life not toward evil but toward natural good is difficult for me to imagine when occasioned by an act that relinquishes infused virtue. Such a case is more conceivable when the loss of friendship with God is occasioned not by an act (e.g., adultery) that is contrary to both the natural and supernatural orders, but rather by some sort of direct repudiation of faith, perhaps a principled "conversion" *away* from the life of faith. I have no stake in denying this possibility, though again I find it less imaginable that *all* occasions where one loses infused virtue entail such principled repudiation and wholesale re-orientation.

What seems more imaginable is that a person who has lost charity is in a more general sense, well, lost. Consider this third possibility. Deprived of the unifying function of charity, the person's life lacks robust coherence, toward either a pernicious end or the natural good of human flourishing. Yet there is still a need to explain the stable dispositions toward seemingly good acts of eating and drinking. What could be the source of such relatively stable specification? It seems customs, residual dispositions from past acts that no longer retain their former intelligibility (from *causa immobile*) but do not (yet?) have one supplied by permeation by practical reasoning toward some pernicious end or natural human flourishing, fit the bill for explaining such stable action. In such a case, a person would not be performing such acts out of habit properly so-called, but out of the custom, a disposition from the prior "accustoming" of one's capacities.

## CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by returning to the ramifications of this argument on recent debate over the possibility of people with infused virtue also possessing acquired virtue. The most obvious ramification is an explanation for the seemingly good acts of a person who has lost infused virtue. We need not posit that such acts reflect a newly attained acquired virtue, which would be a weakness of the transformational account. Nor need we posit that such a person all along possessed acquired virtue with infused virtue, and the loss of infused virtue makes that possession evident. This argument about custom supplies an explanation for consistent good acts after the loss of infused virtue that does not rest on the possession of acquired virtue. This argument does not of course disprove the possibility of acquired virtue coexisting with infused virtue, but it does remove one commonly cited reason to

posit such coexistence. In addition to providing an alternate explanation for a rhetorically effective case in the current debate, this work on the distinction between and relationship between disposition and habit as examined through custom presumably has further ramifications for this topic. It surely has ramifications for a Thomistic theory of education more broadly understood, including as applicable to children. More relevant to the case at hand, this essay has ramifications for how further growth in infused virtue occurs once it is possessed. It is hoped that this essay will prompt precisely such further research. **M**