

AQUINAS, SCOTUS, AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF VIRTUOUS CHARACTER

There continues to be a lively philosophical debate about whether someone can have one or two moral virtues but lack many others. (Can somebody have real moral virtues without being an all-round virtuous person?)

Situationists insist that this is not merely possible but common. Aristotle's admirers argue that it is impossible, and historians of ethics often claim that Aquinas defended the same view. For attacks on the classical unity of virtue one must look instead to the work of Duns Scotus. This paper argues that Aquinas contributes somewhat more to the fragmentation of virtuous character and Scotus somewhat less than a casual reading suggests. Aquinas introduces a sharp division between the inseparable cardinal virtues, defined rather narrowly, and a long list of other virtues discussed by Aristotle. He adds an additional level of fragmentation by arguing that there are inseparable God-given moral virtues with no connection to naturally acquired moral virtues, thereby raising the specter of a heavenbound new convert with none of the naturally acquired traits that Aristotelians regard as moral virtues. As for Scotus, his arguments typically have as their precise-but-modest target various claims for a necessary (or essential) connection between virtues. He expresses little interest in the kind of connections grounded merely in empirical psychology.