Is The Well-Trained Memory Morally Virtuous?: Thomas Aquinas and the Art of Memory
ABSTRACT: In *The Book of Memory*, Mary Carruthers claims that the well-trained memory fits Thomas Aquinas’ definition of a moral virtue “perfectly.” She gives two arguments to support this claim: a) that in Aquinas’ system the contents of memory have an affective (i.e. appetitive) element, and since for Aquinas the moral virtues pertain to appetite, memory can be virtuous, and; b) that Aquinas teaches that the memory is subject to habituation, and can therefore be perfected by a virtue. In this paper, I will demonstrate that Carruthers’ overarching argument is unsupported by the textual evidence, and that Aquinas clearly teaches that memory is not subject to a virtue. However, I will also show how Carruthers’ first argument exposes one way in which the memory can profoundly assist the agent’s moral deliberations and choices, i.e. by habituating pre-deliberative antecedent passions in a way that supports the agent’s efforts to pursue moral virtue.

Word count: 2995
Introduction

In *The Book of Memory* Mary Carruthers claims that, for medieval thinkers, the capacious, well-trained memory was not only technically useful but - “as a condition for prudence” - was deemed "morally virtuous in itself."¹ In support of this claim, Carruthers invokes the 13th century Dominican master Thomas Aquinas, who famously mastered the ancient mnemonic arts.² Carruthers’ argument is two-fold: Since (she argues) for Aquinas the phantasm preserved in the memory includes an *affective* (and therefore appetitive) element, and since morality for Aquinas has to do with right appetite,³ then the phantasms in the memory have an innate moral colouring.⁴ The second half of Carruthers’ argument is based upon Aquinas’ teaching that the memory is subject to a "habit" (*habitus*), and is therefore trainable. Like

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² The anecdotes testifying to the astonishing power of Aquinas' memory are myriad. Some of these come from a biography of Aquinas written by his close companion Bernardo Gui shortly after Aquinas' death. Gui recounts, for instance, the astonishing fact that Aquinas composed his *Catena Aurea* - a vast collection of Patristic texts, quoted verbatim and organized by topic - almost entirely from memory. It is also from Gui that we receive the story of how Aquinas would sometimes dictate to three or four secretaries simultaneously on different subjects. (c.f. Kenelm Foster, ed., *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents* (London: Baltimore: Longmans, Green ; Helicon Press, 1959), 50-51.)

³ Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*. I.II 58.1. “[N]ot every virtue is a moral virtue, but only those that are in the appetitive faculty.” Note that all English translations of the *Summa theologiae* come from the following edition: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. English Dominican Province (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute, 2012). All future citations of the *Summa* will simply use the abbreviation “*ST*”.

⁴ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 85. “Since each phantasm is a combination not only of the neutral form of the perception but of our responses to it (*intentio*) concerning whether it is helpful or hurtful, the phantasm by its very nature evokes emotion. This is how the phantasm and the memory which stores it help to cause or bring into being moral excellence and ethical judgment.”
Aristotle before him, Aquinas defines the virtues as “good habits.”\(^5\) Since Aquinas teaches that the memory can be trained well, this would seem to suggest that a well-trained memory – insofar as it perfects the memory – is a virtue.\(^6\) The well-trained memory, Carruthers therefore concludes, "fits Thomas's definition of a moral virtue perfectly".\(^7\)

In the first part of this paper I will demonstrate that Carruthers’ overarching claim is unsupported by the textual evidence. Indeed, far from affirming that a well-trained memory fits the definition of a moral virtue “perfectly,” Aquinas explicitly and unambiguously repudiates the notion that memory is – in his terms – “subject to a virtue.”\(^8\) In the second part of this paper, however, I will argue that Carruthers’ first argument – that for Aquinas the contents of the memory are not merely objectively informational, but also subjective and affective – rightly identifies how memory can play a crucial role in conditioning the agent’s pre-conscious affective responses to external stimuli (Aquinas’ so-called “antecedent passions”), which affective responses profoundly influence the agent’s conscious moral deliberations and choices.

I. Whether Memory is Subject to a Virtue

Carruthers’ second argument can be expressed neatly in syllogistic form. Major: The memory can be consciously habituated, and therefore perfected. Minor: The perfection of any power is called a “virtue.” Conclusion: The well-trained memory is morally virtuous. As I will show, Carruthers’ argument fails in the minor premise.

\(^5\) ST I.11 55.1.
\(^6\) Carruthers, 81. “The habit is a mediator between a power and its object, for 'every power which may be variously directed to act, needs a habit whereby it is well disposed to its act.' All virtues and vices are habits, good or bad. Defining memory as habitus makes it the key linking term between knowledge and action, conceiving of good and doing it. Memory is an essential treasure house for both the intellect and virtuous action.”
\(^7\) Carruthers, 88.
\(^8\) ST I.11 56.5.
First, let us briefly examine the major. In Aquinas’ faculty psychology the sense powers are sub-divided into the five exterior (or proper) sense powers (i.e. touch, taste, etc.), and the four interior sense powers (the common sense, imagination, memory and the cogitative power).9 Whereas the exterior senses operate determinately according to their natures, and are thus unresponsive to rational command,10 the interior sense powers (including memory11) are to some extent subject to the command of reason.12 Given this, the interior sense powers “can be ordained to various things,” which is to say that they can be consciously habituated.13 “[I]t is clear,” Aquinas notes in his commentary De memoria, “that the habitual grasp of memorable objects is consolidated by frequently engaging in the act of memory, just as any other habit is strengthened by similar acts…”14

Confusion understandably arises insofar as this description so closely parallels Aquinas’ account in the “Treatise on the Virtues” in the Summa theologiae about how habits are developed: namely, by "acts"15 or "many acts"16 or "repeated acts."17 Since, in the same section

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9 ST I.78 3-4.
10 One cannot, for instance, “train” one’s eyes to see better. This does not preclude the possibility of training oneself to pay closer attention to the data provided by the organs of the exterior senses (e.g. a sommelier training her palate). But for Aquinas this would not be understood not as training or improving the organ of sense itself, which simply operates as well as its health and constitution allows, but rather the agent’s capacity to attend to sensation.
11 ST I.II 50.3 ad. 3.
12 ST I.II 55.3 ad. 3.
13 ST I.II 50.3.
15 ST I.II 51.2.
16 ST I.II 51.3.
17 ST I.II 51.3 ad.3.
of the *Summa*, Aquinas defines a virtue as a "good habit,"\(^{18}\) this would naturally seem to suggest that there must be a virtue of memory, by which its operations are perfected.

In fact, elsewhere in the *Summa* explicitly repudiates the notion that any habit that perfects the interior sense powers constitutes a “virtue.” Aquinas first notes that Aristotle only speaks of intellectual and moral virtues. A habit in a sensitive apprehensive power such as the memory is neither of these, and is therefore excluded by process of elimination. Indeed, although it is clear from Aristotle that habits do reside in the interior sensitive powers, it would seem that these habits are not *true* habits and do not belong to the sensitive powers as such, but are, as it were, only "annexed" (*annexum*) to true intellectual habits.\(^ {19}\) However, even if we were to posit the existence of true habits in the sensitive apprehensive powers, they still could not rightly be called virtues, for two reasons. In the first place, a “virtue must needs be in that power which consummates (*est consummativa*) the good act.”\(^ {20}\) In the case of the agent’s apprehensive powers, the “good act” to which they are ordained is the act of understanding truth. However, understanding is consummated in the intellect. The sensitive powers of apprehension merely prepare the phantasm for intellection, and their acts are thus purely propaedeutic.\(^ {21}\)

Furthermore, any habit residing in the memory would not ensure that the agent pursues the *moral* good, and thus fails to meet Aquinas’ full definition of a virtue. We have already seen that Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that there are only two species of virtue: the moral and intellectual. Whereas the moral virtues perfect the appetitive powers (i.e. the rational appetite – the will – and the sense appetites),\(^ {22}\) the intellectual virtues perfect the speculative intellect.

\(^{18}\) *ST I.II 55.1*.  
\(^{19}\) *ST I.II 56.5*.  
\(^{20}\) *ST I.II 56.6*.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid.  
\(^{22}\) *ST I.II 58.1*. 
However, though Aquinas allows that both are virtues, he does not grant them equal status.

Virtue may be understood in two senses: insofar as a virtue "confers aptness in doing good," and insofar as "besides aptness, it confers the right use of it". Only the moral virtues, by perfecting desire and choice, accomplish the second, rendering the moral agent good "simply" (simpliciter). Therefore, only the moral virtues are virtues simpliciter. While the intellectual virtues do confer an aptness for doing good through discovery of truth, they do not ensure the agent utilizes that aptness, thereby living righteously. Human virtue, in its truest and fullest sense, is not merely the perfection of a power, but the perfection of a power "in view of his doing good deeds." For this reason the virtues of the speculative intellect (wisdom, science and understanding) are only virtues "relatively" (secundum quid) and only render a person good secundum quid. They are, therefore, sometimes called virtues, and sometimes not.

To recapitulate: There are only two principles of human action – the intellect and the appetites – the perfection of which constitutes a virtue. Memory, as a sensitive apprehensive power, clearly fails to meet the criteria for possessing a moral virtue in the fullest sense of the term - i.e. simpliciter - since it does not perfect an appetite. However, it also fails to meet the lower bar Aquinas sets for qualifying as a virtue secundum quid. Since apprehending truth culminates in the act of understanding, only the faculty of understanding itself – the intellect –

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23 ST I.II 57.1.
24 ST I.II 56.3.
25 ST I.II 58.3.
26 ST I.II 57.2.
27 ST I.II 56.3.
28 ST I.II 58.3. “Consequently every human virtue must needs be a perfection of one of these principles. Accordingly, if it perfects man's speculative or practical intellect in order that his act may be good, it will be an intellectual virtue: whereas if it perfects his appetite, it will be a moral virtue...”
qualifies as being subject to virtues *secundum quid*. Memory is simply too *remote* from either the apprehension of truth or from moral action to be subject to a virtue.

II. Memory and Emotion

Although by this point it has become clear that Aquinas would not agree that a well-trained memory fits his definition of a moral virtue “perfectly,”

we need not conclude that Carruthers is wholly mistaken in her emphasis on the link between memory and virtue in Aquinas’ philosophy. Indeed, Aquinas is quite explicit that, at the very least, memory constitutes one of the eight “integral parts” of the virtue of prudence – the cardinal virtue that exercises a global influence over all the other moral virtues by translating ethical theory into concrete action. As Aquinas notes, in order to judge how best to apply an abstract ethical principle to a unique set of circumstances, we require the knowledge of what happens “in the majority of cases” (*in pluribus*). That is, we need “experience” (*experimentum*), which is in turn the result of “many memories.” Prudence, therefore, requires the “memory of many things.”

Read at face value, this account of memory’s role in ethics risks suggesting only that in order to know how best to act, the agent needs to acquire and store large quantities of data. This in turn suggests an image of memory as a kind of human “hard-drive,” a coolly-objective repository of sensory data that the agent processes at moments of ethical deliberation.

Carruthers’ first argument noted above, however, rightly enriches the picture by drawing

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30 ST II.II 48.1. Emphasis added.
31 ST II.II 57.1-8.
32 ST II.II 49.1.
attention to the fact that for Aquinas memory is not merely a matter of objective data, but also of
the agent’s *emotional responses* to that data.\(^{33}\)

To understand how this affective element enters into the picture, it is necessary to
examine a peculiarity of Aquinas’ doctrine of memory. An Aristotelian approaching the study of
Aquinas on memory might naturally assume that for Aquinas memory is that power tasked with
storing the phantasms of things experienced in the past. However, this is not the case. Aquinas is
quite clear that this basic preservative function properly belongs to the *imagination*. Rather than
the repository of the phantasms of previously perceived objects, memory is the *thesaurus
intentionum* (the “storehouse of intentions”).\(^{34}\)

This rather peculiar definition of memory turns out to have enormous significance. This
is due to the expansive and rich nature of the “particular intentions” that memory is tasked with
preserving. While answering the question of what, precisely, a so-called “intention” is would
require far more space than is available here, a brief sketch will suffice for our purposes. For
Aquinas, particular intentions broadly correspond to what Aristotle, in the *De Anima*, calls *per
accidens* sensibles. Aristotle contrasts *per accidens* sensibles with *per se* sensibles. The latter are
those objects of sensation directly sensed by the five exterior senses – i.e. taste, tactility, sound,
etc. – including the dynamic aspects of that data, such as motion. *Per accidens* sensibles, on the
other hand, are those singular sensibles that appear to transcend exterior sensation, without,
however, arising to the level of universal intellectual abstraction. Aristotle himself only provides

\(^{33}\) Aquinas himself does not use the term “emotion,” a word that was unknown to him. However, that category of phenomena that we now call “emotion” largely correlates to the category of phenomena that Aquinas called the “sensitive appetites” – which include feelings like anger, fear, hope, love, and despair.

\(^{34}\) ST I.78.4. "Ad apprehendendum autem intentiones quae per sensum non accipiuntur, ordinatur vis aestimativa. Ad conservandum autem eas, vis memorativa, quae est thesaurus quidam huiusmodi intentionum."
one example of a *per accidens* sensible: when someone seeing a certain white object approaching identifies that object as a particular person, i.e. the “son of Diaries.”

No motion or alteration of any of the organs of the external senses can provide a sufficient explanation for the perception of “son of Diaries”; nevertheless it is perceived. Nor can this perception be attributed to the intellect, since the object of the intellect is always universal, and “son of Diaries” is particular. This perception of an approaching object as *this* particular person (Aquinas’ own example is the proper name “Socrates”) is a *per accidens* sensible – an “intention,” to use Aquinas’ term, a term which he borrowed from Avicenna.

Both Avicenna and Aquinas significantly expanded Aristotle’s *per accidens* sensibles to include a host of perceptible objects. To illustrate the nature of these intentions, Avicenna famously provided the sheep-wolf example, which Aquinas repeats in the *Summa*. A sheep, Aquinas notes, recognizes a wolf as something to be feared and flees from it, even though there is nothing *intrinsic* to the sensible qualities of a wolf that suggests something-to-be feared. Similarly a sheep recognizes its lamb as something-to-be-suckled and the grass as something-to-be-eaten, while a bird sees twigs as something-useful-to-build-a-nest. In animals the capacity to cognize such particular intentions pertains to the so-called *estimative sense*, which operates determinately according to instinct. In humans, however, the power that cognizes intentions enjoys an additional nobility due to its proximity to reason, which “overflows” into it, and thus is

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37 Deborah Black, “Imagination, Particular Reason, and Memory: The Role of the Internal Senses in Human Cognition” (February 19, 2010), 1.

38 ST I 78.4.


40 ST I 78.4.
known as the cogitative power or “particular reason” (ratio paricularis).41 The cognition that a particular thing was encountered in the past is one such intention, and thus everything preserved in the memory is preserved under the formality of pastness.

The thing to be noted is that each of the examples above involve singular judgments about the helpfulness or harmfulness of an object of perception to the perceiver, judgments that in turn lead to the appropriate emotions, such as fear or desire. Clearly, then, whatever the precise nature of the “intention” that the cogitative power cognizes, it is intimately bound up in how the agent responds emotionally to the objects of perception. Indeed, in the Summa, Aquinas is quite clear that it is the cogitative power that is proximately responsible for executing a universal judgment of the will about how to respond to this particular thing, and thus for moving the passions. “Anyone can experience his in himself,” observes Aquinas, “for by applying certain universal considerations, anger or fear or the like may be modified.”42 The sense appetites, therefore, are subject to universal reason, but only through the mediation of the cogitative power. Put another way, universal reason is the remote, and the cogitative power the proximate mover of the passions.

The implications of this intimate relationship between the cogitative power, the intentions it cognizes, the passions, and memory for Aquinas’ ethics are myriad. However, for the purposes of this paper I will examine just one such implication, outlined by Daniel de Haan in a recent pair of papers.43 In those papers de Haan notes that Aquinas distinguishes between antecedent

\[ \text{Ibid.} \]
\[ \text{ST I.81.3.} \]
Antecedent passions are those motions of the sense appetites that spontaneously arise in response to stimuli prior to the conscious judgment of reason and choice of the will. For instance, a person offered a piece of chocolate cake may feel an immediate passion of desire, before he has had the opportunity to decide how to feel about it, or whether to accept the offer. Consequent passions, on the other hand, are those passions that arise after the agent has deliberated about how to respond, and consciously chosen a course of action.

There is some debate among interpreters of Aquinas about the moral status of antecedent passions. Since, strictly speaking, only freely chosen actions are properly moral for Aquinas, it would seem that antecedent passions cannot be morally imputed to the agent, since by definition they precede the free choice of the will. However, de Haan notes that antecedent passions are morally relevant in at least two ways: Firstly, the agent can be held responsible for failing to cultivate temperance, the virtue that habituates the passions to respond mildly or ordinately, and; secondly, antecedent passions have the power to profoundly shape conscious moral deliberation and the nature of the ensuing consequent passions, which are themselves morally imputable. If, for instance, an intemperate person on a diet offered a piece of chocolate cake experiences an overwhelming desire for that cake, he is far more likely to consciously endorse that antecedent passion (which then becomes a consequent passion), than if he had carefully habituated his passions to respond temperately through the regular practice of self-denial.

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44 cf. ST I.II 24.3 ad. 1.
46 C.f. ST I.II 75.2. “For just as it is due to the judgment of reason, that the will is moved to something in accord with reason, so it is due to an apprehension of the senses that the sensitive appetite is inclined to something; which inclination sometimes influences the will and reason...”
The question for the interpreter of Aquinas is, how can we explain the fact that the *pre-deliberative*, antecedent passions of the morally virtuous person often appear to spontaneously respond in a way that reflects and supports virtuous decision-making? According to de Haan, the answer is found in the conscious conditioning of the cogitative power. However – and for the purposes of this paper, this is the most crucial point – this process of conditioning in turn must rely upon the conscientious conditioning of the memory.

This is how this conditioning process would work: Every time the cogitative power, at the command of the will, cognizes a particular intention (e.g. “unhealthy” or “undesirable”) in relation to some thing (e.g. a piece of chocolate cake) that intention is stored in the memory, the *thesaurus intentionum*. The next time the agent encounters a similar object, the cogitative power will consult the memory for a template of how to command the passions to move. If a person has routinely and consistently commanded the cogitative power to cognize “undesirable” in relation to unhealthy sweets in the past, the cogitative power (after consulting the memory) is that much more likely to spontaneously reflect this temperate attitude, even antecedent to the conscious deliberation of the intellect and command of the will. This, in turn, makes it easy – even *pleasant* – for the agent to consciously endorse this temperate antecedent passion, and refuse the cake.

Contrast this to the case of the merely “continent” person, who has not habituated his memory and cogitative power through repeated temperate decision-making. The agent’s cogitative power will consult his memory, and find numerous cases in which the agent has endorsed the “intention” of desire for chocolate cake, even against his better judgment. As a consequence, the agent will be forced to overcome an overwhelming antecedent passion of desire in order to make the virtuous choice, and even if he succeeds in refusing the cake he may find the decision to do so excruciatingly painful.
Conclusion

“Whether we perceive the world antecedently or consequently to the judgment of reason, a person cannot help deploying their perceptual habits for recognition,” notes De Haan. “One perceptually identifies things in the world spontaneously, and all acts of apperception deploy the recognitional templates of past experiences…. 47 In Aquinas’ system, those “perceptual habits” or “recognitional templates of past experience” are preserved in the memory, the thesaurus intentionum. Crucially, however, these perceptual habits in the memory are not coolly impartial, but include what De Haan calls “affectional percepts” 48 – i.e. subjective perceptible objects (intentions) that are proximately responsible for moving the passions.

In conclusion, then, while it is true that for Aquinas a well-trained memory cannot be deemed morally virtuous “in itself,” memory can be understood as playing a crucial role in shaping pre-conscious, antecedent passions. These antecedent passions are the appetitive lens through which the agent perceives the world, and in the context of which the agent pursues her process of moral deliberation. As de Haan notes, even if antecedent passions are not moral in themselves, they are “potentially moral,” and they contribute to the quality of the agent’s moral deliberation. 49 That is, the coordinated operations of the memory and cogitative power determine the appetitive “colouring” of the antecedent passions, thereby potentially greatly helping – or hindering – the agent in her efforts to live a morally virtuous life. Carruthers, therefore, while perhaps overlooking important nuances of Aquinas’ position on memory, was not wrong to

48 cf. De Haan, “Perception and the Vis Cogitativa.”
highlight the moral significance of memory, and its capacity to be consciously trained to assist
the agent in her moral efforts by shaping appetite and moral perception.


