From Priam to the Good Thief

*The Significance of a Single Event in
Greek Ethics and Medieval Moral Teaching*

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MODERN MORAL THEORY tends to consider individual volitional actions with respect to their effect on others. Rarely is the act examined for its impact on the agent himself, or for its relevance to his general moral character. More rarely is moral action considered in light of its contribution to a universal human good, such as happiness or beatitude. While Hume's sentiment of sympathy, Kant's categorical imperative, and Mill's utilitarian principle relate to the state of the moral agent, their primary focus is upon the benefits afforded to others. This view of ethics has its staunchest proponent in Kant, whose rejection of the ancient methods of ethical speculation is based upon his formulation of a universal law of human behavior. Kant found the ancient ideal of *eudaimonia* with its emphasis on the fulfillment of individual human potential to be antithetical to the dictates of practical reason, which finds its fullest expression in the consideration of the happiness of others. Between the ethics of Aristotle and the moral philosophy of Kant, however, came the conclusions of the medieval masters of theology, who not only commented upon the ancient texts, but also were active in the teaching of moral action. The greatest challenge to Greek ethics may not actually be the modern philosophers, but rather the Christian teachers of the Middle Ages, who attempted to comprehend moral reasoning in light of their absolute faith in the wisdom of Scripture. How that encounter took shape in the moral teaching of certain theologians, who were familiar with the ethical philosophy of the ancients, is the theme of the talk today. The primary focus is directed toward the problem of whether their knowledge of ancient ethical theory could find expression in their practical moral teaching. In other words, the question becomes how relevant was Greek – primarily Aristotle's – ethics to medieval moral teaching. One way of providing an answer is to examine the impact of a single event on the overall moral worth of a human life. The various responses to this problem may be surprising, but they demonstrate the great differences between Greek ethics and medieval moral teaching.

The moral theories of Plato and Aristotle are constructed in part to help their adherents to overcome two distinct, but related, fears: (1) the fear of death, whose most vivid literary expression is Achilles' admonition to Odysseus that it is better to be the lowly slave of a poor man than the king of all the dead (*Odyssey* 11.471–491); and (2) The fear of human impotence in the face of the overwhelming force of fate (*moira*).

Plato's description in the *Phaedo* of the courage of his revered teacher in the last hours of his life is perhaps the most powerful moral argument in all his works. Socrates' last act is a more compelling demonstration of the Platonic definition of philosophy as 'practice for dying' than any philosophical reasoning. Even Plato, however, intimates that very few people are able to attain the type of moral goodness that comes with the life-long pursuit of philosophical knowledge. He warns the foolish against believing that their destiny is the isle of the blessed, when human life is filled with unforeseen dangers. One might very well argue that, in one sense, no one can attain moral goodness according to the Socratic principle that virtue is knowledge, since one can question the ability of any human to attain knowledge. When Socrates states that "I only know that I do not know," he is not merely employing a rhetorical device to force his students to abandon erroneous preconceptions, he is also asserting forcefully a fundamental tenet of Platonic philosophy: no living person has true knowledge, and cannot therefore be considered completely virtuous.

The moral paradigm in pre-Socratic thought is Achilles, whose willing acceptance of his impending death is matched by Socrates' courage in his prison cell. Plato's comparison of Socrates with Achilles does not merely reflect a transformation of the ethical ideal from physical bravery to moral courage, it also maintains Plato's place among the Greek moralists who posited a superhuman ideal of moral perfection. In objectivizing the moral norm in the eternal forms, Plato places it beyond

human capabilities. Death is no longer to be feared; it is the only means whereby human beings can attain moral perfection.

Although Plato is partially successful in liberating his *sophos*, or wise person, from the vicissitudes of earthly existence and death's sting, Aristotle reminds us that moral actions occur within a human political context and the pursuit of *theoria* is only one aspect of moral perfection. Aristotle, reacting to the over-intellectualization of human goodness and to the radical political proposals of his former teacher, reopens the question of the relationship between human happiness and fate. He frames his inquiry within the broader question of the cause of human happiness, and offers three distinct solutions: human care and effort, divine providence, luck. While modern commentators dismiss quickly the last two solutions as unworthy responses, Aristotle himself and later medieval commentators considered them carefully. Aristotle recognizes that, despite the philosophers' efforts to minimize the impact of external forces in the production of happiness, elements beyond human control may contribute to, or detract from, the overall goodness of life. To present the problem more vividly, Aristotle introduces the example of Priam, whose story all his contemporaries would immediately recognize. Priam, "the godly," as described by Homer in the *Iliad*, led a virtuous life blessed by all the benefits of good fortune. By all accounts, his life would have to have been judged as *eudaimon*. He presided over a prosperous and peaceful city, he enjoyed wealth and honor, and watched his children grow and flourish. At the end of his life, however, his peace and prosperity are destroyed by events precipitated not by himself but by Paris, who abducted Helen. Aristotle concludes his discussion of Priam by saying "that one who has experienced such chances (*tuxais*) and who has ended wretchedly no one calls happy (*Ethica Nicomachea* 1100a7–9). Despite the best efforts of philosophers to place the supreme human good, happiness, firmly within human grasp, Aristotle has to

admit that in some cases one must agree with Solon and Sopho-cles that we must "look upon the last day always. Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain" (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 1529–1530). Even Aristotle's *phronimos*, the man of practical wisdom *par excellence*, Pericles, suffered the type of misfortune that mars happiness, as Socrates reminded his listeners in the *Gorgias*. For the ancient writers even the most just person can fall prey to "evil death and dark fate" (*Iliad* 21.65–66). The life of virtue, perfected in the habitual exercise of good actions, is no guarantee of *eudaimonia*, since fate can crush even the noblest of human beings. Aristotle implies that in the usual course of events a person can actualize the various potentials within the soul and attain the highest human good, but there remains always the terrifying prospect of disastrous events outside of human control. In relocating the moral life within the human sphere, Aristotle again allows for the possibility of a single event destroying the supreme moral good.

Almost 2,000 years had passed between the Homeric age and the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Ethics* in the Latin West. As the *Nicomachean Ethics* became part of the curriculum of the universities of Europe, the first commentators found little difference between the doctrines of the philosophers and their own moral beliefs. Most striking was their understanding of the nature and cause of happiness, which approximated Christian moral theology. Their mistaken assumption, that Aristotle had proclaimed a supernatural end for humans which came directly from God, may have helped the reception of Aristotle's great moral work into the curriculum of the university arts faculties. The commentary of Robert Kilwardby on the 'old ethics' (*c*1245) and those of his confreres, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, helped correct the earlier facile assimilation of Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*. The medieval masters were faced with a new problem: after correctly assessing the nature and cause of happiness how can a Christian theologian

and teacher transmit his ethical study into his moral teaching. For us, the question concerning the relation of happiness, arising from the exercise of habitual virtue, to the Christian notion of eternal perfect beatitude needs examination.

The medieval masters of theology did not restrict their teaching to the classroom. The work of Phyllis Barzillay Roberts, Leonard Boyle, Marie Magdeleine Davy, Jean LeClercq and Louis-Jacques Bataillon, among others, demonstrates that the practice of preaching was generally expected of the theologians of the university. The masters of the Dominican and Franciscan orders were particularly active in preaching and providing spiritual counsel to members of their own order, as well as to a wider audience, both within and outside the university community. By the last quarter of the thirteenth century, Gervais of Mont St. Eloi poses the question whether preaching or teaching is a greater and more meritorious activity for a theologian.[1] The resolution that teaching is more meritorious, though less useful than preaching, is not so significant as the expectation on the part of the author that preaching was an expected duty of theologians. An anonymous quodlibetal question asks whether masters in theology should, when disputing, be swayed by reason or authority. The resolution considers the nature of the theologian's audience: "There should be a distinction made according to the listeners because some are ignorant (*rudes*) and others advanced (*provecti*). The unlearned are easily led by authority."[2] The author clearly expected masters of theology to teach before audiences of widely divergent levels of education. So too does Meister Eckhart, when discussing Seneca's claim that we must speak with sublime souls of great and exalted matters (Epistulae 71.24). Eckhart argues

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1. Aquinas, *Quodlibet* 40, in BnF lat. 15350, fol. 277c–d, ed. J. LeClercq, in "L'idéal du théologien au moyen âge," *Revue de sciences religieuses* 21 (1947): 121–148.

2. *Quodlibet* 40 (ed. LeClercq, p. 137).

against the view that one ought not to talk about, or write, such matters to the untaught: "But to this I say that if we are not to teach people who have not been taught, no one will ever be taught, and no one will ever be able to teach or write. For that is why we teach the untaught, so that they may be changed from the uninstructed into the instructed."[3]

An important aspect of the theologians' profession was to teach others how to attain salvation. "Doctors of theology are like the principal builders [of the spiritual edifice] who enquire and teach how others should procure the salvation of their souls."[4] Despite the theologians' acknowledgment of their duty to teach others how to gain salvation, the question remains as to their methods. For those interested in philosophy, the primary question becomes to what extent, if at all, did their knowledge of Aristotle's ethics influence their moral teaching. In the sermons, *collationes*, and moral counsels of theologians, who certainly were thoroughly familiar with the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the infrequency of citations to Aristotle is striking. Men, such as Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Raymond Lull, Eckhart, Tauler and H. Suso, ignore almost completely the description of virtue and the *summum bonum* that is found in Aristotle. Was their reluctance to employ the conclusions of the philosopher the result of the calculation of their intended audience or was it due

3. Meister Eckhart, "The Book of *Benedictus*: The Book of Divine Consolation," trans. Edmund Colledge, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense,* ed. Colledge and Bernard McGuinn (New York, 1981), p. 239; Eckhart, "Liber *Benedictus* 1: Das Buoch der götlichen Troestunge," in *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* [hereafter *DW* and *LW* for the German and Latin works, respectively], ed. Josef Quint, Josef Koch, et al. (Stuttgart, 1938–), *DW* 5: 60–61. For Eckhart's German works I have followed Colledge's translation, with minor changes.

4. "Theologiae doctores sunt quasi principales artifices, qui inquirunt et docent qualiter alii debeant salutem animarum procurare" (Aquinas, *Quaestiones quodlibetales* 1.7.2, ed. Raymondo Spiazzi, 8th rev. ed. [Turin, 1949], p. 13).

to more philosophical and doctrinal reasons? This question needs to be answered by further research on the relation of moral teaching to philosophical reasoning in the Middle Ages.

Even the most cursory reading of sermons and *collationes* leaves the impression that Aristotle was not considered an authority in moral matters. More surprising is the omission of his name among the pagan philosophers who understood the nature of the human soul. Eckhart and his student Tauler acknowledge the authority of Cicero, Seneca, Plato, and even Proclus, but are silent about the contributions of Aristotle: "The ground of the soul was already known by the pagan philosophers. As they searched its depth, their knowledge caused them to think poorly of transitory things. Such great masters as Proclus and Plato gave a lucid account of the soul, in order to guide those who could not find the way by themselves."[5] "The pagan teachers, Cicero and Seneca, also speak of the nobility of the inner man, of the spirit and of the inferiority of the outer man, of the flesh."[6] Even in Thomas Aquinas' *Collationes in decem preceptis*, characterized by its editor as "undoubtedly the best known guide to Thomas' preaching,"[7] the moral philosophy of Aristotle is ignored. Thomas offers there a rather simplified version of his theory of natural law, in which he reduces all morality to three elements: the knowledge of what to believe (*scientia credendorum*), of what to desire, and of what to do. The best manner by which human beings attain this knowledge is found in the law of nature which is nothing

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5. John Tauler, *Predigten* 61, in *Die Predigten Taulers*, ed. Ferdinand Vetter (Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters 11; Berlin, 1910), p. 332.19–23; trans. Maria Shrady, in *John Tauler: Sermons,* ed. Josef Schmidt (New York, 1985), p. 149, with minor changes.

6. Eckhart, "The Book of *Benedictus* 2: Of the Nobleman," trans. Colledge, p. 241; "Liber *Benedictus* 2: Vom dem eddeln Menschen" (*DW* 5: 111.9–21).

7. J.-P. Torrell, "Les *Collationes in decem preceptis* de saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 69 (1985): 5–40, at p. 23.

other than the light of the intellect instilled in us by God, through which we know what to do and what to avoid."[8] A moral battle occurs when, as Thomas puts it, the devil superimposes another law in humans – that of concupiscence. Because the law of nature has been destroyed (*destructa erat*) by the diabolic law, human beings must be led to virtuous acts, and away from vicious ones, by following the necessary law of Scripture.[9] Thomas provides a rationale for the simplification of his moral theory when he says that clearly not everyone can attain sufficient moral knowledge; Jesus Christ, therefore, gave a brief law (*lex brevis*), so that it might be known by all, and no one would be excused from evil because of ignorance. A person who does not become prudent might have been able to argue that his environment was not conducive to the acquisition of the proper habits, and the one who lacks wisdom might have argued that he was subject to inferior teaching. A Christian, however, can offer no excuse, because this law of divine love, by which every act is made virtuous and right, is the universal and fundamental rule of moral conduct.[10]

In his academic writings, Thomas Aquinas is careful to distinguish the terms 'felicitas' and 'beatitudo,' but in his *Collationes* he uses them interchangeably. In the section concerning the *finis hominis,* he states his goal to be the determination of that which leads to happiness (*quod ad felicitatem perducit*). His response is clear: to those alone (*solum*) who have charity is eternal beatitude promised; everything else without charity is insufficient (*omnia enim alia absque caritate insufficientia sunt*). Thomas anticipates the philosophical objection concerning the lack of a role for human virtue, when he responds to the question concerning the possible differences in beatific states. He argues: "it should be known that there is a difference in beati-

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8. Aquinas, *Collationes in decem preceptis* 1 (ed. Torrell, p. 24).
9. Ibid. 2 (ed. Torrell, pp. 24–25).
10. Ibid. (ed. Torrell, p. 26).

tude only according to the difference in charity and not according to any other virtue" (*et sciendum quod solum secundum differentiam caritatis est differentia beatitudinis et non secundum aliquam aliam virtutem*). Although habitual virtue comprises an essential element to the philosophical understanding of human goodness, it seems here to play no part in Thomas' understanding of the nature of Christian beatitude. Thomas offers the example of the apostles to emphasize the importance of charity in the production of beatitude when he notes that there were many people more virtuous (*magis abstinentes*) than the apostles, but they (the apostles) exceed all others in beatitude because of their excellence in charity.[11]

To attain this type of charity all that is needed is a diligent attention to the divine word (*ad acquirendum caritatem est diligens uerbi diuini auditio*). The proper hearing of the word of God permits one to ascend in love and to recognize the first and greatest mandate of Christian moral teaching: to love the Lord your God with your whole heart. Thomas concludes his discussion by asserting that a prerequisite of this mandate is to turn away from temporal and earthly affairs.[12]

What is most striking in Thomas' *Collationes* is not his emphasis on the need for charity or the slight variation of his doctrine of natural law; it is rather his implicit rejection of the ethics of virtue in his description of the means to attain moral perfection. When Thomas asserts that there were those more abstinent than the apostles he is undoubtedly referring to those who were more prudent, more chaste, and more virtuous than the disciples. But Thomas knows that Christ called imperfect men to follow him, not those who had perfected the practice of habitual virtues. The level of charity alone differentiates the apostles from other men and not any other virtue whatsoever. The Thomas of the *Collationes* offers a moral vision different

11. Aquinas, *Collationes in decem preceptis* 2 (ed. Torrell, p. 28).
12. Ibid. 4–5 (ed. Torrell, pp. 30–33).

from the theologian and master of the university who attempted to clarify the ethics of Aristotle and to define the philosopher's concept of imperfect beatitude.

Thomas' Franciscan contemporary, Bonaventure, offers a similar vision of Christian morality, though with a decidedly harsher view of the claims of philosophers. Bonaventure in the sermon for the third Sunday of Advent criticizes the *confabulatores scientiae* because of their vanity and self-importance (*vanitas et inflatio*). Earthly science presents to the weak and infirm the occasion for multiple errors, which originate in the diabolic nature of pleasure and pride. Bonaventure cautions against accepting the conclusions of non-believers, who were unaware of the extent of their own errors. In the sermon for the second Sunday after the Epiphany, Bonaventure states that God manifested his miraculous works to simple and unlearned people (*simplicibus et idiotis*) who could comprehend the clarity of divine light through the *lumen creaturae*. These miraculous events elevate the unlearned, not by means of contemplation, but rather through the admiration of divine works.[13]

Bonaventure interprets the passage in 1 Kings 2: 3 "recedant vetera de ore vestro," to be a direct attack upon the rational arguments of the philosophers. "Vetera" he understands as a reference to sophistical reason and philosophical argument, which have no force whatsoever; "recedant de ore vestro" does not imply a ban on speaking philosophically, but rather a warning against being convinced by its reasoning. He admonishes his audience to follow the way of truth and justice according to the dictate of divine wisdom, and not according to the dictate of philosophical reason.[14] Human virtue, according to Bonaventure, has to begin and be perfected in divine

13. Bonaventure, *Sermones* 4.13 and 8.8, in *Sermones dominicales,* ed. Jacques Guy Bougerol (Bibliotheca franciscana scholastica medii aevi 27; Grottaferrata, 1977), p. 189.

14. *Sermones* 10.5 (ed. Bougerol, pp. 200–201).

grace even if the industry of free will has a co-operative role.[15] The most effective method of human cooperation is the turning away from love of the world (*abstractio a amore mundano*). When the human intellect is sufficiently removed from "the sensible species, and from the phantasms of the imagination and from philosophical reasons, then one can experience the sweetness of divine wisdom."[16] In this sermon Bonaventure clearly advises his audience that the philosophers' way to knowledge needs to be overcome in order for one to attain human perfection. Recurring themes in Bonaventure's moral teaching are the perils of the world, and the need for detachment from all earthly desire in order to accept the will of God. These virtues of detachment and acceptance become the foundation of Eckhart's moral teaching, as we shall see.

Bonaventure's sermon on the fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost includes his variation on the theory of natural law. There are three elements which allow human beings to act efficaciously and to seek justice: (1) the simplicity of intention in avoiding evil; (2) the persistence of the operation in doing good; (3) the eagerness of solicitude in correcting error.[17] Although Bonaventure provides a definition of justice with which any philosopher could agree, his advice on how best to achieve a just life encourages penitence and the imitation of the saints. The correct paths for the just person are the divine precepts which lead to the happiness of the Kingdom of God.[18]

Like Thomas, Bonaventure insists that human merit arises from charity alone (*Ipsa* [caritas] *certe sola est, quae dat formam meriti*). All other virtues are unformed (*informes*) without

15. Bonaventure, *Sermones* 12.9 (ed. Bougerol, p. 215).

16. Ibid. 22.9 (ed. Bougerol, p. 294).

17. "Primum est simplicitas intentionis in declinando malum; secundum est strenuitas operationis in faciendo bonum; tertium est studiositas sollicitudinis in corrigendo erratum" (Ibid 41.10 [ed. Bougerol, pp. 417–418]).

18. Ibid. 41.11, 12 (ed. Bougerol, p. 418).

charity, since they in themselves lack the benefit of grace.[19]
The elements of charity that correspond to the components of
the natural law are expressed in Bonaventure's Pentecostal Ser-
mon: "No human is in the state of salvation unless he has a
faithful understanding in the intellect, a charitable benevolence
in desire (*affectu*) and a faithful constancy in effect. These three
elements permit one to be assimilated to the Holy Trinity."[20]
Bonaventure exhorts his listeners to turn from the world and
argues that their exercise of philosophical virtues does not
guarantee moral perfection.[21] Like Thomas, he cites examples
of men who are to be considered saved, but who are not num-
bered among the virtuous: "Look at Matthew at the counting
table, a sinner and tax collector, and still chosen as a disciple;
Paul stoning Stephen and still called to be an apostle; Peter
denying Christ, and still pardoned; the soldier crucifying
Christ, and yet able to rely on divine mercy; the thief on the
cross and still gaining pardon ... if it is granted to anyone to be
liberated from sin's danger, it is not a natural gift but one of
divine grace."[22]

The example of the good thief is the most compelling rea-
son for distinguishing medieval moral teaching from Greek
ethical theory. The words of Jesus on the cross, which provide
hope for the most reprehensible of humans, have the secondary
effect of undermining the entire foundation of Greek morality.
A single act of repentance, no matter how authentic, could
never transform a vicious criminal into a *eudaimon*; but for a
Christian teacher, it shows how no human should ever despair
of attaining beatitude. Such a possibility immediately provokes

19. Bonaventure, *Sermones* 44.5 (ed. Bougerol, p. 436).

20. Ibid. 27.3 (ed. Bougerol, pp. 321–322).

21. Bonaventure, "De sex alis seraphim" 1.1, in *Opera omnia,* 10 vols.
(Quaracchi, 1882–1902), 8: 131–132.

22. Bonaventure, "Soliloquium: De quatuor mentalibus exercitiis" 2.4.27
(*Opera omnia* 8: 38).

the question: of what use is a life of virtue for the realization of moral perfection? If the good thief can attain beatitude by means of his acknowledgment of the divinity of Jesus (an act not in accordance with the habits of natural virtue), then should the Christian moralist argue for virtues other than those of the Greeks.

The answer to this question is clear in the numerous Latin and German sermons and the spiritual counsels of Meister Eckhart. In his treatise, *Benedictus*, characterized by the author himself as a book of counsel and consolation, Eckhart refers to the fate of the good thief: "If a thief were able to suffer death with a true, complete, pure, glad, willing and joyful love of divine justice, in which and according to which God and his justice will that the evildoer be put to death, truly he would be saved and blessed."[23] Eckhart, who certainly knew and occasionally cites the *Nicomachean Ethics* in his sermons,[24] sees in the good thief a more compelling example of his own moral teaching than anything in the moral works of Aristotle. Eckhart's primary moral virtue is not the philosophers' prudence or wisdom; nor is it even the Christian virtue of charity. It is rather *Gelassenheit* (acceptance): "Wan der gotes wort hoeren sol, der muoz gar gelâzen sîn."[25] Even in the throes of his final agony the thief's single act of acceptance has transformed the wretched sinner into one who has attained the supreme human good.

Eckhart is well-versed in the moral theory of his day, as his discussion of the opinions of Bonaventure, Godfrey of Fontaines, and Thomas Aquinas demonstrates. Rather than accept

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23. "Möhte der diep waerliche, genzliche, lûterliche, gerne, willicliche und vroeliche, den tot liden von minne der götlichen gerehticheit in der und nâch der got wil und sîn gerehticheit daz der übeltaetige getoetet werde, sicherliche, er würde behalten und saelic" (Eckhart, "Liber *Benedictus*" 1 [*DW* 5: 26.3-6]); trans. Colledge, p. 219.

24. Eckhart, *Sermones* 17.4 (*LW* 4: 164, §174).

25. Eckhart, *Predigten* 12 (*DW* 1: 193.6).

any of their definitions of virtue, Eckhart offers his own alternative: "virtue illuminates reason properly and raises the will to servitude or the subjugation of vices in order to command them."[26] Despite his paradoxical language, in elevating the will to servitude, Eckhart's distance from the rational ethics of Aristotle is evident. Reason does not give rise to virtue, but is illuminated by it. True virtue comes ultimately from the acceptance of grace given freely and without the presupposition of merit. The action of grace is a relation of gifts received in God; it is, therefore, the origin and the principle of goodness in all other things. Since God gives it freely, as is proper to God, Eckhart argues that the function of human beings is to accept (*accipio*) it as freely as it is given.[27]

For Eckhart true acceptance requires a second essential moral virtue, *Abgeschiedenheit*, or detachment. 'Detachment' does mean merely a rejection of material goods, but includes also the ability "to submit oneself to God with one's desires and with one's heart, to make one's will wholly God's will."[28] Eckhart's understanding of volitional freedom is characteristically paradoxical: the will's freedom consists in freedom from willing. Commenting upon the meaning of the beatitude, "blessed are the poor in spirit," Eckhart asserts that a person who truly wants to have poverty ought to be as free of his own created will as he was when he did not will.[29] True detachment reaches far beyond the material goods that conceal goodness in us, it reaches to the internal processes of the will itself. Only through such a profound internal detachment from individual willing can one accept the "complete joy and consolation

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26. "... in qua virtus bene rationem illuminat et voluntatem ad servitutem sive subiectionem vitiorum, ad imperandum sublimat" (Eckhart, *Sermones* 19 [*LW* 4: 179, §193]); my translation.

27. Ibid. 32 (*LW* 4: 287–288, §329).

28. Eckhart, *Predigten* 15 (*DW* 1: 244.8–10); trans. Colledge, p. 189.

29. Ibid. 52 (*DW* 2: 499.1–5); trans. Colledge, p. 200.

in God."[30] Since the perfect abolition of the individual causality of the creature's will is constitutive of human detachment, *Abgeschiedenheit* refers more properly to a determination of the human spirit (*Geist*), rather than of the will itself.[31]

Eckhart considers the problem of human suffering in a way that would have been incomprehensible to the Greek moralists. In an example reminiscent of Priam, he considers a wealthy ruler, beset by suffering, who accepts all his misfortunes for the love of God. If such a person would continue to suffer terribly all his life, but were granted a mere glimpse of divinity, Eckhart argues that he would still rejoice. If after all his torment he still did not attain heaven, he would nevertheless have received a reward greater than all his misfortune. Eckhart preaches that 'acceptance' and 'detachment' align the human spirit so closely with the divine that one would transcend one's suffering and exist in the eternal now with God.[32] Eckhart's definition of true detachment as the complete immobility of the spirit in the sense of its inability to be affected externally shows it to be an overwhelming of the spirit by God.[33] Since perfect detachment is a divine reconfiguration of the human spirit, then it is no longer an acquired ability nor a virtue in the conventional sense; it must rather be understood as a type of freely given divine state of being.[34]

30. Eckhart, "Liber *Benedictus*" 1 (*DW* 5: 24–25 and 29.14–15); trans. Colledge, pp. 218 and 220.

31. See Markus Enders, "Abgeschiedenheit des Geistes: höchste 'Tugend' des Menschen und fundamentale Seinsweise Gottes," *Theologie und Philosophie* 71 (1996): 63–87, at p. 78.

32. Eckhart, *Predigten* 2 (*DW* 1: 33.6–34.2).

33. "Hie solt du wizzen, das rehtiu abgescheidenheit niht ander enist, wan daz der geist also unbewegelich stande gegen allen zuovellen liebes und leides, êren, schanden und lasters als ein blîgîn berc unbewegelich ist gegen einem kleinen winde" (Eckhart, "Vom Abegescheidenheit" [*DW* 5: 411.12–412.3]). See Enders, "Abgeschiedenheit des Geistes," p. 79n66.

34. Eckhart, "Vom Abegescheidenheit" (*DW* 5: 412.3–413.5). See Enders, "Abgeschiedenheit des Geistes," p. 80n68 and Otto Langer, *Mystische Erfahrung und spirituelle Theologie: zu Meister Eckharts Auseinandersetzung mit der*

In the *Benedictus* Eckhart again cites the example of one who loses all earthly possessions, but adds a distinction between the effects of external and internal virtue. Natural human virtue is so powerful that no external act is too difficult for it. But there is also in humans an internal process which is unlimited by time or place. It is "more inward, more exalted, uncreated and without measure." By means of this internal process one can receive the Trinity within the soul. This process Eckhart identifies as the love of God and the desire for goodness. The determination of the will which permits such a process is the acceptance of everything God wishes.[35] Eckhart's assertion that even the pagan teachers, Cicero and Seneca, spoke of "the nobility of the inner man, of the spirit, and of the inferiority of the outer man, of the flesh"[36] implies that the Aristotelian virtues are inadequate for the Christian moral life. The battle against human nature whose victory consists in overcoming one's will and inclination is far removed from the doctrine of *phronesis*. For Aristotle the person plagued by doubt and indecision when faced with a difficult moral choice is at a stage less developed than one who knows and immediately chooses what is the best course of action for oneself. Eckhart's counsel that if a man thought rightly he would not want to lose his inclination to sin, because without it he would lack the power of decision and lose the honor of the moral battle,[37] is a common medieval criticism of the rationally based ethics of Aristotle.

John Tauler, Eckhart's student, who was active in preaching to monastic audiences, developed further the moral themes of his teacher. Tauler urges his audience to accept all things from

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Frauenfrömmigkeit seiner Zeit, Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters 91 (Munich, 1987), p. 179.

35. Eckhart, "Liber *Benedictus*" 1 (*DW* 5: 57.12–13); trans. Colledge, p. 237.
36. "Liber *Benedictus*" 2 (*DW* 5: 111.9–21); trans. Colledge p. 241.
37. Eckhart, "Die Rede der Underscheidunge" 9 (*DW*: 5.214.1–8).

God in humble awe and refer all back to him in total detachment, bowing to divine will. "One accepts all things from God ... in willing acceptance, one submits to the divine will as God wishes in all things, and so one is content both in peace and strife ... ."[38] In Tauler's moral teaching, the troubles that plagued Priam would be a matter of indifference. The good Christian can better accept all from God, the more he has removed himself from both the external goods of the world and from the inner attachment to the accomplishments of reason. Tauler identifies natural reason as a type of captivity, which greatly increases self-esteem, prevents good works and inhibits the development of an interior life.[39] Those devoted to the conclusions of reason cannot view the moral exemplar, Jesus Christ, properly, since their natural light is merely outward brilliance. It reflects pride, conceit and revels in the praise of others and the approval of the world. Reason tends always to the external and contributes to the dissipation of the senses and of the mind. Tauler's virtue of detachment directs one away from the allure of natural powers, and his ideal of acceptance leads to reception of the divine light. Only the divine light in truth makes "everything bow deeply groundward, it knows and perceives itself the least, and by so doing ... it is certainly wholly of God."[40]

Unlike his teacher, Tauler does seem to have some difficulty with preaching a doctrine that ignores entirely the benefits of natural virtues. In his sermons, he affords a preparatory role to them: "the preparation (to receive the Holy Spirit) requires that the outer human being be calmed by, and be proficient in,

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38. Tauler, *Predigten* 5 (ed. Vetter, p. 23.12–16); my translation.

39. "Das dritte gevengnisse das ist das gevengnisse der vernunft" (Ibid. 19 [ed. Vetter, p. 77.22–23]).

40. "[A]ber das götteliche lieht, do daz in der worheit ist, daz trucket alles sich nieder in den grunt, es wiset sich und dunckket sich der minste ...; und daz ist wol recht, wan ist út do, daz ist zumole Gottes" (Ibid. [ed. Vetter, p. 78.2–5]); my translation.

the natural virtues, that the lower powers be ruled by the moral virtues, so then will the Holy Spirit adorn the highest powers with divine virtues."[41] This passage neatly summarizes a common understanding of the role of natural moral virtues in Christian moral teaching. As a responsible preacher could Tauler, or anyone else, assert that habitual virtues are irrelevant to the moral life? But in the examples already considered, those who were considered morally perfected were deficient in the development of natural virtues. Faced with such a dilemma, Tauler reinterprets the significance of Aristotle's primary virtue of *prudentia*. Commenting on the text "Estote prudentes et vigilate in orationibus" (1 Peter 4:9), Tauler understands the term *prudentes* to mean something other than 'wise.' His alternative meaning for *estote prudentes* is "to act with discernment or skill (*Kúndekeit*)".[42] Discernment or expertise, like prudence, results from the habitual and knowing practice of particular actions. St. Peter advised us to select in every instance what is the best means of accomplishing our ends in light of reason. Tauler's explanation of discernment harmonizes in form with Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, but the ends to which these virtues are directed differ greatly. For Aristotle, the *phronimos* directs his actions to the attainment of happiness; for Tauler, the discerning person seeks detachment, surrender to God, inwardness, and spiritual solitude.[43]

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41. "und das dise bereitunge lige an der vier stúcken die wir do sagetent, das was abegescheidenheit, lidekeit, innikeit und einikeit, und wie der usser mensche sol gesat und geübet sin mit natürlichen tugenden und die niderste krefte mit sittelichen tugenden, und wie der heilige geist dann die obersten krefte zieret mit göttelichen tugenden ..." (Tauler, *Predigten* 24 [ed. Vetter, p. 97.12–16]); my translation.

42. "Nu kummet sant Peter ... und sprach 'estote prudentes.' Dis meinet nút eigenliche wisheit in unserme tútsche, sunder es ist also vil also 'kúndekeit,' daz ist: also ein mensche ein ding wol und dicke versùht her, so ist ime das wol kúndig ..." (Ibid. 23 [ed. Vetter, p. 91.20–24]).

43. Ibid. (ed. Vetter, pp. 91–92); my translation.

Natural virtue, for all its power in calming the exterior man, must await the infusion of supernatural virtues and their accompanying graces. Without such illumination the efforts of humans come to nothing.[44] Despite the acknowledgment of the place of the natural virtues, Tauler realizes that their practice is no guarantee of salvation; and conversely the lack of habitual ethical practice does not necessarily lead to damnation. As a result, he advocates a different kind of moral practice: a turning-inward, an obliteration of the self and the disappearance of all joy in the acts of the soul or body: "As long as they remain and are not completely eradicated as everything was when a human being came forth from God, ... so long will one be unsuccessful in the journey to one's source [in God]."[45]

The implicit criticisms of moral philosophy in the sermons find their philosophical expression in the criticisms of Henry of Ghent and William of Ockham, among others. Especially harsh is their view of Thomas' attempt to articulate a theory of natural law, his conviction of the superiority of the human intellect, and his notion of the participatory nature of felicitas in perfect beatitude. Thomas' critics thought that his moral conclusions inhibited the freedom of the will and strayed perilously close to the heresy of Pelagius. Henry's critique of Thomas' position is more than a mere difference of interpretation concerning a concept in Aristotle's ethics. It questions the assumption that a human being can proceed in an orderly way from a comprehension of natural phenomena to the supernatural, and it begins to dissolve the unity of ethics and metaphysics. Henry objects virulently to the assertion that human natural achievements somehow prefigure, and participate in, the supernatural end granted after death. While Thomas was most impressed by Aristotle's claim that human intellectual acti-

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44. Tauler, *Predigten* 23 (ed. Vetter, p. 93.10–17).
45. Ibid. 61 (ed. Vetter, p. 332.2–9); my translation.

vities align man with supernatural beings and that the proper operation of God is intellection, Henry clearly views these ideas as a threat to the doctrines of divine freedom and the necessity for grace. When Thomas claimed that human virtues lead to beatitude *per modum dispositionis et meriti* and that "in the desire for beatitude, one can merit it, provided grace is added, or not merit it, insofar as his appetite is correct or perverse,"[46] Henry responds by removing beatitude from the human realm and placing it in the divine. God is blessed, and man participates in this blessedness perfectly or imperfectly by means of grace, which elevates him to a vision of the divine essence.[47]

Henry insisted that the philosophers had contrived a false notion of beatitude from their misplaced faith in created and temporal things, and that the true human end arises from the will's desire for union with supreme goodness. He argues that the will's desire for the *bonum simpliciter* produces a more intimate union of the human soul and the divine being. His emphasis on the primacy of volitional human actions and his re-interpretation of the intellectual ideal of beatitude call into question any union of ethics and natural philosophy. No longer can the perfection of human nature be found in the study of nature itself. For Henry, beatitude is the result of the overcoming of nature, which is accomplished through the will's receptivity to divine grace.

Ockham's criticisms led him to conclude that the concern of ethics consists entirely in the consideration of how citizens interact with one another and that knowledge of God pertains to religious belief alone. While Thomas attempted to find the connection between imperfect earthly knowledge of God (*beatitudo imperfecta*) and the immutable vision of God promised to the

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46. Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* 4.49.1.1 and 3, in *Opera omnia,* 25 vols. (Parma, 1852–1873), 7.2: 1185a and 1193a.

47. Henry of Ghent, *Summa* 49.5 and 7, in *Summae quaestionum ordinarium* (Paris, 1520), ed. Eligius M. Buytaerts, 2 vols. (repr. St. Bonaventure, NY, 1953), 2: fol. 40rD and 46vT.

Christian believer (*beatitudo perfecta*), Ockham insisted that natural reason could not possibly demonstrate that beatitude is the human end, nor that it is possible for humans to attain such an end.[48] Thomas' argument in the *Summa* that imperfect beatitude can be thought to participate somehow in perfect beatitude depends upon his distinction of the end into the *finis cuius* and the *finis quo*. The *finis cuius* of perfect and imperfect beatitude is the same: the union of man with God. The unity of the end depends solely upon the object of knowledge; in this case, God. Aristotle's description of *theoria* in his ethical and metaphysical works has an affinity with the Christian expectation of a perfect intellectual union with God. The difference in the *finis cuius* is a matter of quality: in imperfect beatitude the intellectual knowledge of God is incomplete and transitory. In perfect beatitude it is perfect and eternal. In terms of the *finis quo*, or the operation by which God is apprehended, however, there seems to be no connection between the two conceptions. In the philosopher's understanding of the human end, the intellectual achievement of the contemplative philosopher is the *finis quo*; in perfect beatitude the *finis quo* must be the result of the infusion of grace. It is this latter notion of the *finis quo* that finds its expression in the sermons of Thomas and the other writings we have examined today. The question for Thomas must have been: how relevant is the ethics of Aristotle for an understanding of the *finis quo* of *beatitudo perfecta*. His answer seems to have been: 'not significantly.' This irrelevance was certainly recognized by his contemporaries, and perhaps Eckhart's virtues of *Gelassenheit* and *Abgeschiedenheit* represent a better response to the problem of the attainment of moral perfection in a single act or throughout a lifetime.

The traditional view of the optimism of Greek ethics, and the pessimism of Christian moral teaching, must be reconsidered in

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48. Ockham, *Reportatio* (*Quaestiones in libros Sententiarum*) 4.16, in *Opera theologica,* ed. Gedeon Gál et al., 10 vols. (St Bonaventure, NY, 1967–1986), 7: 346.10–14.

light of the examples of Priam and of the good thief. Surely Greek ethics can be termed optimistic in so far as a human being possesses the ability (*dynamis*) to attain moral perfection through his own means; but despite his best efforts, *eudaimonia* may be lost through a single catastrophic event outside his control. Christian moral teaching may be termed pessimistic in its view of the fallen nature of humankind, but it also provides for the possibility of a single act transforming even the most vicious person into one of the blessed. Who has attained this end, we can never know, and so let us conclude not with the words of a philosopher or theologian, but rather the poet, Dante:

> "Predestination! Oh how deeply hid
>   your roots are from the vision of all those
>   who cannot see the Prime Cause entirely!
> You men on earth, be slow to judge,
>   for even we who see God face to face
>   still do not know the list of his elect,
> but we find this defect of ours a joy
>   since in this good perfected is our good;
>   for whatsoever God wills we will too."

> "O predestinazion, quanto remota
> è la radice tua da quelli aspetti
> che la prima cagion non veggion *tota*!
>   E voi, mortali, tenetevi stretti
> a giudicar: ché noi, che Dio vedemo,
> non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti;
>   ed ènne dolce così fatto scemo
> perché il ben nostro in questo ben s'affina,
> che quel che vole Iddio, e noi volemo."[49]

49. Dante, *Paradiso* 20.130–138, in *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata,* ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols. (Milan, 1966–1967), 4: 341; *The Divine Comedy,* trans. Mark Musa, 3 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971–1984), 3: 240, with minor changes.