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Aquinas's Unity Thesis and Grace: Ingredients for Developing a Good Appetite in a Contemporary Age

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CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY IS pervaded by images of thinness such that one's perception of one's beauty and value are often linked to how skinny one is. Numerous women (and men) struggle with society's focus on thinness and its impact on their perception of themselves and their bodies. This struggle has been an area of focus for moral theologian Beth Haile who turns to Aquinas's conception of virtue, connatural knowledge, and grace as she engages the moral theological tradition to suggest how women might respond to the consequences of living in a society supremely focused on thinness. While Haile's work is groundbreaking and visionary, the burgeoning storm of social media in the eleven years since her dissertation's publication necessitates returning to Haile's work both to plumb its riches and consider how it might be implemented in and expanded for a contemporary age.

In this paper's first section, I survey the eating disorder landscape in the United States. Next, I analyze the strengths and potential for growth in Beth Haile's Thomistic treatment of eating disorders in the contemporary age. The third part of the paper reviews current literature on Aquinas's unity thesis which offers a response to the contemporary age's challenges. Aquinas's thesis presents the virtues as growing together, moderated by prudence, in the larger context of God's grace. Attending to the collective growth of the virtues provides a way to respond to the difficulties and effects of living in a society hyperfocused on thinness as a marker of beauty. The final section of the paper applies the unity thesis contextualized in grace to the process of navigating eating disorders in a contemporary context, particularly as a response to the challenges presented by thin-ideal images present on the internet and social media. Examples in this paper's fourth part illustrate the role of unified virtue and grace in women's struggles with eating disorders.

EATING DISORDERS IN THE US

Current statistics indicate that around thirty million people of varying ages and genders suffer from an eating disorder in the United States.[1] Specific types of eating disorders occur at distinct rates. Anorexia (the most deadly eating disorder) impacts somewhere between 1 percent to 5.2 percent of young women.[2] Both anorexia and bulimia have been found to present life-long struggles for about 5 percent of the population.[3] While often viewed as less severe or threatening, nonspecified eating disorders occur frequently and present particular challenges. Nonspecified eating disorders (including less-severe forms of

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[1] "Eating Disorder Statistics," ANAD (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders), anad.org/education-and-awareness/about-eating-disorders/eating-disorders-statistics/.

[2] In "Eating Disorders," in *Child and Adolescent Psychopathology*, ed. Theodore Beauchaine and Stephen Linshaw (New York: Wiley, 2012), 715–738, Eric Stice and Cara Bohon determine that between 0.9 percent and 2.0 percent of females and 0.1 percent to 0.3 percent of males will develop anorexia at some point in their lives. Subthreshold anorexia occurs in 1.1 percent to 3.0 percent of adolescent females. In "Epidemiology and Course of Anorexia Nervosa in the Community," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 164, no. 8 (2007): 1259–1265, doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2007.06081388, Anna Keski-Rahkonen et. al arrived at more conservative findings (with a more limited definition of what constitutes an eating disorder), suggesting that anorexia nervosa presents itself among young women at a rate of between 0.3–0.4 percent and among young men at a rate of 0.1 percent. In "The Prevalence and Correlates of Eating Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication," *Biological Psychiatry* 61, no. 3 (2007): 348–358, doi: 10.1016/j.biopsych.2006.03.040, James Hudson, Eva Hiripi, Harrison G. Pope, Jr., and Ronald C. Kessler asked 9,282 English-speaking Americans about a range of mental health conditions, including eating disorders (maintaining a broader definition of eating disorders). The study found that 0.9 percent of women and 0.3 percent of men had anorexia during their life. In "An 8-Year Longitudinal Study of the Natural History of Threshold, Subthreshold, and Partial Eating Disorders from Community Sample of Adolescents," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 118, no. 3 (2010): 587–597, doi: 10.1037/a00164, Eric Stice, C. Nathan Marti, Heather Shaw, and Maryanne Jaconis followed 496 adolescent girls from age 12 to 20 and found that 5.2 percent of the girls met criteria for DSM-5 anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder. When the researchers expanded their criteria for eating disorders to include nonspecific eating disorder symptoms, a total of 13.2 percent of the girls were found to have suffered from a DSM-5 eating disorder by age 20. It is worth noting that likely due to cultural expectations and pressures, women are more often diagnosed with eating disorders than men, and subsequently this paper will focus on the experience of women with eating disorders. However, NEDA's website indicates that from 1999 to 2009, the number of men hospitalized for an eating disorder-related cause increased by 53 percent. Researchers seem to believe this increase is indicative of a greater acceptance of the occurrence of eating disorders among men, as opposed to eating disorders quantitatively increasing among men. It has been noted that diagnosis often occurs later for men because sociocultural stereotypes classify eating disorders as a "woman's disease." Further statistics on this topic can be found on NEDA's website.

[3] "Eating Disorders," Cleveland Clinic, www.clevelandclinicmeded.com/medicalpubs/diseasemanagement/psychiatry-psychology/eating-disorders/.

anorexia that may fall below the typical diagnosis threshold, bingeing/purging, over-exercising paired with calorie restriction for medically-unnecessary weight loss, use of laxatives, etc.) persist at a rate of about 5 percent for both youth and adults.[4] The diagnosis of a nonspecified eating disorder is often considered to be less extreme than a diagnosis of anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders, yet studies find that those with nonspecified eating disorders experience increased anxiety compared to those diagnosed with anorexia. Nonspecified eating disorders persist for a lifetime for about 5 percent of the population and constitute 50 percent of eating disorder diagnoses.[5]

Preoccupation with weight and body image begin at a very early age in the US. By the time young girls turn six, they begin to express concern about their weight or body shape: 40-60 percent of girls in elementary school (ages 6–12) are concerned about their weight or about becoming too fat.[6] While studies involving social media's influence on body dissatisfaction are limited, magazines' influence on body image has been well-documented. Of the elementary school-age girls who read magazines in the US, 69 percent say that the pictures influence their concept of the ideal body shape and 47 percent say that the pictures make them want to lose weight.[7] While recognizing the complexity of factors that influence the development of eating disorders, the best-known environmental contributor to the formation of eating disorders is the sociocultural idealization of thinness.[8] The thin-ideal is particularly prevalent on the internet and in social media, and young people use both at rapidly increasing rates. The Nielsen Company, a US-based global marketing and research firm that tracks media habits and internet-use trends across the world, found that the average American spends upwards of eleven hours a day using media—which is

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[4] Daniel Le Grange, Sonja Swanson, Scott Crow, and Kathleen Merikangas, "Eating Disorder not Otherwise Specified Presentation in the US Population," *The International Journal of Eating Disorders* 45, no. 5 (2012): 712, doi:10.1002/eat.22006. Subsequent citations in this paragraph draw from this study unless otherwise noted.

[5] While the effects of eating disorders on self-identity and confidence are serious, eating disorders' consequences go beyond a loss of confidence, struggling to moderate eating, and/or body dissatisfaction. Eating disorders' mortality rate is higher than any other mental illness, except that of opiate addiction. About every sixty-two minutes someone dies as a direct result of an eating disorder. Young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four with anorexia have ten times the risk of dying compared to their same-aged peers. About 5-10 percent of those struggling with anorexia die within ten years of contracting anorexia nervosa and 18–20 percent of those struggling with anorexia will die after twenty years of struggling with the disease. Without treatment, up to 20 percent of people with serious eating disorders die. With treatment, the mortality rate drops to 2–3 percent. All data is taken from NEDA and ANAD.

[6] "Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders," NEDA (National Eating Disorder Association), www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/statistics-research-eating-disorders.

[7] NEDA, "Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders."

[8] NEDA, "Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders."

more than the average time one spends sleeping or working each day.[9] Youth in America (ages 8–18) spend at least half of their screen time on internet mobile devices.[10] Young people ages 13–18 spend about nine hours a day using entertainment media, and teenagers ages 8–12 average six hours a day on entertainment media.[11]

Several correlational studies have researched the relationship between the use of social media and body image concerns. Studies on pre-teen girls and high school females found that users of Facebook report "more drive for thinness, internalization of the thin-ideal, body surveillance, self-objectification, and appearance comparisons than do non-users."[12] When pre-teen girls, female high school students, and undergraduate women increase the time that they spend on Facebook, their reported propensity to diet is increased, as is each of the side-effects mentioned above.[13] Similar tendencies have been found in studies done with men as well.[14] Studies also found that "elevated appearance exposure on Facebook (e.g., posting, viewing, and commenting on images) was associated with greater weight dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, thin-ideal internalization, and self-objectification among female high school students."[15] However, correlative studies do not establish whether the Facebook users who participated in the abovementioned studies are more concerned with their body image as a result of their Facebook use, or if people who are more concerned with their body image spend more time on Facebook as a result.[16]

Longitudinal studies on social media's effect on body image are collectively inconclusive. One study found that greater social media use among male and female high school students predicted more body dissatisfaction and more conversations about appearance with their peers 18 months after the study took place.[17] In this study, body dissatisfaction did not predict social media usage, which points to social media's negative impact. A second study of female college students supported the prior study's findings, indicating that when users engaged in maladaptive Facebook usage (which constituted seeking negative social evaluations and engaging in social comparisons on the

[9] NEDA, "Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders."
[10] NEDA, "Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders."
[11] NEDA, "Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders." NEDA references Common Sense Media, Inc., (2015) as the source of these statistics. These amounts vary by race, income, and gender, and do not include the use of media in school or doing homework.
[12] Jasmine Fardouly and Lenny R. Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns: Current Research and Future Directions," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 9 (2016): 1, doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.09.005.
[13] Fardouly and Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns," 1.
[14] Fardouly and Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns," 1.
[15] Fardouly and Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns," 2.
[16] Fardouly and Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns," 2.
[17] Fardouly and Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns," 2.

platform), it correlated to increased body dissatisfaction four weeks later.[18] In addition, a study on orthorexia (disordered eating patterns due to an individual's obsession with healthy eating) found that those who used Instagram presented more symptoms than those who did not.[19] However, in contrast to both of the aforementioned studies, other research tracking high school females' use of different social media platforms like blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and online games, did not identify a relationship between social media use and body image concerns, even in a six-month follow up.[20] This study indicates that not all social media platforms impact users' body image concerns equally, and platforms should be evaluated individually.

A 2017 study evaluated social media use and its impact on both body image and eating disorders. The study found that problematic use of social networking sites (which the study's authors identify as dependence on social networking) is related to body image, self-esteem, and eating disorder symptoms/concerns.[21] Behavior like lurking on others' pages without posting on them, or commenting on people's profiles, were found to be connected to increased body image concerns which are in turn linked to people's desire to change how they want to look by engaging in disordered eating habits or eating disorders.[22] The total time users spend on social media is also related to an increase in eating disorder symptoms and concerns.[23] The researchers also point to a 2013 study which noted that when young adult Facebook users seek out negative evaluations and engage in social comparison online, they experienced an increase in negative eating pathology like bulimic symptoms or overeating.[24] In sum, while the influence of social media and online images on young people's body image in contemporary American society is not certain, it is likely.[25]

THE PERVASIVE THIN-IDEAL AND CONNATURAL KNOWLEDGE

Beth Haile's virtue-ethics approach to eating disorders provides a foundation for considering social media's impact on body image and eating disorders. Research from a variety of perspectives points to a spiritual or moral sense, both personal and societal, that lies at the core

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[18] Fardouly and Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns," 2.
[19] Rosie Jean Marks, Alexander De Foe, and James Collett, "The Pursuit of Wellness: Social Media, Body Image, and Eating Disorders," *Children & Youth Services Review* 119 (2020): 3, doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105659.
[20] Fardouly and Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns," 2.
[21] Sara Santarossa and Sarah J. Woodruff, "#SocialMedia: Exploring the Relationship of Social Networking Sites on Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Eating Disorders," *Social Media + Society* 3, no. 2 (2017): 1.
[22] Santarossa and Woodruff, "#SocialMedia," 1, 7.
[23] Santarossa and Woodruff, "#SocialMedia," 6.
[24] Santarossa and Woodruff, "#SocialMedia," 2.
[25] Marks, De Foe, and Collett, "The Pursuit of Wellness," 3.

of eating disorders and makes a virtue ethic response in the context of grace appropriate. Haile references Michelle Mary Lelwica's *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimension of Eating Problems Among American Girls and Women*, in which Lelwica argues that a preoccupation with thinness and food is driven by a desire for fulfillment—a desire that is, at its root, spiritual.[26] Lelwica's work, among that of scholars from various fields (psychology, sociology, medicine, etc.), indicates that the behavioral manifestation of eating disorders or subthreshold symptomatology points back to "the *underlying desires and dispositions from which those behaviors emerged*."[27] Additional sociological research links eating disorders with a (misguided) morality: Simona Giordano indicates that the impulse to be light or thin can be aligned with a moral desire to be good.[28] Lelwica's work identifies a core element of eating disorders as a search for (spiritual) fulfillment in response to an underlying disposition or desire. When one places Lelwica's findings into conversation with Giordano's work, striving for thinness appears to be a response to a moral desire to attain goodness.

The work of anthropologists Richard O'Connor and Penny Esterik indicates that the moral dimension of eating and food is not solely present in those struggling with eating disorders, but is a part of society at large. Haile focuses on O'Connor and Esterik's argument that, for those struggling with anorexia, restrictive eating goes beyond an effort to be beautiful and constitutes an effort to be good—a claim that agrees with Giordano's finding.[29] O'Connor and Esterik go on to classify people with eating disorders as "misguided moralists." However,

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[26] Beth Haile, "A Good Appetite: A Thomistic Approach to the Study of Eating Disorders and Body Dissatisfaction in American Women" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2011), 6–7. Future references to Michelle Mary Lelwica's work will be taken from Haile's presentation of it in her dissertation. In addition to Lelwica's *Starving for Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), her recent *Shameful Bodies: Religion and the Culture of Physical Improvement* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017) is another source of insight into this dilemma. Hannah Bacon (*Feminist Theology and Contemporary Dieting Culture: Sin, Salvation and Women's Weight Loss Narratives* (New York: T & T Clark, 2019)), Jessica Coblentz ("Catholic Fasting Literature in a Context of Body Hatred: A Feminist Critique," *Horizons* 46, no. 2 (2019): 215–245, doi: 10.1017/hor.2019.55), and Lisa Isherwood (*The Fat Jesus: Christianity and Body Image* (New York: Seabury Books, 2008)) have each contributed important research in this area since the publication of Haile's dissertation, but pursuing the nuances of their specific contributions is beyond the scope of this essay.

[27] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 7. Author's emphasis. Haile explores the work of scholars and researchers from the fields mentioned here, but the constraints of space do not permit a further articulation of their findings.

[28] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 63. The citations of Giordano's work represent Haile's presentation of it in her dissertation.

[29] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 63. The further descriptions of the moral aspect of eating disorders in this paragraph come from Haile's presentation of O'Connor and Esterik's work, 63–64.

the dispositions of those struggling with eating disorders reflects a societal attitude or morality surrounding food and eating habits, not something unique to those with eating disorders. Society's moral dispositions regarding food are expressed in the moral language that is used to talk about exercise and eating. Avoiding fat and exercising are perceived as virtuous, while eating and gaining weight are vicious. Other examples of moral food language are expressed in statements most of us use thoughtlessly: "sinning" with a delicious, decadent dessert, "confessing" binges or breaks in diets, or "being good" when one makes healthy choices when faced with a range of meal options. It is clear that the moral dimension of food and body image resonate not only in the experiences of those struggling with eating disorders, but in larger societal attitudes that arise from the idealization of thinness.[30]

Society's attitude about thinness drives body dissatisfaction (beginning at age eight) and behaviors that strive to bring bodies into conformity with society's skinny ideal.[31] Haile brings together the work of Lelwica, Giordano, O'Connor, and Esterik in the following statement: "Disordered attitudes and behaviors towards food in people with eating disorders and other forms of disordered eating are rooted more fundamentally in a disordered view of one's body."[32] Haile's next move is to identify the external factors that contribute to a disordered perception of the body.

Addressing the influence of images and the media on how one views the body requires an exploration of the "thin-ideal" and its internalization. Psychosocial literature's term for the broad societal internalization of thinness as desirable is "thin-ideal internalization." Thin-ideal internalization measures the extent to which the media's ideal of thinness has been adopted by an individual.[33] Research indicates that after women view images of ultra-thin women, if they are of an average or above-average weight, their body dissatisfaction and self-esteem are negatively impacted. The same study indicates that a high degree of thin-ideal internalization is one of the best predictors of the onset and maintenance of eating disorders.[34] The aforementioned research, among other studies, led Haile to conclude that "there is an empirical connection between exposure to certain images, specifically what is referred to as thin-ideal images of women, and increases in body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptomatology."[35] While other societal expectations exist for men's bodies,

[30] The author would like to again note the contributions of Bacon, Coblentz, and Isherwood to this conversation, but due to space cannot attend to the intricacies of their arguments here (see footnote 26 for more detailed references to their work).
[31] Haile, "A Good Attitude," 69.
[32] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 8.
[33] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 8.
[34] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 8.
[35] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 8.

women experience social pressure to achieve an unrealistic thin-ideal, prompting many of them to turn to exercise, dieting, and other methods of dealing with their body dissatisfaction. For some women, societal expectations of extraordinary thinness contribute to the development of an eating disorder, which can also be linked to other factors (genetics, perfectionism, childhood experiences, etc.).[36] A study referenced in a 2020 literature review supports the idea that the thin-ideal influences the formation of eating disorder behavior by indicating that the risk of disordered eating is higher in countries where body-type ideals have been internalized.[37] Haile's claim that the thin-ideal's influence on women's self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and the subsequently increased risk of developing eating disorders aligns with the research reviewed in this paper's first section, and both combine to form a formidable portrait of the contemporary challenges associated with thin-ideal internalization, social media, and body image/eating disorder concerns.

Haile presents Thomistic virtue ethics as a helpful theological hermeneutic for the societal idealization of thinness and its manifestation in individuals who struggle with body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. She argues that a Thomistic approach is well-suited to exploring eating disorders in the context of a thin-idealized society because virtues are "firm and stable dispositions to do the good" or the "interior principles underlying acts."[38] Thus, a virtue ethic approach compels one to focus less on manifested behaviors and more on the interior life of the individual struggling with eating disorders or eating disorder behavior.[39] Haile notes that adopting a Thomistic ethic imparts a "moral maximalism" in which every action a moral agent does or does

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[36] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 69. It is worth noting that the scholarly discussion regarding the factors that predispose individuals to struggle with eating disorders is complex and multi-faceted. Haile offers a more thorough presentation of these factors in her dissertation, but due to space I will not elaborate on this fascinating interdisciplinary research here.

[37] Marks, De Foe, and Collett, "The Pursuit of Wellness," 3.

[38] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 7.

[39] Haile does not ignore the social sin that contributes to the development of the thin-ideal and the effect it has on women. However, in order to focus on what a Thomistic virtue ethic approach contributes to a moral assessment of eating disorders, she acknowledges the multi-fold aspects of sin at work in the development of the thin-ideal and chooses to focus on the internal life of the individual, and how one might respond to the sociocultural forces at work in their daily lives. On page 211, she recognizes that "a virtue-based approach to morality must examine the social and environmental forces which facilitate or hinder the development of virtue," and goes on to discuss the issue of structural sin, problems with the current socialization of US women, etc. See 217–219 of Haile's dissertation for her assessment of the thin-ideal as a result of social sin, particularly the way in which society and the media view and use women's bodies, and her call for social conversion on p. 229. Also see Daniel J. Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011): 341–357.

not perform matters.[40] "Operating within a teleological moral framework, the goodness or badness of any act for Aquinas depends on how conducive that act is in achieving its due end (*telos*), and on how conducive the end of the action is towards the ultimate end of the human agent, which Aquinas (like Aristotle) takes to be happiness (*eudemonia*)."[41] In Aquinas's ethic every act is evaluated by how successfully it achieves its end and how well that end contributes to the ultimate goal of the human person: flourishing, or *eudemonia*.

However, a moral paradox exists when one applies this end or *telos*-based reasoning to eating disorders. One can be aware that an act contributes to an end that is not good, yet continue to desire to engage in that behavior and achieve that end. Such a paradox exists in those struggling with eating disorders. One can know that the act of engaging in eating disorder behavior does not contribute to one's flourishing yet continue to desire to engage in its unhealthy patterns. Haile notes that the distinctiveness of Aquinas's moral theory in responding to this conundrum is located in its illustration of "how the ability to 'reason well' is dependent on the extent to which a person's personality (that is, the complex behavioral, emotional, and mental features of a unique individual) is rightly ordered."[42] Like the problem of addiction, studying eating disorders and eating-disorder behavior raises "a general problem as to how individuals can so consistently behave in a way they know to be unhealthy and unreasonable, both in their desire to conform to a thin-ideal and in the behaviors in which they engage to reach this goal."[43] Haile notes that women without a diagnosable eating disorder experience extreme body dissatisfaction and engage in behaviors symptomatic of eating disorders, "even when rationally they acknowledge that this ideal is not healthy, beautiful, or realistic."[44] Thus, Haile determines that eating disorders and body dissatisfaction do not result from "deficient or erroneous knowledge, but rather, a matter of erroneous or deficient desires."[45] Identifying desire as a primary (misguided) force in women's eating disorder behavior leads to the question of how to address it. Lacunas in knowledge are often rectified by education. Yet forming right-desire is much more difficult than educating women on the impact of eating disorder behavior on the body or the influence of the thin-ideal, especially for women whose valuation of goodness and worthiness have become tied to achieving an unhealthy weight. As women seek to (re)form their desires through therapy, support from friends and family who want to

[40] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 15.
[41] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 14.
[42] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 11.
[43] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 11.
[44] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 11.
[45] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 11.

see them healthy, and spiritually formative disciplines, one is prompted to consider what else from the Christian theological tradition can aid their recovery.

Haile presents Aquinas's conception of connatural knowledge as a possible response to women struggling to align their desire for thinness with their knowledge that being too thin is not healthy. Haile cites a study indicating that "[o]ver half of American girls and undergraduate women report being dissatisfied with their bodies. Research has identified body dissatisfaction as one of the most important variables in predicting eating disorder onset and maintenance."[46] This research indicates the gravity of and need for a reasonable response to the thin ideal's impact on American women and prompts Haile's turn to Aquinas's conception of connatural knowledge. Haile describes Aquinas's understanding of connatural knowledge as "the mode of cognition based on the appetitive inclination toward an object of desire, allow[ing] us to expand the scope of knowledge beyond the activity of the intellect and appreciate the critical role of the emotions [and human experience] in moral knowledge."[47] Haile notes the interconnectedness of reason, emotion, and sense experience as she observes:

> In connatural knowledge, reason, emotion, and sense experience are connected in a single intuitive apprehension. Connatural knowledge is in a sense, a more powerful form of knowledge than the intellect's knowledge of concepts because it unites the knower with the object known: [quoting Aquinas, I-II, Q. 28, art. 1, ad. 3] "Knowledge is perfected by the thing known being united, through its likeness, to the knower. But the effect of love is that the thing itself which is loved, is, in a way, united to the lover, as stated above. Consequently the union caused by the lover is closer than that which is caused by knowledge."[48]

In other words, connatural knowledge is the knowledge of love which prompts us to desire that which is connatural to us.[49] Haile reminds her reader that in Aquinas's understanding of connaturality, the more one acts on one's inclinations to possess that which one desires, the more permanent and stable one's inclinations (or habits) become. Both good and bad objects and desires can become connatural to a person.[50] Connatural knowledge helps us understand how women can know that they are too thin, or that they desire to be too thin, and yet continue

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[46] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 12. Citing F. Johnson and J. Wardle's "Dietary Restraint, Body Dissatisfaction, and Psychological Distress: A Prospective Analysis," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 114 (2005): 119–125.
[47] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 10, 135.
[48] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 18–19.
[49] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 19.
[50] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 19.

the behaviors which they hope will align them with the "beauty" of the thin-ideal.

Aquinas's theory of connatural knowledge also aligns with the aforementioned scientific data tracing the thin-ideal's impact on women's body dissatisfaction. Fardouly and Vartanian's previously-mentioned research review of social media's effect on body image indicates that many users of social media (predominantly Facebook) experience higher drives for thinness, greater internalizing of the thin-ideal, and more frequent comparisons of their bodies to their peers' physiques and diet.[51] The 2020 study "The Pursuit of Wellness" also shows that the risk of disordered eating is higher in countries in which the internalization of body-type ideals has taken place.[52] These studies, among others, lend scientific support to Haile's application of Aquinas's theory of connatural knowledge to eating disorders and body image.

Yet it is important to note that connatural knowledge is not deterministic for Aquinas. A dialogue between the intellect and the appetite or passions permits judgment to occur; whatever one perceives, or what society values and upholds does not necessarily or automatically become connatural to the person. While our human appetite drives what we desire (to be unnaturally thin, in this example), the intellect helps guide the appetite, and the intellect cannot make a judgment without the appetite's influence.[53] Haile summarizes Aquinas's assessment of the relationship between human appetite or passion and the intellect by stating that, "The passions point the will towards the concrete goods that allow it to realize its final good, happiness. Thus, the will is dependent on the passions, and both are dependent on knowledge."[54] Knowledge is the foundation of the will and the appetite which allows both the intellect and the passions to the formed, not merely determined by societal influences.

Echoing Haile's articulation of Aquinas, Jean Porter describes the interdependent relationship of the intellect and will as best "understood as two moments in one process by which the rational creature grasps her proper good (or perhaps a similitude of the same) and acts accordingly."[55] When the appetite is attracted to an apparent good, it becomes a source of judgment for the intellect. This mode of judgment is distinct from "the intellect's rational discursive way of judging."[56]

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[51] Fardouly and Vartanian, "Social Media and Body Image Concerns," 1.
[52] Marks, De Foe, and Collett, "The Pursuit of Wellness," 3.
[53] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 145.
[54] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 147.
[55] Jean Porter, "The Unity of the Virtues and the Ambiguity of Goodness: A Reappraisal of Aquinas's Theory of the Virtues," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no. 1 (1993): 149.
[56] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 163.

However, "Aquinas's moral theory helps us to realize that greater intellectual awareness about the nature of these images and their potential dangers is not the solution." Rehabilitating the appetite requires a re-habituation, or training the appetite to desire other goals wherein a richer truth and meaning are found. This process is not merely an intellectual one and takes place in the context of grace.

Haile applies Aquinas's understanding of connatural knowledge to the experience of women exposed to and influenced by thin-ideal images. As women view images of beautiful, too-thin women, they desire to become like them:

> A woman diets and exercises, and may even starve herself and purge largely because she experiences a certain affinity with the thin-ideal she is bombarded by on a day-to-day basis. Based on her appetite, she knows that what these images offer is desirable—that extreme thinness is what makes a person beautiful—even if she rationally knows the opposite. This inclinational knowledge shapes how she acts. The more she exposes herself to these images, the more stable her inclination to desire them, and the more consistently she acts to conform herself to them.[57]

Simply put, the more a woman aspires to conform to the thin-ideal that surrounds her, the more it becomes connatural to her. This paradox is difficult to understand, prompting many people to wonder how one can know that the women they see are too thin, unhealthily so, and yet desire to look like them. However, the desire to be thin paired with actions that enact that desire (dieting, over-exercising, etc.) exist simultaneously with the realization that the goal, desire, and behavior are unhealthy.[58] A significant portion of women who struggle with body dissatisfaction know that thin-ideal images are not real, nor conducive to body satisfaction, health, or flourishing, yet still desire to conform to them. The desire for thinness, which often correlates to beauty and goodness, is difficult to either ignore or re-habituate.

Haile's central proposition to address the challenge presented by the thin-ideal is that women should moderate their interaction with magazines to avoid seeing harmful images. She suggests media fasts, focusing on fashion magazines as something women struggling with body dissatisfaction and eating disorders can and should avoid.[59] Haile concludes that "By examining the exposure to a thin-ideal of human beauty, we have seen that every action, even the most seemingly mundane and ordinary like looking at fashion magazines, are *moral* actions and contribute to overall happiness of the moral agent."[60] To combat

[57] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 22–23.
[58] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 128.
[59] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 251.
[60] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 226.

images' negative influence and the ease with which they become connatural to women, women should avoid the images. As previously indicated, current research supports Aquinas's philosophical claim on which Haile's suggestion is based. Haile notes that "Studies do indicate that reduced exposure to media promulgating a thin-ideal may result in reduced body dissatisfaction and disordered eating symptomatology."[61] However, the act of disassociating oneself with images that surround and pervade one's life is difficult, as is persevering in that avoidance and re-habituating one's desires. Haile explains:

> One of the misconceptions this dissertation is trying to challenge is that one can always change one's behavior simply by changing one's beliefs, or developing more informed beliefs. We have seen that Aquinas in his conception of connatural knowledge does not support this opinion—our action is largely determined by our loves, in addition to our rational commitments to moral principles. Additionally, the empirical evidence on thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction supports the Thomistic thesis regarding the importance of affective knowledge. Simply knowing that an image is unrealistic or contrary to flourishing is not sufficient to prevent being affected—both in attitude and action. Change of behaviors requires a change of heart.[62]

In addition to the dilemma Haile articulates, a further challenge exists. The social media and internet age presents an obstacle to Haile's suggestion that women avoid magazines that feature thin-ideal images or go on media fasts to avoid their becoming connatural. Ad generators are able to identify users' age and gender based on their searches and social media profiles, almost ensuring that women of all ages will be presented with thin-ideal images. Women are also likely to encounter sponsored profiles on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook that feature photos of ultra-thin women designed to capture attention and generate interest in a diet, new fashion, fitness routine, or other good or service. In short, thin-ideal images are all but impossible to avoid. Along with the development of the virtues in unity, something more is needed for changing one's heart, re-habituating desire, and becoming more virtuous in viewing one's body or avoiding eating disorder behavior.

For Aquinas, the re-habituation of desire is guided and assisted by the Holy Spirit's grace. Grace is the means by which one becomes connatural with God's charity.[63] Grace from the Holy Spirit "disposes a person on an affective level to divine things according to her ultimate *telos*, which is union with God."[64] Haile explains that the "fulfillment of the perfection of the rational creature cannot be achieved by means

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[61] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 185.
[62] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 244.
[63] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 26.
[64] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 118.

of a rational creature's natural internal capabilities—something from without is needed, which Aquinas identifies as the infusion of divine grace, by which the creature is rendered capable of 'a kind of participation in divinity.'"[65] Grace makes it possible to both desire and be a part of God's goodness and being.

The creature's perfection does not exclude natural happiness. Rather, Haile describes Aquinas's conception of happiness and its alignment with the *telos* of an individual in the following manner: "Supernatural happiness does not replace natural happiness, but rather, profoundly affects the way in which natural happiness can be achieved in this life. Through its orientation towards a higher goal than 'optimal flourishing,' the human appetite pursues things which are not only conducive to health and happiness, but also conducive to union with God."[66] Both the perseverance required to pursue the "higher goal" of optimal flourishing and the means to progress toward that goal come through the Holy Spirit's aid. In addition to the help of the Holy Spirit, Haile notes the role that the virtues' embodied practice plays. "One does not learn moderation or balance only by conceptualizing or theorizing what moderation and balance consist in; rather, one learns moderation and balance also through practice. We learn by doing."[67]

In summary, this essay's first section reviews the research on eating disorders' pervasiveness, the rate at which young people use media, and social media's influence on body satisfaction in young people. This research collectively presents a challenging picture for the contemporary world. Haile responds to these challenges by presenting a response to the growing societal idealization of thinness through Aquinas's virtue ethics, particularly his recognition that humans can know something is wrong (like society's thin-ideal) and still desire it. To address wrongly-ordered desire in regard to the thin-ideal, Haile focuses on Thomas's presentation of the concept of connatural knowledge by which one becomes "connatural" with what one sees. However, counteracting an unhealthy connaturality requires a re-habituation of the appetite, which itself necessitates grace in cooperation with virtue, and Aquinas's unity thesis and treatment of grace can build on Haile's laudable turn to Thomistic virtue theory.

AQUINAS'S UNITY THESIS

Aquinas's conception of a virtue is radically distinct from the myriad ways that contemporary society conceives of it. Jean Porter articulates Aquinas's understanding of a virtue as a "habitual qualification of one of the intellectual or desiderative faculties of the human soul,

[65] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 204.
[66] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 202.
[67] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 253.

by means of which the individual is enabled to think or act in a specified way."[68] Porter adds that virtuous action consists not only in knowledge of what is good, but in appetites that have been aligned with a knowledge of the good.[69] In other words, one's virtuous habits incline one to not only act in a particular manner but also influence what one desires.[70]

Understanding virtue as a habit is central to Aquinas's unity thesis as is his conception of the relationship between the virtues. The cardinal virtues, "considered as distinct virtues, are connected." As Porter explains, the cardinal virtues

> are interlocked, in such a way that no one of them can function properly without the others. Prudence, considered as the capacity to discern and choose in accordance with one's overall desires for what is good, noble, and just, could not develop in someone who did not have these desires at all, or experienced them only fitfully or intermittently.[71]

Prudence plays a central role in Aquinas's understanding of the virtues, imparting the capacity to discern what action will bring about a good desire. Aquinas refers to prudence as "the principal virtue of the intellect considered as practical reason" which guides the development of the other virtues in his ethic.[72]

Aquinas's unity thesis argues for the interconnected development of all the virtues. Andrew Kim explains the unity thesis as referring "to the view that a single virtue cannot be possessed in isolation from the other virtues."[73] Aquinas's theory appears to invite critique born of both philosophical reasoning and common sense: if the unity of virtues is true, how is it possible for anyone to be virtuous? Kim argues that Thomas's version of the unity thesis avoids the aforementioned flaw, and supports his claim by comparing the concept of virtue that undergirds Aquinas's unity thesis with that of the Stoics and St. Augustine. The Stoics understood virtue as something one either fully possessed or totally lacked. In the Stoic understanding, if one has a modicum of courage, or has achieved a decent amount of courage, one still lacks courage. Therefore, one is not courageous at all. The Stoic Cicero explained the possession of virtue via an illustration of a man

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[68] Jean Porter, "Virtue and Sin: The Connection of the Virtues and the Case of the Flawed Saint," *Journal of Religion* 75, no. 4 (1995): 524.
[69] Porter, "The Unity of the Virtues," 145.
[70] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 150.
[71] Porter, "Virtue and Sin," 524–525.
[72] Porter, "Virtue and Sin," 525. Porter's translation of Aquinas, I-II 58.4.
[73] Andrew Kim, "Progress in the Good: A Defense of the Thomistic Unity Thesis," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (2014): 147.

drowning. Whether a man is lying face down in a puddle and drowning, or is flailing in the middle of an ocean without another human in sight, in both cases the man is still drowning.[74] In other words, "Anyone who has room left to morally progress lacks virtue completely.... [F]or the early Stoics, to be virtuous is to be beyond improvement, to be morally perfect."[75] The possession of virtue exists on an either-or scale for the Stoics. Either one possesses perfect virtue and cannot progress further in it because one already has it so cannot have more of it, or one lacks it totally.

Kim invokes Augustine's conception of virtue to critique the Stoic view. Augustine understands the Stoic presentation of virtue to be problematic because no one can actually become virtuous; the standard is impossible to reach.[76] Odon Rigaud points out that the Stoic approach is totalizing; in contrast to the Stoics' view, Augustine initiates "a tradition of challenging the totalizing claims associated with the Stoic definition of virtue."[77] Kim, summarizing Rigaud's view, states that "[T]he problem is that, given the Stoic definition of virtue only consisting in 'the highest state,' the Stoic version of the unity thesis is an outgrowth of the impossible standard set by the Stoic linking of virtue exclusively with the highest state."[78] Rigaud identifies the Stoics' three totalizing claims as: (a) virtue is an absolute; (b) it is the highest state which permits no room for gradation, nor degrees of possession; and (c) it consists of a pendulum-swing from a lack to complete possession.[79] Because of its totalization of virtue as an absolute state, Kim argues that the Stoic view does not function in real life.[80] Ultimately, "The Stoic view leads to the discounting of virtue as it manifests in the lives of actual people and entails either implausible descriptions of moral progress or eliminates the possibility of it altogether."[81] Kim agrees with Augustine's critique of the Stoic totalization of virtue and its subsequent lack of applicability in daily life.

Aquinas, contradicting the Stoics, presents virtue as existing in degrees and developing in three stages. Kim establishes this claim based on Aquinas's *De virtutibus in communi*, which says:

> The character of virtue does not consist in being the best of its kind in itself, but with reference to its object. For it is through virtue that someone is ordered towards the upper limit of his capacity, that is, towards doing things well. That is why Aristotle says that virtue is the

[74] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 149.
[75] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 150.
[76] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 151.
[77] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 151.
[78] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 153.
[79] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 153.
[80] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 155.
[81] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 155.

> tendency of something complete towards what is best. However, someone can be more disposed or less disposed towards what is best; accordingly, he has virtue to a greater or lesser degree.[82]

Aquinas's definition contradicts the Stoics' totalized idea of virtue, by which one either fully possesses or lacks virtue. One can be "more disposed or less disposed towards what is best," which is reflected in an increase or decrease in one's possession of virtue. In Kim's words, "One becomes virtuous when the whole soul is brought into harmonious alignment with truthful vision of the way things are; this occurs by degrees in stages of time."[83] Aquinas presents the development of virtue in three stages (*triplex gradus virtutum*) in *De virtutibus cardinalibus*.[84] The first level consists of "natural dispositions to virtue which are wholly imperfect (*virtutes omnino imperfectae*), because they exist without prudence and so do not achieve right reason." Virtue's second stage of development "achieves right reason but does not reach God because they are not combined with charity. These virtues are complete in relation to the human good (*perfectae per comparationem ad bonum humanum*) but not perfect simply. They are true but imperfect virtues." Finally, the third level of virtue consists of virtue combined with charity (*simul cum caritate*), which Aquinas describes as simply perfect (*virtutum simpliciter perfectarum*). Thus, while the first stage of virtue is made up of "fragmented and unstable dispositions capable of actualizing the rational soul only in a wholly imperfect way," these dispositions represent the start of a journey through which one can reach simply perfect virtue.[85] If one never attempts to live virtuously, which will certainly result in pitfalls and failures at the beginning of and throughout one's quest toward perfect virtue, how can anyone become virtuous?

Aquinas, like Augustine, indicates that absolutely perfect virtue is unattainable in this life. For Aquinas, "Virtue unfolds in 'stages of time' and our virtue can be complete relative to that."[86] Thus, every life has the potential for continued moral improvement, based on Aquinas's aforementioned three stages of virtue development. Kim writes,

> Perfect virtue is distinguished from imperfect virtue, then, on the basis of attainment of the supernatural end, but also on the basis of the unity thesis. The *triplex gradus* resolves the apparent conflict between the first and second articles. Clearly there is no such thing, in Aquinas's

[82] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 154.
[83] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 162.
[84] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 162–163. The following articulation of the three gradations of virtue comes from Kim's reading of Aquinas's *De virtutibus cardinalibus.*
[85] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 164.
[86] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 170.

> view, as disconnected virtues ordered to separated ends. In the second article, Aquinas is distinguishing supernatural, infused virtue (level 3) from acquired and connected virtue (level 2).[87]

In this way, the second level of virtue is perfect, insofar as the virtues in their varied, developmental stages are connected by prudence. Yet these same virtues are also imperfect when compared to the third level of virtue because they are not in perfect harmony with charity. Jean Porter explains that "perfected virtues will always give rise to morally good actions; in contrast, the imperfect virtues, which also qualify the desiderative faculties, typically result in actions which are good only in some limited respect (I-II 65.1). Aquinas thus accepts Augustine's definition of a moral virtue, not as any habit, but as a habit which is productive of good actions."[88] The extent to which one possesses perfected virtue is evaluated by the actions one produces. No one can be perfectly good all the time, but progress in choosing the good and becoming more virtuous is both possible and necessary in living the Christian life.

Aquinas understands virtue to develop proportionately, which is why he can uphold a unity thesis. Kim describes Aquinas's understanding of the growth of virtue as equated "to the manner in which a hand grows. As the whole hand grows, the fingers grow 'at a proportional rate.' Thus, with respect to acquired virtue, as prudence (the hand) grows so too the fingers (the moral virtues) at a proportional rate."[89] Subsequently, if a virtuous action or decision is to help one acquire virtue, it has to be aligned with right reason, for all virtues come to be possessed with and through prudence.[90] For Aquinas, "Becoming virtuous entails the unification of the virtues through prudence."[91] Yet, even if virtue always has room to grow in this life, Aquinas's theory of how to attain virtue reflects Aristotle's, who implores one seeking to become virtuous to do what a virtuous person would do: to act virtuously.[92] "Even though it is not possible to have the moral virtues without prudence or to have prudence without the moral virtues, it is possible to act virtuously without yet having acquired virtuous habits. Otherwise, the acquisition of any virtue (fragmented or otherwise) would indeed be impossible."[93] To attain virtue, one begins by enacting virtue, even if it has not yet been acquired as a habit—for it is by repeated action and choice in the context of grace that one begins to assume the habit of virtue.

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[87] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 165.
[88] Porter, "The Unity of the Virtues," 144.
[89] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 168.
[90] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 168.
[91] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 165–166.
[92] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 167.
[93] Kim, "Progress in the Good," 167.

Both Porter and Kim, in their discussion of Aquinas's unity thesis, emphasize grace's role in the moral life and virtue development. Porter writes that because of the infinite chasm between God and creature, "It is not enough to act out of the dynamisms of one's created nature in order to attain God. The human person must receive a new and qualitatively different set of capacities, in order to attain an end which altogether transcends the natural *telos* of any created nature, namely, direct personal union with God."[94] Grace is necessary to transform the soul, and to help it acquire the infused virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Charity is accompanied by other virtues that transform a whole person.[95] It also works to transform the affective level of the person, making one connatural with divine things. Grace is not "something which works against a person's nature, but rather with (*cum*) her nature, perfecting her appetites and capacities and directing them ultimately towards their ultimate goal."[96] Natural human desires are perfected and oriented to their true goal through grace: perfect charity and union with God.

Understanding Aquinas's unity thesis is imperative to comprehending its usefulness as a response to the challenges presented by the contemporary thin-ideal and the challenges men and women experience with eating disorders. As the virtues grow together, they develop through practice and unfold over time with grace's aid. Grace is integral to virtue formation, perfecting our nature so that we come to be more fully in line with and oriented to the goal of unity with God. Aquinas's unity thesis and the influence of grace offer a new response to the challenges presented by the thin-ideal and its role in the formation of eating disorders.

The Unity Thesis and Eating Disorders in Contemporary Media-Driven Times

What does one do when one cannot avoid viewing thin-ideal images, images that studies show influence one's body image negatively and increase one's likelihood to engage in eating disorder behaviors? Haile's suggestion that women avoid fashion magazines and other sources of thin-ideal images, while helpful for an era in which internet and social media use was not a regular component of daily life, is almost impossible to implement for most women and young girls in the United States. While women may strive to limit their interaction with thin-ideal images by not following social media accounts that contain edited images, promote dieting or eating disorder behaviors (like pro-ana or thinspiration communities), or feature unnaturally thin women, women cannot stop advertisements from popping up that showcase

[94] Porter, "Virtue and Sin," 534.
[95] Porter, "Virtue and Sin," 535. Porter is referencing ST I-II 63.4.
[96] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 199.

new diet programs, the latest fashions modeled by extremely thin women, or suggest undergarments to slim their figure (guided by the societal assumption that their figure inherently needs slenderizing because thinner is always better). Completely removing oneself from social media platforms is possible but would realistically be very difficult, especially for young women for whom social media is a central mode of communication and connection. In addition, women who work or study are often required to spend extended period of times on the internet. They are highly likely, if not certain, to be exposed to advertisements and edited images promoting the thin-ideal. To abstain from all internet use is nearly impossible, especially for women enrolled in school or using a computer in their job.

Aquinas's unity thesis can be responsive to the question that Haile's dissertation, when shifted to the context of contemporary times, leaves unresolved: what to do when women cannot avoid being exposed to thin-ideal images which studies indicate increase their likelihood to engage in eating disorder behaviors and be dissatisfied with their bodies. Aquinas's unity thesis posits that the virtues grow together, guided by right reason or prudence, in the context of a grace-infused life. As prudence increases, it guides the growth and development of the other virtues. So, perhaps an alternate suggestion to abstaining from all thin-ideal images (and therefore the internet where they might appear) is to focus on the development of prudence and other virtues which, according to the unity thesis, will facilitate the growth of all virtues. An example will aid the elucidation of this concept as it applies to women struggling with eating disorders, but we must first turn to an analysis of temperance.

Many, if not all, women struggling with an eating disorder are also challenged by temperance. Haile describes temperance as developing "a bridge between the natural appetite—the first nature—and the acquired appetite or 'second nature' that follows from habit."[97] While struggles with temperance are usually associated with over-indulgence (enjoying a pint, not a serving of ice cream or watching an entire series of television shows in one sitting, not just an episode), for those struggling with eating disorders, temperance can be developed in either extreme direction. Those who struggle with bulimia binge and often purge; those struggling with anorexia do not eat enough to meet their body's caloric needs for normal daily activities.[98] Both bulimia and anorexia miss the mark of temperance whether by excess or defect. One who is temperate is able to discern not only what is too much but

[97] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 169.

[98] For a helpful foray into the complexities of regarding temperance as disposition, acquired virtue, and infused virtue, but beyond the scope of the current essay, see William C. Mattison, "Can Christians Possess the Acquired Cardinal Virtues?" *Theological Studies* 72, no. 3 (2011): 558–585, doi.org/10.1177/004056391107200304.

what is too little and has oriented their appetite to desire the right amount of food.

In order to build on Haile's work with Aquinas's unity thesis, it is important to examine Haile's treatment of temperance. Haile turns to the work of Nicholas Austin, SJ, to highlight temperance's liberative nature. Austin understands temperance to function in two ways, arguing "that temperance has two modes—restraint and what might be called 'enjoyment' or 'proper use': One can be too restrained, but one cannot be too temperate; temperance therefore, is not restraint alone....The appropriate response to human hungers and appetites can often be joyful fulfillment, in grateful recognition of the gifts of God."[99] Austin reminds us that temperance goes beyond a false image of brute strength forcing the passions into submission, or a spreadsheet calculation of what is "just right." Instead, when employed rightly with grace's aid, temperance is a "grateful recognition of the gifts of God" which results in the joyful fulfillment of our human appetites and desires. As Kim and Haile emphasize, the perfection of temperance (and all of the virtues) depends on training and habituation.[100] Temperance's habituation helps train the desires with and through the intellect, serving as a liberative virtue that "frees us from the pursuit of false desires and allows us to identify and satisfy those desires which are authentically ours."[101] Temperance allows us to orient our desires not toward what is immediately satisfying—like achieving a thin-ideal, no matter the cost to one's physical and mental health—but to our human *telos*, our flourishing that leads us toward communion with God.

Let us take, for example, a woman who is struggling to moderate her eating, or to exercise temperance in her food consumption. While she is, as of yet, unable to discontinue limiting her food to an unhealthy amount, she finds she is able to go to a therapist weekly. The habit of attending therapy that she is forming (in addition to the aid therapy itself provides) enables the habituation of other virtues like courage and fortitude.[102] According to Aquinas's unity thesis, in the context of and through grace's aid, developing courage and fortitude will help temperance grow as well. Both courage and fortitude will help this woman combat the thin-ideal's pressures and other factors that have contributed to the development of her eating disorder. It also

[99] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 173. Austin is cited in footnote 36.
[100] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 179.
[101] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 196.
[102] Jessica Coblentz presents a fascinating and related idea on 564–568 of her article "The Possibilities of Grace amid Persistent Depression," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (September 2019): 554–71, doi.org/10.1177/0040563919857184, entitled "small agency" and details the flourishing it can bring about in the context of persistent depression.

appears reasonable that if, in other settings, she is able to practice temperance, her practice could strengthen her ability to be temperate, one day, in the context of her eating.

Re-habituating temperance—which is part of what my application of Aquinas's unity thesis to body image concerns and eating disorders necessitates—also requires exercising prudence, or right reason. Prudence brings one's action into alignment with reason "which sets the standard of goodness in any particular action."[103] Prudence's task is "to see the truth beyond the thin-ideal, and to recognize that excessive thinness as promoted in the thin-idealized media images is not an effective means of achieving the end of temperance—the pleasures afforded by this life."[104] Prudence can both remind and guide the intellect of and toward what is true, which helps re-habituate desire. Returning to our example, if the woman struggling to practice temperance in her eating is able to be temperate in other areas of her life, with prudence's guide, this can help ready her to become more temperate in her eating. Women who have practiced restrictive eating often apply their habituated rigid restraint to other areas of their lives, operating on strict regimens in regard to their time or other "indulgences" like watching television or engaging in hobbies that detract from study or work. Thus, if prudence helps an individual arrive at the conclusion that she can, indeed, watch not only one but two episodes of her favorite show to relax, her practice of prudence can help re-habituate temperance on a general level. One day, she may be able to permit herself a small dessert after dinner, or a second serving of a particularly delectable dish. These small steps, guided by prudence and enacted through the slow re-habituation of temperance accompanied by fortitude and courage, can help one struggling with an eating disorder to develop temperance, the virtue that helps one align their goal of human fulfillment with God's dream for them. Alignment is a liberative act, permitting the enjoyment of life's pleasures by fulfilling one's desire not with the false idol of the thin-ideal, but with the bounty of delight which God desires for us—beginning in life here and preparing us for fulfillment (in and through perfect virtue) in the next life.[105]

Developing the virtues both necessitates and mediates grace in the context of women's challenges with body image concerns and eating disorders. "Grace habituates the appetite to take pleasure in things

[103] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 181.
[104] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 193.
[105] Another paper could easily be written on the goods of friendship and community, and how they aid the recovery of those with eating disorders through support and growth in virtue. Space does not permit the elucidation of this idea here, but especially in communion with the Church and ritual worship, community and friendship can play an important role in the re-habituation of desire and can help develop both prudence and temperance through support, modeling, and the grace of both prayer and the sacraments.

which are ultimately conducive to happiness not through commands and rational precepts, but rather, through the sort of holy delight that comes from connaturality with the ultimate end."[106] Grace, working with and guiding prudence, can help one avoid becoming connatural to thin-ideal images by helping form women's desire to become connatural to their *telos*—a life of fulfillment with God, not a daily life in which one is enslaved to a calorie count, how much one exercises, or the amount that one weighs. Haile describes grace-inspired knowledge as "not a rational knowledge in the form of commands and precepts, but a deeper kind of knowing, inexpressible in words and concepts, of what is good and true and how to act in order to achieve happiness."[107] Grace not only deepens one's knowledge and helps rightly orient the desires but imparts strength and comfort to those striving to grow in virtue. Christ's grace "can go where others cannot. He can enter into the cemetery of the...soul in a way no one else can and encounter the inward man afflicted, crying out...and there not only comfort him but also heal his mind and return him to his family to tell of all the Lord has done for him."[108] Christ can, and does, heal our afflictions. The mystery of this healing is complex and raises difficult questions: why are some healed, and others pray fervently for healing but continue to struggle? This question's answer is frankly inexplicable, as it hinges on the working of a God who is completely "other," but as one invites Christ into one's struggle, healing can (and does) occur through Christ's accompaniment.

The hope that grace brings, whether for the possibility of complete healing or for support for the next step on a journey to recovery, is imperative for those struggling with the thin-ideal and its consequences in a social media age. While the consequences and pervasiveness of a thin-idealized society can fill one with despair, Christ's grace and the gift of the virtues offer hope. As the virtues grow together, under the influence and harmony of the intellect and the desires guided by prudence, they both mediate and aid our reliance on grace. The words of Jean Porter remind those struggling to live a virtuous life that grace is not moral ramen; it is not instant. She writes, "Yet it does not follow that all those who are justified by God's grace are paragons of moral virtue either. The infused cardinal virtues may be potentially present in an individual, who nonetheless finds it difficult to exercise them because of the effects of past habits or some other similar cause."[109] Thus, all those who struggle with body dissatisfaction, eating disorder behaviors, and other practices that are not in line with the

[106] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 224.
[107] Haile, "A Good Appetite," 221.
[108] Andrew Kim, "Newness of Life and Grace Enabled Recovery from the Sin of Addiction," *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, Special Issue no. 1 (2021): 124–142.
[109] Porter, "Virtue and Sin," 529–530. Porter is referencing (ST I-II 65.3 *ad* 2).

telos for which God made us are called to not only seek the virtues' development in unity, but to rely on Christ's generous gift of grace poured out in love. Coupled with the effort we exert in combating the sin around us and in our own lives, grace enables and aids the transformation of our hearts, selves, and society.[110] Grace is the essential ingredient in the pursuit of virtue, especially as one seeks to develop a good appetite in a thin-idealized, social-media driven society.[111] M

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[110] While this article approaches the issue of virtue and eating disorders from an interpersonal lens, the author is aware of the need to engage a social ethic/community-oriented hermeneutic in order to adequately address the topic of body image and eating disorders. The author will engage a socially-oriented lens to treat this issue in a separate essay.

[111] I am exceedingly grateful for the mentorship, insights, and generosity of Dr. Andrew Kim, whose work inspired my interest in the unity thesis, and all those who have been a part of my theological journey. Many thanks are also owed to the peer reviewers of this article; your suggestions have improved the essay immensely.