

## Vocation to Love

Rooney, James Dominic

*Published in:*  
International Journal of Systematic Theology

*DOI:*  
[10.1111/ijst.12553](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12553)

Published: 01/04/2022

*Document Version:*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Rooney, J. D. (2022). Vocation to Love: Supererogation in Aquinas. *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 24(2), 156-172. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12553>

### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent publication URLs

**Vocation to Love: Supererogation in Aquinas**

*Fr. James Dominic Rooney, OP*

Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum)

Largo Angelicum 1

Roma, RM 00184 Italia

rooney@pust.it

*Abstract:* Thomas Aquinas' account of religious vocation has been interpreted as involving a qualified duty, where ordinary people fall short of living up to the moral ideal of becoming a monk or nun. Such an account of religious vocation makes a hash of Aquinas' thought and misses important aspects of his ethics. Aquinas holds that religious life is praiseworthy, but not morally required, because there are multiple sources of normativity. I conclude by proposing that, while elements of Aquinas' notion of supererogation might be shared with other traditions in virtue ethics, his theological commitments are central to his notion of supererogation.

An interpretative problem surrounding Thomas Aquinas' account of moral normativity has gone largely unnoticed. The problem is particularly visible in a paradigm case: the nature of the religious vocation. Entering 'religious life,' making public vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience in a religious order, is ostensibly 'supererogatory' – i.e., morally permitted and praiseworthy for people to do, but not morally required. Some have attributed to Aquinas the view that the supererogatory is explained by the fact that some are excused from living a certain moral ideal. In the paradigm case, then, there would be a defeasible, general moral obligation for all to enter religious life, although this obligation gets defeated for many people by other considerations, such as their individual lack of capability. I will argue that this interpretation fails.

What has gone overlooked are two important dimensions in Aquinas' ethics. On one hand, his ethics requires two sources of ethical normativity, corresponding to different ways that human beings flourish: what is required for the flourishing of any given individual and what is required for the flourishing appropriate to the human community as a whole. Further, our lives are lived in relationship to God and others, and these relationships shape what counts as a flourishing life for each individual. I conclude by proposing that Aquinas' vision of supererogation, while sharing intuitions with other virtue ethics, is uniquely theological. In light of these two dimensions, Aquinas believes the life of grace allows unqualifiedly supererogatory free acts to dedicate ourselves to others and to God.

## 1. The *Normative Problem of the Religious Call*

The general approach to moral normativity that Aquinas takes might be variously characterized as a 'virtue ethics' or a 'natural law' theory. Aquinas understands the 'natural law' to involve the apprehension of certain facts about human nature – namely, those facts about what things are appropriate *goods* for human beings and constitute a life well-lived – and the virtues are dispositions for living well in light of that knowledge:

“...to the natural law belongs everything to which a man is inclined according to his nature. ... all acts of virtue are prescribed by the natural law: since each one's reason naturally dictates to him to act virtuously. ...[and] many things are done virtuously, to which nature does not incline at first; but which, through the inquiry of reason, have been found by men to be conducive to well-living.”<sup>1</sup>

Aquinas does not merely outline a secular ethic but enunciates a moral theology in which God's grace centrally figures. He thinks that original sin has made it that human beings cannot keep the natural law consistently; even if they can keep some of it, some of the time, human beings are morally sick and enfeebled, with an innate tendency to moral evil. Yet he also believes God has gratuitously called human beings to share in the life of God Himself, and this would be something that even a perfect human nature would not give us the ability to do.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the gift of sanctifying grace, which heals our human nature from this wound of sin and raises us to fellowship with the Trinity, God gives us special abilities that enable us to operate according to a

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Benzinger Bros., 1920) (hereafter *ST*), I-II, q. 94, a. 3, resp. See also Mark Murphy, "The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/natural-law-ethics/>, esp. sec. nn. 1.3 & 2.1.

<sup>2</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 2, resp.

supernatural mode. One set of these habits perfect our reason to act in light of our supernatural end – these are the ‘theological’ virtues of faith, hope, and charity.<sup>3</sup>

Another set of these habits are what Aquinas calls the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. It should seem strange that we would need another set of habits/abilities, if human reason could guide us to form the right intentions for action. But, while human reason is directed toward human activity, our supernatural destiny is to share in God’s life. We then require a divine principle of action appropriate to God’s own mode of activity. The Gifts dispose human faculties so that they can act under the movements of the Holy Spirit immediately.<sup>4</sup> As people transformed by grace, those who have the Gifts are disposed to live their ordinary lives not merely in accord with what they know *about* God’s intentions, but as *living* or *acting* in close metaphysical connection with God’s actual mind and will. For example, we need the Gift of Counsel to make decisions in difficult matters. Aquinas’ analogy is that, where we would naturally have a lack of certainty in coming to difficult moral decisions, we ordinarily appeal to wiser people and seek counsel from others. So too Aquinas thinks the Gift allows us to be disposed to receive help from God in knowing what we ought to do in morally difficult matters, by ‘taking counsel’ with Him directly.<sup>5</sup>

A striking consequence of Aquinas’ moral theology is the possibility of receiving a call from the Holy Spirit to dedicate yourself to God as a religious. To forestall misinterpretation, Aquinas considers a call not as an audible voice or vision, but an interior movement of the Spirit that leads to a spontaneous desire to enter a religious order.<sup>6</sup> In fact, some of Aquinas’ contemporaries argued that we are obliged to respond immediately to God’s call to religious life only when that happens in an extraordinary way; otherwise, we are obligated to discern whether that interior desire to enter religious life is a product of the Holy Spirit or delusion. To the contrary, Aquinas argues that, “If then we are bound to obey immediately the audible voice of our Creator, how much more ought we not, unhesitatingly and unresistingly, to obey the interior whisper, whereby the Holy Spirit changes the heart of man. ... he who resists or hesitates, does not act by the impulse of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, “...the Holy Spirit gives His revelations not only by teaching man what he ought to speak, but by suggesting to him what he ought to do. When, therefore, a man is inspired by this Holy Spirit to enter religious life, it is his duty to follow the inspiration at once, without waiting to take counsel of human advisers.”<sup>8</sup>

One question about our obligation to enter religious life is epistemological, namely, “How do I know God is really calling me to become a religious?” Aquinas seems to think this is obvious: if you feel a desire to join religious life for good motives (e.g., desire to dedicate yourself to God wholly), then you are *ipso facto* being moved by the Holy Spirit and should not doubt His call to you.<sup>9</sup> I leave this epistemological claim to one side and want to focus on the fact that it is clear that Aquinas holds that failing to obey the voice of the Spirit, or to delay in doing so, would be to

---

<sup>3</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 62, a. 1, resp.

<sup>4</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 1, resp.

<sup>5</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 52, a. 1, esp. ad. 1 & 2.

<sup>6</sup> Aquinas thinks this is ordinarily the case; e.g., *Contra doctrinam retrahentium a religione*, trans. John Procter (in *An Apology for the Religious Orders*, London: Sands and Co., 1902), c. 9.

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

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 10: “But the postulants themselves cannot be in doubt as to the motive which leads them to seek the religious habit.”

doubt God and be morally blameworthy. Aquinas' position raises an important normative question because he elsewhere says repeatedly that dedicating yourself to a religious vocation is a paradigmatically *supererogatory* action. That is, entering religious life is an action which, while praiseworthy, goes beyond what is (at least ordinarily) morally required.

Aquinas interprets Scripture as counseling Christians that it is praiseworthy to give up spouse and all property for the single-minded pursuit of holiness. In order to make sense of these counsels, Aquinas draws a distinction between matters of *precept* – acts that are universally commanded – and *counsel*.<sup>10</sup> The distinction between precepts and counsels is not, however, a distinction between different virtues or standards of perfection applied to different classes of people.<sup>11</sup> On Aquinas' account, the perfection of the moral life, for all people, simply and radically consists in loving God through the virtue of charity. Being perfect in the love of God brings with it, as it were, all of the other acts that involve love of neighbor and fulfillment of all our other moral duties.<sup>12</sup> Whereas precepts forbid those acts that are *incompatible* with loving God (such as adultery), the counsels are supposed to be means for removing *obstacles* that impede love of God (such as occupation with business).<sup>13</sup>

The acts associated with the counsels are works of “supererogation” (*supererogationes*)<sup>14</sup>: “when something is permitted, if it is not done, it is not a sin; then, whatever more is done is ‘supererogatory.’”<sup>15</sup> Aquinas nevertheless draws a distinction. On one hand, everyone is obligated to observe the *spirit* of the counsels of perfection by both virtues of charity and (infused) religion. That is, every Christian is supposed to strive to be perfect in love of God, according to their circumstances.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Aquinas specifically highlights religious vows as a *state* of perfection whereby one publicly vows to observe the counsels of Christ and so to seek perfection. And here one arrives at what is supererogatory about the counsels: even though all are obliged to love God and to avoid sin, it is not universally obligatory that everyone observe the counsels by, for example, entering a religious order.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. The Paradox of the Supererogatory

---

<sup>10</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, resp.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Joseph Droste, “‘If You Will Be Perfect...’ – St. Thomas Aquinas on Evangelical Poverty,” in *Angelicum*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (2012): pp. 539-540.

<sup>12</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 7, resp. Aquinas qualifies that this claim is strictly understood as ruling out merely natural virtues.

<sup>13</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 3, resp.

<sup>14</sup> “Supererogatio” and its forms occur 45 times in Aquinas' corpus, according to the “Index Thomisticus” on [corpusthomicum.org](http://corpusthomicum.org), and it appears in most cases (especially in early works) that Aquinas holds the realm of the supererogatory and that of the counsels are co-extensive, if not identical. See, for example, *Liber contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem*, (Leonine ed., 1970), Pars II, c. 1, ad 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Super Mt.* (rep. Leodegarii Bissuntini, Taurini edition, 1951; [corpusthomicum.org](http://corpusthomicum.org), translation mine), cap. 10 l. 1: [...quando aliquid est permissum, si non fiat, non est peccatum; quicquid autem plus fit, supererogationis est.]

<sup>16</sup> See *Liber contra impugnantes*, Pars 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Quaestiones De Virtutibus* (Taurini ed., 1953), q. II, a. 11. See Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 111.

A well-known problem is that virtue-ethical accounts have a hard time accommodating the supererogatory, because it seems like the virtue-ethical notion of the morally obligatory is as follows:

“It is morally obligatory for an agent  $A$  to  $\Phi$  in circumstances  $C$  if and only if a fully virtuous and relevantly informed person  $V$  would characteristically  $\Phi$  in  $C$ .”<sup>18</sup>

The virtue ethicist who holds that there are supererogatory actions therefore has a burden of answering two questions: [1] why *wouldn't* the fully virtuous person perform the more praiseworthy among two or more possible actions open to them, and [2] what makes those actions praiseworthy, if those actions are such that the virtuous agent does not fail to be fully virtuous when opting not to perform them?

Even though Aquinas does not define moral obligation in terms of what a virtuous person would do, and instead in terms of right reason, the question of the supererogatory requires that Aquinas posit a distinct *set* of moral reasons that does not correspond to the standard of moral reasons in light of which we judge acts to be morally obligatory. The ethical law, on Aquinas' theory, is summed up in terms of precepts of charity, where we have reason to perform morally obligatory actions because those actions are constitutive of love of God or other people.<sup>19</sup> But then we need to answer why we have reason to dedicate ourselves to religious life, as it is not required for love of God or others. If Aquinas does not explain the connection between these two kinds of reasons for action, it could render Aquinas' account of the supererogatory incoherent: we would not be able to say *why* the vows are praiseworthy or why we should live in that way.

We have to be clear to distinguish the supererogatory from a conceptual neighbor: the possibility of a blameless moral fault.<sup>20</sup> It is clear that, for Aquinas, the choice to be married is *not* a blameless moral fault compared to the praiseworthy act of choosing to be a religious. Instead, choosing to be married can be an act of the perfectly virtuous agent just as well as choosing to be a religious. Aquinas gives the case of the biblical patriarch Abraham as a married, rich, lay man who was perfectly virtuous without living the counsels.<sup>21</sup> I point this out because this position that there are praiseworthy, but not obligatory, actions is conceptually different from the view that one could be blameless for doing less than a given standard – one does not entail the other.

One easy response would be to say that the problem of the supererogatory for virtue ethics presumes a certain kind of moral principle: one is morally obligated to do the thing that is *best* for you to do, within any given circumstances.<sup>22</sup> This principle is often implicated in the well-known 'paradox of the supererogatory,' where the paradox is stated with appeal to the view that we are obligated to perform that action which we have the best reasons to perform. Then, if the existence of the supererogatory implies that we are permitted to perform actions other than that action for

---

<sup>18</sup> Zhong Lei, “A Confucian Account of Supererogation,” in *Philosophy East & West*, Volume 66, Number 1 (Jan. 2016): p. 329.

<sup>19</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 44, a. 1, ad. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Munoz, “Three Paradoxes of Supererogation,” in *Nous* (2020): p. 2, DOI: 10.1111/nous.12326.

<sup>21</sup> *Liber de perfectione spiritualis vitae* (Leonine ed., 1970), c. 7.

<sup>22</sup> See Munoz, p. 1.

which we have the best reasons to perform, the view seems to involve an inconsistent set of assumptions.<sup>23</sup>

One might initially suppose this principle that we are obligated to do that action which we have the *most* reason to perform is obviously flawed, as it seems possible for there to be no one morally ‘best’ option in some circumstances; e.g., where one chooses among morally equivalent or even incommensurable options. Consider the case where I am in a burning building and can rescue only two of the four children present, all of who are alike and have no personal relationship to me. It does not seem like rescuing any possible set of two children is any better or worse than any other, as all options would be horrifically tragic for two of the children and their parents. Perhaps too there are cases of action where the obligation to do the best thing would not apply as all the options are morally neutral.<sup>24</sup> Or, one could hold that there is no one best option in a choice of a vocation in life, as there can be multiple incommensurate choices among being, for example, a scientist and seeking goods of the mind versus becoming a hospital nurse who seeks the good of health for his patients. We can imagine a perfectly virtuous scientist, going about his business exemplifying love of others in his pursuit of scientific truth, just as we can imagine the perfectly virtuous nurse doing the same at the hospital.<sup>25</sup>

Yet we can still ask whether Aquinas’ virtue ethics requires subscription to a similar moral principle that it is morally obligatory to do the *better* of any two or more moral options, relative to an agent and their circumstances. This more qualified principle requires not that one determine one single best action, but involves a merely agent-relative evaluation that an ethical agent would be defective (in terms of practical wisdom, for example) if they chose a lesser good over other greater goods. Then, the fact that there might be incommensurate or commensurable equal goods does not rule out that there might be cases where I would be morally praiseworthy for choosing a higher good rather than a lesser good. To say that there is an action that is praiseworthy but not required seems to imply that I am seeking some good that can be weighed against other actions open to me, as a commensurate kind of good. The case of vocations is illustrative: in weighing whether to be a married layperson or a religious monk, it is not obvious that I am weighing commensurate equal or incommensurate goods against one another when deciding between a life of sacrifice with a spouse or in a religious order. More specifically, too, Aquinas reads the Catholic dogmatic tradition as indicating that the life of the evangelical counsels is an objectively higher or more perfect way of life – indirectly implying that these goods *can* be weighed against each other, if a religious way of life in celibacy is better than marriage.<sup>26</sup>

It seems obvious then that Aquinas will be committed to rejecting or qualifying the principle that one is always obligated to choose the better. The example of Abraham makes clear that one

---

<sup>23</sup> For example, such a principle of ‘dominance reasoning’ is assumed in Christian Tarsney, “Rejecting Supererogationism,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 100 (2019): p. 605: “This argument crucially assumes that, according to the supererogationist theory *T<sub>s</sub>*, A has equal or greater all-things-considered reason to choose the supererogatory option O as to choose the merely-permissible option P.” See also Alfred Archer, “Supererogation,” in *Philosophy Compass* (2018): p. 5, DOI: 10.1111/phc3.12476.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., Munoz, pp. 3-8.

<sup>25</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), pp. 1-16.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon Bourke (New York: Hanover House, 1956) (hereafter *SCG*), III, c. 136, n. 16. See further in *ST II-II*, q. 186, a. 4, resp.

can be a perfectly virtuous agent while still choosing something less than the ‘better’ option open to one in given circumstances. But to point this out does nothing more than restate the problem of the supererogatory for Aquinas. The problem is then *why* we should reject or qualify a moral principle that we should always do the better. It would otherwise seem that, on Aquinas’ virtue ethical assumptions about normativity, one is less than perfectly virtuous if you choose anything *other than* what is best or better among those options open to you in any given ethical situation. I will propose that Aquinas’ response to this problem can be rendered plausible when we clearly distinguish different sources of normativity. Aquinas, I will argue, proposes that there are overlapping, compatible sources of moral normativity, involving different kinds of evaluation of an action.

### 3. The False Start: Qualified Supererogationism

Contemporary philosophers often distinguish two kinds of theories of the supererogatory. Qualified supererogationism holds that “there are actions which lie beyond the call of duty, but their value is derived from their being hypothetical duties, subjective duties, duties from which one may be excused, that is, duties in a weaker sense.” Unqualified supererogationism holds that “supererogatory actions lie entirely and without qualification beyond the requirements of morality and that is the source of their unique value.”<sup>27</sup> Aquinas seems to rule out the possibility of an unqualifiedly supererogatory action in claiming that every intentional individual act must be either good or evil; there are no intentional actions anyone can perform that are morally indifferent because one always acts in light of some circumstances that order otherwise indifferent acts to some end.<sup>28</sup> While there may be one sense in which there are morally equivalent actions for Aquinas, it will not help resolve the paradox of the supererogatory to appeal to them. In addition, on Aquinas’ account, to be a good act is to be an action directed to an appropriate end (one in accord with right reason), and these appropriate ends seem to be nothing other than willing in conformity with the Divine will.<sup>29</sup> This makes it appear that Aquinas could not hold, as other theories of the supererogatory hold, that there are non-moral reasons (in addition to the moral reasons one has to perform an action) in light of which an action could be praiseworthy but not obligatory. All of the reasons for action must be morally normative ones, that is, reasons in light of which this action is in accord with right practical reason.

It is therefore tempting to interpret Aquinas as proposing a qualified theory of the supererogatory, on which we collapse what might otherwise seem to be distinct kinds of moral reasons for action (those in light of which you perform morally obligatory duties and those in light of which you follow the counsels of perfection) together into one class of moral reasons. If we read Aquinas as holding a qualified theory of the supererogatory, Aquinas would be distinguishing moral reasons according to subjective circumstances of each agent, such that a particular person can have moral reasons that excuse one from performing the supererogatory action which they would otherwise have reason to do. Such a view of the supererogatory has, in fact, been attributed to Aquinas:

---

<sup>27</sup> David Heyd, “Supererogation,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2019), sec. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *ST I-II*, q. 18, a. 9.

<sup>29</sup> *ST I-II*, q. 19, a. 10.



“Another line of justifying supererogation...goes back to Thomas Aquinas but has some contemporary followers who sometimes speak in terms of *vocation*. Supererogatory behavior is required, but not of *everybody*. It can be expected only from those who subjectively feel the commitment to do it or from those who are objectively blessed with the necessary strength of character and virtue. ...this approach is based on a principle of *excuse*: most human beings, due to their frail moral nature and imperfection are excused from omitting what from an ideal (religious, ethical) point of view is prescribed as a duty.”<sup>30</sup>

One can find Rawls and other authors appealing to a similarly qualified approach to the supererogatory, taking one as excused from following a general duty to pursue ideal moral behavior, or as entitled to ignore certain practical reasons for action.<sup>31</sup> While many of these might confuse the question of blameless moral fault with praiseworthy non-obligatory actions (and Aquinas’ clearly does not hold that choosing married life necessarily involves a moral fault), this interpretation of Aquinas as holding such a qualified theory would require that one ‘falls short of the moral ideal’ in obeying only a limited subset of moral duties that applies to your own situation, compared with a fuller set of such duties that might apply to more capable persons.

On this view, agent-relative considerations qualify the principle that one is always obligated to choose the better within the context of *one’s given circumstances*. And Aquinas quite explicitly qualifies his acceptance of a principle that we are always obligated to do what is better to circumstances:

“It must be said that any two things can be compared with each other both absolutely and according to some particular case. For nothing prohibits that which is absolutely better from being the less preferred in some case, e.g. philosophizing is absolutely better than increasing your wealth, but in time of necessity the latter is to be preferred. And any precious pearl is dearer than one piece of bread, but in a case of hunger the bread is to be preferred to the pearl...”<sup>32</sup>

Aquinas applies the principle to say that a bishop or theologian can be obliged in certain circumstances to leave off study or teaching theology, even though such works benefit more people, in order to engage in pastoral work.<sup>33</sup>

Further, Aquinas makes claims that can appear to imply this kind of qualified principle as applying to the counsels: “The aforesaid counsels, considered in themselves, are expedient to all; but owing to some people being ill-disposed, it happens that some of them are inexpedient, because their disposition is not inclined to such things.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, perhaps religious life is universally better for everyone and a duty for all, but some people’s subjective circumstances excuse them from pursuing the vowed religious life due to their inability to undertake what is required (e.g., physical

---

<sup>30</sup> Heyd, sec. 3.2. See also David Heyd, *Supererogation* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 22-23.

<sup>31</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 117. See also Joseph Raz, “Permissions and Supererogation”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 12 (1975): pp. 161–168.

<sup>32</sup> *Quodlibetal Questions 1 and 2*, tr. Sandra Edwards, *Mediaeval Sources in Translation*, 27 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983), *Quodlibet I*, q. 7, a. 2, *sed contra*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, resp.

<sup>34</sup> *ST I-II*, q. 108, a. 4, ad. 1.

capacity to work among the poor, or emotional capacity to live in community and share all goods).<sup>35</sup> On this reading of Aquinas as holding a theory of the qualified supererogatory, there is only one source of moral normativity, and so a standing obligation to do the better thing in your subjective circumstances, but actions are counted as supererogatory in virtue of not everyone standing in the same subjective circumstances. The religious state of life is only *effectively* required of some, yet *conditionally* of all. Even if someone rejected the idea of standing obligation, the essential aspect of this interpretation is that religious life constitutes a moral idea, so that a qualified interpretation of the supererogatory in Aquinas would require holding that those who do not embrace the counsels are doing something morally inferior to those in the religious state.

But we have already seen that Aquinas holds that only one thing is required for moral perfection: charity or love of God. If the married and rich patriarch Abraham can live perfect charity without embracing the counsels, or even be a better person than a monk, there is no clear sense in which Abraham is actually living less of a moral ideal than a monastic.<sup>36</sup> And Aquinas is very clear that one *can* use the goods of the world in a morally legitimate way and that the counsels only make it objectively *easier* for one to live up to the moral ideal; the counsels do not make one capable of living a certain degree of charity not otherwise accessible to lay persons.<sup>37</sup>

In explaining the counsels, Aquinas notes that being poorer (for example) does not mean that one is more perfect in charity: “perfection consists in those things which pertain to an interior disposition of the mind, and especially in the act of charity which is the root of all the virtues. But secondarily and accidentally, this perfection also consists in certain external things, such as virginity, poverty, and other such things. .... [for example] poverty does not pertain to perfection unless it dispose one to follow Christ. For, we follow Him not with the movements of our body, but with the affections of the soul.”<sup>38</sup> And, thus, “it does not follow that he who is poorer is more perfect. ...he is said to be more perfect whose poverty separates him the more from earthly occupations and makes him freer in devoting himself to God.”<sup>39</sup> For this same reason, while it is certainly true that dedicating yourself to religious life in the vows may involve an act of the virtue of magnanimity and a certain intensity of devotion, feeling or acts of virtue should not *constitute* the religious vocation or what is morally praiseworthy about it. Everyone is bound to have all the virtues, and acts against the virtues are morally blameworthy for everyone, so the fact that embracing a vocation exemplifies or requires a virtue would not explain the unique value of a vocation.<sup>40</sup> Further, the interpretation of Aquinas as holding a qualified view of the supererogatory seems to make a hash of Aquinas’ understanding of the religious vocation. If everyone has a

---

<sup>35</sup> This be plausibly attributed to Richard Butler, *Religious Vocation: An Unnecessary Mystery* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co., 1961). E.g., pp. 70-78 on the universal call to the religious counsels, and pp. 116-127 on legitimate excusing circumstances, physical or psychological, and pp. 152-154 on vocational calls to particular people.

<sup>36</sup> *SCG* III, c. 137, n. 3.

<sup>37</sup> *SCG* III, c. 130.

<sup>38</sup> *Quaestiones De Virtutibus*, q. 2, a. 11, ad 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Pace* Edward Farrell, “The Nature of Sacerdotal and Religious Vocation,” in *The Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Convention* (New York: Catholic Theological Society of America, 1957): pp. 186-187.

defeasible duty to enter the religious life, then it is not clear what work the Holy Spirit is doing (or why) calling particular individuals to the religious state of life.<sup>41</sup>

In light of these claims, in Aquinas' earlier claim that religious vows are inexpedient for the ill-disposed need not be interpreted as a claim that one is excused from the general obligation, but only that choosing to enter religious life may not be good for some people or in some circumstances. For example, a person who has a desire to join religious life for a stable income or to escape from their problems with the other sex would likely not be helped, and instead morally impaired, by entering a religious order. The claim that the counsels are good for everyone in general would neither conflict with the view that they would be counter-productive for such ill-disposed people, nor would it entail that everyone has a duty to embrace them.<sup>42</sup> One can hold that the counsels are good for everyone (that is, praiseworthy that all profess them), without holding that everyone has a standing duty to undertake religious vows or that they are constitutive of a moral ideal.

#### 4. Unqualified Supererogation and Multiple Sources of Ethical Normativity

The interpretation of Aquinas' theory as qualified supererogation collapses all moral normativity to a kind of general, universal moral obligation, and thereby misses something important about Aquinas' ethics that involves the aspect in which one relies on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit and a relationship with a personal God to live the moral life. There are therefore reasons to approach Aquinas as proposing an unqualified account of the supererogatory. On this reading, the value of the counsels lies in the special fact that they are not required as a matter of general obligation or constitutive of the moral ideal. Notice, first, that what had inclined us to reject an unqualified account of supererogatory in Aquinas does not rule out such an interpretation. Aquinas holds that every particular action we perform must be good or evil, but he never says we cannot be faced with a choice between a good and a better action. (And God and the blessed appear to be ordinarily faced with choices where no options are morally evil).<sup>43</sup> And we have seen Aquinas holds that an action can be generally praiseworthy, even if not obligatory for any particular person, and yet that this same action can be obligatory given some other considerations.

But, if Aquinas does hold an unqualified theory of supererogation, this requires that there be distinct sources of moral normativity that overlap in the life of an individual: i.e., there is one source of moral normativity that establishes what is obligatory in regard to precepts and another that establishes what is praiseworthy in the counsels. I believe Aquinas' account of how these sources interact removes much of the paradox, in light of two distinctions he draws in regard to moral normativity. One distinction to be made is that, for Aquinas, there are two standards of evaluation that get confused in the typical presentation of the paradox of supererogation for virtue ethics: what is good *for everyone* and what is good *for me*. Aquinas' brand of virtue ethics does not determine what we have moral reason to do merely by the standard of what is required for any

---

<sup>41</sup> One could end up with an implausible reading in which one has been called by the Holy Spirit to become a religious only in virtue of actually *having chosen to be* one; Butler comes close: pp. 72-74, 128-129.

<sup>42</sup> Aquinas notes in *Liber de perfectione*, trans. John Procter (in *The Religious State, the Episcopate and the Priestly Office*, St. Louis: B. Herder, 1902), ch. XXIII: ““Some men live in a state of perfection, while their charity is either very imperfect, or does not exist...”

<sup>43</sup> E.g., *ST I*, q. 19, a. 10, ad. 2; *De Veritate*, q. 24, a. 8.

given individual to live a good life. Aquinas' ethics holds that some goods are ineliminably plural or common.<sup>44</sup> In many contexts Aquinas quite explicitly appeals to a communal standard of what is good for society, as, for example, in describing what is good about acts of courageous self-sacrifice.<sup>45</sup> What counts as good for me and my life is sometimes what furthers someone else's well-being, even when that requires me to sacrifice my own life, as when a mother sacrifices her life for her children. Even more particularly, charity is an archetypically relational virtue. My perfection in charity does not exist in isolation from other people, because the virtue is precisely *friendship* of a certain kind; and you cannot be a friend by yourself.<sup>46</sup>

When we recognize that Aquinas' virtue ethics is not an 'individualist' virtue ethics, we can notice that he explicitly identifies the good of religious vocations as a communal good for the society of the Church, the supernatural human community. In his discussion of individual counsels, he explains their value as a communal one: "since many things are needed for man's life, for which one man could not suffice of himself, it is necessary for different jobs to be done by different people. For some should be farmers, some caretakers of animals, some builders, and so on for the other tasks. And since the life of man requires not only corporeal but, even more, spiritual goods, it is also necessary for some men to devote their time to spiritual things, for the betterment of others; and these must be freed from concern over temporal matters."<sup>47</sup> Even more strongly, he claims that "the community of mankind would not be in a perfect state unless there were some people who direct their intention to generative acts [i.e., married people] and others who refrain from these acts and devote themselves to contemplation."<sup>48</sup> For this reason, then, it seems plausible that what *makes* a religious state supererogatory is in part that it contributes to the good of the community, whether directly (by active works) or indirectly (by contemplation), because the diversity among states in the Church, including the presence of religious, contributes to the Church's well-being or its 'beauty'.<sup>49</sup> And we can see why this distinction would help ground two different standards of moral normativity: communal goods are required for the community to flourish and so good for it, but that leaves indeterminate whether any given individual is required to perform that role or take up that state, so that any particular individual in the community does not have a moral obligation to become a religious.

Yet not every act or state performed for the communal good is supererogatory or supererogatory in the same way. For example, Aquinas holds that acts of fasting are supererogatory in the qualified sense as being a standing, generic obligation: everyone is obliged to fast, but the general obligation does not require that one fast at any particular time (although the Church can oblige fasting in Lent, for instance).<sup>50</sup> Further, acts that are otherwise supererogatory can, by circumstance, become obligatory. Religious orders (e.g., Mercedarian or Trinitarian friars) can make a supererogatory vow to sell themselves into slavery and ransom others, but someone can

---

<sup>44</sup> See Charles De Koninck, *De la primauté du bien commun contre les personnalistes* (Montréal/Québec, Fides/Éditions de l'Université Laval, 1943); Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, *Sententia libri Ethicorum* (Leonine ed., 1969), Bk VIII, lec. 1 & 2; see also *ST II-II*, q. 124, a. 5, a. 3; q. 61, a. 1.

<sup>46</sup> E.g., *ST II-II*, q. 23, a. 1.

<sup>47</sup> *SCG III*, c. 134, n. 2.

<sup>48</sup> *SCG III*, c. 136, n. 11.

<sup>49</sup> *ST II-II*, 183, a. 2.

<sup>50</sup> *ST II-II*, q. 147, a. 3, ad. 1.

also, in special circumstances, be morally required to give their life for others or to perform an act of courage that would be supererogatory under ordinary circumstances.<sup>51</sup>

For this reason, a second distinction needs to be drawn to properly understand Aquinas' claims about supererogation. This is best understood in the context of Aquinas' claim that one can be obliged to obey the call of the Holy Spirit to enter religious life. Specifically, we need to see that, while virtue ethicists are acknowledged as particularists about moral principles, Aquinas' ethics has a deeper element of *relational* particularism that comes in large part from his theological commitments.<sup>52</sup> Our concrete relation to our friends, family, and God are a significant factor in determining our moral obligations throughout the course of our lives. Aquinas outlines an objective order among relationships, such that some relationships are normatively more important than others.<sup>53</sup> These relationships do not merely determine our moral circumstances, under which general moral norms apply to us, but also the concrete shape under which our life is a flourishing or perfected human life.

Naturally, for Aquinas, all the actions of a good human life depend intimately on the particular relationship and history one has with God – not merely my choice of a state in life. And so, Aquinas' account of the supererogatory extends to both states of life and actions, although all supererogatory actions fall under the general ambit of the counsels: in performing any supererogatory action, one is always acting in the *spirit* of the counsels.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, the fact that Aquinas' moral theology does not require merely individual perfection, but a perfection in concrete relationships with others and with God, allows us to understand Aquinas' insistence that we need the Gifts of the Holy Spirit *in addition* to the theological virtue of charity. My life is only a flourishing life when I am properly in relationship with God, but there is no fixed rule that allows me to determine what I ought to do to maintain or deepen my relationship with God (aside from avoiding what would damage or destroy my relationship to God). For this reason, I need to be dynamically responsive to Him through a habit (a Gift) which is distinct from charity.<sup>55</sup>

In this context, it is misleading to claim that Aquinas accepts the principle that we are morally obligated to perform that action for which we have the more all-things-considered reasons to perform. First, the fact that there are communal reasons to do something (e.g., reasons for the community to have some dedicated to supererogatory states) does not automatically give *me* a reason to perform an action. An action or state can be better in terms of the community's needs without entailing that I must perform that action. Second, every action we perform must have good moral reasons (i.e., must be in accord with God's will and right reason), but a constitutive part of our moral reasons are contingent relationships that we have with other persons in our life. While I

---

<sup>51</sup> *Liber de perfectione*, ch. XIV.

<sup>52</sup> For a perspective that accentuates this aspect of Aquinas' ethics, see Eleonore Stump, "The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas's Ethics," in *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 28, Iss. 1 (2011): DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201128114.

<sup>53</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 26.

<sup>54</sup> E.g., *ST* I-II, q. 108, a. 4, resp.: "Now if a man observe these absolutely, this is in accordance with the counsels as they stand. But if a man observe any one of them in a particular case, this is taking that counsel in a restricted sense, namely, as applying to that particular case. For instance, when anyone gives an alms to a poor man, not being bound so to do, he follows the counsels in that particular case...." Further, see Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, (London: Continuum, 2006), p 112.

<sup>55</sup> E.g., Michael Sherwin, *By Knowledge and Love* (Catholic University of America Press, 2005), esp. pp. 163-170, 204-238. See also Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. pp. 108-128.

have reason to embrace a religious state because it frees me to love God, and I can recognize that it does so better than the lay life, *my* reasons for action cannot be calculated without appeal to my relationships to other persons and their normative weight for me, including my relation to God.<sup>56</sup> It is important to note that these intuitions about morality are not parochial to Aquinas or Christianity. Confucianism, for example, is a virtue ethics in which the form of life appropriate to human beings critically or centrally involves relations with other people (e.g., the central virtue is a relational virtue, *ren* 仁, similar in many ways to Aquinas' *caritas*).<sup>57</sup> It is possible that these other virtue ethics could adopt elements of the Thomistic account of supererogation as well.<sup>58</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In sum, I take it that there are three dimensions of moral evaluation that help us to understand Aquinas' theory of the supererogatory. On one level of evaluation, we can ask whether an action is compatible with charity. This is what determines whether an action is morally required in a general way of any human being, because loving God and neighbor is required for being a good individual. On a second level of evaluation, we can ask whether an action or state of life benefits human society (e.g., the Church). These states of life or actions will be praiseworthy in virtue of promoting communal well-being, even though not morally required of any particular human being. Lastly, we can evaluate whether my concrete relationship with God or others might require me to give myself in a particular way to an action or state of life, that is, whether I have obligations arising from these relationships to sacrifice myself for others or from a specific call of God that gives me reason to dedicate my life to the religious state.<sup>59</sup> Here I can be blameworthy or morally defective for not having followed those obligations or that call, even if the action are supererogatory in other circumstances.<sup>60</sup> Yet, it remains true that, in my free and dynamic relationship with God, I might always do something *better* for Him, and so that the possibility of supererogatory acts is always open to me.

The reason for this permanent possibility is that there is no way for us to love God completely perfectly; "...the object of the Divine love which is God surpasses the judgment of reason, wherefore it is not measured by reason but transcends it."<sup>61</sup> In this theological context, the principle that one would be always obliged to do what is best, or that action for which I have better

---

<sup>56</sup> This has applicability to other ethical cases like Genesis 22; see Matthew Levering, "God and the Natural Law," *Modern Theology*, 24:2 (April 2008): pp. 151-177.

<sup>57</sup> For an overview, Antonio Cua, "Early Confucian Virtue Ethics," in *Dao Companion to Classical Confucian Philosophy*, ed. Vincent Shen (Springer Netherlands, 2014), pp. 290-334; and Yong Huang, "Why Confucian Ethics is a Virtue Ethics, Virtue Ethics Is Not A Bad Thing, And Neville Should Endorse It," in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 47:3-4 (September-December 2020): pp. 283-294.

<sup>58</sup> There has been controversy among Confucians as to how to understand supererogation: e.g., Timothy Connolly, "Sagehood and Supererogation in the *Analects*," in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40:2 (June 2013): pp. 269-286; Zhong Lei, "A Confucian Account of Supererogation,"; Tsung-Hsing Ho, "The Suberogation problem for Lei Zhong's Confucian Virtue Theory of Supererogation," in *Philosophy East & West*, Volume 69, Number 3 (July 2019): pp. 779-784.

<sup>59</sup> Compare St. Francis of the Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. Henry Mackey (Tan Books, 1997), p. 335: "The counsels are all given for the perfection of the Christian people, but not for that of each Christian in particular." And, "the loving heart does not receive a counsel for its utility, but to conform itself to the desire of him who gives the counsel, and to render him the homage due to his will" (p. 334).

<sup>60</sup> Aquinas claims *every* act of supererogation can sometimes be obligatory; *ST* II-II, q. 124, a. 3, ad. 1.

<sup>61</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 27, a. 6, ad. 3.

reason to perform than any other action, breaks down. There is *always* something better I can do in my relationship with God, and no unique ‘better’ option in any given circumstance. For this reason, Aquinas notes that the Christian living in grace, sharing in the life of God Himself and so under the ‘New Law’ of the Spirit (as opposed to the moral precepts of the Old Testament), allows for the possibility of supererogatory actions in a way that is not otherwise possible:

“...there are works which are not necessarily opposed to, or in keeping with faith that worketh through love. ...to each one it is free to decide what he should do or avoid; and to each superior, to direct his subjects in such matters as regards what they must do or avoid. Wherefore also in this respect the Gospel is called the ‘law of liberty’ ....”<sup>62</sup>

Aquinas’ moral particularism has implications for how we should understand the call of the Spirit. Aquinas’ apparent epistemic over-confidence in being able to discern the voice of the Spirit is understandable in this relational context: you cannot easily be confused whether you are burning with a loving desire to give yourself to God. Consequently, if we imagine what Aquinas’ advice would be for those discerning a religious vocation, it would likely involve engaging in prayer to hear whether God wants you to give yourself in this way, and to experience, in visits to a religious community, paying attention to whether that way of life fills you with zeal for God and neighbor (or not!). It would be a mistake to enter religious life if one only felt an abstract obligation or felt obliged by pressure from family or friends, but did not intend to enter into the right kind of personal relationship to God.<sup>63</sup> Rather, as St. Augustine notes in his rule for monastics, what should draw you to embrace a supererogatory state of life is that you freely desire to do something beautiful for God: “The Lord grant that you may observe all these precepts in a spirit of charity as lovers of spiritual beauty, giving forth the good odor of Christ in the holiness of your lives: not as slaves living under the law but as men living in freedom under grace.”<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> *ST I-II*, q. 108, a. 1, resp.

<sup>63</sup> One may note a distinction in moral evaluation of my *motivation* to vow religious life or marriage, and another of my actions *after* I have so vowed (even for defective reasons). I can still have obligations in virtue of my vow, regardless of whether I had defective motivations for making one.

<sup>64</sup> Translated by Robert Russell (based on Luc Verheijen, *La regle de saint Augustin*, Etudes Augustiniennes, Paris, 1967): <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/ruleaug.html> (accessed 12 April 2021).