

# Studiositas, *The Virtue of Attention*

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At the entrance to the first ring of Hell, Dante reads the famous lines inscribed above the outer portal to that accursed city, an inscription which concludes with these famed and ominous words: "abandon every hope, ye who enter here." Perplexed and troubled, Dante seeks clarification from his guide Virgil, who utters this simple phrase in response: "we have come to the place where . . . you will see the wretched people who have lost the good of the intellect." As if to offset the force of this harsh and enigmatic explanation, Dante confides how Virgil "placed his hands in mine, and with a cheerful look from which I took comfort, he led me among the hidden things."<sup>1</sup>

The good of the intellect: this is what the wretched people have lost. And if the loss of this good is the worst of all possible losses, imagine how immensely wondrous will be its gain! Yet for all its importance, Dante does not immediately tell us in what precisely this good of the mind consists, nor exactly how and where we may find it. But if we turn to his chief guide in matters philosophical and theological, St. Thomas Aquinas, we learn that *truth* is the very good of which Dante speaks: falsehood, Thomas teaches, is the ruin of the intellect, just as truth is its good.

*Verum est bonum intellectus.* Truth is the good of the intellect! This phrase appears time and again in Thomas's works. It bears ample repetition, because for him there is no human achievement more crucial than discerning the truth about our world, ourselves and God; St. Thomas is convinced that

<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), Canto 3.

our very happiness hinges on this discovery: "No desire," he writes, "carries us on to such sublime heights as the desire to understand the truth," to which he adds this sharp admonition: "Let those men be ashamed, then, who seek human happiness in inferior things, when it is so highly situated."<sup>2</sup>

So happiness, our fulfillment as human beings, is in a very special way bound up with our personal commitment to truth. Every authentic good has its price, however. The joy of knowing truth is no exception. To find truth we must seek it ardently, and to be worthy of its company we must gain the strength of character requisite for its pursuit. Few philosophers have underscored this better than Plato, who, in the *Republic* especially, urges us to acquire the virtues of philosophic character—intellectual self-control, spiritedness, courage and gentleness—as part and parcel of the moral fiber that we must possess if we are to seek truth well. For instance, at the conclusion of *Republic* Book I we find Socrates chastising himself for his intellectual gluttony:

I have not dined well. . . . As gluttons snatch at every dish that is handed along and taste it before they have properly enjoyed the preceding, so I . . . before finding the first topic of our inquiry—what justice is—let go of that and set out to consider [something else]. . . . So that for me the present outcome of the discussion is that I know nothing at all.<sup>3</sup>

This Socratic admission is meant to teach us that the "appetite for inquiry must find gratification in a disciplined way if truth, . . . the mind's natural "nutrition," is to be obtained."<sup>4</sup> Essential to this intellectual discipline is the recognition that, despite the vast array of things which we may study in the course of our lives, we must not pursue these studies disconnectedly, but rather, whenever possible, we should strive to attain a synoptic vision, in which we see all these things in, to use Plato's words, "a comprehensive survey of their affinities with one another and with the nature of things."<sup>5</sup> Speaking in this same vein, Cardinal Newman tells his readers that "you must be above your knowledge, not under it, or it will oppress you, and the more you have of it, the greater will be your load."<sup>6</sup> And to bring home this

<sup>2</sup> *Stimma Contra Gentiles* III, chap. 50.

<sup>3</sup> *Republic* I 354a–b. Translations from the *Republic* are those of Paul Shorey, reprinted in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton and Hamilton Cairns, eds. (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Patterson, "Plato on Philosophic Character," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987): p. 328.

<sup>5</sup> *Republic* VII 537c.

<sup>6</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 106.

same point, he adds, with a characteristic touch of wry humor: "How many commentators are there on the Classics, how many on Holy Scripture, from whom we rise up, wondering at the learning that has passed before us, and wondering why it passed!"<sup>7</sup> If we are to be intellectually temperate, we must seek to feed our minds on not just anything and in any way whatsoever, but only on what is truly important, and according to the unity that befits our vocation to wisdom.

In addition to intellectual moderation, Plato urges us to cultivate intellectual spiritedness which consists, he says, in a keen desire for victory. The virtuous lover of truth "must be ready, willing, and able to 'do lengthy battle' on behalf of the truth."<sup>8</sup> Desire for victory in matters of the mind "is not to be confused [however] with victory of one's own views."<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, the virtuous inquirer is one who will "actually hope that insofar as his views are false they will meet defeat."<sup>10</sup> Thus "in the pursuit of truth one must not become angry or resentful at the proper refutation of one's own views."<sup>11</sup> Instead, "one ought to welcome as just . . . the revelation of one's own ignorance."<sup>12</sup> "Strength of spirit there must be for the intellectual enterprise, but a strength open to persuasion and even, as need be, to rebuke."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, despite their willingness to engage in intellectual battle, virtuous inquirers will not "prosecute such victory savagely, harshly, or in anger at an opponent, but with gentleness and gracious good will."<sup>14</sup> Or, as Plato puts it, "he who would attain the highest understanding of truth and goodness must himself be orderly and gracious, 'friendly and akin to truth, justice, courage, and self-mastery,' presumably because only such a person will prove genuinely receptive to noble discourse, whose purpose is a thoroughgoing education of the soul to virtue" and truth.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Plato tells us that the virtuous inquirer's love of victory must be accompanied by "courage to enter the fray."<sup>16</sup> "Courage finds a place within intellectual activity in two important ways: first, as the courage to

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Patterson, p. 341.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 341.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

make one's convictions known, even under adverse circumstances: second, as perseverance in the face of long and difficult inquiry."<sup>17</sup>

Noteworthy in Plato's account of intellectual character is his focus on the appetitive side of truth-seeking. Each of the virtues mentioned above—intellectual moderation, courage, and gentleness—assures rectitude in the *desire* to know. As such, these virtues of philosophic character do not coincide with those virtues that Aristotle was later to term "intellectual virtues" or "virtues of thought," i.e., wisdom, understanding, science, art and prudence, which, with the exception of the last, are exclusively perfections of intellectual judgment. Thus the Stagirite draws a rather sharp distinction between the moral virtues on the one hand and the intellectual virtues on the other.

Hence, whereas Plato took care to posit moderation and courage within intellectual activity itself, to assure that the passions which arise within the mind's proper pursuits do not lead the mind astray, Aristotle, for his part, appears reluctant to follow his mentor's lead. In his treatment of moderation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for instance, Aristotle explicitly excludes from the scope of this moral virtue those pleasures which arise from knowledge and learning.<sup>18</sup> Even so, it is well worth observing that Thomas Aquinas does not exhibit this same reticence. Under the influence of St. Augustine, Thomas sought to integrate the Platonic teaching on intellectual character into his account of the moral virtues. Nowhere is this more noticeable than in his treatment of temperance in the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*. Surprisingly—given the Aristotelian cast of his ethics—Thomas widens the scope of this virtue to include not only the appetite for tactile pleasures, but what's more, the very appetite for truth as well:

[answer that, as stated above [IIa-IIae, q.41, aa.3-5] it belongs to temperance to moderate the movement of the appetite, lest it tend excessively to that which is desired naturally. Now just as in respect of his corporeal nature man naturally desires the pleasures of food and sex, so, in respect of his soul, he naturally desires to know; thus the Philosopher observes at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* i 1: "All men have a natural desire for knowledge." The moderation of this desire pertains to the virtue of *studiositas*; wherefore it follows that *studiositas* is a potential part of temperance, as a subordinate virtue annexed to a principal virtue.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>18</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics* III.10 1117b27-35.

<sup>19</sup> *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae, q. 166, a. 2, c.

Thomas proceeds to explain that the name *studiositas* is taken from the noun *studium*. *Studiositas* designates a virtue which assures the moral rectitude of the *studium*, just as temperance is a virtue which assures the moral rectitude of the concupiscible appetite. Next, Thomas defines the *studium* as a “*vehemens applicatio mentis ad aliquid*,” literally “a vigorous application of the mind to something.”<sup>20</sup> Let’s pause for a moment to consider the parts of this definition:

(i) *Vehemens*: ardent, intense, vigorous.

(ii) *Applicatio*: a joining, attaching, or applying; connotes a persistent or sustained contact of one thing to another. In Thomas’s technical lexicon it designates *usus*, the voluntary employment of the soul’s powers.

(iii) *Mentis*: of the *mens*, the mind, a shorthand reference to the human soul’s cognitive faculties. *Applicatio mentis* thus signifies the voluntary employment of the cognitive faculties (sensory or intellectual).

(iv) *Ad aliquid*: any item to which cognitive agents may be vitally joined by their engagement in willed acts of thinking or sensing. Thomas tells us that the items in question encompass things which are simply objects of cognition (through either theoretical speculation or sensory delight) or things which may be transformed by human labor.

Thus defined, the scope of *studium* is surprisingly vast: it signifies any voluntary engagement of the mind in cognitive endeavors, speculative or practical, sensory or intellectual. As such, the English term “study” does not faithfully translate the Latin *studium*; the former is more restrictive in scope, signifying as it does the cultivation of a particular branch of learning, science or art. Such scholarly activities are comprised under the heading of *studium* but not exclusively so, since in Thomas’s usage *studium* denotes any purposeful application of the mind. Hence, on his account the *studium* also encompasses what we today call “work” or “exercising an occupation,” either manual or mental, for here too the agent is intent upon something involving concentration and effort. In fact, the expressions “heightened attention,” “concentration,” or “vigorous mental occupation” are more suitable transcriptions for *studium* than its English cognate “study,” for they convey without undue restriction the full breadth of this Latin word. Accordingly, to concentrate rightly, to occupy one’s mind well, to attend to whatever truly warrants one’s attention, is to exercise the virtue of *studiositas*.

The Angelic Doctor assigns a dual role to *studiositas*.<sup>21</sup> Its primary func-

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., q. 166, a. 1, c.

<sup>21</sup> On the dual role assigned by Thomas to *studiositas*, see *Summa Theologiae* II-IIae, q. 166, a. 1, ad 3.

tion consists in curbing the appetite for knowledge, which easily tends to excess due to the pleasure experienced in acts of knowing. Here the virtue functions as a form of temperance or moderation. The opposing vice, *curiositas*, embraces two forms of cognitive immoderation: first, an inordinate appetite for pleasures arising within intellectual knowing, intellectual *curiositas* (*circa cognitionem intellectivam*<sup>22</sup>), and second, an inordinate appetite for pleasures arising within the operation of the external senses and the imagination, sensory *curiositas* (*circa sensitivam cognitionem*, Thomas's version of the *concupiscentia oculorum* so vigorously condemned by St. Augustine).<sup>23</sup>

Thomas is not very specific about what kinds of knowledge ought to be sought, when and where and by whom. This is in keeping with his keen sense of the limitations of moral science, which cannot direct action in particular instances. The virtue of prudence alone can fully disclose how a specific person ought to pursue speculative inquiry within the context of his or her life. Nonetheless, Thomas does venture to propose four criteria to guide our moral judgments concerning the concrete exercise of the speculative intellect.<sup>24</sup> These criteria are stated negatively, as various forms of intellectual *curiositas*:

(1) A speculative inquiry becomes excessive when it entails neglect of other studies, studies which are necessary for the acquittal of one's personal and social duties. Thomas cites the case of a judge who is so enamored of geometry that he arrives in court ill prepared to hand down informed decisions in prosecution of justice.<sup>25</sup> Examples of this sort could easily be multiplied. The point is that virtue requires a studious attention to the matter at hand, a sense of priority in knowing what one's mind should be on in the present circumstances, and the willingness to develop and to apply competent knowing in the accomplishment of the responsibilities incumbent on one's vocation.

Likewise, the other extreme ought also to be avoided, namely an obsessive engagement in professional activities, to the neglect of more lofty callings. Aquinas holds that a life well-lived requires an attention to "higher

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., q.167, a. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., q.167, a. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., q.167, a. 1.

<sup>25</sup> "[Q]uando propter occupationem in studio alicujus scientiae impeditur ab executione officii ad quod tenetur; sicut iudex si propter studium geometriae desisteret a causis expediendis. . . ." *Scriptum super Sententiis* III (ed. Mandonnet/Moos), dist.35, q. 2, a. 3, ad 3. no. 1205.

things," an aspiration to weave wisdom into the tapestry of daily life. The love of wisdom can presumably manifest itself in different ways, according to the diversity of individuals and cultures. For some this will involve the study of philosophy and theology, for others an engagement in spirituality and prayer within a religious tradition, or for still others an openness to the sapiential dimension of existence through a participation in the fine arts.

(2) Since human beings acquire understanding by learning from others, virtuous knowing requires a vigilance in regard to the *sources* of instruction; for knowing can become inordinate. Thomas writes "when a man studies to learn from one by whom it is unlawful to be taught, as in the case of those who seek to know the future through the demons." [?] To advance a more contemporary example one could cite the controversy surrounding the morality of using scientific data which Nazi scientists procured by means of cruel experiments on human subjects. Should access to these materials be barred because their source was morally blameworthy?

In any event, the question about the sources of knowledge is actually broader than is at first blush indicated by Thomas's example. Indeed it concerns the overall question of how tradition, authority, and the social context of learning are integrated into a virtuous pursuit of truth. For instance, Thomas remarks that one manifestation of pride is the unwillingness to receive instruction from others—whether from fellow men or from God. On a positive note, Aquinas considers the social dimension of learning to be of such vital importance that he assigns a special virtue to regulate this domain. This is *docilitas*, which consists in moderating the appetite for knowledge so that the learner is receptive to instruction within the context of an ongoing intellectual tradition. This virtue is attached to the cardinal virtue of prudence, although Thomas suggests that it should accompany the cultivation of the intellectual virtues in their entirety.<sup>26</sup>

(3) The pursuit of knowledge becomes immoderate when a man desires to know the truth about creatures, without referring this knowledge to its due end, namely the knowledge of God. This should not be read as a condemnation of the desire to uncover the secrets of nature through an investigation of secondary causes. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas devotes several chapters to explaining why the assiduous study of creatures is a praiseworthy pursuit.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the stress here is not on some intellectual error regarding the relation between creatures and God, or even igno-

<sup>26</sup> On this, see *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae, q. 49, a. 3, esp. ad 1 and 2.

<sup>27</sup> See in particular, Book II, chap. 1–4.

rance concerning God as creator. Instead, the focus is on a disordered *will*, which moves the process of knowing toward an ultimate end other than the infinite truth which is God. Just as the avaricious person seeks an unbounded satisfaction in unlimited finite goods through the acquisition of wealth, likewise the intemperate inquirer seeks full intellectual satisfaction in dwelling upon the inexhaustible variety of natural phenomena. Both place their last end in something other than God, the first in the accumulation of material possessions, to the exclusion of spiritual possessions; the second in the enjoyment of science to the exclusion of wisdom.

(4) Finally, Thomas names a fourth variety of intellectual *curiositas*, which occurs when a man studies to know the truth above the capacity of his own intelligence, since by doing so men fall easily into error. Thomas does not give any examples to illustrate the nature of this vice. It clearly has an affinity with pride (*superbia*), because the prideful person hopes to achieve some good beyond the measure of his or her inner strength.

Previously I noted that *studiositas* has two roles, of which the primary is to curb the appetite for knowledge, for reasons that we have just now considered. By contrast, in its secondary role, *studiositas* reinforces intellectual desire. Here it functions as intellectual courage. In fact the very name *studiositas* is taken from this secondary role, inasmuch as the *studium* signifies a tenacious application of the mind (*vehemens applicatio mentis*).

Thomas does not expressly name the vice opposed to keen interest in truth and the strength needed for applying one's intellect in a consistently focused manner. He does however, give some indications on the unnamed vice of intellectual indolence and its remedy.

The essential problem here is to overcome the body's resistance to the effort involved in the acquisition of knowledge. By extension, however, any kind of difficulty encountered in the pursuit of knowledge is strengthened by studious fortitude, the difficulty that we face, for instance, in resisting the pressure to conform to prevailing opinions. Aquinas makes due note of this when he relates how the supreme act of fortitude, martyrdom, can encompass not only a witness to the divine truth of faith, but a firm adherence to truths of the natural order as well, when they are violently denied by others.<sup>28</sup> Finally, in addition to assuring endurance against fatigue and other pains incurred in the pursuit of truth, studious fortitude also fortifies the soul against the seductive attraction of sensible pleasures which can distract and dissipate its arduous quest for knowledge.

<sup>28</sup> On martyrdom for truth's sake, see *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae, q. 124, a. 5, ad 2.

The implications of Thomas's teaching on *studiositas* for a sane theory of education are numerous. Fundamental, in my estimation, is his emphasis on the moral or ethical dimensions of knowing. In this respect, St. Thomas is very much the disciple of St. Augustine, whose *Confessions*, in particular, are replete with comments about the intentions which ought (and ought not) to guide the student in his or her pursuit of knowledge. Augustine faults himself, for instance, for having sought intellectual cultivation, not for the sake of insight about himself and God, but rather in order to impress his classmates and professors. Likewise, he faults his parents and educators for their misguided motives: they wanted to see him educated in order that he might achieve worldly stature, thus to secure for himself an ample income and the pleasant amusements money can buy. On the positive side, Augustine informs us that his reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* awakened in him a love of truth, an attachment to knowledge for its own sake, and that this love was the beginning of his journey back to God.

Aquinas's teaching on *studiositas* could also profitably be read in conjunction with an incisive essay by Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God."<sup>29</sup> There she argues provocatively that "the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and the sole interest of studies."<sup>30</sup> What matters most in education is not the acquisition of particular truths about particular subjects—although this clearly has its importance—but rather increasing the power of attention with a view to the highest and best use of the intelligence; this, for Weil, is a contemplative communion with God in prayer. Significantly, she does not equate the "power or faculty of attention" (clearly akin to Aquinas's *studium*) with simple will-power, i.e., the ability to concentrate despite one's inclination to the contrary.

Contrary to the usual belief, it [will-power] has practically no place in study. The intelligence can be led only by desire. For there to be desire there must be pleasure and joy in the work. . . . It is the part played by joy in our studies that makes of them a preparation for the spiritual life, for desire directed toward God is the only power capable of raising the soul.<sup>31</sup>

Here Weil utters a profound truth. Since knowledge is actively sought only when it is desired, and the since desire springs from love—which is nothing other than to rejoice and delight in the good thing loved—it follows that

<sup>29</sup> In *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: C.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), pp. 104–116.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

educators should strive above all to convey to their students the joy of knowing truth. It is precisely the experience of enjoyment in acts of knowing which enables epistemic agents to recognize the disinterested knowledge of truth as intrinsically good for the self. That recognition has an ethical dimension, because the moral life requires a firm attachment to the good of the intellect, wherein lies our ultimate beatitude. Intellectual enjoyment thus quickens the appetitive powers, rendering them auxiliaries of the mind's approach to the Living Truth.