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VIRTUES AS DISPOSITIONS: DIFFERENT APPROACHES IN MEDIEVAL ANALYTIC THOUGHT

Abstract: Is virtue a disposition? Can we understand the Greek “hexis”—used in the Aristotelian definition of virtue—as a kind of disposition? Were virtues considered dispositions in medieval philosophy and theology? I am going to show that definitions of virtues represent different approaches with respect to the first question and that medieval analytic thinkers who developed interesting theories concerning virtues and the concept of *habitus*, were not unanimous in this matter. In my paper, I refer to works of such figures as Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, Alain of Lille and Simon of Tournai, as well as to fragments from recently edited *Quaestiones Theologiae* by Stephen Langton. Finally, I am going to present the theory of Thomas Aquinas. The analyses provided by these authors reveal that disposition was conceptualized differently by medieval analytic authors, and that this concept did not always fit with the definition of virtue. They also give us valuable insights concerning the notion of disposition.

Key words: virtue, *habitus*, disposition, Aristotle, Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, Simon of Tournai, Stephen Langton, Thomas Aquinas

1. Introduction

Can we say that virtues, e.g. courage, temperance, friendliness or justice, are dispositions? This question seems important if we try to define the range of our potential dispositions. Virtues are natural candidates to be part of them, due to the fact that in some translations of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, they are explicitly defined as dispositions. However, one can doubt: can we understand the Greek “hexis” used in the Aristotelian definition of virtue as “disposition”? There is also another important question: is the Aristotelian approach to the concepts of virtues and dispositions the only correct way to understand them?

An interesting set of material which is helpful in considering these problems are several utterances of medieval thinkers, who for their precision and analytic approach, represent what can be called medieval analytic thought. Their analyses and insights can inspire us to consider different possible relationships between such concepts as: virtue, *habitus* and disposition. In their examples, we can see an evolution of thinking about those relationships and examine the roots of a shift in understanding the term “disposition.”

In this paper, I will first refer to a seminal article on the concept of *habitus* by Cary J. Nederman (1989), who examined the relationships between *habitus* and virtue in the works of prominent medieval thinkers, and to a polemic text by Marcia L. Colish (1993). These two papers provide us with deep knowledge on how medievals understood and used such terms. However, although these and other authors in different works dealt with medieval definitions of virtue which referred to the concept of disposition (e.g. Cunningham 1969), among them many works on Aquinas’s theory of virtue (e.g., Torchia 2002; Goris 2017; Whitmore 2018; Mattison III 2019; Swanstrom 2020), or asked about virtues as dispositions in a modern context (Socket 2009; Azzano and Raimondi 2023), to my knowledge, they have not directly posed and answered the question of whether medieval authors, including early scholastics, understood virtues as dispositions. I hope this article will be a valuable contribution to the debate.

Below, I plan to refer to an interesting fragment from Peter Abelard’s *Ethics*, and compare it to the approach of his disciple John of Salisbury, adding a critical note to one of Nederman’s interpretations. Next, I will present the approach of Simon of Tournai, as well as interesting fragments from recently edited and published *Quaestiones Theologiae* by Stephen Langton, and conclude with the theory provided by Thomas Aquinas. This material will be very helpful in answering the questions posed in the first paragraph of this introduction. Its presentation will be preceded by a comparison of definitions of virtue, including different translations of the definition provided by Aristotle.

Lastly, let me add a short linguistic note: I will use English words “virtue” and “disposition,” but at the same time I will write “*habitus*” and not “habit” to avoid misunderstanding caused by the modern use of this term. This decision has been inspired by a caveat, which will be quoted in section 6, made by Nicholas Austin (2017, p. 23–24).

2. Definitions

Let us start with selected modern and medieval definitions of virtue expressed in English. A relatively representative example of the modern approach to this term has been presented by Rosalind Hursthouse and

Glen Pettigrove (2023) in the entry “Virtue Ethics” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. The authors define virtue as “an excellent trait of character” and “a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor—something that, as we say, goes all the way down, unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker—to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways.” Hence, they explicitly state that virtues are dispositions. They also contrast them with “habits,” understood, as we will see below, in an absolutely different way than medieval thinkers did. Contrary to a virtue, a habit would be something which is not “well entrenched in its possessor.” An illustration they give is being a tea-drinker, so we can deduce that, in their view, being a tea-drinker is something that is not deeply rooted in a person and that can be easily changed.

So how did medievals define virtue, and how did they understand such terms as “*habitus*” and “disposition”? As Jeroen J.W. Laemers (2005, p. 119) points out, a current definition of virtue in the twelfth century was: “virtue is the condition or disposition of the well-ordered mind” (*virtus est habitus mentis bene constitutae*). He indicates that this formula was present in the writings of Boethius and that it was him who introduced “this definition into the ethical discourse of the Latin West.” He also reports that both theologians (he mentions Anselm of Laon and Peter Abelard) and monastic writers, as well as civil lawyers adopted this formula. The examples analysed below will confirm his thesis. We should also note that Laemers decided to translate the word “*habitus*” as “condition or disposition.” This interpretation decides that virtues are or can be understood as dispositions. Such a translation decision is not illegitimate. Yet, as we will see below, at least some twelfth-century thinkers would not be able to accept it, if we assume that “disposition” means the same as what they called *dispositio*.

Notably, Nederman translates this word differently. As he argues at the beginning of his article, “among the range of moral concepts that the Middle Ages derived from Aristotle, few exercised greater influence than the doctrine of *habitus* (a term ordinarily translated as ‘habit,’ but more properly meaning ‘state’ or ‘condition’)” (Nederman 1989, p. 87). Hence, “condition” appears again, but instead of “disposition” Nederman proposes the word “state.” We should note that in the next sentence, he supports his claim by pointing out the thirteenth-century thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas, Godfrey of Fontaines, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham, who “placed *habitus* (derived from the Greek term ἕξις) near the heart of their studies of ethics.” He also adds that this “thirteenth-century interest in the concept of *habitus*” is likely to be explained “on the basis of the appearance of Robert Grosseteste’s full translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean*

Ethics.” It clearly shows that Nederman combines the career of this word in the ethical discourse with the entrance onto the scene of Aristotle’s ethics. He adopts the Aristotelian understanding of *habitus* and presents it as an equivalent of Greek ἔξις. However, it will not apply to the use of the word *habitus* by the twelfth-century thinkers, as Colish will later point out (1993, p. 80).

Let us finally take a look at Aristotle’s definition of virtue and its English translations. As Stagiritae writes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*:

ἔστιν ἄρα ἡ ἀρετὴ ἔξις προαιρετική, ἐν μεσότητι οὖσα τῇ πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ὠρισμένη λόγῳ καὶ ᾧ ἂν ὁ φρόνιμος ὀρίσειεν. (Aristotle, *Ethica*, II.6, 1106b36–1107a1)

According to the translation of David Ross from 1925:

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. (Aristotle 1925, p. 31)

Greek ἔξις has been translated as “a state of character.” In the translation of Jonathan Barnes from 1984, it is shortened to “a state.” The first part of this definition is translated as follows: “Excellence, then, is a state concerned with choice... (...)” (Aristotle 1984, electronic markup 1991, p. 25). Both translations emphasise that, before all, virtue is something stable that exists in a human and that is a fact concerning this person. This is an approach which resigns from the word “disposition.”

By contrast, the translation by Harris Rackham, first published in 1926, reconciles the above-mentioned stability with the concept of disposition. According to this translation: “Virtue then is a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions... (...)” (ed. Aristotle 1956, p. 95). So ἔξις is a disposition, however, a special kind of disposition, such that it is settled in humans, which corresponds to the idea of stability. And consequently, virtue is a kind of disposition as well.

Also Richard Kraut, in his entry “Aristotle’s Ethics” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, includes “disposition” as an element of the definition of virtue and of the meaning of ἔξις. As he states, “Aristotle describes ethical virtue as a ‘hexis’ (‘state’ ‘condition’ ‘disposition’)—a tendency or disposition, induced by our habits, to have appropriate feelings” (Kraut 2022). Interestingly, he distinguishes disposition and what he calls “habits” as two elements, such that the former is induced by the latter. At the same time, disposition is one possible meaning of ἔξις. Thus, the

“habits” that he mentions should not be identified with *habitus* which is a Latin word for ἕξις. Anyhow, what is most important at this stage is that Kraut represents the approach according to which, in Aristotle’s view, virtue can be understood as disposition, and presents it in one of the most influential philosophical encyclopedias.

3. Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury

Peter Abelard precisely set up for the next generations the relationship between the three concepts: virtue, *habitus* and disposition. In his theory, he included two important elements of this relationship which are: the process of gaining virtues and the degree of their stability.

First, as Nederman notices, according to Abelard, “virtue is something which is necessarily the product of human effort” (Nederman 1989, p. 95). This scholar points out that for Abelard, shaping such a moral character requires “struggle” and “active process.” “Purely natural or instinctual inclination” is not sufficient to speak about virtue. Even more, in Abelard’s view, virtue can be credited to someone who develops his character “contrary to his nature” (Nederman 1989, p. 96).

Second, Abelard utilizes the above-mentioned formula transmitted to the Latin West by Boethius and clearly distinguishes between *habitus* and dispositions. Let us quote an extensive fragment from his *Ethics*:

The philosophers have agreed that virtue is by no means said to be in us unless it is a *habitus* of the best mind or a *habitus* of the well-ordered mind. Now, what they call *habitus* or *dispositio*, Aristotle diligently distinguished in the first species of quality, that is, teaching that those qualities which do not inhere naturally in us, but arrive by our application, are designated *habitus* or *disposiciones*. They are called *habitus* if they are difficult to change – such are, he says, knowledge and the virtues; by contrast, they are called *disposiciones* if they are easily changed. (Abelard, *Ethica*, 128, transl. Nederman 1989)

Hence, we see that Abelard knows Aristotle’s idea of *habitus* and dispositions. He shows that both of them belong to the category of quality (according to the Aristotelian framework of ten categories) and are not natural, but require application, or in other words: a sort of practical training. At the same time, there is a huge difference between them. Disposition can be easily changed, whereas *habitus* is quite the opposite. Finally, Abelard expresses a common opinion of philosophers that we have virtue if it is a *habitus*. Hence, *a contrario*, virtue is not a disposition.

We should note here that Aristotle indeed presents such a distinction in his *Categories*, where he writes:

One sort of quality let us call 'habit' or 'disposition'. Habit differs from disposition in being more lasting and more firmly established. The various kinds of knowledge and of virtue are habits... (...) By a disposition, on the other hand, we mean a condition that is easily changed and quickly gives place to its opposite. (Aristotle, *Categories*, 8, transl. Edghill)

However, a few sentences later the Stagirite adds:

Habits are at the same time dispositions, but dispositions are not necessarily habits. For those who have some specific habit may be said also, in virtue of that habit, to be thus or thus disposed; but those who are disposed in some specific way have not in all cases the corresponding habit. (ibid.)

This means that *habitus* is also a disposition. However, the two are distinct, because not every disposition is a *habitus*. Hence, only a disposition which is not a *habitus* can be easily changed, not every disposition. However, it seems that this fact was overlooked or neglected by medieval thinkers. Importantly, they also did not know Book V of *Metaphysics*, which would come onto the scene in the 13th century and which closely connects these two concepts. Before that time, a strong opposition between them had been established. And consequently, virtue was not considered a disposition, but only *habitus*.

Abelard's disciple, John of Salisbury, follows the approach of his master and adds some new insights. Nederman (1989, p. 100) indicates that "John explicitly refers in this regard to the Aristotelian distinction between διάθεσις (*dispositio*) and ἕξις (*habitus*)."¹ He points out John's utterance according to which theoretical principles "must be consolidated by practice and exercise, except perhaps where a disposition has already been transformed into a *habitus*."¹ According to this statement, disposition seems to be a step towards *habitus*. It can be understood as a stage which precedes *habitus*. Hence, disposition and *habitus* are not just opposed to each other. They are distinct, but at the same time they are connected as two stages of one process.

Let us add that Nederman claims that John presents the end of this process as the formation of a "second nature." He describes John's proposed "second nature" (*altera natura*) as "an irresistible but acquired inclination to behave in accordance with definite precepts." As he explains, it is "present only when a *habitus* has been engendered, that is, only when a

1 John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon* (*Patrologia Latina* 932c): "(...) si non usu et exercitio assiduo roboretur: nisi forte in habitum transient dispositio."

quality becomes so thoroughly person that it inheres in him.” (Nederman 1989, p. 100–101).

However, in my opinion, Nederman’s presentation is a bit exaggerated and lacks sufficient textual evidence. This author does not provide any quotation when mentioning the connection between *habitus* and second nature (Nederman 1989, p. 102) and just notes in a footnote that “the notion of an *altera natura* is discussed at *Policraticus* 489b and in *Letters* II 144.” Unfortunately, in the *Polycraticus* we can only find one sentence in which John says that according to some people (so it is an opinion he revokes) use (*usus*) is difficult to unlearn, and custom (*consuetudo*) assists another (or: second) nature (*altera natura*).² Next, the only place where John mentions the two types of nature (*primitiva natura* and *altera natura*) is in his letter to Bartholomew, a bishop of Exeter. However, he speaks there about primitive nature which has been joint in Christ with divine nature. John explains that he calls it primitive to distinguish it from another nature which corresponds to our degenerate state according to which we are children of anger. He mentions “another nature” as part of the reference to Cicero: he says that according to the Orator, use (*usus*) is another nature (*altera natura*), from which it is very difficult to be torn away.³

Hence, John of Salisbury does not introduce the idea of *altera natura* and does not combine it with the concept of *habitus*. He just borrows this idea from Cicero. In the latter case, he absolutely does not relate it to the process of our formation. Quite the opposite: he presents it in a negative way, in the context of our degeneration. However, on these grounds, he indeed proposes the idea of *primitiva natura*, as our pure human nature, not influenced by our customs and abuses, as distinct from the domain of *usus*, which constitutes another nature.

Yet, even if Nederman’s presentation goes too far, it seems that John could accept using this distinction in the way Nederman proposed. So, it is likely that the philosopher from Salisbury would agree that virtues are part of such another/second nature. However, although not without serious grounds, it is only a supposition. What we can say for sure, is that

2 John of Salisbury, *Polycraticus* (PL 489b-c): “Usus enim, ut ait quidam, aegre dediscitur, et consuetudo alteri naturae assistit.”

3 John of Salisbury, *Epistola CLXXXIV. Ad Bartholomaeum Exoniensem Episcopum* (PL 189a-b): “Sunt enim corpus unum, (...), dum admirabili commercio illa, quae carnis sunt ex natura primitiva Domino impertit, ut ab eo plenitudinem divinae naturae recipiat (...). Primitivam naturam dixerim ne abusiois inveteratus mos natura reputetur, juxta quem omnes sumus natura filii irae, non quod in ea conditi sumus, sed quia in eam degeneravimus. Nam ut ait orator, usus altera natura est, a quo difficillimum est avelli.”

John, who followed Abelard, like other generations of philosophers, including Albert the Great (see Cunningham 1969, 114), improved his theory. He showed that although *habitus* is different from disposition, at the same time *habitus*, and in consequence, virtue, can arise from disposition as a result of consolidation, which makes it resistant to change.

4. Alan of Lille and Simon of Tournai

Nederman emphasises a statement of Alan of Lille and Simon of Tournai, according to which “the genus of virtue is the category of quality.”⁴ Although Abelard already stated the same, Nederman argues that “this claim is significant in helping to determine when virtue can properly be ascribed to an agent” (Nederman 1989, p. 104).

In my view, Simon in fact repeats what we find in Abelard’s and John’s utterances, although he puts it differently. He says that such a quality as disposition, which is easily changeable, is not called virtue, but it happens when it is changed (*versa*) in a tenacious *habitus*. However, there is at least one aspect which is worth mentioning. Simon stresses more on the time-perspective. He concludes that virtue does not seem to be something momentaneous, but durable.⁵ Hence, disposition, contrary to virtue which is a *habitus*, can be understood as a quality which is transient and may easily disappear.

Importantly, it does not exhaust Simon’s contribution to the issue we are discussing here. Simon provides us with another important insight concerning the concepts of virtue and *habitus*, probably overlooked by Nederman. I mean his considerations on virtue in the perspective of the distinction between two aspects expressed in Latin as: *in habitu* and *in usu*.

These considerations regard a theological thesis concerning the virtues according to which “he who has one virtue has all of them,” which is connected to the problem of interconnection of virtues (see more: Bieniak 2014). Simon emphasises that we should understand it as “he who has one virtue as *habitus* has all of them.” Consequently, “also he who is incapable of exercising one, is incapable of exercising any of them.” However, as he points out, “by virtue we do not call only something which we have or a *habitus*, but also use (*usus*).” In the latter sense, we cannot admit that he who has one of virtues, has all of them, Simon claims. Similarly, he shows

4 “Est enim qualitas genere predicamenti” (after: Lottin, *Psychologie et morale* III ii 107; cf. Alan of Lille, *Tractatus* 47).

5 Lottin, *Psychologie et morale* III ii 106: “Que qualitas quamdiu est dispositio facile mobilis non dicitur virtus, sed tunc demum cum versa est in tenacem habitum. Unde virtus non videtur momentanea, sed diuturna.”

that vice can be considered as *habitus* (as something contrary to virtue as *habitus*) or as abuse (contrary to virtue as *usus*).⁶

Colish indicates the significance of the distinction between virtue *in habitu* and *in usu*, to criticize Nederman for presenting Alan and Simon “as full-blooded Aristotelians” (Colish 1993, p. 80). As she argues, “this formula suggests a very non-Aristotelian understanding of the term, whereby *habitus*, as inner intention, is contrasted with *usus*, as its outer expression.” Colish also refers to Artur Michael Landgraf, who discovered an unpublished mid-twelfth-century manuscript which ascribes this distinction to Peter Lombard. And as she indicates:

the Lombard can certainly be classified as one of those thinkers who, when they use the term *habitus*, do not feel a need to view it according to the precepts of any one philosophical school. In his own definition of virtue as a *habitus mentis* disposed toward the good, for instance, he does not indicate whether he means this term as a fixed ethical intentionality along the lines of the Stoics, a mental disposition only, or a more Aristotelianizing ethical intentionality developed and reinforced by exercise. (ibid.)

This constation warns us not to use Aristotelian interpretation as the only key to understand the concept of *habitus* in twelfth-century thought. As we saw, it refers also to Simon, who employed the distinction: *in habitu* vs. *in usu*. It is then natural to see how this distinction and the pair disposition-*habitus* work in texts of another prominent Parisian master of those times, whose *Theological Questions* has recently been edited and published, namely Stephen Langton.

5. Stephen Langton

Stephen Langton encounters the distinction *in habitu* vs. *in usu* when he discusses a question of chastity in the example of Abraham. In his question 89 *On virginity*, which is part of his *Theological Questions* (see Stephen Langton 2022), he refers to the following statement of St. Augustine, which he finds in the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard: “the chastity of the unmarried is better than the chastity of marriage; whereof

6 Simon of Tournai, *Disputationes*, d. 33, q. 1, p. 97: “Sicut autem qui habet unam virtutem habitu, habet omnes ut dictum est, ita quoque qui inhabilis est ad exequendum unam, et ad quamlibet exequendam inhabilis est. Unde si vitium intelligitur habitus vel habilitatis privatio, qui unum vitium habet, et omnia. Sed virtus non solum haberi dicitur natura vel habitu, sed etiam usu, ut dictum est. Quo modo non qui unam habet, et omnes. Usui vero virtutis contrarius est abusus, qui dicitur vitium secundum quod soliti sumus dicere.”

Abraham had one in use, both in habit.”⁷ It is clear that Abraham could perform chastity of marriage, which is represented by chastity *in usu*. But how does Langton explain that Abraham had both forms of chastity *in habitu*?

In one of three versions of question 89 *On virginity*, marked as q. 89g, Langton points out, in line with Augustine’s solution, that Abraham was capable (*habilis*) of both forms. He argues that if God willed, Abraham would also be happy to perform the chastity of the unmarried. Finally, Langton shows that *habitus* can be understood here in different ways. Although Abraham did not have virginity in such a way that he could be called a virgin, he had it in a way that if his wife died, he would have widower’s continence, Langton argues.⁸

In this example, we see that Langton applies the discussed distinction and that *habitus* can be understood in multiple ways. In general, Langton reads *habitus* as an ability or capacity of a person. So, such a capacity may be understood on different levels: a capacity which can be or is being performed, or a capacity which a person has, which could be performed in different circumstances. As he shows, the virtue of continence is such a *habitus* that can be considered in different ways. It also seems that, in line with Colish’s observation, this approach to *habitus* is not necessarily based on the Aristotelian concept.

Another example that illustrates utilizing the concept of *habitus*, connected to the distinction *in usu* vs. *in habitu*, can be found on q. 90. Similarly to Simon of Tournai, Langton applies this distinction to the discussion of the controversial statement according to which he who has one of the virtues has all of them. Langton finally accepts this thesis and argues that a person who has virtues is like a king who fights with bad spirits and carnal temptations using his army of virtues. Although he uses particular virtues for particular enemies, each virtue is ready to help and defend. He

7 Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*; cf. Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, c. 22, 27, ed. Zycha, CSEL 41, 222 (PL 40, 392): “melior est castitas caelibum quam castitas nuptiarum: quarum Abraham unam habebat in usu, ambas in habitu.” Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, d. 33, c. 2, 1 (Roma, Grottaferrata 1971, II, p. 460).

8 Stephen Langton, *Quaestiones Theologiae* (hereinafter: *QT*), q. 89g, c. 8, p. 348: “Set ibi procedit quod ‘Abraham habuit unam in usu et ambas in habitu’. Et notandum quod continentia ibi duobus modis accipitur, scilicet large et stricte. Utramque dicitur habuisse quia habilis fuit ad utramque, quia si deus uellet, tam libenter haberet hanc ut illam. Et diuersimode accipitur hic ‘habitu’, quia non habuit uirginitatem ita in habitu ut ab ea posset denominari ‘uirgo’. Vel habuit in habitu quia, si <uxor eius> moreretur, haberet continentiam uidualem.” Cf. *ibid.*, q. 89b, c. 9.2, p. 342: “‘In habitu’, idest habilis fuit ad continendum et paratus continere quantum lex matrimonii permisit.”

concludes that this means precisely “to have virtues *in habitu*.”⁹ Although they are not being used at once or currently, they are ready to be used whenever they are needed.

However, Langton also provides us with insights concerning the concept of *habitus* as compared to the notion of disposition. He refers to them in all three versions of q. 89, marked as q. 89b, q. 89c and q. 89g. We find there a distinction similar to the one we know from previously mentioned authors. In q. 89b, Langton states “that to be virginity is for virginity something accidental, similarly, for a disposition to be a disposition, because it will be a disposition when it will not be a disposition, but a *habitus*.” As he affirms, after a sexual encounter, if there was no mortal sin, the virtue remains, but this virtue which was “virginity or virginal continence, is now a conjugal chastity.”¹⁰

Does he say anything new here? In my opinion: yes. Apart from distinguishing disposition from *habitus*, he emphasises a strong connection between them. He not only shows that a disposition can be transformed into a *habitus*, like John of Salisbury indicates; he also seems to stress that it is still the same thing, although in some way different. To point out this identity, he uses a contradictory formula, according to which a disposition will be a disposition and at the same time will not be a disposition. It seems that he tries to say that *habitus* is still a disposition, but the one which became a *habitus*. It is the same thing, but modified, namely strengthened.

In q. 89g, he does not use the contradictory formula, but speaks about one and the same property, which “is now a disposition, and will be a *habitus*.” Hence, although he does not give space to say that *habitus* is disposition, he emphasises that both of them are one property, but in different states, similarly to a virtue which once is virginity, and next is no longer virginity, although it is still this virtue.¹¹

9 Stephen Langton, *QT*, q. 90, c. 6, p. 357: “ita et homo habens uirtutes est quasi rex qui congregitur contra spiritus malignos et carnis temptationes cum exercitu uirtutum, quarum quedam percutiunt, ut continentia spiritum luxurie si temptatur de luxuria, alie autem uirtutes parate sunt ut pugnent si opus fuerit, ut si temptetur de superbia, pugnet humilitas etc. (...) Oportet enim ut una uirtus suffragetur alii, et hoc est habere uirtutes in habitu, idest habere eas paratas ad defendendum si opus fuerit.”

10 Stephen Langton, *QT*, q. 89b, c. 1, p. 339: “Accidentale est uirginitati esse uirginitatem, sicut dispositioni esse dispositionem, erit enim dispositio quando non erit dispositio set habitus. Quod patet in uirgine contrahente: ante contractum fuit in ea uirginitas, post cognitionem non, et tamen uirtutem quam habuit non amisit, quia uirtus nonnisi per peccatum mortale amittitur. Illa ergo uirtus que fuit uirginitas uel continentia uirginalis modo est castitas coniugalis.”

11 Stephen Langton, *QT*, q. 89g, c. 1, p. 344: “Accidentale est uirtuti esse uirginitatem, quia erit uirtus cum iam non erit uirginitas. Simile potes habere in dispositione et habitu, quia hec proprietas que modo est dispositio iam erit habitus.”

Let us also mention Langton's utterance in q. 89c, where he also does not use the contradictory formula, but adds an element known from Abelard's utterance. Langton states "that to be virginity is for virginity something accidental, because it can be also conjugal or widow's continence." He asserts that, similarly, "it is accidental for a disposition, which is easily changeable, to be a disposition, because it can be a *habitus*, which is hard to change."¹² Hence, this time he follows the distinction adopted by philosophers mentioned by Abelard, which is based on the criterion of changeability.

In all three versions, Langton presents the analogy between a virtue of virginity and disposition to argue that virginity is not something that can grow in a way that someone will become a greater virgin. We cannot say that when a disposition grows, one who has it will be more disposed, because, as Langton says in q. 89c: "I assume that the disposition would become a *habitus*."¹³ At the same time, he emphasises that disposition is not something that can grow in such a way that it will extend itself or will get more intensive, e.g., that it will give more power. Similarly, as he argues, a young man who grows will not get younger. When a disposition grows, it gets firmer and finally becomes a *habitus*.

It is also worth mentioning that Langton applies the notion of *habitus* to the discussion on love. When analysing the problem of intensity of love in the example of a sentence "this person loves more God than a neighbour," in one of arguments he introduces three meanings of loving. As he indicates in q. 76.2, "the word 'loving' refers to some *habitus* between love (*caritas*) and the movement,"¹⁴ where by movement he understands action or act of loving. Or as he puts it in other words: "the word 'loving' can be understood in three ways: sometimes it refers to love, sometimes to a *habitus* or a capacity (*facultas*), sometimes to a movement of love." Thus, when we say that someone sleeping loves God more than a neighbour, "loving" refers to such a capacity. Moreover, we could say that there are two faculties of loving: loving God and loving a neighbour, with different intensities, though they come from one love.¹⁵

12 Stephen Langton, *QT*, q. 89c, c. 1, p. 334: "Accidentale est uirginitati esse uirginitatem, quia potest esse coniugalis continentia uel uidualis, sicut accidentale est dispositioni, que est facile mobilis, esse dispositionem, quia potest esse habitus, qui est difficile mobilis."

13 Stephen Langton, *QT*, q. 89c, c. 1, p. 334: "Uel sic: dispositio est in isto, ergo ea crescente erit magis dispositus quam sit, quod falsum est, quia pono quod dispositio fiat habitus."

14 Stephen Langton, *QT*, q. 76.2, c. 1.1, p. 159: "uerbum diligendi copulat quendam habitum medium inter caritatem et motum."

15 Stephen Langton, *QT*, q. 76.2, c. 1.1, p. 159–160: "Et uerbum diligendi tripliciter dicitur: quandoque copulat caritatem, quandoque habitum siue facultatem, quandoque motum caritatis. Et ita, cum dicitur 'iste dormiens magis diligit deum

However, although Langton decides that such a solution to the problem could be accepted, he ultimately adds nuance to this theory. He says that loving refers to love (*caritas*), which is one, whereas the intensity of love refers to its effects, which are its movements, however: not the movements which someone has (because a sleeping person does not have such movements), but the ones which are *in habitu*. This time Langton gives an example of a sentence “God loves more this person than that” to show that “loving” does not refer here to the love in God (as in the case of God, his love is his essence, so it must be one), but to the intensity of effects of love in different persons. He means effects which these persons have or will have, and probably for this reason he calls it a movement of love *in habitu*.¹⁶ This case again illustrates the different uses of the word *habitus* in Langton’s theological analyses. Sometimes *habitus* is almost the same as a capacity (*facultas*), and in other situations it is something that someone can have as an effect of someone else’s action. Obviously, virtue is not a *habitus* in the latter sense.

Lastly, let us mention that Langton applies the concept of *habitus* to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He considers the question of whether such gifts are different from virtues and whether they are prior to them, simultaneous, or posterior. He decides that “the gifts are posterior to virtues, because they are effects or quasi-effects of virtues.” Next, he adds that by “effect” he does not mean the use (*usus*), but *habitus*.¹⁷ So, virtue can also cause something that is a *habitus*. Or, as Andrea Nannini puts it, “the gifts constitute the effects of virtues: effects understood not as the uses (acts) of the virtues but as the relative habitual dispositions” (Nannini 2022, 44).

To conclude, Langton employs the term *habitus* in the discourse on virtue. He uses this term with different intended meanings, sometimes in a broad sense, like something which we have as ready, or in a very spe-

quam proximum, ‘diligat’ copulat facultatem ibi. Potest dici quod alia est facultas qua diligit deum et alia qua diligit proximum, et una est magis intensa, alia minus, licet ex eadem caritate surgant.”

- 16 Stephen Langton, *QT*, q. 76.2, c. 1.1, p. 160: “Hoc forte impune posset concedi. Set tamen ad presens dicimus quod hoc uerbum ‘diligat’ in predicta copulat caritatem que unica est in isto. Nec tamen illa notatur esse magis uel minus intensa, quia non notatur excessus respectu caritatis, set respectu effectus eius, scilicet motus; non dico motuum quos habeat, cum dormiens nullos habeat, set motuum in habitu quorum caritas in tali statu est effectiua, sicut cum dicitur “deus magis diligit istum quam illum”, non notatur excessus in caritate, quia illa est unica, scilicet diuina essentia, set notatur excessus effectuum quos habebit uel habet in istis.
- 17 Stephen Langton, *QT*, q. 94, c. 2, p. 372: “dona naturaliter sunt posteriora uirtutibus, quia sunt effectus uel quasi effectus uirtutum – non dico ‘effectus’, idest usus, set ‘effectus’, idest habitus.”

cial sense, like in q. 76.2, where he speaks about the effect of loving in some person and calls it: *in habitu*. He applies to a problem of virtues the distinction *in habitu* vs. *in usu*., which, according to Colish, comes from Peter Lombard and which was present in Simon of Tournay. Langton also employs the distinction between disposition and *habitus* as transmitted by Abelard. In my view, Langton improves it by stressing that a disposition and a *habitus* that comes from it are in fact the same thing.

6. Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas introduces a significant change in thinking about virtues, dispositions and *habitus*. Before we start analysing his utterances, let us quote a caveat by Nicholas Austin, which was the main reason to use the term *habitus* in the Latin version in this article:

There is an acute danger of misinterpreting Aquinas's virtue theory as we read his understanding of habit through modern eyes. Even scholars who recognize some differences between modern and medieval accounts of habit are often unaware of how wide the gap really is. To simply substitute the modern idea of habit for Aquinas's *habitus* would be a significant failure of exegetical accuracy and, more important, would obscure the riches of Aquinas's helpful account. (...) The modern concept of habit therefore picks out a mechanistic pattern of response, generated by multiple repetitions of identical actions. Habits, therefore, lead to unthinking and nonvoluntary action. (Austin 2017, p. 23–24)

Austin refers to Aquinas's theory. However, as we see, this warning applies to all medieval authors. For all of them, *habitus* is not something automatic and not controlled by will. Moreover, it can also mean other different things, if we adopt a broader sense. Anyhow, as we will see, this connection to rational action, which as such is combined with human will, is particularly emphasised by Thomas Aquinas.

In his *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas discusses the problems related to *habitus* and virtues in questions 49–67 of the first part of the second part (Ia-IIae). In q. 49, he considers *habitus* in general as to its substance: whether it is a quality, whether it is a distinct species of quality, whether *habitus* implies an order to an act, the necessity of *habitus*. In the next question, he concentrates on the subject of *habitus*, e.g., whether there is a *habitus* in the body, or whether the soul is the subject of *habitus*, etc. From q. 55, Aquinas starts his analyses on virtues and considers: whether human virtue is a *habitus*, whether it is an operative *habitus*, whether it is a good *habitus*, the definition of virtue.

In article 1 of q. 49 of Ia-IIae, we find the following argument against the starting hypothesis, which contains a definition of *habitus*:

Further, every habit (*habitus*) is a disposition, as is stated in the Book of the Predicaments (*Categor.* vi). Now disposition is the order of that which has parts, as stated in *Metaph.* v, text. 24. But this belongs to the predicament Position. Therefore habit is not a quality.¹⁸

For the first time, we see that *habitus* has been called a disposition (*dispositio*). Moreover, disposition has been clearly defined here, as an order of that which has parts. What is more, both definitions are based on Aristotle's texts. Next, the conclusion of the argument is refuted by the third definition: "On the contrary, The Philosopher says in the *Book of Predicaments* (*Categor.* vi) that habit is a quality which is difficult to change." In the main reply, Thomas explains that if something "has a relation in regard to itself or to something else" *habitus* is a quality, "since this mode of having is in respect of some quality." In this way, he defends the traditional approach that we already know from previously presented medieval thinkers.

However, is Aquinas right? Does Aristotle really call *habitus* a disposition? In Book V of *Metaphysics*, the Stagirite writes:

Having (ἔχειν) means (a) in one sense an activity, as it were, of the haver and the thing had, or as in the case of an action or motion; for when one thing makes and another is made, there is between them an act of making. In this way between the man who has a garment and the garment which is had, there is a "having." Clearly, then, it is impossible to have a "having" in this sense; for there will be an infinite series if we can have the having of what we have. But (b) there is another sense of "having" which means a disposition (διάθεσις), in virtue of which the thing which is disposed is disposed (διακείται τὸ διακείμενον) well or badly, and either independently or in relation to something else. E.g., health is a state, since it is a disposition of the kind described. Further, any part of such a disposition is called a state; and hence the excellence of the parts is a kind of state. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V, 1022b, transl. Tredennick)

This is exactly the fragment that Aquinas refers to. We clearly see that Aristotle indeed affirms that *habitus* is a disposition. In the above quote, I have added key Greek words from the original text to emphasise that

18 This and the next quote literally translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Online Edition 2017 by Kevin Knight, New Advent). See original wording: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 49, a. 1: "Preterea, omnis habitus est dispositio, ut dicitur in praedicamentis. Sed dispositio est ordo habentis partes, ut dicitur in V Metaphys. Hoc autem pertinet ad praedicamentum situs. Ergo habitus non est qualitas."

Aristotle really speaks about ἕξις, consequently translated to Latin as *habitus*, and that he really defines it as διάθεσις, which according to leading Greek-English dictionaries, such as DMLBS, means exactly: ‘a disposition, arrangement.’

So, Aquinas is perfectly right when quoting Aristotle. What is more, we see that the approach that distinguishes *habitus* and disposition, presented by Peter Abelard, Alan of Lille, Simon of Tournai and to some extent by Stephen Langton, is not coherent with Aristotle’s concepts of ἕξις and διάθεσις. Aquinas, who reads original works of the Stagirite, becomes more faithful to his theories and finally presents *habitus* as disposition.

Now, the last step is to answer the question: how does Thomas define virtue? In article 1 of q. 55 of Ia-IIae, in the main answer, he states that “virtue denotes a certain perfection of a power (*potentia*).” A few sentences later, he adds:

Now there are some powers which of themselves are determinate to their acts; for instance, the active natural powers. And therefore these natural powers are in themselves called virtues. But the rational powers, which are proper to man, are not determinate to one particular action, but are inclined indifferently to many: and they are determinate to acts by means of habits, as is clear from what we have said above (q. 49, a. 4). Therefore human virtues are habits.¹⁹

Hence, rational powers which are determinate to their acts, which are called virtues, do it by means of *habitus*. In the light of this quote, we can add that it is because of the disposition, which makes actions ordered, and thus, directs them or determines them towards the proper end. So, because it is being done by means of *habitus*, Aquinas concludes, virtue is *habitus*. But *habitus* is a disposition. Therefore, according to Thomas Aquinas: virtue is disposition.

7. Conclusions

The analyses provided by the authors mentioned in this study show that disposition was differently conceptualized by medieval analytic authors. The notion of disposition has not always fit with the concept of virtue.

19 Ibid., q. 55, a. 1, co.: “Sunt autem quaedam potentiae quae secundum seipsas sunt determinatae ad suos actus; sicut potentiae naturales activae. Et ideo huiusmodi potentiae naturales secundum seipsas dicuntur virtutes. Potentiae autem rationales, quae sunt propriae hominis, non sunt determinatae ad unum, sed se habent indeterminate ad multa, determinantur autem ad actus per habitus, sicut ex supradictis patet. Et ideo virtutes humanae habitus sunt.”

Although as Nederman claims, philosophers reported by Peter Abelard, initially referred to these two key terms used by Aristotle, namely: *ἕξις* and *διάθεσις*, and accepted his statement that *ἕξις* belongs to the category of quality, they did not follow him in defining *ἕξις* as *διάθεσις*. Quite the opposite, they distinguished these two concepts, *habitus* and *dispositio*, and claimed that the first one is difficult to change, whereas the latter is easily changeable. This approach was rooted in Aristotle's utterance presented in *Categories*, 8. However, they neglected his further statement, according to which *ἕξις* is *διάθεσις*, and they did not know *Metaphysics*, V, which in their times had not been translated into Latin yet. In consequence, these thinkers and the next generations, represented by Alain of Lille or Simon of Tournai, and later by Stephen Langton, decided that virtue can only be *habitus* and not *dispositio*.

Moreover, as Colish rightly indicated, in twelfth-century thought, *habitus* was not understood only in an Aristotelian way. We have presented clear illustrations which confirm her opinion, at least in Langton's considerations. We have also demonstrated that the term *habitus* played an important role in the discussions concerning virtues, but in a very different context. For instance, it was employed to distinguish between virtues *in usu* and virtues *in habitu*. We have also considered different uses of this term to speak about the ontological status of loving.

However, we have also observed that step by step medieval thinkers were trying to connect these two concepts back. John of Salisbury indicated that a disposition can be transformed into a *habitus*. Hence, it becomes *habitus* when it is unlikely to change. So, virtue, which is *habitus*, is something that was previously a disposition. Next, Stephen Langton pointed out that, in fact, a disposition and a *habitus* which comes from a disposition are one thing.

Finally, Thomas Aquinas went back to Aristotle's texts and faithfully employed his conceptual framework. As a result, he stated that *habitus* is disposition, so, we can say the same about virtue.

To answer the questions posed in the introduction, we can say that according to Aristotle's theory, adopted by Thomas Aquinas, moral virtues, such as courage, temperance, friendliness or justice, are dispositions. Next, we can also confirm that the Greek "*hexis*" used in the Aristotelian definition of virtue is a kind of disposition. Finally, the Aristotelian approach "virtues" and "dispositions" is not the only possible way of dealing with these terms. There were different approaches which are also plausible and perhaps even valuable.

However, these answers are not the only benefit of analysing medieval texts. In my view, there are important lessons we can learn from

this short history of the use of the three terms: “virtue,” “disposition,” and “*habitus*”, in the texts of analytic medieval thinkers. The meaning of such terms themselves is vague. It depends very much on the context or on the conceptual framework in which they are employed. It was enough to tear them away from Aristotle’s text to understand them differently. This conclusion refers to both dispositions and *habitus*. Disposition was restricted only to something easily changed. *Habitus* was understood as something different from disposition and also acquired a broader meaning.

We can also notice that it was very easy to adopt a sharp distinction and lose a deep understanding of what a disposition is. It seems that the medievals before Aquinas understood dispositions as a sort of readiness, and did not see that it denotes a special arrangement which enables specific actions. Otherwise, they could see that being a *habitus* does not exclude being a disposition – which, according to one modern translation, is a “settled” one. This deep meaning has been restored by Aquinas thanks to his careful reading of Aristotle, and virtues “became” dispositions again.

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