SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT'S REVOLUTION:

LEGITIMIZING ARISTOTELIAN ETHICAL THOUGHT

AND ITS INTEGRATION INTO A THEORY OF THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

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Theology

Introduction

Despite a slow but growing interest in the writings of Aristotle in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, Saint Albert the Great's embrace of Aristotelian thinking significantly increased the depth and the breadth of scholarly interest. Saint Albert so enthusiastically championed integration of Aristotelian thought into the intellectual milieu of his day that he spent nearly a quarter of a century attempting to assemble the first encyclopedia of Aristotle's thinking in Latin, "a user-friendly compilation and objective interpretation of the entire Aristotelian *corpus* for students, confrères, and scholars in the Latin West."[1] This paper elucidates Saint Albert's role in fostering acceptance of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* within the emergent field of moral science. It chronicles the seminal importance of his commentaries on *Nicomachean Ethics*, then available in its entirety to the Latin West for the first time. It locates these developments within the broader arc of medieval scholarship regarding the traditional cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. In the process, it traces the flowering of Saint Albert's contemplation of Aristotle from the period before the availability of the complete *Nicomachean Ethics* to the period after it. Saint Albert had already demonstrated a rather unique openness to incorporating Aristotelian ideas into a theory of the cardinal virtues even before publication of the entire *Nicomachean Ethics*, and, after its

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publication, his interest only grew in intensity.[2] Finally, the paper demonstrates that Saint

Albert's intellectual work product in this area definitively shaped the trajectory of scholarship for

generations, deeply influencing the output of Saint Thomas Aquinas and other important

thirteenth- and fourteenth-century figures.

Due to the potential immensity of such an undertaking, though, this paper limits its scope to a

relatively narrow though still sufficiently illustrative focus: Saint Albert's approach to the

distinctness of the cardinal virtues as a set. Consequently, discussion of specific virtues appears

in very limited fashion, serving only to exemplify key aspects of Saint Albert's approach. To

accomplish these goals, the paper, after providing a brief biographical sketch of Saint Albert, sets

forth a robust overview of relevant scholarship from the first half of the thirteenth century. This

contextualizes the immediately subsequent discussion of Saint Albert's contributions in his early

ethical treatise *De bono*. Then, the paper considers Saint Albert's later treatment of the cardinal

virtues in *Super Ethica*, the first commentary on Aristotle's complete *Nichomachean Ethics*

produced in the Latin West, before assessing Saint Albert's influence on succeeding generations.

Saint Albert the Great: The Man and His Ethical Writings[3]

Both the date and the location of Saint Albert's birth are uncertain. Saint Albert is generally

believed to have been born in the last years of the twelfth century because he was said to be at

least eighty years old when he died in 1280, and most scholars presume that he was from the

German town of Lauingen, if only because he was known during his life as Albert of Lauingen.

Uncertainty also abounds regarding the biographical details of Saint Albert's life, especially his

early life, but he is known to have been a student in Padua in the 1220s, where the preaching of

the Dominican Master General, Blessed Jordan of Saxony (Saint Dominic's immediate

successor), attracted him to join the Order. Later ordained, he was assigned to teach young

Dominicans in the Order's houses of study where he was stationed. His superiors recognized his intellect and sent him to the University of Paris to pursue studies as a Master. He arrived sometime in the early 1240s and composed his earliest treatises at that time. He first encountered the ideas of Aristotle while studying at Paris. Having become a Master in 1245, Saint Albert joined the Paris faculty and taught there for three years, meeting his most famous student, Saint Thomas Aquinas, in 1246.

After his time at Paris, he returned to Cologne to teach in the new Dominican house of studies there, and he brought Saint Thomas with him. Saint Albert's writings and teaching made him famous, "an increasingly public figure,"[4] frequently charged with secular and ecclesiastical missions of arbitration and diplomacy. In 1254, he was elected Prior of the Dominicans' vast German Province. He spent time as an advisor to Pope Alexander IV in Rome, Agnani, and Viterbo and was ordained Bishop of Regensberg in 1260. He resigned his diocese in 1262 after restoring its finances and morale but continued to assist Popes with special missions while resuming his teaching career, which lasted until 1277. Saint Albert attended the Council of Lyons in 1274. He died on November 15, 1280, as "something of a legend" and, "contrary to all normal academic etiquette, . . . an 'authority' in the schools, on a par with the ancients."[5] His friend, confrère, and student, Ulrich of Strasbourg, hailed him as "so godlike (*divinus*) in every branch of knowledge that he can aptly be called the wonder and the miracle of our time."[6] In 1622 he was beatified, and in 1931 he was canonized and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. Ten years later, he was declared Patron of Natural Scientists.

Saint Albert's accolades and posthumous ecclesiastical recognitions reflect his enormously wide series of academic interests and accomplishments: "[H]is encyclopedic interests led him to concern himself not only with philosophy and theology, like other contemporaries of his, but also

with every other discipline then known, from physics to chemistry, from astronomy to minerology, from botany to zoology."[7] Like Aristotle, he was clearly a man of wide-ranging interests. With respect to ethical and moral issues, Saint Albert's huge *corpus* includes five treatises—*De natura boni* (c. 1236–1240), *De bono* (1241–1243), *Sententiae* (c. 1246–1249), *Super Ethica* (1250–1252), and *Ethica* (c. 1262)—as well as sundry theological *Quaestiones* (c. 1241–1250), Biblical commentaries (after 1257), and his *Summa theologiae sive de mirabili scientia Dei* (after 1268).[8] As previously noted, this paper primarily draws on *De bono* and *Super Ethica*, although it briefly regards in passing *De natura boni* and *Ethica*.

<p align="center">**Virtue Theory in the Early Thirteenth Century:**</p>

<p align="center">**Traditional Understanding and Aristotle's Limited Influence**</p>

The Parisian Masters

Twelfth-century scholars had only possessed *Ethica nova* and *Ethica vetus*, versions of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* which contained only the first three books. Later, fragments of Books VII and VIII were known from the *Ethica Borghesiana*. As a consequence, scholarly commentators developed an incomplete and distorted sense of Aristotle's thinking, which impeded penetration into a thought-world already dominated primarily by Saint Augustine and secondarily by patristic-age Stoicism and Arabic Neoplatonism. Even in the prestigious Arts department at the University of Paris, a largely indifferent faculty consigned Ethics to the status of an optional discipline about which Masters could lecture only during holidays.[9] When Robert Grosseteste's unprecedented and freshly completed translation of all ten books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* entered circulation in 1246 or 1247, the slow, "piecemeal" process by which *Nicomachean Ethics* emerged in the Latin West concluded.[10] Because Aristotelian

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thought often arrived in the West via the Islamic Arab world, many scholars and ecclesiastical authorities viewed it with deep suspicion.[11]

Five commentaries on the incomplete versions of *Nicomachean Ethics* produced by Arts Masters at Paris have survived from the first half of the thirteenth century. By equating Aristotle's notion of happiness with the notion of union with God, they typically render the perfection required for attainment of happiness much more difficult than what Aristotle originally envisioned. The resulting "metaphysical conception of happiness" to be pursued via an " 'ascetic' morality" prioritizes intellectual virtues over moral virtues and misconstrues Aristotle's concept of practical knowledge or practical wisdom (*i.e.*, *phronesis*),[12] fundamentally recasting what some deem the "central theme" of *Nicomachean Ethics*.[13]

According to the Parisian Masters, the respective orientations of intellectual virtues, on the one hand, and moral virtues, on the other, distinguish them as two different classes of virtue: "[I]ntellectual virtue is oriented towards the superior world of the intelligible, [and] moral virtue towards the inferior world of corporeality." The Masters emphasize intellectual virtue as fundamentally important in leading and orienting human beings to happiness, *i.e.*, the "First Principle" or God. One, Robert Kilwardby, in assessing Aristotle's tripartite division of intellectual virtues among those encompassing intelligence, wisdom, and *phronesis*, attributes the task of "knowing and loving" the First Principle exclusively to wisdom and identifies *phronesis* with prudence.[14]

Meanwhile, the Parisian Masters recognize that the moral virtues regulate one's behavior toward one's own body, as well as relations with one's neighbor. As a result of the unavailability of Book V of *Nicomachean Ethics*, though, they tend to stress the self-regulatory function while neglecting moral virtue's social or political aspect in Aristotle's construct. Even

so, Aristotle's claim that human beings by nature lack moral virtue grounds the Parisian Masters'

contention that development of moral virtue necessitates regular practice via constant and

frequent performance of good actions because "the actions that form moral virtue derive from

sensory faculties." Two key ideas follow from the Parisian Masters' analysis. First, emphasis on

the individual aspect of moral virtue results in glorification of the contemplative life over the

civil and political life in ways which do not accord with Aristotle's ideas. Secondly, when

coupled with the notion that pursuit of intellectual virtue motivates and fosters the contemplative

life, whose end is mystical union with God, the Parisian Masters accord Aristotle's intellectual

virtues a position not unlike that of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity in

traditional Christian theology.[15] Consequently, "the Arts Masters of the first half of the

thirteenth century developed a solid theory of the virtues based on a complex structure of the

soul and in many ways similar to the theory of the masters of the Faculty of Theology who were

active in the same period."[16] Yet they still recognized a need for the Aristotelian and theological

intellectual frameworks to remain to some degree distinct, and they proceeded to compare and to

present these points of view as respectively being "according to philosophers" or "according to

theologians."[17] They would additionally "report the thought of theologians when Aristotle's

thought more markedly departs from it."[18]

William of Auxerre and Philip the Chancellor

Only in the second quarter of the thirteenth century, with William of Auxerre's *Summa aurea*

(1215–1229) and Philip the Chancellor's *Summa de bono* (1225–1228), did systematic moral

treatises begin to emerge. Before then, moral speculation typically advanced within the

framework of commentaries on Peter Lombard's classic and highly influential *Sententiae*, a

compendium of scriptural and patristic excerpts accompanied by comments and explanations,

which had entered circulation by 1158. With an "architectonic structure" based on the Apostles' Creed, Peter's treatment of morality is split between "Book II, within the context of sin," and "Book III, following the treatise on Christ." Within the latter, consideration of morality appears between the topics of charity (the third of the three theological virtues) and the gifts of the Holy Spirit; "no room is made [either in Book II or Book III] for a treatment of the naturally acquired virtues as such." This topical sequence dominated scholarship for generations, as subsequent scholars developed their own thought in the form of commentaries on *Sententiae.*[19]

William continued the tradition of adhering to Peter's structure, and, even though moral doctrine comprises approximately half of *Summa aurea*, it remains divided into two pieces. Within the second piece in his own Book III, however, between discussions of the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (and, thus within the context of grace), William "inserted two full-fledged treatises hitherto absent in theological syntheses: a lengthy but disjointed analysis of the cardinal virtues, preceded by another treatise on natural law." His schema, opening with a discussion of the concept of the good, followed by natural law, before proceeding to cardinal virtues, was designed "to supplement the data of revelation with the natural principles of rational ethics, and a willingness to use the classical Latin sources to this end." In employing non-Christian classical sources, William leveraged a countercultural intellectual undercurrent from the first half of the twelfth century, epitomized by the work of Peter Abelard, which promoted the development of a philosophical definition of virtue independent of (even if complementary with) the prevailing theological discourse and prepared to reference Christian and classical pagan authorities. Yet, although William is familiar with those portions of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* then available, he "still seems to favor the Augustinian notion of

virtue," even asserting that "the acquired virtues, of which Aristotle speaks, are not virtues absolutely."[20]

In his *Summa de bono*, Philip, like William, patterns his work on Peter Lombard's in *Sententiae*, although, rather originally, he opens with "a disquisition on the transcendental notions of being, the one, the true, and the good." Philip's outlook is clearly theological, though. He presents a tripartite division of the good (as physical good, generic good, and supernatural grace), but nearly two-thirds of his treatise concentrates on supernatural grace. Additionally, he retains a conventional topical sequence: grace generally, theological virtues, cardinal virtues, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.[21]

Ambiguity, though, characterizes Philip's discussion of human acts and his treatment of the traditional cardinal virtues. First, with respect to human acts, he identifies three grades of goodness—the generic, the moral, and that of grace—but the generic always remains subject to additional considerations regarding both circumstances (apparently including intention) and virtue in determining moral goodness. Confusion arises about whether the generic good is really just a factor within determination of the moral good and about the status of intention within circumstances. Secondly, Philip's location of his treatment of the cardinal virtues betrays a general vagueness (by no means new with Philip) about whether moral goodness derives from human action or supernatural grace. Interestingly, several of Philip's conclusions resemble those of the Parisian Masters. Preoccupied with the theological virtues, Philip concludes in good Augustinian fashion that "[t]heological virtues inform the exalted part of man's spirit *(ratio superior)*, whereas cardinal virtues perfect the lower part of the soul *(ratio inferior)*. Or, theological virtues are those to be loved and cherished *(frui)*, whereas cardinal virtues belong to the order of the useful *(uti)*." Philip's attitude towards Aristotle's ideas of political virtue gives

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further evidence of Philip's interests: "Note too that political virtue, although it could be called 'virtue' according to the ethicist, is not full-fledged virtue nor virtue in the true sense of the word, but only an ethical virtue; God-given virtue, however, is virtue absolutely."[22]

Saint Albert's Contributions

Cardinal Virtues and **De bono**

As previously noted, Saint Albert's first two forays into morality and ethics were his treatises *De natura boni* and *De bono*.[23] *De natura boni* is dated to c. 1236–1240, while *De bono* can be assigned to 1241–1243.[24] The completion of Philip's *Summa de bono* in 1228 and William's *Summa aurea* in 1229 provides the immediate context for Saint Albert's work, and Philip's *Summa de bono* in particular constitutes "an indispensable link in our appreciation of the proximate influences upon Albert's thought," notwithstanding that "the differences in vision and intent between Philip and Albert are profound."[25] As was the case with the efforts of the Parisian Masters, William, and Philip, both of Saint Albert's treatises precede the availability of Aristotle's entire *Nicomachean Ethics*.[26] Before addressing the considerably more significant *De bono*, a word on *De natura boni* is in order.

Saint Albert intended *De natura boni* to address in systematic fashion foundational issues in moral theory. The treatise first distinguishes uncreated from created goods, noting that only one good (namely, God) comprises the former category, and then it proceeds to "three interrelated subjects: how uncreated goodness is manifested in human creatures, how it becomes diminished in them, and how, once diminished, it can be recovered." Saint Albert's plan was to trace in sequence seven "interconnected forms of a moral perfection": nature, virtue, grace, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the fruits of the Holy Spirit, earthly happiness, and heavenly happiness. *De natura boni*, however, abruptly breaks off in the middle of the section on virtue, leaving

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incomplete the treatment of the cardinal virtues. Saint Albert's discussion of temperance morphs

into a lengthy exposition on chastity and virginity, as exemplified by the Blessed Mother (an

exposition destined to comprise two-thirds of what was written). Saint Albert likely considered

it easier to start anew than to re-work this material. What survives exhibits rather heavy

Augustinian and rather light Aristotelian influences.[27]

De bono, essentially a treatise about the cardinal virtues, incorporates much of the theory of

De natura boni but in the more rigorous, academic fashion of *quaestiones disputates* (a form

which posits one or more propositions and, sequentially for each, identifies objections, cites

supporting and opposing authorities, and offers a synthesis or resolution in arguments analyzing

the objections and the authorities). In the process, Saint Albert dispenses with "the biblical

examples that comprise the bulk of Albert's discussion in *De natura boni*." Saint Albert's aim

was synthesis: He closely relies on Cicero's *De inventione*, in particular, its model of

circumstances which determine whether actions merit praise or blame, and on Aristotle's

Nicomachean Ethics for analysis of the cause of virtue. He thus "presents virtue as a stable

disposition of the soul with both a proximate efficient cause (virtuous human actions) and remote

efficient cause (the will)," claiming that human beings "become disposed to act and react in

excellent ways through the repeated performance of like actions and reactions."[28]

Saint Albert better carries forward his systematic plan for the cardinal virtues in *De bono*.

"He defines each virtue and specifies its matter or objects as well as the action in which it is

paradigmatically expressed," and he also generally treats each virtue's "parts," *i.e.*, their related

secondary virtues.[29] In doing so, he contrasts Philip's position, which follows Stoic tradition,

from his own, which follows Aristotle. Specifically, the Stoic view considers the cardinal virtues

general conditions of all virtuous acts and ultimately rests on unity of the virtues as collectively

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comprising the single true virtue of wisdom, which expresses itself variously in different acts. Saint Albert disputes this, arguing that one who possesses temperance, for example, does not perforce need to be simultaneously prudent, just, and courageous merely by virtue of the possession of temperance.[30]

Similarly, Saint Albert disputes Philip's Stoic-based view of the relation of a virtue's parts to the virtue itself and holds instead that the parts are "potestative rather than integral."[31] Thus, the parts themselves essentially constitute specific subordinate—or "adjunct"—virtues, and not "merely conditions" of the cardinal virtue to which they relate. Indeed, Saint Albert considers the adjunct virtues participative, separate from the related cardinal virtue (and its other adjunct virtues), such that each adjunct virtue remains distinct. Otherwise, the status of each cardinal virtue "would be jeopardized; it would have no being outside its parts and could simply be reduced to them." Saint Albert's argument, however, still accommodates consideration of the four cardinal virtues as "principal" in the sense that "the other moral virtues can somehow be traced back to them."[32]

Saint Albert has already begun to manifest what at the time was a unique openness to Aristotelian ideas: "Albert seems to presume the general adequacy of Aristotle's framework; he does not work towards it so much as start from it."[33] Consequently, his perspective in approaching problems differs from that of his predecessors. Treatment of fortitude provides an excellent example.

Aristotle's notion of fortitude, developed in the context of a "heroic" society with a "Homeric" tradition, posed a problem for medieval audiences because its paradigmatic exemplar was "the citizen who fights bravely in war for his city" and could face the fear connected with death in battle. Such exclusive emphasis, however, on valiant participation in "civic warfare as

the most appropriate context for courage does not sit too well with their [i.e., medieval Christian readers'] religious and theological background."[34] Aristotle sought to exclude death from accidental or natural causes in order to preserve the concept of death for a good cause, but Christians professed other good causes, some superior to civic warfare. Even Saint Albert, who cultivated an appreciation for Aristotelian thinking, required a broader scope and held that, because "true courage always involves willingness to die[,] it is manifested in a death deliberately chosen," as for example, by "Christian martyrs who choose to die when confronted with a choice between staying true to their faith and dying and renouncing their faith and staying alive." Quite arguably, this view still preserved the essential characteristics of Aristotle's thinking.[35]

In considering this problem, Philip had begun with Cicero's premise that "courageous action consists in the confrontation and endurance of 'difficulties' (*difficilia*) and hence that difficulties are the virtue's proper object." By arguing that "courage rules passions that arise from difficulties," Philip then attempts to reconcile Aristotle's statement that the proper object of courage is the passions with theological authorities which hold that courage confronts and endures any number of adversities. Ultimately, Philip seeks to base his theory of the unity of virtues on Cicero's affirmation that *all* virtues involve difficulties.[36]

While only rarely naming Philip, Saint Albert conspicuously but critically challenges Philip's ideas: "Philip's solutions sometimes figure as objections to Albert's own position—objections that Albert refutes." For example, Saint Albert refutes Philip's idea that fortitude can concern external passions because it implies that fortitude would then *depend* on external circumstances outside a person's control and thereby preclude "the free, deliberate, and repeated practice of fear management that is required for the acquisition of the habit of fearing rightly."[37]

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In any event, the influential effect of Philip's work on *De bono* is clear. Like Philip, Saint Albert maintains that perfect goodness and perfect being unite in God. Additionally, Saint Albert largely follows the structure of Philip's *Summa de bono*, prefacing his discussion of virtue with an exposition of goodness "as a transcendental property of existing things."[38] Thus, Saint Albert authored "a systematic work, a composition that hangs together, a work in which there is evidence of organization and consecutive development in Albert's thought and synthesis."[39] Notwithstanding the general resemblance to Philip's structure, though, Saint Albert's plan for *De bono* differs in one genuinely marked respect: Its discussion of virtue *begins* with the cardinal virtues, not the theological virtues; the never begun sections on the theological virtues (in themselves and in relation to the cardinal virtues) would have followed.[40] In this subtle structural shift, Saint Albert attributed a degree of importance to the cardinal virtues not previously encountered and manifested his interest in furthering the development of a "*natural morality*."[41]

Aristotelian Commentary

Saint Albert used the complete Grosseteste translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as the basis for a series of lectures at the Dominican house of studies in Cologne between 1250 and 1252.[42] Saint Thomas Aquinas, still studying under Saint Albert, accompanied Saint Albert from Paris to Cologne to attend these lectures, and Saint Thomas's meticulous transcriptions constituted the nucleus of *Super Ethica*, Saint Albert's comprehensive, line-by-line commentary on the text. This was the first Latin commentary published in the West, and it attained a remarkable degree of popularity during Saint Albert's own lifetime. Indeed, the West's second Latin commentary was not completed until c. 1262—and it was Saint Albert's *Ethica*, a more condensed summary version with a few new ideas, sometimes called *Paraphrasis* (the name

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hereafter applied in this paper for the sake of clarity). These commentaries represent "the most influential instrument in directing the medieval understanding of ancient ethics. Albert's work influenced nearly all the later medieval expositors of Aristotle," including Saint Thomas, even when they disagreed with some of Saint Albert's conclusions. Saint Albert's commentaries "played a crucial role" in securing the "enormous influence on Christian moral theology in the 13th century" of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.[43]

Super Ethica, like *De bono*, utilized the rigorous *quaestiones disputates* format, whereas *Paraphrasis* treats the material much more discursively.[44] Unfortunately, *Super Ethica* was lost to history for several centuries. It was only rediscovered in 1922 and initially republished incrementally between 1968 and 1972.[45] Yet even within the last half-century, it has come to be considered "far more substantial and original" than *Paraphrasis*,[46] as well as more indicative of Saint Albert's own thought. Comparatively, *Paraphasis* retains merit less as a source of Saint Albert's own theories than as his assessment of Aristotle's thinking and as a complement to *Super Ethica*.[47]

Saint Albert sought to accomplish three goals with *Super Ethica*. First, he wanted to challenge earlier misreadings of Aristotle, "in particular among the masters of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Paris." Saint Albert "effectively severs Aristotle's discussion of highest earthly ends and activities from the discussion of God's supreme goodness" because "affirmation that human beings strive for a human end entails no denial that God is their ultimate end." Secondly, he desired to legitimate Aristotle's particular reasoning as a proper focus of study in the realm of philosophy. Finally, Saint Albert thereby aimed to foster "the moral-philosophical enterprise itself" on the grounds that, apart from theology, "philosophers, following their powers

of reason and without the aim of revelation, could and did reach sound conclusions about such matters" related to the ends of human existence.[48]

To that end, *Super Ethica* is a landmark not only in connection with the presentation and the promotion of Aristotelian ethical thinking as a proper field of academic inquiry but also in connection with the development of scholarly method. In the work's Prologue, Saint Albert analyzes the "the whole 'science' of ethics and its very possibility as a practical science. It is certainly one of the most authoritative, if not the earliest, of such dedicated treatments in the Latin West, and provides valuable insights into Albert's concept of the role and nature of natural moral theorizing." Saint Albert affirms that ethics can be approached from a purely rational and speculative perspective and, therefore, developed as "moral science" which possesses its own distinct subject matter, goal, and usefulness.[49] Thus, the potential motivation behind Saint Albert's structural innovation in *De bono* receives its explanation here.

Substantively, however, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* presented a challenge to conventional thirteenth-century Christian virtue ethics, particularly with respect to the concept of the cardinal virtues. Patristic thinkers had long before absorbed into Christian thought "[t]he scheme of the four cardinal virtues, first introduced in Plato's *Republic*, [which had] found wide acceptance among Neoplatonic and Stoic philosophers of Greek and Latin antiquity." Yet, "the four cardinal virtues are alien to the ethical system of Aristotle."[50] Aristotle's system classifies virtues as either intellectual or moral and identifies wisdom as the "most perfect intellectual virtue."[51] For Aristotle, "[p]rudence is one of five intellectual virtues while justice, fortitude, and temperance figure among the eleven moral virtues. To be sure, prudence lies at the root of all moral virtues while justice, understood as general or legal justice, coincides with perfect virtue; still the four virtues known as cardinal do not constitute a special quartet in Aristotle's

ethics, let alone a scheme of principal virtues that cover the entire range of morality."[52]

Medieval thinkers faced a question: Could Aristotle's system be reconciled with the received

concept of the cardinal virtues, or should the concept of cardinal virtues be set aside?

Saint Albert sought reconciliation. He proceeded by addressing two main issues. First is the

status of prudence. Before the thirteenth century, only Peter Abelard seriously considered the

idea that prudence was not a moral virtue, whereas others continued to argue well into the

fourteenth century that prudence was both an intellectual *and* a moral virtue. In *Super Ethica*,

Saint Albert maintains that "prudence occupies a middle ground between the intellectual and

moral virtues," essentially agreeing with Grosseteste's own gloss that "prudence is an intellectual

virtue in its cognitive function, but a moral virtue in that it directs the operations of justice,

temperance, and fortitude."[53]

Yet Saint Albert also recognizes both that prudence, if exercised in order to contribute to

other virtues, must be subordinated to those other virtues and that "happiness could not consist in

prudential virtue, since it is not an end in itself." Indeed, Aristotle's priority for wisdom implies

that happiness consists in *it*, not prudence. Saint Albert reasons, though, that, if prudence marks

"the perfection of reason," reason itself must be distinguished between "that which acts

according to its own object, and that which governs other actions"; thus, prudence, which must

be able to perfect itself in acting according to its own object in order to direct other actions, must

be "more perfect than other virtues" in that it "completes wisdom by choosing what is

beneficial."[54] Consequently, prudence does not merely perfect theoretical thought but, rather,

"identifies the mean in every virtue" so that, "in its function as a ruling element, prudence is the

most perfect achievement of reason and is essential to happiness." Additionally, Saint Albert

argues that prudence and wisdom attend to different ends and, therefore, belong to different

orders, because prudence perfects reason, whereas wisdom perfects the intellect. As a result, wisdom "pertains to contemplative happiness, which is simply superior to the type of civic happiness that results from prudential judgments" derived from action and from maintenance of rectitude in action.[55]

The second important question is how justice, fortitude, and temperance could be considered preeminent among Aristotle's moral virtues. Saint Albert indicates that "the cardinal virtues can be understood in both a general and a specific sense. In the general sense, the cardinal virtues are broad concepts on which the other virtues depend; in the specific sense, as defined by Aristotle, these four virtues stand on their own." Although Saint Albert depends on Philip's *Summa de bono* for this particular idea, he again rejects Philip's view that the cardinal virtues *collectively* "underlie any of the other moral virtues or indeed any mental disposition or human act with a claim to virtue" because such a view essentially blurs the distinctions among the virtues.[56] Justice, fortitude, and temperance survive for Saint Albert (and Saint Thomas) as preeminent cardinal virtues, however, precisely in their specific sense "because they relate to the three foremost aspects of moral action: the even distribution of goods, which is the principal instance of rightness; the capacity to endure mortal danger for a just cause, which is the ultimate instance of courage; and the capacity to restrain the sense of touch, which is the supreme instance of moderation of the passions." Aristotle's other moral virtues, perforce of lesser importance, remain "adjunct" virtues (as described in *De bono*).[57]

Subsequent Reaction to Saint Albert's Treatment of the Cardinal Virtues

First, one can quite reasonably conclude that Saint Albert's treatment of the cardinal virtues exerted considerable influence on Saint Thomas for several reasons. As the first two commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Saint Albert's *Super Ethica* and *Paraphrasis*

(composed with at least ten years elapsing between them) thus precede Saint Thomas's own commentary. Also, Saint Thomas as a student attended Saint Albert's inaugural lectures on Aristotle's *complete* work and as Saint Albert's scrivener transcribed the lecture notes from which Saint Albert fashioned *Super Ethica*. (In fact, Saint Thomas remained Saint Albert's student in Cologne until 1252, before returning to Paris—in all likelihood *after* Saint Albert's completion of *Super Ethica*.[58]) Additionally, modern scholarship tends to treat these two thinkers as generally inhabiting the same thought-world to such an extent that their ideas are often either presented together or in such a way as to demonstrate that Saint Thomas significantly relied and built on Saint Albert's work. For example, Saint Thomas adopted Saint Albert's posture toward attempting to reconcile Aristotle with existing intellectual tradition, as well as Saint Albert's distinction between the general and specific senses of the cardinal virtues as a means of preserving the cardinal virtues as cardinal.[59] One scholar, indicating the extent of Saint Thomas's reliance on Saint Albert by their relatively infrequent (even if significant) differences, has recently explained:

> In Thomas's own time his commentary on the NE [*Nicomachean Ethics*], while a careful exposition of Aristotle's text, exerted less influence on his contemporaries than the exposition of his teacher, Albert the Great. While Thomas agrees with many interpretations of Albert, especially concerning the nature and process of prudential decisions, he does not accept Albert's notion of 'two happinesses' as a correct reading of Aristotelian doctrine. While Albert views the potentialities of reason as so distinct that their actualities result in two distinct types of perfection, contemplative and practical, Thomas judges Aristotle to have intended both moral and intellectual virtue to be complementary elements within human happiness. Thomas's reading of Aristotle may be accurate, but Albert's understanding of this idea influenced every known commentary on the NE in the late thirteenth century, since they all include the idea of two distinct kinds of human happiness.[60]

This observation confirms that Saint Thomas's positions often accord with Saint Albert's. Citing as a rare example of disagreement their difference on the question of whether Aristotle posited one or two distinct kinds of happiness,[61] the foregoing observation also emphasizes that Saint

Albert's view, not Saint Thomas's, animated academic consideration of the issue for the next four decades.

Quite obviously, then, Saint Albert influenced many thirteenth-century scholars in addition to Saint Thomas. In fact, "scholars have shown Albert's moral thinking to be a source of ideas, information, and inspiration for thinkers as diverse as Thomas Aquinas, Ulrich of Strasbourg, and Siger of Brabant, and hence for movements as diverse as Christian Aristotelianism, Christian Neoplatonism, and Latin Averroism."[62] Scholars did not universally accept Saint Albert's conclusions, though. Specifically in connection with integration of the cardinal virtues into Aristotle's system, Saint Albert's ideas proved quite popular into the fourteenth-century *among theologians*, while facing resistance among later commentators on *Nicomachean Ethics*. Many of these commentators rejected characterizations of prudence as a moral virtue and of justice, fortitude, and temperance as "the principal moral virtues in their specific Aristotelian conception." Consequently, some ultimately rejected in its entirety the notion of the cardinal virtues. John of Tytynsale and Henry of Friemar rejected them in the general sense while recognizing them in the specific sense, whereas early fourteenth-century Averroist commentators, who "apparanetly had some success in making the cardinal virtues irrelevant to the interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*," held that, "in their general sense, the cardinal virtues are no virtues, while in their specific sense, they are not cardinal."[63]

Yet, despite the fact that the cardinal virtues "gradually disappeared" from the commentary tradition, Gerald of Odo and John Buridan ultimately revived them toward the middle of the fourteenth century, but their arguments proceed differently from those of Saint Albert (and Saint Thomas).[64] For Gerald,

> the cardinality of the four virtues does not lie in the fact that all other moral virtues can either be subsumed under them, as tradition had it, or annexed to them, as Albert and

Aquinas believe, but in their intrinsic indispensability. The four virtues comprise the essentials of moral goodness in the sense that human beings need them as a minimum to be good, whereas the other moral virtues are accidental in this respect. Moral goodness is inconceivable without prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, but not without the other moral virtues.[65]

Gerald, however, failed to incorporate all of Aristotle's moral virtues into a comprehensive schema based on this proposition.[66] Buridan, though, while "rejecting Albert the Great's view that the cardinal virtues concern all aspects of human life," develops and deepens Gerald's theory so as to overcome Gerald's shortcoming in this regard: "[P]rudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance denote both cardinal and Aristotelian virtues, for these coincide in Buridan's conception; in fact, Buridan extends Aristotle's definitions of the specific cardinal virtues in such a way as to include aspects of morality that are fundamental from a medieval Christian perspective."[67] While Buridan's thought might ultimately provide the best integration of the notion of the cardinal virtues into the Aristotelian scheme, such that his commentary became "by far the most authoritative and most widely circulating commentary in this period and directly influenced a number of later commentators, notably at Central European universities,"[68] he and these commentators remain indebted to Saint Albert for his early enthusiasm for Aristotelian thinking and his conviction that such integration could, in fact, be accomplished.

Conclusion

Saint Albert inestimably influenced the development of the ethics of the cardinal virtues. Not only did his teaching bear on Saint Thomas and many others, but, even after certain of his ideas fell out of fashion, the problems which he raised and explored continued as the focus of later thinkers for generations. Most fundamentally, however, he "mainstreamed" Aristotle as an authority in the Christian West, opening new paths of intellectual development. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, Saint Albert's "extraordinary openmindedness is also revealed in a cultural feat which he carried out successfully, that is, the acceptance and appreciation of Aristotle's

thought. . . . Saint Albert the Great opened the door to the complete acceptance in medieval philosophy and theology of Aristotle's philosophy, . . . an authentic cultural revolution in that epoch." In the process, "Saint Albert the Great thus contributed to the formation of an autonomous philosophy, distinct from theology and united with it only by the unity of the truth."[69]

1. This project remained incomplete at Saint Albert's death. Stanley B. Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency: The Moral Philosophy of Albert the Great* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 41–42.

2. Saint Albert vigorously promoted study and acceptance of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as appropriate for Christian education and scholarship. Within just a few years of Saint Albert's publication in 1252 of the first Latin commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics*, the Faculty of Arts at the University of Paris issued a prescription on March 19, 1255 incorporating "nearly all the works of Aristotle" into the curriculum. Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 42. Moreover, the Council of Valenciennes, in 1258, affirmatively followed Saint Albert's advice and officially authorized study of *Nicomachean Ethics* as part of the curriculum in all Dominican houses of study. See Martin J. Tracy, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," in *A Companion to Albert the Great: Theology, Philosophy, and the Sciences*, ed. Irven M. Resnick (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 372.

3. Information in this biographical sketch derives from Simon Tugwell, "Albert the Great: Introduction," in *Albert & Thomas: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Simon Tugwell (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 3–28, and Benedict XVI (Pope), "Saint Albert the Great," in *Holy Men and Women of the Middle Ages and Beyond* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 58–60.

4. Tugwell, "Albert the Great: Introduction," 11.

5. Tugwell, "Albert the Great: Introduction," 11.

6. Tugwell, "Albert the Great: Introduction," 3.

7. Benedict, "Saint Albert the Great," 60. This is no exaggeration. Perusal of the table of contents for Brill's 805-page volume, *A Companion to Albert the Great*, reveals hefty chapters analyzing Saint Albert's contributions to the following disciplines, with some meriting more than one chapter: systematic theology, Mariology, mystical epistemology, philosophy, physics, botany, medicine and natural philosophy, anthropology, ethics and morality, mathematics, astronomy, astrology and magic, logic and science, and metaphysics. The last topic commanded no fewer than thirteen separately authored subchapters. Additionally, the work concludes with an epilogue treating Saint Albert's influence on vernacular literatures. Irven M. Resnick, ed., *A Companian to Albert the Great: Theology, Philosophy, and the Sciences* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013).

8. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 348.

9. See Irene Zavattero, "Moral and Intellectual Virtues in the Earliest Latin Commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages: Commentaries on Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics," 1200–1500*, ed. István P. Bejczy (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 31–32; Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 25.

10. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 24–25, 39 (quotation at 24).

11. See Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 367, 371; Benedict, "Saint Albert the Great," 62.

12. Zavattero, "Moral and Intellectual Virtues," 32–33 (quotations at 33).

13. See Anthony J. Celano, *Aristotle's "Ethics" and Medieval Philosophy: Moral Goodness and Practical Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), vii.

14. Zavattero, "Moral and Intellectual Virtues," 38, 45, 46.

15. See Zavattero, "Moral and Intellectual Virtues," 42, 51–52 (quotation at 42).

16. Zavattero, "Moral and Intellectual Virtues," 53–54.

17. Zavattero, "Moral and Intellectual Virtues," 34.

18. Zavattero, "Moral and Intellectual Virtues," 36.

19. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 47–49 (quotations at 49).

20. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 52–61 (quotations at 52, 53–54, 52, and 53, respectively).

21. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 64–65 (quotation at 64 [citation omitted]).

22. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 67–69 (quotations at 68–69 and 69, respectively). The latter quotation itself quotes Philip the Chancellor, *Philippi Cancellarii Parisiensis: Summa de bono*, ed. Nicolai Wicki (Berne: Francke, 1985), 597, lines 33–35. Bear in mind that only select portions of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* were available to Philip when he wrote his *Summa de bono*.

23. As a matter of textual historiography, it is interesting to note that *De natura boni*, which Albert had not published, remained entirely undiscovered until 1919, as did the manuscript of *De bono* which became the basis for the work's first critical edition, published in 1951 by the Cologne Institute (whose projected 40-volume critical edition of Saint Albert's entire *corpus* presently remains unfinished but ongoing). See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 27, 30.

24. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 348.

25. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 53, 70 (quotations at 70).

26. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 35.

27. See Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 353 (quotations); Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 28–29.

28. See Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 359 (quotations); Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 32–33.

29. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 360.

30. See Jörn Müller, "In War and Peace: The Virtue of Courage in the Writings of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, in *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages: Commentaries on Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics," 1200–1500*, ed. István P. Bejczy (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 81, 81n11, 86.

31. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 360.

32. Müller, "In War and Peace," 84–88 (quotations at 87, 87, 86, 84, and 84, respectively).

33. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 362.

34. Müller, "In War and Peace," 77.

35. Müller, "In War and Peace," 90–91 (quotations at 90).

36. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 361.

37. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 360, 362.

38. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 363.

39. Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 32.

40. See Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 359; Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 35.

41. Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 37 (emphasis in original).

42. See Celano, *Aristotle's "Ethics,"* 131; Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 38.

43. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 38, 43; Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 348, 368 (quotations at 368).

44. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 38, 41, 79.

45. Dominic Farrell, *The Ends of the Moral Virtues and the First Principles of Practical Reason in Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2012), 52. See also Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 41.

46. Farrell, *The Ends of the Moral Virtues*, 52.

47. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 42–43.

48. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 368–371 (quotations at 368, 369, 369, 370, and 370, respectively).

49. See Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency*, 75 (quotation), 79–80; Celano, *Aristotle's "Ethics,"* 131–132.

50. István P. Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues in Medieval Commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1250-1350," in *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages: Commentaries on Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics," 1200–1500*, ed. István P. Bejczy (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 199.

51. Celano, *Aristotle's "Ethics,"* 135. See also Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 199.

52. Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 199.

53. Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 202–203 (quotations at 203).

54. Celano, *Aristotle's "Ethics,"* 135.

55. Celano, *Aristotle's "Ethics,"* 136.

56. Becjzy, 204.

57. Becjzy, 205.

58. See Farrell, *The Ends of the Moral Virtues*, 54.

59. See generally Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 199–205.

60. Celano, *Aristotle's "Ethics,"* 174 (footnote omitted).

61. The heart of the difference can simplistically be summarized thus: Saint Albert understood Aristotle as presenting a "strict dichotomy" between (a) civic happiness, "the substantial operation of prudence," with all other moral virtues "directed to the dispositions to the perfect prudential act," and (b) contemplative happiness, "substantially the act of wisdom [an intellectual virtue], because, as Averroes claims, human flourishing consists in speculative wisdom that all other virtues serve." Celano, *Aristotle's "Ethics,"* 150–151 (citing Albertus Magnus, *Super Ethica commentum et quaestiones libri quinque priores*, ed. W. Kübel, in *Alberti magni Opera omnia* 14:1 [Münster: Aschendorff, 1968], 499, lines 31–46). Saint Thomas, on the other hand, read Aristotle as envisioning "both moral and intellectual virtue to be complementary elements within human happiness"—a *single* human happiness. Celano, *Aristotle's "Ethics,"* 174.

62. Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 352 (footnote omitted). Martin Tracey particularly offers the following "careful study" for further reading on the influence specifically of *Super Ethica* on Saint Thomas: René-Antoine Gauthier, "Praefatio," in *Thomas Aquinas:*

Sententia libri Ethicorum, ed. René-Antoine Gauthier, Editio Leonina (Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1969). Tracey, "The Moral Thought of Albert the Great," 352n16.

    63. Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 205–211 (quotations at 207, 211, and 210, respectively).
    64. See generally Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 213–219 (quotation at 213).
    65. Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 213.
    66. Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 215.
    67. Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 217.
    68. Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues," 217–219 (quotation at 218–219).
    69. Benedict, "Saint Albert the Great," 61–62, 62.

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