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Virtue and Grace: Reflecting on Thomas Aquinas's Graced Ethics

Virtude e graça: refletindo sobre a ética agraciada de Tomás de Aquino

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Abstract

There exists a significant relationship between virtues and grace in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. This paper delves into this relationship within the context of acquired virtues. The question of how grace influences acquired virtues in Aquinas's thought remains open for debate. Some argue that acquired virtues are independent of grace, suggesting that infused grace does not transform acquired virtues into infused virtues through any action of grace. Conversely, others posit that grace does indeed cause acquired virtues to become infused, asserting that individuals do not stray from infused grace after this transformative experience. This paper suggests that Aquinas's nuanced distinction prevents a clear understanding of the true role of grace in his theological ethics. Rather, I propose that he presents a theological paradigm rooted in a theological anthropology beginning with human nature and culminating in the experience of grace with God as the creator, mover, and ultimate end of all creatures. Consequently, ethics in Aquinas transcends a mere epistemological analysis of human behavior. Therefore, Aquinas's ethics embodies a theological ethic of a graced anthropology, wherein he develops a coherent framework of virtues rooted in grace. This framework constitutes a transcendental anthropology of virtues, confirming and surpassing human nature.

Keywords: Theological Ethics, Virtues, Grace, Thomas Aquinas, Human Nature.

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Resumo

Existe uma relação significativa entre virtudes e graça no pensamento de Tomás de Aquino. Este artigo apresenta uma reflexão sobre essa relação no contexto das virtudes adquiridas. A questão de como a graça influencia as virtudes adquiridas no pensamento de Tomás de Aquino permanece aberta ao debate. Alguns argumentam que as virtudes adquiridas são independentes da graça, sugerindo que a graça infundida não transforma as virtudes adquiridas em virtudes infundidas através da ação da graça. Por outro lado, outros postulam que a graça de fato faz com que as virtudes adquiridas se tornem infusas, afirmando que os indivíduos não se desviam da graça infusa após esta experiência transformadora. Esse texto sugere que a distinção matizada de Tomás de Aquino impede uma compreensão clara do verdadeiro papel da graça na sua ética teológica. Em vez disso, proponho que ele apresente um paradigma teológico enraizado numa antropologia teológica que começa com a natureza humana e culmina na experiência da graça com Deus como criador, motor e fim último de todas as criaturas. Consequentemente, a ética em Tomás de Aquino transcende uma mera análise epistemológica do comportamento humano. Sendo assim, a ética de Tomás de Aquino incorpora uma ética teológica de uma antropologia agraciada, na qual ele desenvolve uma estrutura coerente de virtudes enraizadas na graça. Este quadro constitui uma antropologia transcendental das virtudes, confirmando e superando a natureza humana.

Palavras-Chaves: Ética teológica, virtudes, graça, Tomás de Aquino, Natureza Humana.

Introduction

Considering the 750th anniversary of Thomas Aquinas's death, I offer a reflection on his theological ethics, focusing on the relationship between ethics and grace in his thought. I hope this reflection is a way for me to honor the incredible contribution of Aquinas's work for theological ethics. Ethics and theology are intrinsically related in Aquinas's work. Hence, it is not controversial to affirm that his ethical account is not merely an epistemological analysis of human behavior and relationality but rather a theological ethics from the perspective of the Christian faith as it develops in people's relational reality. This theological dimension is evident as Aquinas integrates virtues within the context of divine grace, asserting that the moral life is essentially rooted in the life of grace, and that virtues find their proper context within this life. Just as Servais Pinckaers says: "The grace of the Holy Spirit, acting through faith and charity, is truly the head of the organism of virtues

that shapes the structure of St. Thomas's moral teaching" (Pinckaers, 1999, p. 178). Thus, Aquinas's ethics transcends a secular framework, embedding moral virtues within the transformative experience of grace. Marie-Dominique Chenu emphasizes the foundational role of grace in Aquinas's thought (Chenu, 1959, p. 126). In Chenu's interpretation, Aquinas's theology is grounded in grace, which underlines his entire reflection on the relationship between human beings and God. Concerning his ethics, Aquinas elaborates, then, a theological ethics that is grounded in an anthropology of grace.[1]

St. Thomas Aquinas presents a theological paradigm rooted in a deep theological anthropology that commences with human nature and culminates in the experience of grace with God as the creator, mover, and ultimate end of all creatures. Hence, contrary to how many scholars interpret his work, ethics in Aquinas is not merely an epistemological analysis of human behavior. Aquinas's ethics is rather a theological ethics of a graced anthropology (O'meara, 1997, p. 272). Grace stands as the pinnacle of his ethics, yet it also serves as a principle guiding his comprehension of human life in relationships with oneself, others, and God. For humans, as rational, social, and transcendent beings created by God's love, grace plays a pivotal role in St. Thomas Aquinas's theological framework.

In this paper, I will examine how grace is foundational in Aquinas's theological ethics of virtues. I argue that any interpretation of Aquinas's theology that excludes the foundational role of grace is incomplete because it frames him as a modern philosopher in which grace is relegated to an appendix at the end of his work. He is a philosopher whom we cannot understand separate from his experience of God and the role of grace. Grace, directly or indirectly, is the atmosphere of his work, making him a graced theologian, an Angelic Doctor, as the Catholic tradition calls him.

Aquinas's ethical account contains an essential relationship between grace and virtue. He elaborates an ethics of virtues with two moments. The first occurs

1. O'Meara says: "The moral theology of Thomas Aquinas is first and foremost an anthropology of Grace. It is a description of the potentialities offered by the triune creator in the realms of being and grace for life's journey to a special future" (O'meara, 1997, p. 272).

in human relationships oriented to achieve their natural end in society. The second occurs when natural ends are not enough to satisfy the human being who wishes something higher than created things. Thus, Thomistic ethics begins with an anthropology to be elevated by the experience of grace that responds to the human desire for the infinite. Aquinas divides these two moments into what he calls *acquired moral virtues* and *infused virtues*. I propose that this division has two finalities: first, presenting the development of the human being in its social life, and second, in its relationship with God. In this perspective, Aquinas offers an ethical account of human growth toward its natural and supernatural happiness, the goal of morality. I will develop this argument in three steps. First, I will present Aquinas's ethics as a theological ethics and outline his understanding of virtues. Second, I will explain the foundational role of grace in Aquinas's theological ethics. Third, I will highlight grace as a mystical crowning of Aquinas's ethics that elevates all human actions.

Two preliminary observations are necessary. I will concentrate on Aquinas's writings in the *Summa Theologiae*[2] because it is his mature work where one finds a synthesis of his whole thought. Second, I will dialogue with an interpretation of Aquinas's writings from a Latin American perspective developed by Frei Carlos Josaphat, a Dominican Priest from Brazil.[3]

Theological Ethics of Virtues in Thomas Aquinas

Saint Thomas Aquinas develops a theological ethics of virtues (Cessario, 2009, p. 30–33), beginning with God as Creator and culminating in what I call

2. I use the version of *Summa Theologiae*, in Latin and its English translation, available at: https://dhspriory.org/kenny/CDtexts/summa/index.html.

3. Carlos Josaphat Pinto de Oliveira, or Frei Carlos as he is well known in Brazil, is an authority in Thomistic studies in South America, especially in Aquinas's moral theology. He was born in 1922 in a small village in Minas Gerais, Brazil, became a Dominican priest in 1953, and died in 2020. In the 1960s he was a prominent leader against oppression by the military regime and its human rights abuses in Brazil, which cost him exile to preserve his freedom and life. He was a professor at the University of Freiburg for 27 years and taught at the Dominican School of Theology in São Paulo for over 20 years. He produced a vast work published in Portuguese, French, Spanish, and Italian. Some of his books include: *Paradigma Teológico de Tomás de Aquino* (São Paulo: Paulus and EDT, 2012); *Ethique Chrétienne et Dignité de L'Homme* (Fribourg: Edition Universitaires: Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1992); *La Dimensione Mondiale dell'Etica: Situazione e Futuro del Mondo Umano* (Bologna, Edizione Dehoniane, 1986); and *Fe, Esperanza y Caridad – A La Luz de La Santísima Trinidad* (Colombia: Ediciones Paulinas, 2000).

a *mystical crowning*. He proposes a broad and well-organized ethical project in which the human being works to enhance and surpass him/herself. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas presents a theological paradigm of freedom and salvation, addressing theological ethics in its second section.

The Thomistic ethic emerges from a certainty that the human being is essentially ethical and open to be elevated to theological ethics through grace. Frei Carlos Josaphat affirms: "But this concrete quality of elevation will only be effectively in reality by a free gift of God, that is, a grace that surpasses nature. Nature is assumed to be in a process of transformation and enhancement, dependent on the possibility of creatures' participation in Creator's intimacy" (Josaphat, 2012, p. 403–404).

It is well known that the Aristotelian notion of virtue is the philosophical basis for Aquinas's theological ethics. Aristotle's notion is situated in a paradigm of perfectibility in which all humans have, in their freedom, a tendency to the human good. The good is the goal of human actions in society. People have a natural and universal desire to achieve the good. A person acts toward the good in which they will find their happiness. Aristotle developed an ethical framework wherein virtues are a way to work to achieve the good and find happiness. Therefore, virtues are good practices that all people perform in society towards the end of the good. According to Aristotle, a person acquires virtues through habits that are an essential dimension of moral life.

The intellect helps us to move to achieve the good, as an end of our actions. Animals with lack of intellect do not perceive objects as a means to a higher end that would give them happiness. They desire objects by instincts and objects themselves become ends of their desires (Oliver, 2005, p. 56). Human beings act as a result of the interaction between intellect and will. That interaction moves human beings to choose objects able to lead them to achieve a good (oliver, 2005, p. 57). This tendency to pursue the good is a natural condition present in humans, making them ethical beings and moving their wills towards the universal good as an ultimate good that satisfies the natural human desire. Objects – as immediate goods – are chosen in order to attain the good by the operation of the intellect.

Virtue is a practical way human being fulfill their *telos* under the interaction between intellect and will. Habit occurs when a virtue becomes part of a person who performs virtuous actions in society as a habit. Virtues guide humans in the handling of objects uprightly to attain the universal good. Although this movement is natural in each person because "the will is moved of necessity towards the universal Good which is its proper ends" (Oliver, 2005, p. 57), the intellect is the faculty of discernment that makes one make the right choices to act through virtue.

Although Aquinas appropriates the Aristotelian schema in his theological ethics, he goes beyond it. Aristotle's ethics is a natural ethic that leads the human being to achieve natural ends and natural happiness. The Holy Spirit and Her gift – as a grace – lead Aquinas's theological ethics. Therefore, Aquinas says that no human being will ever be fully satisfied unless they contemplate the essence of God (Josaphat, 2012, p. 405). Aquinas recognizes that a person is able to live uprightly in society without God and the experience of grace. However, they will never be limited to natural ends that are only able to be acquired by natural powers. Human desires are deeper and seek an end that natural powers themselves are unable to attain. Therefore, there is an ultimate end that requires supernatural powers to be achieved. This end is God, and our participation in God's life is a gift of supernatural grace (ST I-II, q. 110, a. 4).

Thomas Aquinas presents an ethical project that is completely anthropological and theological, in an intrinsic relationship that prevents one being isolated from the other. Frei Carlos suggests that Aquinas's ethical project is a transcendental anthropology, an ethics characterized by human immanence eminence and a theological transcendence that elevates human nature (Josaphat, 2012, p. 405). Aquinas's ethics is deeply rooted in human experience and nature. The human creature is a being in the world and in communion with other humans as a rational and free creature that seeks happiness. All people, through reason, can recognize that their lives have meaning. This meaning becomes real by action in communion with people in the seeking of happiness; it is a social relationship in the political realm. Reason is a natural light that leads us to choose the right thing

to get to the natural end, which then transcends the political realm to participate in the ultimate good (ST I-II, q. 110, a. 3).

Aquinas's anthropology becomes transcendental theology because the human being has a deep desire unable to be fully satisfied by natural ends or goods. Hence, in ST I-II q.1-5, Aquinas presents the human vocation to seek divine happiness. Built upon Aristotle's ethics, he points out that happiness is the end of the human being. However, we are finite beings that desire the infinite; consequently, natural ends are limited in their ability to satisfy us because they are finite as we are. True, divine, happiness occurs in God in which we find the Infinite, our ultimate end (ST I-II q. 2 and 3). This end is the foundation and the first principle of ethics.

Although the natural light of reason leads us to choose the right thing as a natural end, it is not sufficient by itself to lead us to achieve the supernatural end. The human creature is *capax Dei*, that is, a finite creature with the capacity of apprehending the infinite. *Homo*, *capax Dei*, as Aquinas affirms, has an infinite desire that can be satisfied in God, in a relationship wherein human nature is elevated by grace. God allows us to participate in the divine infinity. As Frei Carlos writes, "It is not the finite that possesses the Infinite. The Infinite offers itself and it is welcomed in love that transforms and attracts the finite" (Josaphat, 2012, p. 409). This does not deny human faculties and freedom, but fulfills them once the human being rises to their full realization.[4] This is the theological foundation for Aquinas's ethics.

Aquinas explains his theological ethics in the I-II of the *Summa Theologiae*. He divides the first section of part II into two moments. First (I-II 6-48), he analyzes the basic elements of his transcendental anthropology, the human being in its vocation to become a full human as part of a process of divine realization. In this moment, he asserts the human being as a rational, passionate, and

4. Leo J. Elders affirms: "The fundamental inclination to the good should not be considered something without freedom. While this is not a certain level in which we meet free will, this inclination means one seeks the good consciously because it is good. Likewise, this means one acts by himself. One can call freedom the complacency to the desire and assumes it with his own nature. But it is a form of freedom that transcends the free will" (Elders, 2009, p. 214).

free creature. Second, he exposes the ethical and mystical foundations of full realization of human nature and its elevation by grace (I-II 49-114). Frei Carlos affirms that ST I-II is an "ethical project crowned by mysticism that is the true conducting wire of the II Part of the Summa" (Josaphat, 2012, p. 416).

In St. Thomas Aquinas's perspective, virtue is comprehended within the context of his transcendental anthropology, culminating in the mystical experience. Beatitude is the word that Aquinas uses to define the supernatural end of human life (ST I-II, q. 69, a. 1). In the ST I-II q. 8-17, he explains that virtues belong to the will that is free and moved by a rational appetite, responsible for commanding the will to attain the good (ST I-II, q. 17, a. 5; a. 7).

In ST I-II q. 55, Aquinas explains what virtue is. He says that virtue is a *habitus*.[5] However, *habitus*[6] is not a repetitive and alienating action, but rather a free and aware expression of a good that has been internalized. *Habitus* is an inner disposition towards something by an action or a passion (ST I-II, q. 49, a. 1). As Aquinas writes, "*Habitus* implies a disposition in relation to a thing's nature, and to its operation or end, by reason of which disposition a thing is well or ill disposed thereto" (ST I-II, q. 49, a. 4). There are good and bad *habitus*. The intellect is responsible for discerning between good and bad *habitus* and guides the will to achieve the good as the end. Good *habitus* leads the human being to ends that are true goods. In the light of reason, a good *habitus* guides human actions toward natural goods. In the light of grace, a good *habitus* guides a human

5. ST I-II q. 55, a. 1 discusses whether human virtue is a *habitus*. Aquinas responds: "Virtue denotes a certain perfection of a power. Now a thing's perfection is considered chiefly in regard to its end. But the end of power is act. Wherefore power is said to be perfect, according as it is determinate to its act. Now there are some powers which of themselves are determinate to their acts; for instance, the active natural powers. And therefore these natural powers are in themselves called virtues. But the rational powers, which are proper to man, are not determinate to one particular action, but are inclined indifferently to many: and they are determinate to acts by means of *habitus*, as is clear from what we have said above. Therefore human virtues are *habitus*".

6. I opted to use the Latin word *habitus* which comes from the verb *habere* (to have). *Habitus* expresses better Aquinas's thought because it points to a dynamic movement while the English word habit has a static connotation. Thomas himself affirms this dynamism of *habitus* when he responds to the question of whether *habitus* is a quality: "Respondeo dicendum quod hoc nomen habitus ab habendo est sumptum. A quo quidem nomen habitus dupliciter derivatur, uno quidem modo, secundum quod homo, vel quaecumque alia res, dicitur aliquid habere; alio modo, secundum quod aliqua res aliquo modo se habet in seipsa vel ad aliquid aliud".

action toward the supernatural end, that is, God.[7] Virtues are good *habitus*.[8] They are acquired moral virtues when they turn human actions to natural goods, and they become infused virtues when they turn the human being toward God, the supernatural end in which one finds the Infinite that satisfies their deep desire for transcendent happiness.

Frei Carlos affirms: "Virtue will manifest as the triumph of freedom and the rational, free love of the good" (Josaphat, 2012, p. 423). Virtue penetrates and transforms the human being by an inner action in the organic and complex unity of all persons. Even when grace is present, human freedom is not violated because the inner transformation draws a person closer to what is more proper to his/her nature as a being created by a Creator. The closer we draw to our Creator, the freer we become, as we fulfill the destiny of our nature. St. Thomas Aquinas offers an integral anthropology that sees the human as a full being. But the experience of grace elevates this being that will live as a full being in an atmosphere of grace.

Grace and the End of Human Existence

Some scholars suggest that Thomas Aquinas's work is divided into periods: before and after the experience of grace. But, as indicated above, his account of the human being and God is entirely underlined by grace, with the Incarnation of God serving as his reference point. Jesus, the Word of God who became human, allows us to be coheirs of his eternal life and to participate in divine grace. The Incarnation is the penetration of grace into human nature that does not violate it, but rather elevates it to its full realization (O'meara, 1997, p. 226). Hence, Aquinas's theological ethics has a full conception of the human being

7. ST I-II, q. 110, a. 3: "For just as the acquired virtues perfect a man so that he may walk in a way which befits the natural light of reason, so the infused virtues perfect a man so that he may walk in a way which befits the light of grace".

8. ST I-II, q. 55, a. 3: "Virtue implies a perfection of power: wherefore the virtue of a thing is fixed by the limit of its power. Now the limit of any power must needs to be good: for all evil implies defect; wherefore Dionysius says that every evil is a weakness. And for this reason the virtue of a thing must be regarded in reference to good. Therefore human virtue which is an operative *habitus*, is a good *habitus*, productive of good works".

as a rational *and* free being. In addition, it is a theological ethics of virtue with grace as its source. Therefore, grace has a foundational role in Aquinas's ethics.

As noted above, Thomas Aquinas does not deny human nature and its potentialities to organize a society toward the good. But this is not sufficient to satisfy the human desire for infinitude. A supernatural power that comes from God's grace is necessary. It is possible to divide Thomistic ethics into a two step-reflection: in one, he presents the acquired virtues in an Aristotelian way, and in the other, he examines the rebirth of the human being as the result of the Incarnation that brought the experience of grace revealed by Jesus Christ. However, as one may note in the ST, Aquinas develops a systematic theology that begins with God and ends with God made human in Jesus. Therefore, his explanation of the acquired virtues is meant to ground his "graced anthropology", as Chenu puts it, or his "transcendental theology of the immanent human being", according to Frei Carlos. Aquinas does not present acquired virtues to suggest that it is possible to stop there, but his presentation is already under the graced experience of Christian life. This experience makes all things change and become new in Christ.

Aquinas begins the ST by affirming that philosophical knowledge alone is not enough to lead the human being to its supernatural destiny, "because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason" (ST I, q. 1.a.1). Or as O'Meara writes, "Grace names the message, the power, and the goal of the ST whose opening lines announce a higher orientation, that is, a special plan and destiny for people. This supernatural 'ordo' engages the entire work and each question" (O'meara, 1997, p.259).

As a good professor, Master Thomas is didactic in the ST, particularly when he presents his theological ethics of the virtues. He begins ST I-II with the human being and its natural potentialities in which we find the moral acquired virtues. Then he ends with the grace that affects the whole of human existence. He opens ST II-II with faith and then develops each individual virtue, one by one, in detail. When he explains the virtues, in general in I-II or in detail in II-II, his vision of the human being is holistic, not fragmented. This is especially true

after the experience of grace. As Marie-Dominique Chenu puts it, "The moral virtues, presented by Aristotle, are only a previous device of the contemplative perfection of man; they are at the same time, through an ascetic combat, a terrene failure of happiness, incompatible with such effort [to achieve the beatific life]"(Chenu, 1959, p. 60). The moral virtues are a mundane failure because we cannot contemplate God without grace.

After the experience of grace, all human actions, classified as cardinal or theological virtues, are under the atmosphere of grace: "God's grace transforms human activity in the life of discipleship" (Mattison III, 2011, p. 560). Therefore, it is unclear why some readers of Aquinas's writings interpret his ethics as a fragmented anthropology in which the human being, even after the experience of grace, has two different kinds of operative systems. One system operates by reason and another by grace, without communication. Each exists without conflict in the same person. If we accept this interpretation, we also need to accept that grace is not enough *per se* to elevate human nature because nature still needs to act without grace to be perfect.

This argument can be applied to those who assert that acquired virtues are imperfect, but attain perfection through charity, coexisting with infused virtues (Osborne, 2007, p. 39–64). Aquinas's thought suggests that charity is not grace.[9] So then it is possible that someone has acquired virtues that are improved by charity. On the other hand, grace is a divine presence that affects the whole of human existence and turns it to its supernatural end. Aquinas says about grace: "It is a participation in a deep level of God's love" (ST I, q. 43, a.3): it is "a supernatural principle moving one into interiority" (ST II-II, q. 6, a.1); it is a "kind of supernatural reality in the human being coming from God' (ST I-II, q 110, a.1); and, 'a kind of quality" (ST I-II q. 110, a. 2). Yet Aquinas also writes: "The gift of grace surpasses every capacity of created nature, since it is nothing other than a certain participation in the divine nature, which surpasses every

9. ST I-II, q. 110, a. 3. Aquinas differentiates grace from the infused virtues. In the answer to objection one, Aquinas argues that charity is the first manifestation of sanctifying grace in one who has faith. "The act of faith of him that worketh by charity is the first act by which sanctifying grace is manifested".

other nature" (ST I-II, q. 112, a.1). The human being becomes a full being by the experience of grace because he/she participates in God's life as a beatific vision of the ultimate end. Everything after this vision will be different and the moral life will be the result of this mystical crowning. Therefore, the human being walks in friendship with God.[10]

Mystical Crowning of Aquinas's Theological Ethics

In this last section, I propose that Aquinas's theological ethics do not have a fragmented vision of the human being and a dualistic conception of theory and practice in the Christian life. The theological ethics of Aquinas's virtues form a unity in which one morally embodies an existence of friendship with God, a gift of God's grace that allows us to participate in the divine. For Master Thomas, the moral life is crowned by a mystical experience that transforms all human persons and their actions.

All human virtues are under an atmosphere of the graced mystical crowning of ethical life. Many scholars ask about the relationship between acquired and infused virtues after the experience of grace. Jeremy D. Wilkins suggests that some complain that there is an obscure relationship between these two kinds of virtues in Saint Thomas's writings (WILKINS, 2011, p. 724). Angela McKay Knobel recognizes this relationship is not clear in Aquinas (KNOBEL, 2010, p. 599). According to Knobel, the lack of clarity allows different interpretations about the relationship between acquired virtues and infused virtues in the Christian life, that is, after the experience of grace. She explains two theories about this relationship that she calls the 'coexistence theory' and the "unification theory" (Knobel, 2010, p. 600–612).

The "coexistence theory" affirms that for Thomas Aquinas acquired and infused virtues coexist in the same person after the experience of grace. Thomas M. Osborne is another who defends this theory. He argues that Aquinas distinguishes five levels of virtue: four are acquired virtues and one is an infused

10. Frei Carlos affirms that charity is an immanent realization of a divine friendship that happens after a person contemplates God; e.g. a gift of benevolence, reciprocity, and mutual love (Josaphat, 2012, p. 515).

virtue. According to him, Aquinas makes a distinction between: "(1) false virtue, (2) altogether imperfect (*omnino imperfect*) virtue, (3) true but imperfect (*vera sed imperfect*) acquired virtue, (4) perfect (*aliqualiter perfecta*) acquired virtue, and (5) infused virtue, which is simply speaking perfect (*simpliciter perfecta*) virtue' (Osborne, 2007, p. 51). The issue is that, after the experience of grace, one still has the acquired virtues (that might be true, but imperfect without grace), but they become perfect because of grace. Therefore, the Christian life is a combination of perfect acquired virtues and infused virtues. Osborne stresses:

> The close connection between imperfect and perfect acquired virtues explains why Thomas does not treat them separately in his discussion of the connection between the virtues. Imperfect acquired virtue would be connected if it were developed in conjunction with the other virtues. For this reason imperfect and perfect acquired moral virtues cannot coexist in the same agent, whereas acquired and infused can. But imperfect acquired virtue and infused virtue can also exist separately (Osborne, 2007, p. 51).

On the other hand, according to Knobel's "unification theory", all virtues become infused virtues after the experience of grace and direct the agent to the supernatural end. This theory does not accept the existence of a perfect acquired virtue that is not transformed into infused virtue after the experience of grace (Knobel, 2010, p. 605). Since grace transforms all virtues, Knobel asserts that a natural interpretation of Aquinas's writing is that "the acquired virtues are 'taken up' or 'transformed' into the infused virtues, so that all the Christian's virtues are infused virtues" (Knobel, 2010b, 396).

These two interpretations fall short in that they forget to look at Aquinas's writings as a work under the experience of grace. Master Thomas does not deny the human experience, but he affirms there is a new person after the experience of grace like there is a new world after the incarnation of the Word of God. Chenu writes that, "The sign of terrene efficiency of the Gospel is the subtle harmony between grace and nature. In other words, nature is perfected by grace. *Gratia non tollit naturan sed perfecit* (I, q. 1 a.8. ad. 2). The grace of the divine life in which I participate" (1959, p. 156).

In Thomas Aquinas's theological ethics, grace has a foundational role in the Christian life. Nothing in the human life remains the same after one contemplates God. The mystical crowning of ethical life provides a fantastic unity between theory and practice. This unity is a result of our participation in the divine life. Participating in God's life, our nature is elevated by grace, and we receive the infused virtues that we need to achieve supernatural happiness. Through participation in the divine nature, with no mix or confusion between human and divine natures, theory and practice are united (ST I-II. q. 110, a. 3). The dualism of action and contemplation is overcome, and everything is affected by grace, even acquired virtues (Josaphat, 2012, p. 488; Chenu, 1959, p. 63). There are no two human actions or experiences after grace in Aquinas. Contemplation makes the human being free. "The contemplative life consists in a certain liberty of the soul" (ST, II-II, q. 182, a. 1, ad. 2), which allows a person to have full engagement in the world though a practice that is a moral expression of grace (Chenu, 1959, p. 138).

According to Chenu, "Grace makes nature to be itself, that is, human, a rational and free nature, with its laws, its values, its structure, its methods, and its criteria" (1959, p. 156). There is no contradiction between acts of human nature and acts of grace in human nature. Neither of these two human faculties leads to two moral actions, one that is acquired by reason and another by grace. After the experience of participation in the divine nature, all human existence becomes a new life through grace in Christ. Nature fulfills what is most proper to itself. Thomas Aquinas says:

> For as man in his intellective powers participates in the Divine knowledge through the virtue of faith, and in his power of will participates in the Divine love through the virtue of charity, so also in the nature of the soul does he participate in the Divine Nature, after the manner of a likeness, through a certain rebirth or re-creation (ST, I-II, q. 110, a.1).

This rebirth incorporates all aspects that are inherent in human nature, such as intellect, will, and freedom, transforming an individual into a new, full person.

A *mystical link* shapes Aquinas's theological ethics. The mystical link "is characterized as a real participation in the Infinite that lives and transforms the finite to inaugurate a capacity of partnership between living and acting through the gift of grace" (Josaphat, 2012, p. 453). The virtues are the way that this partnership – a friendship between God and a person – becomes concrete and visible in the world. This theological ethic rises as a full realization of human dignity and its responsibility as a being that confirms and validates itself in the world by virtues (Josaphat, 1992, p. 19–21; 124–125).

Conclusion

Saint Thomas Aquinas develops a coherent theological ethic of virtues in which grace is his main source. It is a transcendental anthropology of virtues that confirms and surpasses human nature. A mystical crowning is the apex of this ethics in which a person contemplates God who, at the same time, allows one to participate in the divine nature. This experience affects all human existence, giving a full realization and an inner unity between action and contemplation. Participating in divine nature, the human life moves, full of dignity and freedom, under an atmosphere of grace that will be expressed by virtues. Therefore, grace is a fundamental concept in Aquinas's theological ethics. On the one hand, it is possible to read Master Thomas with an exclusive focus on his epistemological analysis of the moral life. On the other hand, it does not appear to be an accurate interpretation if this approach to his thought does not consider his work as a full theology with a coherent corpus. This corpus offers a full ethical project in which grace is its source, anthropology its basis, and mystical crowning its goal. Aquinas's thought begins from the experience of faith as an act of belief (*Credo Deum, Credo Deo, and Credo in Deum*) that happens in grace and makes us docile to the Holy Spirit and Her gift. Virtues are elevated by docility to the Holy Spirit who integrates, affects, and guides the entire Christian life, and this is God's grace, shaping a graced ethics.

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