

## St. Thomas Aquinas

# The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[First Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 61](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

### OF THE CARDINAL VIRTUES (FIVE ARTICLES)

We must now consider the cardinal virtues: under which head there are five points of inquiry:

(1) Whether the moral virtues should be called cardinal or principal virtues?

(2) Of their number;

(3) Which are they?

(4) Whether they differ from one another?

(5) Whether they are fittingly divided into social, perfecting, perfect, and exemplar virtues?

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[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[First Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 61](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Article: 1](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

### Whether the moral virtues should be called cardinal or principal virtues?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that moral virtues should not be called cardinal or principal virtues. For "the opposite members of a division are by nature simultaneous" (Categor. x), so that one is not principal rather than another. Now all the virtues are opposite members of the division of the genus "virtue." Therefore none of them should be called principal.

**Objection 2:** Further, the end is principal as compared to the means. But the theological virtues are about the end; while the moral virtues are about the means. Therefore the theological virtues, rather than the moral virtues, should be called principal or cardinal.

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[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [FS](#) » [FS061.html](#) is so by participation. But the intellectual virtues belong to that which is essentially rational: whereas the moral virtues belong to that which is rational by participation, as stated above ([Question \[58\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#)). Therefore the intellectual virtues are principal, rather than the moral virtues.

**On the contrary**, Ambrose in explaining the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" ([Lk. 6:20](#)) says: "We know that there are four cardinal virtues, viz. temperance, justice, prudence, and fortitude." But these are moral virtues. Therefore the moral virtues are cardinal virtues.

**I answer that**, When we speak of virtue simply, we are understood to speak of human virtue. Now human virtue, as stated above ([Question \[56\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#)), is one that answers to the perfect idea of virtue, which requires rectitude of the appetite: for such like virtue not only confers the faculty of doing well, but also causes the good deed done. On the other hand, the name virtue is applied to one that answers imperfectly to the idea of virtue, and does not require rectitude of the appetite: because it merely confers the faculty of doing well without causing the good deed to be done. Now it is evident that the perfect is principal as compared to the imperfect: and so those virtues which imply rectitude of the appetite are called principal virtues. Such are the moral virtues, and prudence alone, of the intellectual virtues, for it is also something of a moral virtue, as was clearly shown above ([Question \[57\]](#), [Article \[4\]](#)). Consequently, those virtues which are called principal or cardinal are fittingly placed among the moral virtues.

**Reply to Objection 1:** When a univocal genus is divided into its species, the members of the division are on a par in the point of the generic idea; although considered in their nature as things, one species may surpass another in rank and perfection, as man in respect of other animals. But when we divide an analogous term, which is applied to several things, but to one before it is applied to another, nothing hinders one from ranking before another, even in the point of the generic idea; as the notion of being is applied to substance principally in relation to accident. Such is the division of virtue into various kinds of virtue: since the good defined by reason is not found in the same way in all things.

**Reply to Objection 2:** The theological virtues are above man, as stated above ([Question \[58\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#), ad 3). Hence they should properly be called not human, but "super-human" or godlike virtues.

**Reply to Objection 3:** Although the intellectual virtues, except in prudence, rank before the moral virtues, in the point of their subject, they do not rank before them as virtues; for a virtue, as such, regards good, which is the object of the appetite.

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[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[First Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 61](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Article: 2](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

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## Whether there are four cardinal virtues?

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [FS](#) » [FS061.html](#)  
directing principle of the other moral virtues, as is clear from what has been said above ([Question \[58\]](#), [Article \[4\]](#)). But that which directs other things ranks before them. Therefore prudence alone is a principal virtue.

**Objection 2:** Further, the principal virtues are, in a way, moral virtues. Now we are directed to moral works both by the practical reason, and by a right appetite, as stated in *Ethic.* vi, 2. Therefore there are only two cardinal virtues.

**Objection 3:** Further, even among the other virtues one ranks higher than another. But in order that a virtue be principal, it needs not to rank above all the others, but above some. Therefore it seems that there are many more principal virtues.

**On the contrary,** Gregory says (*Moral.* ii): "The entire structure of good works is built on four virtues."

**I answer that,** Things may be numbered either in respect of their formal principles, or according to the subjects in which they are: and either way we find that there are four cardinal virtues.

For the formal principle of the virtue of which we speak now is good as defined by reason; which good is considered in two ways. First, as existing in the very act of reason: and thus we have one principal virtue, called "Prudence." Secondly, according as the reason puts its order into something else; either into operations, and then we have "Justice"; or into passions, and then we need two virtues. For the need of putting the order of reason into the passions is due to their thwarting reason: and this occurs in two ways. First, by the passions inciting to something against reason, and then the passions need a curb, which we call "Temperance." Secondly, by the passions withdrawing us from following the dictate of reason, e.g. through fear of danger or toil: and then man needs to be strengthened for that which reason dictates, lest he turn back; and to this end there is "Fortitude."

In like manner, we find the same number if we consider the subjects of virtue. For there are four subjects of the virtue we speak of now: viz. the power which is rational in its essence, and this is perfected by "Prudence"; and that which is rational by participation, and is threefold, the will, subject of "Justice," the concupiscible faculty, subject of "Temperance," and the irascible faculty, subject of "Fortitude."

**Reply to Objection 1:** Prudence is the principal of all the virtues simply. The others are principal, each in its own genus.

**Reply to Objection 2:** That part of the soul which is rational by participation is threefold, as stated above.

**Reply to Objection 3:** All the other virtues among which one ranks before another, are reducible to the above four, both as to the subject and as to the formal principle.

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[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[First Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 61](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Article: 3](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

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**Objection 1:** It would seem that other virtues should be called principal rather than these. For, seemingly, the greatest is the principal in any genus. Now "magnanimity has a great influence on all the virtues" (Ethic. iv, 3). Therefore magnanimity should more than any be called a principal virtue.

**Objection 2:** Further, that which strengthens the other virtues should above all be called a principal virtue. But such is humility: for Gregory says (Hom. iv in Ev.) that "he who gathers the other virtues without humility is as one who carries straw against the wind." Therefore humility seems above all to be a principal virtue.

**Objection 3:** Further, that which is most perfect seems to be principal. But this applies to patience, according to James 1:4: "Patience hath a perfect work." Therefore patience should be reckoned a principal virtue.

**On the contrary,** Cicero reduces all other virtues to these four (De Invent. Rhet. ii).

**I answer that,** As stated above ([Article \[2\]](#)), these four are reckoned as cardinal virtues, in respect of the four formal principles of virtue as we understand it now. These principles are found chiefly in certain acts and passions. Thus the good which exists in the act of reason, is found chiefly in reason's command, but not in its counsel or its judgment, as stated above ([Question \[57\]](#), [Article \[6\]](#)). Again, good as defined by reason and put into our operations as something right and due, is found chiefly in commutations and distributions in respect of another person, and on a basis of equality. The good of curbing the passions is found chiefly in those passions which are most difficult to curb, viz. in the pleasures of touch. The good of being firm in holding to the good defined by reason, against the impulse of passion, is found chiefly in perils of death, which are most difficult to withstand.

Accordingly the above four virtues may be considered in two ways. First, in respect of their common formal principles. In this way they are called principal, being general, as it were, in comparison with all the virtues: so that, for instance, any virtue that causes good in reason's act of consideration, may be called prudence; every virtue that causes the good of right and due in operation, be called justice; every virtue that curbs and represses the passions, be called temperance; and every virtue that strengthens the mind against any passions whatever, be called fortitude. Many, both holy doctors, as also philosophers, speak about these virtues in this sense: and in this way the other virtues are contained under them. Wherefore all the objections fail.

Secondly, they may be considered in point of their being denominated, each one from that which is foremost in its respective matter, and thus they are specific virtues, condivided with the others. Yet they are called principal in comparison with the other virtues, on account of the importance of their matter: so that prudence is the virtue which commands; justice, the virtue which is about due actions between equals; temperance, the virtue which suppresses desires for the pleasures of touch; and fortitude, the virtue which strengthens against dangers of death. Thus again do the objections fail: because the other virtues may be principal in some other way, but these are called principal by reason of their matter, as stated above.

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## Whether the four cardinal virtues differ from one another?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that the above four virtues are not diverse and distinct from one another. For Gregory says (Moral. xxii, 1): "There is no true prudence, unless it be just, temperate and brave; no perfect temperance, that is not brave, just and prudent; no sound fortitude, that is not prudent, temperate and just; no real justice, without prudence, fortitude and temperance." But this would not be so, if the above virtues were distinct from one another: since the different species of one genus do not qualify one another. Therefore the aforesaid virtues are not distinct from one another.

**Objection 2:** Further, among things distinct from one another the function of one is not attributed to another. But the function of temperance is attributed to fortitude: for Ambrose says (De Offic. xxxvi): "Rightly do we call it fortitude, when a man conquers himself, and is not weakened and bent by any enticement." And of temperance he says (De Offic. xliii, xlv) that it "safeguards the manner and order in all things that we decide to do and say." Therefore it seems that these virtues are not distinct from one another.

**Objection 3:** Further, the Philosopher says (Ethic. ii, 4) that the necessary conditions of virtue are first of all "that a man should have knowledge; secondly, that he should exercise choice for a particular end; thirdly, that he should possess the habit and act with firmness and steadfastness." But the first of these seems to belong to prudence which is rectitude of reason in things to be done; the second, i.e. choice, belongs to temperance, whereby a man, holding his passions on the curb, acts, not from passion but from choice; the third, that a man should act for the sake of a due end, implies a certain rectitude, which seemingly belongs to justice; while the last, viz. firmness and steadfastness, belongs to fortitude. Therefore each of these virtues is general in comparison to other virtues. Therefore they are not distinct from one another.

**On the contrary,** Augustine says (De Moribus Eccl. xi) that "there are four virtues, corresponding to the various emotions of love," and he applies this to the four virtues mentioned above. Therefore the same four virtues are distinct from one another.

**I answer that,** As stated above ([Article \[3\]](#)), these four virtues are understood differently by various writers. For some take them as signifying certain general conditions of the human mind, to be found in all the virtues: so that, to wit, prudence is merely a certain rectitude of discretion in any actions or matters whatever; justice, a certain rectitude of the mind, whereby a man does what he ought in any matters; temperance, a disposition of the mind, moderating any passions or operations, so as to keep them within bounds; and fortitude, a disposition whereby the soul is strengthened for that which is in accord with reason, against any assaults of the passions, or the toil involved by any operations. To distinguish these four virtues in this way does not imply that justice, temperance and fortitude are distinct virtuous habits: because it is fitting that every moral virtue, from the fact that it is a "habit," should be accompanied by a certain firmness so as not to be moved by its contrary: and this, we have said, belongs to fortitude. Moreover, inasmuch as it is a "virtue," it is directed to good which involves the



[Donate bitcoin.](#) St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [FS](#) » [FS061.html](#) that it is a "moral virtue" partaking of reason, it observes the mode of reason in all things, and does not exceed its bounds, which has been stated to belong to temperance. It is only in the point of having discretion, which we ascribed to prudence, that there seems to be a distinction from the other three, inasmuch as discretion belongs essentially to reason; whereas the other three imply a certain share of reason by way of a kind of application (of reason) to passions or operations. According to the above explanation, then, prudence would be distinct from the other three virtues: but these would not be distinct from one another; for it is evident that one and the same virtue is both habit, and virtue, and moral virtue.

Others, however, with better reason, take these four virtues, according as they have their special determinate matter; each of its own matter, in which special commendation is given to that general condition from which the virtue's name is taken as stated above ([Article \[3\]](#)). In this way it is clear that the aforesaid virtues are distinct habits, differentiated in respect of their diverse objects.

**Reply to Objection 1:** Gregory is speaking of these four virtues in the first sense given above. It may also be said that these four virtues qualify one another by a kind of overflow. For the qualities of prudence overflow on to the other virtues in so far as they are directed by prudence. And each of the others overflows on to the rest, for the reason that whoever can do what is harder, can do what is less difficult. Wherefore whoever can curb his desires for the pleasures of touch, so that they keep within bounds, which is a very hard thing to do, for this very reason is more able to check his daring in dangers of death, so as not to go too far, which is much easier; and in this sense fortitude is said to be temperate. Again, temperance is said to be brave, by reason of fortitude overflowing into temperance: in so far, to wit, as he whose mind is strengthened by fortitude against dangers of death, which is a matter of very great difficulty, is more able to remain firm against the onslaught of pleasures; for as Cicero says (*De Offic. i*), "it would be inconsistent for a man to be unbroken by fear, and yet vanquished by cupidity; or that he should be conquered by lust, after showing himself to be unconquered by toil."

From this the Reply to the Second Objection is clear. For temperance observes the mean in all things, and fortitude keeps the mind unbent by the enticements of pleasures, either in so far as these virtues are taken to denote certain general conditions of virtue, or in the sense that they overflow on to one another, as explained above.

**Reply to Objection 3:** These four general conditions of virtue set down by the Philosopher, are not proper to the aforesaid virtues. They may, however, be appropriated to them, in the way above stated.

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[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[First Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 61](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Article: 5 [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

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**Whether the cardinal virtues are fittingly divided into social virtues, perfecting, perfect, and exemplar virtues?**

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virtues, perfecting virtues, perfect virtues, and social virtues. For as Macrobius says (Super Somn. Scip. 1), the "exemplar virtues are such as exist in the mind of God." Now the Philosopher says (Ethic. x, 8) that "it is absurd to ascribe justice, fortitude, temperance, and prudence to God." Therefore these virtues cannot be exemplar.

**Objection 2:** Further, the "perfect" virtues are those which are without any passion: for Macrobius says (Super Somn. Scip. 1) that "in a soul that is cleansed, temperance has not to check worldly desires, for it has forgotten all about them: fortitude knows nothing about the passions; it does not have to conquer them." Now it was stated above ([Question \[59\]](#), [Article \[5\]](#)) that the aforesaid virtues cannot be without passions. Therefore there is no such thing as "perfect" virtue.

**Objection 3:** Further, he says (Macrobius: Super Somn. Scip. 1) that the "perfecting" virtues are those of the man "who flies from human affairs and devotes himself exclusively to the things of God." But it seems wrong to do this, for Cicero says (De Offic. i): "I reckon that it is not only unworthy of praise, but wicked for a man to say that he despises what most men admire, viz. power and office." Therefore there are no "perfecting" virtues.

**Objection 4:** Further, he says (Macrobius: Super Somn. Scip. 1) that the "social" virtues are those "whereby good men work for the good of their country and for the safety of the city." But it is only legal justice that is directed to the common weal, as the Philosopher states (Ethic. v, 1). Therefore other virtues should not be called "social."

**On the contrary,** Macrobius says (Super Somn. Scip. 1): "Plotinus, together with Plato foremost among teachers of philosophy, says: 'The four kinds of virtue are fourfold: In the first place there are social\* virtues; secondly, there are perfecting virtues [\*Virtutes purgatoriae: literally meaning, cleansing virtues]; thirdly, there are perfect [\*Virtutes purgati animi: literally, virtues of the clean soul] virtues; and fourthly, there are exemplar virtues.'" [\*Cf. Chrysostom's fifteenth homily on St. Matthew, where he says: "The gentle, the modest, the merciful, the just man does not shut up his good deeds within himself... He that is clean of heart and peaceful, and suffers persecution for the sake of the truth, lives for the common weal."]

**I answer that,** As Augustine says (De Moribus Eccl. vi), "the soul needs to follow something in order to give birth to virtue: this something is God: if we follow Him we shall live aright." Consequently the exemplar of human virtue must needs pre-exist in God, just as in Him pre-exist the types of all things. Accordingly virtue may be considered as existing originally in God, and thus we speak of "exemplar" virtues: so that in God the Divine Mind itself may be called prudence; while temperance is the turning of God's gaze on Himself, even as in us it is that which conforms the appetite to reason. God's fortitude is His unchangeableness; His justice is the observance of the Eternal Law in His works, as Plotinus states (Cf. Macrobius, Super Somn. Scip. 1).

Again, since man by his nature is a social [\*See above note on Chrysostom] animal, these virtues, in so far as they are in him according to the condition of his nature, are called "social" virtues; since it is by reason of them that man behaves himself well in the conduct of human affairs. It is in this sense that we have been speaking of these virtues until now.

But since it behooves a man to do his utmost to strive onward even to Divine things, as even the Philosopher declares in Ethic. x, 7, and as Scripture often admonishes us---for instance: "Be ye... perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" ([Mt. 5:48](#)), we must needs place some virtues between the social or human virtues, and the exemplar virtues which are Divine. Now these

who are on their way and tending towards the Divine similitude; and these are called "perfecting" virtues. Thus prudence, by contemplating the things of God, counts as nothing all things of the world, and directs all the thoughts of the soul to God alone: temperance, so far as nature allows, neglects the needs of the body; fortitude prevents the soul from being afraid of neglecting the body and rising to heavenly things; and justice consists in the soul giving a whole-hearted consent to follow the way thus proposed. Besides these there are the virtues of those who have already attained to the Divine similitude: these are called the "perfect virtues." Thus prudence sees nought else but the things of God; temperance knows no earthly desires; fortitude has no knowledge of passion; and justice, by imitating the Divine Mind, is united thereto by an everlasting covenant. Such as the virtues attributed to the Blessed, or, in this life, to some who are at the summit of perfection.

**Reply to Objection 1:** The Philosopher is speaking of these virtues according as they relate to human affairs; for instance, justice, about buying and selling; fortitude, about fear; temperance, about desires; for in this sense it is absurd to attribute them to God.

**Reply to Objection 2:** Human virtues, that is to say, virtues of men living together in this world, are about the passions. But the virtues of those who have attained to perfect bliss are without passions. Hence Plotinus says (Cf. Macrobius, Super Somn. Scip. 1) that "the social virtues check the passions," i.e. they bring them to the relative mean; "the second kind," viz. the perfecting virtues, "uproot them"; "the third kind," viz. the perfect virtues, "forget them; while it is impious to mention them in connection with virtues of the fourth kind," viz. the exemplar virtues. It may also be said that here he is speaking of passions as denoting inordinate emotions.

**Reply to Objection 3:** To neglect human affairs when necessity forbids is wicked; otherwise it is virtuous. Hence Cicero says a little earlier: "Perhaps one should make allowances for those who by reason of their exceptional talents have devoted themselves to learning; as also to those who have retired from public life on account of failing health, or for some other yet weightier motive; when such men yielded to others the power and renown of authority." This agrees with what Augustine says (De Civ. Dei xix, 19): "The love of truth demands a hollowed leisure; charity necessitates good works. If no one lays this burden on us we may devote ourselves to the study and contemplation of truth; but if the burden is laid on us it is to be taken up under the pressure of charity."

**Reply to Objection 4:** Legal justice alone regards the common weal directly: but by commanding the other virtues it draws them all into the service of the common weal, as the Philosopher declares (Ethic. v, 1). For we must take note that it concerns the human virtues, as we understand them here, to do well not only towards the community, but also towards the parts of the community, viz. towards the household, or even towards one individual.