

THE THOMIST

A SPECULATIVE QUARTERLY REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

- **Aquinas on Shame, Virtue, and the Virtuous Person**

- *Heribertus Dwi Kristanto S.J*

Shame is a true Christian virtue, and also a human virtue. . . . Being ashamed of oneself is a virtue of the humble, of the man or woman who is humble.¹

Pope Francis, *Encountering Truth*

SOME SCHOLARS within the Aristotelian tradition, notably C. C. Raymond and K. Kristjánsson, have recently questioned the Stagirite’s denials that shame (*aidōs*) can be a moral virtue in the proper sense of the term and that a virtuous person needs a sense of shame in addition to other moral virtues.² Aristotle famously claims that, although shame is the mean between bashfulness and shamelessness, shame is “more like a feeling than a state of character” and that “one is ashamed of what is voluntary, but the virtuous person will never voluntarily do base things.”³ Raymond and Kristjánsson argue that Aristotle has overlooked two interrelated distinctions: first, the distinction between an episodic or occurrent *feeling of shame* and a durable emotional disposition of *a sense of shame*, and second, the distinction between retrospective shame (which follows upon base actions) and prospective shame (which inhibits base actions).⁴ Even if it be conceded that virtuous **[End Page 263]** persons might not need to

draw upon retrospective shame, according to Kristjánsson, they will still need proper dispositional shame or prospective shame as “a deterrent voice to warn them against potentially base future courses of action.” If not, Aristotle would be committed to a conception of a saintly or morally infallible virtuous person.⁵ For his part, Raymond contends that, if Aristotle admits that honor and social standing constitute external goods and that virtuous persons are not indifferent to what people think of them (to such a degree that avoiding disrepute can be the goal of action), “it seems that Aristotle should allow that *aidōs* can be a ‘prohairesis’ mean as well,” that is to say, a virtue, since “knowing when, how, and to what extent to care about the opinion of others will require practical wisdom.”⁶

This article addresses these interpretations by exploring the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas,⁷ given that in his treatment **[End Page 264]** of shame, especially in “De verecundia” (*STh* II-II, q. 144, aa. 1–4), he draws substantially on Aristotle’s ideas about shame in both the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2.7.1108a31–36; 4.9.1128b10–35) and the *Rhetoric* (2.6.1383b11–1385a15). I shall argue in section I that since, unlike Aristotle, Aquinas does not conceive of persons with acquired virtues as morally infallible, he does not preclude the experience of (both retrospective

and prospective) shame in the virtuous person's moral life. Indeed, in keeping with the Philosopher, Aquinas holds that shame is best understood as a passion of the soul (or an emotion), and yet he also claims, as I shall expound in section II, that shame's concurrence is necessary for the virtue of temperance, for shame is an integral part of this cardinal virtue. Felt in an appropriate degree with respect to a truly disgraceful action (be it one already done or one yet to be done), shame is morally praiseworthy and, as such, can be called a virtue in the loosest sense of the term.⁸ Aquinas retains the idea, however, that shame is properly speaking not a moral virtue because it falls short of the perfect notion (*ratio*) of a virtue as a habit that operates from choice (*habitus electivus*) and as a habit that produces good actions (*habitus operativus*). Since, furthermore, the person who experiences shame naturally tends to shrink and to hide from others, to the extent that sometimes shame even "sends the person into despair,"⁹ in section III of this paper I shall extend Aquinas's argument by suggesting that, for shame not only to be praiseworthy but also to produce a beneficial outcome in the person, it must be accompanied by the paired virtues of humility and magnanimity. In suggesting this, I go beyond what Aquinas [End Page 265] explicitly says, though the idea is latent in his biblical commentaries.