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## Health as a Habit in Aquinas

AQUINAS NOT ONLY DEVELOPS AND EXPANDS ARISTOTELIAN NOTIONS OF habit, he also notes Aristotle's references to health and utilizes them in his own examples of the moral life. Aquinas mentions health no less than fifteen times in his volume on habits (1a2ae 49-54). Every single question in the *Treatise on Habit* references health.<sup>1</sup> Like Aristotle, for Thomas it appears that a consideration of habits of virtue naturally includes a discussion of health. Aquinas states that the "virtue of anything must be expressed in terms of the good. Hence human virtue, which is an operative habit, is a good habit and productive of good works."<sup>2</sup> If good habits orient to virtues, and health certainly represents a good, then health must be worthy of consideration and practice. The cultivation of health embodies a moral good oriented to the kind of life God wants for us. In arguing that health constitutes a habit for Aquinas, we'll examine what Thomas means—and doesn't mean by "health." Then I'll develop chapter 2 and 3's definitions of habit in relationship to practices of health, using a case study of the exercise of running. For Thomas, the practice of health represents a vital part of the virtuous life lived to an end in God's love.

### What Health Means for Aquinas

Aquinas consistently uses the Latin word *sanus/sanitatis* for health, which translated means "to be sound, healthy, sensible, and sane"—holding within the word itself ideas of both moral and physical health. Thomas

1. Aquinas mentions specifically mentions health in *ST* I-II 49.1-4, I-II 50.1, 3, I-II 51.1, 3-4, I-II 52.1, 2, I-II 53.1, I-II 54.1.

2. Aquinas, *Treatise on the Virtues*, I-II 55.3.

upholds Aristotle's use of health to exemplify the moral life and physical practices as orienting to the mean. Yet (as is typical for Aquinas) he nuances his understanding of health so that health's definition includes both "health as a status", and "health as an entitative habit." This nuanced and intelligent perspective on health provides for a Christian practice that acknowledges we can get sick, but won't leave us in a morass of enervating self-pity about it.

### *Health as a Status*

Aquinas understands health as a quality that is well disposed in nature and orientation but is also easily lost.<sup>3</sup> In this definition, health (and sickness) by its nature has variable causes (and losses) and is properly termed a disposition, not a habit.<sup>4</sup> Aquinas believes that health as a status can be nourished both by exterior principles such as medicine, and/or from divine intervention; God can produce health without a natural cause in order to manifest His power.<sup>5</sup> Whether by nature or divine intervention, though, health can be easily changed, altered, or lost in humans. Such an orientation toward constant change means that "health as a status" cannot be a habit, since habit (as discussed above) retains a quasi-permanent status and is resistant to change.

Thomas also allows for there being variations among people's health status according to their different constitutions.<sup>6</sup> Though Thomas wouldn't have known concepts of heredity, he does note that some health is from "nature," meaning that someone can be genetically predisposed toward sicknesses or can have an immune system (nature) that aids one in recovering health.<sup>7</sup> Like Aristotle, Thomas understood "nature" as comprised of the Hippocratic humors, which need to be in correct human proportion and balance for there to be a disposition of health.<sup>8</sup> There

3. Aquinas, *ST I-II* 49.1–2.

4. *Ibid.*, I-II 49.2.

5. *Ibid.*, I-II 51.1, 4.

6. *Ibid.*, I-II 51.1. "It is natural to Socrates or Plato to be sickly or healthy, according to their respective physical constitutions."

7. *Ibid.*

8. Aquinas, *ST I-II* 54.1; Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, 49. In this article Aquinas considers the humors in the body, and acknowledges that the balance of those humors leads to health—in the much the same way as Aristotle did. Aquinas would have had Galen's anatomical canon added to the Hippocratic corpus; this medicine

can also be fluctuations in health so that it is more or less at different times in a person's life, while that person could still be said to be healthy overall.<sup>9</sup> In other words, for Aquinas brief illnesses don't profoundly affect one's health status. In sum, people's health according to constitution, heredity, immune system function, and temporary fluctuations can only be qualified as a status. "Health as a status" for Aquinas does not possess moral capacities.

Aquinas utilizes his understanding of the vegetative soul to affirm the absence of moral virtue in "health as a status." "The faculties of the nutrient part (of the soul) are not naturally capable of obeying the command of reason, and therefore there are no habits in them."<sup>10</sup> So just as habit cannot be in the body's functions (nutritive, etc) it cannot be in the health of that body.<sup>11</sup>

However, Thomas doesn't completely view our health as a given status. He also supports our responsibility in the care and nurture of our health; health is not just a matter of given genetic constitution. This second understanding of health does retain the moral capacities of habit, and it is to this aspect of health that we now turn.

### *Health as a Habit*

Thomas states clearly in I-II 49 that "health is a habit," quoting Aristotle from the *Metaphysics*.<sup>12</sup> By this Aquinas means that health is in the first

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would have been practiced in medieval Europe as *physic*. Also in this article Thomas offers that "if the humours are in a state which accords with human nature we have the habit or disposition of health." Does Thomas mean here that the humours, or status of the body, can be habituated—or does he mean more that the humours are a changeable, non-habitual disposition? Since at the end of the paragraph he also interchanges the terms "habit" and "disposition," I can't say for certain. However, based upon his definition of disposition as more changeable than habit, it seems most likely that the humours for Thomas comprise a status of the human that changes frequently, but can contribute to a habit of strength or weakness in the body.

9. Aquinas, *ST I-II* 52. 1.

10. *Ibid.*, I-II 50.3.

11. Later in this chapter under the discussion of health and passions I will offer that anatomical science unavailable to Aquinas demonstrates that health of our organs/bodily functions impacts reason and thus habit—offering a correction to Aquinas's understanding of the vegetative soul.

12. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* as cited in Aquinas, *ST I-II* 49.1 and 49.4. When Aquinas states in I-II 50.1 that health is not a habit absolutely, but "like a habit" he is referring to the changeable nature of health as a status. By differentiating between health as a status

species of quality that is difficult to change—an integral part of habit's definition.<sup>13</sup> Health resides in the person as a habit, ordering his or her nature. A person *is* healthy according to how their condition compares to what a healthy human is determined to be (health as a status), but a person can cultivate a greater or lesser degree of health according to how they participate in their own health.<sup>14</sup> Health can increase or decrease by the habits that a person cultivates regarding their wellbeing.

Therefore health constitutes not just a status for Aquinas, but a moral activity in which every person participates. Health's attribute as a habit means that health, or the lack thereof, doesn't just happen to us. For Thomas we retain a Christian responsibility, regardless of our current health status, heredity, or diseased/disabled condition, to practice the care of our health.<sup>15</sup> Health as a habit means that how we treat our beings matters; we are not disembodied rational minds, but we are en-fleshed creatures whose flesh deserves and demands virtuous attention. Health as a habit means we join with God in a journey toward the greatest wholeness and wellbeing we can experience in this life on earth.

By acknowledging health as a status Aquinas can sympathize with all those who struggle with disease etiologies outside of their control or who were born with disabilities. Yet at the same time the Thomist understanding of health as a habit exhorts these people to engage in practices that nudge them toward the most vibrant life they can have. Thomas complexifies the meaning of "health" so that it is both passive and active. Aquinas thus requires Christians to participate in their own healthcare as a part of faithful life oriented to God.

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and health as a habit, I'm able to clarify what seems like a contradiction in Aquinas. In a subsequent section below I'll explore in more depth how health is a habit—here I'm just trying to support that health has a moral aspect to it.

13. Aquinas, *ST I-II* 50.1 Aquinas clarifies that Aristotle also places health as habit in the first species of quality (Aristotle *Physics* VII, 3 [246b 4]), in contradiction to Simplicius's argument.

14. "Health itself admits of more and less: there is not the same proportion of humours in all, nor always the same in each, but up to a point health may grow less and still be health." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10, 3 (1173a24–6) as quoted in Aquinas, *ST I-II* 52.1. Clearly, Aquinas's conceptions of what health is are heavily influenced by Aristotle.

15. This perspective also affirms Barth's insistence that we are to cultivate whatever health we may have; otherwise we capitulate to the forces of death.

## What Health Does Not Mean for Aquinas

However, Thomas resists any vestiges of Pelagianism. He doesn't think that through our own efforts we can save ourselves from sickness and death (unlike many bestselling health self-help books). Also, unlike the bastions of modern industrial medicine that expend billions of dollars striving toward health, Thomas recognizes that health isn't the greatest good in life. Those medical complexes stand as contemporary temples to the worship of health; Aquinas's understanding of health definitively resists idolatry. As a way of further clarifying Aquinas's articulation of health, we'll argue for what a Thomistic vision of health is *not*—namely salvation, the *summum bonum*, an idol, and the definition from the World Health Organization.

### *Health Is Not Salvation*

Aquinas states clearly that “neither man, nor any other creature, can attain ultimate happiness by his own natural powers”;<sup>16</sup> “one needs a strength from grace that is added to natural strength for one reason, namely in order to do and wish supernatural good (ultimate happiness).”<sup>17</sup> Therefore for Thomas, even with our best habits of health, the perfect happiness and salvation of the afterlife comes only by grace.<sup>18</sup> Health cannot be conflated with salvation in Thomas.

Besides salvation being absolutely dependent upon grace, health differs from salvation in a couple more ways. Health requires personal responsibility, dedication and commitment, but such works don't require faith. Pagans can also dedicate themselves to the care of their health. Salvation, on the other hand, doesn't make sense unless one has been moved by grace to faith in Christ. “Health and salvation are also distinguished by the fact that complete health always includes physical well-being whereas salvation does not depend upon one's bodily condition. . . the Christian scriptures do not assume that vital faith in God is accompanied by physical and mental wellbeing . . .”<sup>19</sup> Therese of Liseaux, for example, suffered poor bodily health but was a saint who certainly rests in the bosom of God. We do not have to be perfectly healthy in order to be saved into

16. Aquinas, *ST I-II* 5.5.

17. *Ibid.*, I-II 109.2 in Bauerschmidt, *Holy Teaching*, 125.

18. Kent, “Habits and Virtues,” 124.

19. Evans, *Redeeming Marketplace Medicine*, 75.

God's perfection. For Thomas, even with our best habits of health, the perfect health, happiness and salvation of the afterlife is attainable only by grace.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Health Is Not the Summum Bonum***

Aquinas's understanding of virtue ethics places limits on what health can be for humans. Clearly, a Thomist understanding of ends places the greatest good squarely in the lap of God; our highest good is beautiful friendship with the Creator who made us. Although health is a good, it isn't the greatest good, or *summum bonum*. Our health and the means to it enable us to better serve God's glory, but health isn't glorious in and of itself.<sup>21</sup> Physical, emotional, and social health is an important good, but not the ultimate good.<sup>22</sup> As Thomas says, "the end is the measure of things ordered to the end", which means that health is a legitimate human end, but must be ordered properly to the ultimate end, which is human flourishing, or beatitude in God.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Health Is Not an Idol***

Thomas's recognition that health, while a good isn't a god, keeps Christians from worshipping health. In America health promoting habits often aren't just for well-being's sake but are also seen as a means for personal and social redemption; "wellness becomes a mechanism for the middle class. . . to demonstrate virtuousness while still focusing on themselves."<sup>24</sup> People expend astronomical sums of money and amounts of time to feel better and look good as a way of demonstrating their own worth and value. Thomas counters such Pelagianism by utilizing Aristotle's teaching on the mean—habits of health when done to the right degree lead one to God; habits when done too much or too little lead one to narcissism.

20. Kent, "Habits and Virtues," 124.

21. Verhey, *Reading the Bible*.

22. Shuman, *Body of Compassion*, 83.

23. Aquinas, *Treatise on Happiness*, 3. The contemporary health culture (from Weight Watchers to Gold's Gym) and many Christian-based weight loss programs lose sight of proper ends, confusing weight loss or fitness with happiness.

24. Conrad, "Wellness as Virtue," 388, 398.

## *Health Is Not the WHO*

The World Health Organization (WHO), founded in 1948, defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”<sup>25</sup> appears to be holistic and consistent with Thomistic thought. However, the WHO definition of health assumes, along with modern medicine, that we can trace illness to one germ or one gene gone wrong and then instrumentally find ways of ridding ourselves of any lingering finitude or illness.<sup>26</sup> Even though the WHO’s definition seemingly promotes health over disease, it’s still indelibly connected with a disease-care system that doesn’t know how to cultivate health.

The WHO and its definition also assume the human body can be conformed to the aims of science, often without consulting the patient. “Modernity (and its medicine) purports to know with some certainty what health is, based upon scientific knowledge of the body.”<sup>27</sup> The legacy of Enlightenment continues to haunt this WHO definition with an underlying assumption of the body as machine or product.<sup>28</sup> Even if scientific medicine manipulates the bodily “project” toward the good of health, it still objectifies the patient. The WHO definition doesn’t convey any sense of patient agency or of their ability to cultivate their own habits of health—thus it lacks any moral foundation.

Lastly, the WHO definition lacks any larger *telos*. God and flourishing are largely exempt from this definition, except in some vague reference to the “spiritual.” Such a definition would be unrecognizable as “health” for Aquinas, for it still partitions a whole person into discrete, fixable parts for remedying by a medical system. Even if a person were to check off all the seven components of WHO’s health as “satisfactory,” she may still be at a loss as to a larger story with which to guide her life’s

25. Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, June 19–22, 1946; signed on July 22, 1946 by the representatives of sixty-one states (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on April 7, 1948 ([www.who.int/about/definition/en/print/html](http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/print/html)). Since then the definition has been broadened to include as many as seven aspects of health: emotional, intellectual, physical, environmental, social, occupational, and spiritual.

26. McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*.

27. Shuman, *Body of Compassion*, 84.

28. For an exploration of women’s interactions with their bodies as “projects” see Brumberg, *Body Project*.

narrative. She could still be unhappy, even if she is “healthy” by WHO standards.

Health as a habit, then, doesn’t save us, isn’t higher than God or worthy of worship, nor is it conformity to science’s understanding of health. Health as a habit isn’t even the fluctuations in the way we feel from day to day or month to month, nor is it our genetic constitution. Rather, health as a habit constitutes our ethical intentions and efforts to live wholesome lives—lives that lead us deeper into love with God and our neighbor. Having explored fully what “habit” means and what “health” means, we can now see how the two function together.

## **Habit and Health: Running Together**

This section affirms the agency present in “health as a habit.” I’ll work through the seven aspects of habit (habit as a lasting quality, oriented to action, repetitive, can increase/decrease/ is corruptible, constitutes virtue, is infused by God, has a telos to God) Aquinas offers in the treatise of habit, placing them in relationship to health. As a way of depicting how habit and health relate together to nudge someone toward wellbeing and relationship with God, I’ll immerse the seven descriptions of habit into a case study of a person performing the healthy practice of long-distance running.

### ***Habit as a Lasting Quality***

Aquinas affirms in *I-II 49.1* that health does reside in the first species of quality, which indicates that as a habit it maintains a lasting consistency. Health, then, describes a body and soul orientation that is difficult to change.<sup>29</sup> Habits of health, like any other habit, are not easily lost and are well disposed in regards to something.<sup>30</sup>

29. Aquinas does indicate in *ST I-II 50.1* that bodily dispositions are not difficult to change and are easily lost. This kind of health, which would include Aquinas’s and his medical world’s conceptions of the “humors,” clearly refers to “health as a status” described earlier in the chapter. The fluctuating nature of the body is NOT the same thing as habits of health, which are stable and lasting. At the same time, the body does retain the capacity to nurture and sustain habit through the soul. For example, in *I-II 50.1* Thomas states that habitual disposition can be in the body, compared to the soul as subject to form.

30. Aquinas, *ST I-II 49.1*.



For example, a long distance runner (we'll call her Gena) exemplifies what it means to sustain health as a "lasting quality with consistency."<sup>31</sup> She gets up early almost every morning, puts on her running gear, and heads out the door to train. If she is out of town on a trip, or someone in her family needs her, or any multitude of life's circumstances intervene, she still finds a way to practice. Gena isn't easily dissuaded from running. For her running isn't just something to get done; this habit represents part of who she is. She says to others, "I am a runner." A habit that becomes quasi-permanent, that becomes like "second nature" (as Aquinas and Aristotle would say) describes a habit that has a lasting quality. For Gena running is such a habit.

### *Habit Orients to Action*

Since habit implies an ordering to act, so too do virtuous practices of health. Aquinas quotes Aristotle in saying that a human being, or any part of his body can be considered healthy "when he can perform the operation of a healthy man."<sup>32</sup> Aristotle clarifies further that a habit of health "only makes us do healthy actions, not their contraries; for we say we are walking in a healthy way if [and only if] we are walking in the way a healthy person would."<sup>33</sup>

In the case of our runner Gena, her habit orients her to the healthy action of running. To be clear, the habit properly understood isn't the exercise itself, but the potentiality within her that inclines her to awaken before dawn, put on her shoes, and get moving. Gena's habit orients her to action, motivating her to move when natural forces (instinct) might

31. By using the example of running I'm not in any way wanting to diminish other dimensions of health. I'm simply focusing on a habit that I know well; before my MS-like attacks inhibited my gait and biomechanics, causing me eventually to hang up my running shoes, I was a competitive cross-country/distance runner from early adolescence into young adulthood. Gena was the captain of my cross-country team in high school when I was a freshman and sophomore. She taught me how to run with the passion of my heart and became my first close African-American friend; tragically in the spring of her senior year she died from an undetected congenital heart defect. I use her name as a way of upholding and remembering her virtuous practice of running.

32. Aristotle, *De Historia Animalium* X, I. 633b23–5 as quoted in Aquinas, *ST I-II* 49.3.

33. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* V, 1 (1129a). This obviously means that actions which inhibit or damage health can never be on a list of "healthy habits"—like smoking, excessive drinking, drug abuse, etc.

incline her to being sedentary (i.e., remaining in bed). Her movement, her action of engaging in the habit that sustains a running practice naturally leads to better health, because running demonstrates health.

### *Habit Bears Repeating*

Habits of health require more than one action in order to be established within a person.<sup>34</sup> Health requires repeated, sustained effort.<sup>35</sup> In order to be a runner, for example, one must run over and over and over again—until it almost becomes natural and somewhat “easy” to run. Though the kinds of runs may vary each day (sprints, *fartleks*, hill training, etc) a runner must run often and repeatedly in order to maintain top conditioning. The more a runner runs the more she is transformed by her conditioning so that “good habits make us the types of persons who do good things readily.”<sup>36</sup>

### *Habits Increase, Decrease, and Are Corruptible*

Thomas recognizes that all of us come into the world differently; some of us receive robust constitutions and bodies, while others of us suffer endlessly with maladies and challenges.<sup>37</sup> “An equal degree of knowledge or health is received in one person more than in another because of a differing aptitude, either from nature or from custom.”<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, regardless of our “health as status” or how we were born into the world, we can cultivate habits to increase our health as part of an ongoing, lifelong moral pursuit in which we can realize increasing good even if we don’t achieve the perfection of it.

34. Aquinas, *ST I-II* 51.2–3. For health, like in other habits, reason requires many repetitions in order for it to move the appetitive power enough for the memory to be impacted.

35. *Ibid.*, I-II 51.

36. Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology*, 59. Instead of running Mattison employs the example of repeatedly going to the gym in order to demonstrate how one acquires good habits.

37. Aquinas, *ST I-II* 51.1. “it may be natural according to the nature of the individual: as it is natural to Socrates or Plato to be sickly or healthy, each according to his own constitution.”

38. *Ibid.*, I-II 52.2.

We increase habits of health just like any other habit—through our greater participation in the habit such that the habit produces a more perfect participation in its existing form.<sup>39</sup> In corporeal habits in particular, which would of course concern health, habit increases by intensity on behalf of the acting human being—an intensity that must display both interior desire and exterior potential.<sup>40</sup>

Our runner, Gena, easily exemplifies the phenomenon of habit increase. She decides to work more intensely with her coach over the next couple of months to train for an upcoming race. Under his guidance she does harder and faster speed intervals and adds more strength training to her routine. In just looking at the exterior results of her running, both her coach and she feel that her habit is increasing. Yet for her to be truly habituated into a stronger practice of running, Gina would have to have an “inner fire.” She must not only do the difficult training runs, she must also desire in her heart to run harder and faster. Something about the pounding of her heart, the reach of her legs, the power of her billowing lungs—or even just the exhilaration when the run is over—must draw her. In order to be a champion athlete with greater intensity in training, Gina must love something about running. Her passion for the habit supports and sustains the actual action resulting from it. Gina’s commitment to the habit is one of body and soul, of heart and mind, of inward and outward quality.

Yet suppose if for whatever reason her coach left her and she ceased training with the same level of intensity. In this scenario, Gina has only been conditioned into good shape; her training hasn’t become a habit. She doesn’t maintain any inward intensity without outward instigation. Her habit diminishes according to the different way she now participates in it.<sup>41</sup> Certainly her level of health diminishes along with that, from peak

39. *Ibid.*, I-II 52.1-2. In I-II 52.2 Aquinas also states that we can talk about the habit itself as greater or lesser—“as health is said to be greater or less.” He doesn’t offer a specific example of a habit of health itself increasing.

40. *Ibid.*, I-II 52.2. “That proportion, of course, which constitutes its health, may be brought to a more perfect state; but this comes about because of the change of simple qualities which admit only of that sort of change in intensive magnitude which concerns the degree to which their possessors possess them.” In other words, the change in intensity would be far more the case for increase of habits of health than the change in the habit itself. However, Thomas does admit in the “reply to 1” on this question that bodily habit increase can still increase as itself—as by the addition of subject to subject.

41. *Ibid.*, I-II 53.2. A habit “does diminish according to the different ways the subject participates in it.” The demise of many well-intentioned diet/fitness plans after

athlete to recreational runner. Her habit must flow from who she is, from her internal character and passions, in order for her to sustain it. Without “fire” for what she is doing, her habit can only diminish—perhaps even to the point of ending completely.

The complete cessation, or corruption, of her habit of running (without any replacement exercise) would not only render her a disgruntled and possibly sick (or overweight) couch potato but would also mean she would stop observing the mean of health she once had. The existence of health’s opposite of sickness means that health can be completely lost.<sup>42</sup> Without exercising her virtuous habit at all, she eventually loses it completely.<sup>43</sup> After months without running, were she to attempt to run around a track she would find herself panting and out of breath when once she could almost float across the pavement. Habits of health demand vigilant, balanced action or they and the health they sustain vanish.

### *Habits Constitute Virtue*

Habits that dispose us to an act that is appropriate to our nature and conforms with reason are virtues. Since “health is a habit” and habits that dispose us to the good are virtues then it follows naturally to say that habits of health represent virtues.<sup>44</sup> Through habits of health we perform well and produce good.<sup>45</sup> In a similar way to which we must have inward and exterior intensity to match in order to maintain a habit, we must not only be adept at a habit of health, we must also direct its practice rightly toward the good.

Certainly aerobic fitness and strength comprises part of the healthy nature of a human being, so running (when practiced in the mean

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their participants return home from a workshop weekend testifies to the presence of conditioning without habituation.

42. Aquinas, *Treatise on the Virtues*, I-II 53.1. “If therefore there should be some habit whose subject is corruptible and whose cause has a contrary, then the habit could be corrupted in either way, as is evident with bodily habits such as sickness and health.”

43. Aquinas, *ST I-II* 53.3. “If a man does not exercise his virtuous disposition in moderating his feelings and actions, of necessity many feelings and actions will come about which will transcend the bounds of virtue, under the influence of the sense-appetite and other external pressures. And so his virtue will be lost, or weakened, if it is not exercised.”

44. *Ibid.*, I-II 49.2 and I-II 55.1.

45. *Ibid.*, I-II 56.3.

without excess or deficiency), constitutes part of the “good” that is health. Consider again our runner Gena (who let’s say has maintained her training and hasn’t become a couch potato). Suppose she practices and trains diligently, and becomes quite good at running; she wins or comes close to winning the races she runs. However, if her running only becomes oriented to competition and winning, the moral goodness of her practice fades. Any virtue within her running completely erodes if she cheats or demonstrates unsportsmanlike conduct to others. Thus, she could be a really good runner without being “good” in the virtuous sense.

In order to be a good runner “inside and out,” Gina must cultivate joy and dedication. She must run with an inner fire and an outer light. As she practices this habit of health, she becomes shaped by the endurance, character, diligence, and commitment required for long distance running. The habit of running improves more than her speed or resting heart rate; it enables her to become a more blessed person. Because she cultivates this habit she feels great physically and mentally, which enables her in turn to have more endurance and patience in order to serve God and her neighbor.

When we care for ourselves through habits of health, we become better people; such improvements are a part of Thomas’s design for the virtuous life. Whether we run, or eat more vegetables, or take time to care for the health of our marriage, or seek out counseling during a time of grief, all of the habits of health we practice enable us to grow closer to God. Those things to which we dedicate time and energy in order to care for our embodied selves reap harvests not only of greater health, but more loving lives. As we become healthier we have greater capacity to worship God and tend to others. Taking time to practice a habit of health for ourselves remains the farthest thing from selfish or narcissistic; indeed nurturing a habit of health within us inevitably strengthens our ability to be faithful and to embody *caritas*.<sup>46</sup> Thomas’s virtue ethic urges us to practice habits of health so that we might have the endurance and strength to live a true Christian life.

46. Habit’s aspect of contributing to the lives of others is largely missing from secular programs for health, and according to Marie Griffiths in *Born Again Bodies*, historically most Christian health programs avoid any mention of service to neighbor.

## *Habits Can Be Infused by God*

Aquinas thinks that God participates with us in the development of our habits of health. Once we have expended our efforts in a virtuous direction, God graciously strengthens whatever habit we have. Thomas names this strength imparted to us an infused habit—it has been infused with God’s grace and represents one of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. He writes that “acts produced by an infused habit do not cause a habit, but strengthen the habit already existing, just as medicinal treatment given to a man who is naturally healthy does not cause a healthy condition, but invigorates the health he already has.”<sup>47</sup> Infused habits invigorate the habit we are already cultivating, giving us a gracious “boost” in order to sustain our healthy life of virtue.

For Gena, this means her habit of long distance running is sustained by grace. The gift of infused habit prevents her from relying completely upon her own efforts and exertions—a reliance which would represent a common Pelagianism within athleticism. Instead as she runs she can trust that the sustenance of her habit doesn’t depend totally upon her. Perhaps Aquinas’s understanding of infused habit really invites her to a place of trust. If she offers her body and soul to the increase of her habit, then she can rely on God’s grace to keep her from failing. Though this gift doesn’t extricate Gena from the responsibility for developing and sustaining her habits of health, grace does encourage her along the way to a more wholesome life.

## *Habits Have a Telos*

Habits of health possess *teloi*. They lead persons to proximate ends. From the practice of a habit of health a person could lose weight, lower their blood pressure, gain fitness, reconcile with an estranged family member—the possibilities are endless. Each of these proximate ends are good; lower numbers on a blood pressure cuff or a weight scale would be celebrated by someone trying to lose weight.<sup>48</sup>

47. Aquinas, *ST I-II* 51.4.

48. However as proximate ends these results from the practices of health don’t comprise the complete end of the story. In contrast, current weight loss programs (from Weight Watchers to the South Beach diet) and fitness regimes only maintain proximate ends. Nothing more exists for a practitioner than better scale numbers or greater levels of fitness.

In Aquinas's moral schema though, the practices of health as proximate ends don't simply end there—health habits point to the larger end of friendship with God and support people along their way to that destination. When we practice habits of health with all the factors described above, we have greater energy, vitality, and strength so that we can worship God and love our neighbor. While not *eudaimonia* itself, habits of health nonetheless play an important role in ushering us along the path to happiness. Beatitude blesses us all the more when we can arrive at it without panting.

## In Summation

Aquinas adopts, adapts, and elaborates upon Aristotelian philosophy of habit and health to develop his own moral strategy. Aquinas offers dual meanings of health that allow both for health to be a status, and a habit. Health as a status retains no moral component, and fluctuates dependent upon a person's heredity, immune system, and constitution. At the same time health can comprise part of a virtuous life as a person cultivates lasting habits in order to care for her wellbeing. We've also established what health is not for Aquinas, namely salvation, *summum bonum*, an idol, nor the WHO definition. Each of the seven aspects of habit—lasting quality, orients to action, repetitive, increases/decreases/is corruptible, constitutes virtue, is infused by God, has a telos—can be correlated to practices of health. The runner Gena serves as an example of such healthy habit cultivation. With a clear understanding of what is meant by habit and health, and the knowledge that health retains a moral significance in Aquinas, we can now move to consider more deeply the anthropology of habit, and how that impacts the unity of body and soul.