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*UT TRANSEANT LIBERATI.*  
*ORDO ANIMAE AND MORAL TRANSFORMATION*  
*IN ALBERT THE GREAT'S ETHICS*

*UT TRANSEANT LIBERATI.*  
*ORDO ANIMAE E TRASFORMAZIONE MORALE*  
*NELL'ETICA DI ALBERTO MAGNO*

Abstract

Questo saggio si concentra sul tema dell'ordine dell'anima (*ordo animae*) nell'etica di Alberto Magno (1200 ca.-1280). Ispirandosi a varie *sententiae* bibliche e integrandole con la fondamentale idea dell'*Etica Nicomachea* di Aristotele per cui il fine della filosofia morale è diventare buoni (*ut boni fiamus*), Alberto concepisce l'etica non come mero “discorso filosofico”, per prendere a prestito un'etichetta da Pierre Hadot, ma come un'attività la cui preoccupazione primaria è l'ordinamento – e la trasformazione e liberazione che ne seguono – di sé. Il fatto che Alberto sviluppi tale riflessione sia nei suoi commenti filosofici che in quelli biblici, affidandosi in entrambi i casi sia a fonti aristoteliche che scritturiste, testimonia poi che la sua filosofia e la sua esegesi biblica, solitamente ritratte come radicalmente separate, sono, in realtà, profondamente connesse.

*This essay focuses on the theme of the order of the soul (ordo animae) in the ethics of Albert the Great (1200 ca.-1280). Drawing on several biblical sententiae and integrating them with the fundamental idea of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics that the end of moral philosophy is to become good (ut boni fiamus), Albert conceives of ethics not as a mere “philosophical discourse”, to borrow a label from Pierre Hadot, but as an activity whose primary concern is the ordering – and the consequent transformation and liberation – of the self. The fact that Albert develops such a reflection in both his philosophical and biblical commentaries, relying in either case on both Aristotelian and scriptural sources, testifies then that his philosophy*



*and biblical exegesis, which are usually portrayed as radically separate, are, in fact, deeply connected.*

### Keywords

Alberto Magno; etica cristiana; etica aristotelica; trasformazione morale; libertà

*Albert the Great; Christian Ethics; Aristotelian Ethics; Moral Transformation; Freedom*

libertà va cercando, ch'è sì cara  
(Dante, *Purgatorio*, I, 71)

Cercherò la via ... la via  
(*One Piece*, third Italian opening)

### 1. Introduction

In canto XVII of *Purgatorio* (76-138), right in the middle of the second canticle and, therefore, of the whole *Commedia*, Dante is instructed by his master Virgil, who speaks in the guise of distinguished scholastic doctor (*l'alto dottore*; *Purg.*, XVIII, 2) and truthful father (*padre verace*; *Purg.*, XVIII, 7), in the origin of the seven capital vices, which constitute the ethical rationale that underpins the organization of the seven terraces of Purgatory<sup>1</sup>. Virgil argues that the seed (*sementa*; *Purg.*, XVII, 104) of all moral dispositions, both of the virtues and of the vices, is love (*amore*; *Purg.*, XVII, 92). Indeed, as Dante should know from scholastic texts, remarks Virgil, love is twofold, that is, either natural or of the soul. While the for-

<sup>1</sup> For a recent explanation of the structure of the second realm of Dante's afterlife, see G. Corbett, *Dante's Christian Ethics. Purgatory and Its Moral Contexts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020, pp. 30-37. On Dante's doctrine of virtue and vice, see the recent (and extraordinary) G. d'Onofrio, *Per questa selva oscura. La teologia poetica di Dante*, Città Nuova, Roma 2020, pp. 138-149.

mer is an instinct always devoid of error, the latter is founded on the counsel of reason – it is often referred to as “elective love”, i.e., love consisting in deliberate choices – and can err multifariously: either by intending evil, especially that of the neighbor, or by excessively longing for finite and imperfect goods, or by being deficient in the desire for the only infinite and perfect good, namely, God (*per malo obietto / o per troppo o per poco di vigore; Purg.*, XVII, 95-96). The first error is the root of pride, envy, and wrath, the second determines the pangs of greed, gluttony, and lust, while the third is the source of sloth. When we find ourselves in the grip of these vices, love draws us (*vi tira; Purg.*, XVII, 130)<sup>2</sup> toward wrong ends and false promises of goodness. Accordingly, if vice essentially consists in the corrupted order (*ordine corrotto; Purg.*, XVII, 126) of love, one can infer that, for Dante, virtue is tantamount to the right order of love.

The concept of order is at the forefront of medieval moral tradition from its early patristic origins. In particular, the tight connection between order, virtue, and love can be traced back to the authority of Augustine, who, in the *De civitate Dei*, famously affirms

<sup>2</sup> This verb brings to mind the Latin saying according to which moral beauty (*honestum*) draws us to it because of its force and binds us by virtue of its worth: *Honestum est quod sua vi nos trahit et sua dignitate nos allicit*. The scholastics usually attribute this saying to Cicero, although, as it stands, it appears in the XII century compilation of uncertain authorship known as the *Moralium dogma philosophorum*, which largely draws on Cicero’s texts (the saying derives in fact from Cic., *Inv.*, II, 52, 157). See O. Bychkov, *The Reflection of Some Traditional Stoic Ideas in the Thirteenth-Century Scholastic Theories of Beauty*, in “Vivarium” 2/34 (1996), pp. 146-147; 154-155. Dante might allude to the Ciceronian idea of the natural attraction to goodness in describing the perverse attraction that occurs in the opposite case of vice. Albert the Great often quotes the pseudo-Ciceronian adage (for example in Albertus Magnus, *Super Ethica*, I, lec. xii, ed. W. Kübel (*Opera Omnia, editio Coloniensis*, XIV, 2 vols.), Aschendorff, Münster 1968-1987, p. 65, ll. 82-87 and in Albertus Magnus, *Ethica*, I, 7, 11, ed. A. Borgnet (*Opera Omnia*, 7), Vivès, Parisiis 1891, col. 124a) and frequently interweaves its language into his own ethical analyses (see Albertus Magnus, *Super Matthaicum*, 10, ed. B. Schmidt (*Opera Omnia, editio Coloniensis*, XXI), Aschendorff, Münster 1987, p. 336, ll. 45-52).

that virtue can be briefly and truthfully defined as the order of love (*ordo amoris*)<sup>3</sup>. The Augustinian account played a pivotal role all the way through the Middle Ages up to the XIV century, as Dante's reasoning in *Purgatorio*, XVII reveals, and well beyond, exerting a profound influence even on contemporary philosophical thought<sup>4</sup>.

In this essay, I will show the prominence of the theme of the ordering of the self – and of its consequent transformation and liberation – in the ethical thought of the XIII century Dominican theologian and philosopher Albert the Great (1200 ca.-1280)<sup>5</sup>. It is, in effect, a theme to which, in several passages of his large moral output, Albert manifests a considerable attention<sup>6</sup>. His reflection on this

<sup>3</sup> Aug., *Civ. Dei*, XV, 22: *Unde mihi videtur, quod definitio brevis et vera virtutis ordo est amoris.*

<sup>4</sup> The notion of the order of love is very much at work, for example, in the German philosopher Max Scheler (1874-1928), who significantly titled one of his books *Ordo amoris*. See A. Piazza, *Il problema dell'ordo amoris in Max Scheler*, in "Dialegethai. Rivista telematica di filosofia" 13 (2011), available online at <https://mondodomani.org/dialegethai/>. As for Albert the Great's appropriation of Augustine's definition of virtue, the Dominican takes it into account since his first two ethical treatises, the *De natura boni* (1233-1234 ca.) and the *De bono* (1242 ca.) (for the dates of Albert's works, I refer to H. Anzulewicz, *Zeittafel (Chronologie nach derzeitigem Forschungsstand)*, in Albertus-Magnus-Institut (ed.), *Albertus Magnus und sein System der Wissenschaften*, Aschendorff, Münster 2011, pp. 28-31). In particular, see Albertus Magnus, *De natura boni*, II, 3, 1, ed. E. Filthaut (*Opera Omnia, editio Coloniensis*, XXV.1), Aschendorff, Münster 1974, p. 30, l. 17-p. 31, l. 90, where Albert surveys ten definitions of virtue, including Augustine's, and the much shorter list of Albertus Magnus, *De bono*, I, q. 5, art. 1, ed. H. Kühle, C. Feckes, B. Geyer, W. Kübel (*Opera Omnia, editio Coloniensis*, XXVIII), Aschendorff, Münster 1951, p. 67, ll. 7-18, where Albert quotes Augustine's definition of virtue together with other three.

<sup>5</sup> For a recent, informative, and highly enjoyable portrait of Albert and of his cultural milieu, see I. Resnick, K. Kitchell Jr., *Albertus Magnus and the World of Nature*, Reaktion Books, London 2022, pp. 9-93.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of Albert's *corpus ethicum*, see J. Müller, *Natürliche Moral und philosophische Ethik bei Albertus Magnus*, Aschendorff, Münster 2001, pp. 62-73; S. Cunningham, *Reclaiming Moral Agency. The Moral Philosophy of Albert the Great*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 2008, pp. 24-45; M. Tracey, *The Moral Thought of Albert the Great*, in I. Resnick (ed.), *A*

crucial ethical question certainly matures through the rumination on a multiplicity of sources, both scriptural and philosophical. As we will see, Albert is undoubtedly influenced by various biblical lines, especially from the New Testament, which he often refers to when addressing such matters. But the Dominican was also a careful reader of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, a reader in the deep sense of the scholastic practice of the *lectio*. When in 1248 he was appointed to found a *studium generale* in Cologne, i.e., an institution for the higher education of the members of the *Ordo Praedicatorum* with a curriculum on a par with that of the highest-ranking European universities, and to personally take care of the education of his confrères, Albert surprisingly and somewhat boldly undertook the task by lecturing on the Philosopher's *Nicomachean Ethics*. This activity eventually resulted in the *Super Ethica* (1250-1252), a commentary that combines literal analysis with *quaestiones* in the typical scholastic format<sup>7</sup>. This was followed by a second commentary, the *Ethica* (1262 ca.), a paraphrastic exposition of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that Albert composed as part of his immense enterprise of expounding (and expanding) the whole Aristotelian corpus in order

*Companion to Albert the Great. Theology, Philosophy, and the Sciences*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2013, pp. 347-379.

<sup>7</sup> The *Super Ethica* is the first complete commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* written in the Latin West. Albert composed it a few years after Robert Grosseteste provided the full Latin translation of Aristotle's work from the original Greek (1246-1248 ca.). The *Super Ethica* enjoyed a vast circulation, was highly influential, and has been praised also by contemporary interpreters of Aristotle's ethics: even before the publication of the critical edition (1968), Gauthier and Jolif singled it out as *hands down, the best of the innumerable commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics that the Middle Ages have handed down to us* (R.A. Gauthier, *Introduction*, in Aristote, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, ed. R.A. Gauthier, J.Y. Jolif, 2 vols., Publications Universitaires de Louvain/Louvain, Éditions Béatrice Nauwelaerts/Paris 1958-1959, p. 77, transl. mine). In the 1230s and early 1240s, when he wrote the *De natura boni* and the *De bono*, respectively, Albert could still access part of the *Nicomachean Ethics* through the fragments of an older translation, the so-called *Ethica vetus* and *Ethica nova*, which transmitted books I-III of Aristotle's text.

to make it *intelligible to the Latins*<sup>8</sup>. Thus, over the course of little more than ten years, the Dominican grappled twice with the wide array of questions raised by Aristotle's ethical treatise. This is a unicum in his exegetical activity that, as the examination of the theme of moral order will confirm, had a deep and lasting impact on his thought.

In a frequently cited passage of the *Super Ethica*, Albert points out that the investigation of theologians and that of philosophers differ from each other with respect to their principles, scopes, and methods of inquiry<sup>9</sup>. In the wake of statements like this, the scholarship on Albert has often disjoined the consideration of his theology and biblical hermeneutics from that of his philosophy and science, usually neglecting to look into the possible connections between the former ambits and the latter<sup>10</sup>. It is my conviction, however, that such interpretative approach is in need of a substantial revision. In fact, although Albert's programmatic claims certainly indicate that he conceived of theology and philosophy as two distinct disciplines, his actual practice as a thinker and writer reveals that he did not consider them incommunicable. Therefore, I think we should start looking at Albert's texts from a quite different angle, that is, one that emphasizes the relationship, rather than the distance, between his theological-hermeneutical and philosophical sides. Indeed, the next sections will document that the Dominican's philosophical reflec-

<sup>8</sup> This well-known phrase is to be found in the prologue to Albert's commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, where the Dominican most clearly defines the end and the method of his exegetical work on the Philosopher (Albertus Magnus, *Physica*, I, 1, 1, ed. P. Hossfeld (*Opera Omnia, editio Coloniensis*, IV.1), Aschendorff, Münster 1987, p. 1, ll. 9-49). On Albert's "Aristotle project", see I. Resnick, K. Kitchell Jr., *op cit.*, pp. 66-72.

<sup>9</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Ethica*, X, lec. xvi ... cit., p. 774, l. 80-p. 775, l. 13.

<sup>10</sup> The interpretative paradigm of the separation of ambits in Albert, with regard to ethics in particular, can be found in J. Dunbabin, *The Two Commentaries of Albertus Magnus on the Nichomachean Ethics*, in "Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale", 2/30 (1963), pp. 232-250.

tions on ethical improvement echo some biblical lines, and that, vice versa, he refers to philosophical authorities when dealing with this topic in his own biblical commentaries. Thus, the present essay also intends to be a little contribution to the reassessment of our picture of the *Doctor Universalis* in a new and, in my view, much-needed direction.

## 2. Ut boni fiamus. *Albert the Great on the Goal of Philosophical and Religious Ethics*

At the beginning of book VI of the *Super Ethica*, Albert specifies very clearly the aim of philosophy in general and of moral philosophy in particular. Quoting the IX century Arab thinker al-Kindī, he writes: *in the book on the five essences, al-Kindī says that philosophy is nothing but the ordering of the soul (ordinatio animae). Indeed, the disorder (inordinatio) of the soul comes from the confusion among its faculties, which comes from their imperfection*<sup>11</sup>. Philosophy's mission of contrasting the disorder and confusion that often reign among the powers of the soul and of favouring their ordering, is fulfilled especially by moral philosophy, because, as Albert goes on to explain, *among all the parts of philosophy, ethics chiefly consists in the order of the soul (ordo animae)*<sup>12</sup>. In other words, the

<sup>11</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Ethica*, VI, lec. i ... cit., p. 391, ll. 4-8: *Iacob Alkindi dicit in libro de quinque essentiis, quod philosophia nihil aliud est quam ordinatio animae; inordinatio enim provenit ex confusione potentiarum, quae est ex imperfectione ipsarum* (the translations of Latin texts are mine). Al-Kindī's *Liber de quinque essentiis*, whose original Arabic version is lost, has survived thanks to the Latin translation made by Gerard of Cremona in the second half of the XII century (cf. C. D'Ancona, *La trasmissione della filosofia araba dalla Spagna musulmana alle università del XIII secolo*, in C. D'Ancona (ed.), *Storia della filosofia nell'Islam medievale*, 2 vols, Einaudi, Torino 2005, pp. 809-810). Iacob Alkindi, *Liber de quinque essentiis*, ed. A. Nagy (*Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, II, 5), Aschendorff, Münster 1897, p. 28, l. 11: *Philosophia non est nisi ordo animae*.

<sup>12</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Ethica*, VI, lec. i ... cit., p. 391, ll. 29-30: *ethica*

function of ethics is the regulation of the soul and the harmonization of its powers, so that the lower ones are guided by the higher ones. What the Dominican already seems to outline is the picture of a moral philosophy that does not content itself with formulating a theoretical system and with solving a skein of abstract conceptual problems but that is rather preoccupied with “ordering” us, that is, with improving us qua human beings by effecting a change of our very being.

As noted above, such conception of the goal of ethics is surely inspired by Scripture, which – this is anything but an exaggeration – Albert, like many contemporaries, literally knew by heart. Various biblical lines are worth citing in connection with the question at hand. Starting from the Old Testament, the Book of Proverbs (14:23) contrasts the abundance proper to every action (*opus*) with the scantiness that we usually witness when words (*verba*) are too many<sup>13</sup>. More relevantly, moving to the New Testament, in the Gospel of Luke (8:21), Jesus emphatically states that his mother and his brothers are, in fact, all the people who listen (*audiunt*) to the word of God and put it into practice (*faciunt*)<sup>14</sup>. A few chapters later (11:28), in a similar vein, he claims that blessed are those who listen (*audiunt*) to the word of God and observe it (*custodiunt*)<sup>15</sup>. But Albert’s favorite scriptural lines on the difference between listening to and enacting the Word are to be found in the Letter to the Romans and in the Letter of James: in the former (2:13), Paul declares that the listeners (*auditores*) of the Law are not just before God, while its doers (*factores*) will be justified<sup>16</sup>; the latter (1:22), which, among these *sententiae*, is probably the most cited or referred to by Albert,

*inter alias partes philosophiae principaliter est ordo animae.*

<sup>13</sup> According to the Vulgate, to which I will refer from now on, Pr 14:13 reads: *In omni opere erit abundantia; ubi autem verba sunt plurima, ibi frequenter egestas.*

<sup>14</sup> Lk 8:21: *Mater mea et fratres mei hi sunt, qui verbum Dei audiunt, et faciunt.*

<sup>15</sup> Lk 11:28: *Quinimo beati qui audiunt verbum Dei, et custodiunt illud.*

<sup>16</sup> Rm 2:13: *Non enim auditores legis iusti sunt apud Deum, sed factores legis iustificabuntur.*



admonishes us to be not only listeners (*auditores*) of the Word but also its doers (*factores*)<sup>17</sup>. Without doubt, from all these biblical passages, the Dominican derives the idea of the superiority of the practice of concrete actions over the understanding of mere discourses, including those that constitute the foundation of actions.

This conclusion is remarkably in keeping with the declarations on the aim of moral philosophy that are contained in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a work which, as we saw before, Albert was particularly familiar with. In fact, in it, Aristotle repeatedly affirms that the end of ethical reflection is not knowledge but action, not to discover a set of truths but to become good<sup>18</sup>. Thus, following the Philosopher, in book X of the *Super Ethica*, the Dominican sharply distinguishes the speculative aim of the theoretical sciences and of logic from the practical one of ethics:

<sup>17</sup> Jas 1:22: *estote factores verbi, et non auditores tantum*. In commenting on Lk 1:2, where the evangelist mentions those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus's deeds and became ministers of his Word (*ministri fuerunt sermonis*), Albert clarifies that these are the doers (*operatores*) of the Word. He then goes on to quote Jas 1:22 and the opening line of the Acts of the Apostles, which reminds us of the things that Jesus began to do (*facere*) and teach (*docere*) (cf. Albertus Magnus, *Super Lucam* (1-9), prooemium, ed. A. Borgnet (*Opera Omnia*, 22), Vivès, Parisiis 1894, col. 4a).

<sup>18</sup> See Arist., *Eth. Nic.*, I, 2, 1095a6, where γνῶσις is opposed to πράξις; II, 2, 1103b26-29, where the Philosopher claims that becoming ἀγαθός, not θεωρία, is the purpose of his inquiry; and X, 9, 1179a33-b4 (I follow the division into chapters of Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1984). In Robert Grosseteste's Latin version of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, these three passages read, respectively: *finis est non cognitio, sed actus* (Aristoteles, *Ethica Nicomachea. Translatio Roberti Grossateste* (AL, XXVI, 1-3, fasc. tertius), ed. R.A. Gauthier, Brill/Leiden, Desclée De Brouwer/Bruxelles 1972, p. 143, l. 19); *praesens negotium non contemplationis gratia est quemadmodum alia, non enim, ut sciamus quid est virtus scrutamur, sed ut boni efficiamur, quia nullum utique esset proficuum eius* (ivi, p. 164, ll. 24-26, emphasis mine); *quemadmodum dicitur non est in operabilibus finis speculari singula et cognoscere, sed magis operari ipsa. Nihil utique de virtute sufficiens scire, sed habere et uti temptandum, vel si aequaliter aliter boni finis* (ivi, p. 364, ll. 18-21).

*of the various existing questions, there are some that we want to know for their own sake because of the wondrousness and grandness of the subject matter, of the cause, or of their features, as in the case of all the sciences that constitute the essential parts of philosophy, which deal with the things that do not exist as a result of our actions<sup>19</sup>. There are then questions that we want to know because of their instrumental value, as in the case of logic, which is the method of philosophy. But the questions concerning moral matters have nothing grand, lofty, or beyond our reach, nor are they inquired into for their own sake, nor are they instruments for knowing other things. It thus remains that, in the case of moral questions, in no way do we look for knowledge (scire) but only action (operari).<sup>20</sup>*

Laying even greater stress on the end of moral philosophy as opposed to that of all the other sciences, at the very beginning of the *Ethica*, Albert asserts that moral philosophy is the only discipline that, instead of striving for pure knowledge, makes us good, thus bringing about the perfection of our very being:

*all the other sciences perfect us with respect to something only through knowledge. But none of them perfects the knower in his very being (secundum esse) according to goodness and moral beauty (honestum), that is, in such a way that he himself becomes good and morally beautiful. To perfect its possessor according to the essence of goodness and moral beauty is a prerogative of moral science alone.<sup>21</sup>*

<sup>19</sup> These are the three Aristotelian theoretical sciences, i.e., mathematics, physics, and metaphysics (cf. Albertus Magnus, *Physica*, I, 1, 1 ... cit., p. 1, ll. 43-48).

<sup>20</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Ethica*, X, lec. xvii ... cit., p. 777, ll. 73-85: *problematum quaedam sunt, quae volumus scire propter se propter mirabilitatem et magnitudinem subiecti vel causae vel passionis, sicut in omnibus scientiis, quae sunt partes essentialis philosophiae, quae sunt de rebus non ab opere nostro existentibus, quaedam autem volumus scire sicut adminiculantia, sicut in rationali doctrina, quae est modus philosophiae. Sed problemata moralium non habent aliquid magnum elevatum supra nostrum posse nec propter se quaeruntur nec est adminiculans ad alia scienda. Et ideo restat, ut nullo modo in talibus quaeratur scire, sed tantum operari. Cf. ivi, II, lec. i, p. 95, ll. 67-72.*

<sup>21</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Ethica*, I, 1, 1, in J. Müller, *Natürliche Moral* ... cit., p.

As the Dominican concisely writes shortly afterwards resorting once again to the notion of order, no science is capable of ordering and perfecting the human being with regard to all the aspects of human nature other than the sole moral science<sup>22</sup>.

In the light of this accentuation of the transformative goal of moral philosophy, the distinction drawn by Albert between theoretical and practical ethics becomes all the more relevant. Every discipline, we read in the *Ethica*, possesses both a doctrinal side (*doctrina*) and an applied one (*usus*)<sup>23</sup>. This is true of medicine – an often discussed case in scholastic disputations – as well as of any other art that involves ingenuity (*ingenium*)<sup>24</sup>. In Albert's example, if we consider

326, ll. 13-16: *aliae omnes scientiae ad quaedam perficiunt cognoscendo tantum, nulla autem secundum bonum et honestum perficit scientem secundum esse, ita scilicet quod ipse bonus et honestus sit. Hanc autem praerogativam sola habet moralis quod sui possessorem secundum esse perficit boni et honesti.* In his fundamental monograph, Jörn Müller has provided a critical edition of the first treatise of book I of the *Ethica* by taking into account 24 manuscripts.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, I, 1, 1, p. 327, ll. 5-7: *nulla scientia hominis secundum omnia, quae de natura hominis sunt, ordinativa est et perfectiva nisi sola moralis.* At this point, one could (and should) wonder to what extent, for the Christian theologian Albert, ethics can guarantee such ordering of the human being. In fact, according to the doctrine of original sin, human nature has been wounded so severely that it has lapsed into ignorance, malice, infirmity, and concupiscence (cf. Albertus Magnus, *Quaestio de vitiis capitalibus*, art. 3, in Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones*, ed. A. Fries, W. Kübel, H. Anzulewicz (*Opera Omnia, editio Coloniensis*, XXV.2), Aschendorff, Münster 1993, p. 167, ll. 41-44; cf. P. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire. Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1993, pp. 49-50). The moral cardinal virtues that we can acquire naturally, i.e., through our own efforts, are partly able to stave off the dreadful effects of these *vulnera*; however, only God's grace can fully restore fallen human nature. Thus, a second and more precise question is: up to which point, for Albert, can natural ethics enable the healing of the corrupt human being, and where, instead, does the intervention of supernatural grace become necessary? Addressing this problem goes beyond the scope of this essay, but I thought it appropriate to draw the reader's attention to it.

<sup>23</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Ethica*, I, 1, 2, in J. Müller, *Natürliche Moral ... cit.*, p. 331, ll. 13-16.

<sup>24</sup> The origin of the tripartition *doctrina-usus-ingenium* is in Augustine (*Trin.*, X, 11, 17; *Civ. Dei*, XI, 25), who is influenced by both Cicero (*Orat.*, II, 162; III,

the art of playing a string instrument, it is clear that the grasp of the instrument's workings (*causae et rationes*), which certainly allows one to know which string has to be plucked to produce a sound of a given pitch, is far removed from the skill, acquired through repeated exercise on the fingerboard, that enables one to actually play the instrument. In a few words, in cases like this, theory must be distinguished from practice<sup>25</sup>. This holds true for ethics too, whose doctrinal part (*ethica docens*) is very different from the applied one (*ethica utens*): whereas the former provides the knowledge of the concepts that, as it were, are imparted in a moral philosophy class, the latter makes us capable of applying those abstract concepts to the concreteness of life, thus helping us to make it better<sup>26</sup>. From the viewpoint of the ultimate goal of ethics, however, the two parts are not on the same level. In fact, according to the Dominican, whatever one learns in the speculative branch of ethics is a means to the previously described practical end, whose paramount importance is undisputed: *what can be known about moral matters is not sought after for its own sake, as in the case of the other speculative sciences; we thus look for it only for the sake of action (opus)*<sup>27</sup>. In Aristotle's renowned words, the ethical treatment must be pursued in order to become good, *ut boni fiamus*. Albert draws this phrase, which he re-

77) and Quintilian (*Inst. orat.*, VI, 3). I am thankful to prof. Giovanni Catapano for referring me to these sources.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, I, 1, 2, p. 332, ll. 1-10.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Albertus Magnus, *Super Ethica*, prologus ... cit., p. 4, ll. 1-22; ivi, prologus, p. 2, ll. 20-22. The distinction between *ethica docens* and *utens* was not Albert's invention. Indeed, it already appears in works written before his, such as pseudo-Peckham's commentary on the *Ethica nova* and *vetus*. See J. Müller, *Ethics as a Practical Science in Albert the Great's Commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics*, in W. Senner, H. Anzulewicz, M. Burger, R. Meyer, M. Nauert, P. Sicouly, J. Söder, B. Springer (eds.), *Albertus Magnus. Zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren: Neue Zugänge, Aspekte und Perspektiven*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2001, p. 280.

<sup>27</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Ethica*, I, 1, 4, in J. Müller, *Natürliche Moral ... cit.*, p. 347, ll. 14-15: *quod scibile est de moribus, non volumus propter se sicut in aliis speculativis scientiis, et ideo non quaerimus ipsum nisi ad opus*. Ivi, I, 1, 4, p. 349, l. 3: [*scientia moralis*] *theorica ad praxim ordinatur*.

currently employs almost as a formulaic expression, from the *Ethica vetus*, a portion of the first and fragmentary Latin translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, usually favoring it over the equivalent *ut boni efficiamur* of Robert Grosseteste's complete version<sup>28</sup>.

And now, against the backdrop of this reconstruction, we can finally come to appreciate some of Albert's most remarkable statements on the practical function of moral philosophy. In the *Ethica*, perfectly adhering to the opinion of the Philosopher but maybe with the biblical lines quoted before ringing in his ears too, the Dominican contrasts the listener of mere academic dissertations with the person who truly has the practical side of wisdom close to his heart:

*in moral matters, the listener (auditor) has to refer everything he has listened to to actions, which he can choose, flee, or stick to. Indeed, I am not speaking here of the listener who in school listens to doctrinal science (scientia docens), but of the loving listener of applied science (scientia utens). Otherwise, the end of this treatment would not be to become good (ut boni efficeremur) but some sort of contemplation.*<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Aristoteles, *Ethica Nicomachea. Translatio Antiquissima libr. II-III sive "Ethica Vetus" et Translationis Antiquioris quae supersunt sive "Ethica Nova", "Hoferiana", "Borghesiana"* (AL, XXVI, 1-3, fasc. secundus), ed. R.A. Gauthier, Brill/Leiden, Desclée De Brouwer/Bruxelles 1972, p. 7, l. 1. For Grosseteste's rendering, see *supra*, n. 18. The expression *ut boni fiamus* enjoyed a wide resonance in the Late Middle Ages. For example, in the *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (II, 33), advocating for the superiority of existential and spiritual questions over theoretical and scientific ones, Petrarch affirms the high moral value of letters by writing: *You know, O Lord, before Whom is my every desire and yearning, that of letters, whenever I used them soberly, I demanded nothing more than to become good (ut bonus fierem)*. See A. Edelheit, *Negative and Positive Curiositas in the Renaissance: A Lesson from Petrarca*, in A. Speer, R. Schneider (eds.), *Curiositas* ("Miscellanea Mediaevalia" 42), De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2022, pp. 77-83.

<sup>29</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Ethica*, I, 4, 4 ... cit., col. 54a: *in moribus auditor omne auditum referre habet ad electionem vel fugam, et stare in opere. Non enim hic loquimur de auditore qui audit scientiam docentem in schola, sed de eo qui auditor est diligens scientiae utentis: aliter enim finis huius operis non esset ut boni efficeretur, sed esse alicuius contemplationis gratia.*

*But in moral matters, anyone's expertise derives from nothing but experience and perseverance in difficult actions*<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, I am not speaking here of the listener (auditor) who in school listens to doctrinal science (scientia docens). Such a listener, taking refuge in reasoning, seeks to philosophize and not to be good. And as Aristotle says, someone who philosophizes in this way will never have a good soul. On the contrary, I deem a good listener he who refers what he has listened to in applied science (scientia utens) to his own choices and actions.<sup>31</sup>

As one can see, in the second passage, Albert explicitly develops his argument under the aegis of Aristotle, who, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, asserts that in order to become, say, just or temperate the habituation to real actions is of the utmost importance. As a result, the *hoi polloi*, who seek refuge in simple discourses and hope to miraculously become good in this way, are condemned to miss the mark of virtue forever: just as the sick person who listens attentively to the doctor's diagnosis but does nothing of what he prescribes will never have a healthy body, so too whoever confines himself to an intellectual approach to moral matters will never have a healthy soul<sup>32</sup>. But even though Albert manifestly conducts his reasoning under the

<sup>30</sup> According to Arist., *Eth. Nic.*, II, 3, 1105a8-9, virtue, as well as art, has to do with difficult situations.

<sup>31</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Ethica*, I, 4, 5 ... cit., col. 55a: *Eruditio autem non venit alicui in moralibus nisi per experientiam et perseverantiam in difficilibus artibus. Non enim loquimur hic de auditore qui scientiam docentem audit in schola. Talis autem ad rationem confugiens quaerit philosophari et non esse bonus: et sicut dicit Aristoteles, numquam habebit bene animum sic philosophans: sed illum bonum dicimus auditorem qui in scientia utente auditum ad electionem refert et ad opus.*

<sup>32</sup> See Arist., *Eth. Nic.*, II, 4, 1105b7-18. Grosseteste's translation of ivi, II, 4, 1105b12-18, in particular, reads: *Sed multi haec quidem non operantur; ad rationem autem confugientes, existimant philosophari, et sic fore studiosi, simile aliquid facientes laborantibus qui medicos audiunt quidem studiose, faciunt autem nihil eorum quae praecepta sunt. Quemadmodum igitur neque illi bene habebunt corpus ita curati, neque isti animam sic philosophantes (Aristoteles, *Ethica Nicomachea*. *Translatio Roberti* ... cit., p. 168, ll. 13-18).*

guidance of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the enthusiasm with which he recasts its core thesis is testament to his wholehearted commitment to it: on the supreme goal of moral inquiry and on the path to attain it, the *sententia* of the Philosopher is also that of the Dominican<sup>33</sup>.

To declare with both Aristotle and Albert that the objective of all moral investigations is *boni fieri*, i.e., to become good by way of action, amounts to conceiving of ethics according to that fundamental idea of ordering and transformation of the self that with this essay I intended to bring to the fore. Interestingly, Albert presents such a picture of the nature of moral reflection not only in his commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in his independent philosophical works but also in distinctively religious contexts, such as that of biblical exegesis. In the commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (1257-1264), for instance, citing once again the Aristotelian formulaic expression, he maintains that *in divine matters, obedience to the Law (mandata) provides a greater understanding than the effort of study (studia): indeed, Sacred Scripture 'does not exist for the sake of contemplation but in order to become good (ut boni fiamus)'*<sup>34</sup>. Finally, the Dominican refers to the authority of the Philosopher also in the commentary on the final lines of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 7:24-27), where Jesus famously counterpoises the person who listens (*audit*) to the Word and puts it into practice (*facit*) with the person who just listens to it, comparing them, respectively, with someone who has wisely build his house on solid rock and someone who has foolishly build it on unsteady sand<sup>35</sup>. In glossing these lines,

<sup>33</sup> S. Cunningham, *op cit.*, p. 88: *Albert evidently has strong opinions on this point; and this is probably why, in his later Ethica, he appears to express disapproval of those scholars who practice ethical speculation merely as an intellectual exercise, without reference to self-improvement.*

<sup>34</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Matthaicum*, 16 ... cit., p. 456, ll. 43-46: *Oboedientia enim mandatorum plus dat intellectum in divinis quam labor studiorum; 'non erit' enim sacra scriptura 'contemplationis gratia, sed ut boni fiamus'.*

<sup>35</sup> Mt 7:24-26: *Omnis ergo qui audit verba mea haec, et facit ea, assimilabitur viro sapienti, qui aedificavit domum suam supra petram ... Et omnis qui audit verba mea haec, et non facit ea, similis erit viro stulto, qui aedificavit domum suam super*

Albert quotes in full the passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* about those who seek to become good through reasoning alone (*Eth. Nic.*, II, 4, 1105b12-18), admonishing his readers against unduly separating the conceptual apprehension and verbal profession of Jesus's teaching from its concrete application to the ethical life:

*But the appropriation (usurpatio) of Jesus's teaching (doctrina) without moral righteousness (iustitia) is not the verity of the Kingdom but the vanity of an empty speech. Regarding this, the Philosopher says: 'There are some people who do not perform actions but, taking refuge in reasoning, seek to philosophize and to be good in this way. By doing so, they are similar to the sick who attentively listen to doctors but do nothing of what they are told to do: just as the latter, with such treatment, will never have a good body, so too the former, philosophizing in that way, will never have a good mind'.<sup>36</sup>*

When the truth of the evangelic message, even when it is carefully attended to and sincerely believed in, is severed from the actual moral conduct it entails, it runs the risk of morphing into vain sermons, which end up debasing the dignity of a doctrine that, first and foremost, must be lived rather than preached. As Albert pressingly asks in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke (1264-1268) after paraphrasing one more time *Eth. Nic.*, II, 4, 1105b12-18, *[w]hat profit is it to listen to good advice and not act<sup>37</sup>?* Thus, from the standpoint of the ultimate goal of moral discourses, in the mind of

*arenam.*

<sup>36</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Matthaicum*, 7 ... cit., p. 266, ll. 47-56: *Usurpatio autem doctrinae sine iustitia non est veritas regni, sed vanitas nudi sermonis. De quibus dicit Philosophus: 'Sunt, qui opera non faciunt, ad rationem autem confugientes quaerunt philosophari et esse boni, aliquid simile facientes aegris, qui medicos quidem audiunt studiose, faciunt autem operandorum nihil; et quemadmodum isti nunquam bene habebunt corpus sic curati, sic nec isti mentem sic philosophantes'.*

<sup>37</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Lucam*, 9 ... cit., col. 616b: *Quid enim valet bona audire, et non facere?*



the *Doctor Universalis*, the view of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and that of the Gospel magnificently converge.

### 3. *Moral Transformation as Liberation: Concluding Remarks*

In his celebrated *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, first published in 1981, Pierre Hadot held that the conception of philosophy as an art of life, typical of the whole ancient tradition and inherited by both Patristics and medieval monasticism, tragically met its end in XIII century universities, where philosophy according to its original – and in Hadot’s eyes, apparently – nobler form was superseded by “philosophical discourse”, that is, by mere technical knowledge to be transmitted from *magister* – in the words of Dante quoted at the beginning, *l’alto dottore* (*Purg.*, XVIII, 2) – to *discipulus*<sup>38</sup>. Several years after putting forward this somewhat strong thesis, the great French historian partly revised it, recognizing that at least for some thinkers active in the scholastic milieu, such as Boethius of Dacia, author of the *De summo bono*, the philosopher is primarily a figure who embodies a specific way of life<sup>39</sup>. But for Albert the Great too, as I have documented in this essay, if not the entirety of philosophy, certainly one part of it, i.e., moral philosophy, cannot be reduced to what Hadot calls philosophical discourse. Indeed, drawing on both Aristotle and the Bible and keen to show the agreement between them, Albert underscores time and again that ethics, far from being concerned with purely doctrinal questions, is chiefly aimed at the ordering, improvement, and transformation of

<sup>38</sup> I consulted the most widespread Italian edition: P. Hadot, *Esercizi spirituali e filosofia antica*, trad. it. di A. Marietti, A. Taglia, Einaudi, Torino 2005 (ed. orig. Albin Michel, Paris 2002), pp. 161-162.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. P. Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, Gallimard, Paris 1995, pp. 380-381; 392-393. Hadot’s new position, as he himself informs us, is indebted to J. Domański, *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre? Les controverses de l’Antiquité à la Renaissance*, Cerf, Fribourg-Paris 1996.

our life. Its goal is eminently practical: *bene agere* and *boni fieri*.

The good order of the soul that Albert urges us to attain also brings about the longed-for liberation from inordinate passions and from the excessive preoccupations (*curae*) of the earthly condition. This is another theme of high spiritual significance that runs through the vast ethical output of the Dominican and which, by way of conclusion, I would like to briefly touch on. In particular, a short passage from Albert's commentary on the Gospel of Luke is worth reading for its striking beauty. Patterning his sentences on Is 51:10, where God's arm is said to have drained the deep sea and turned its bottom into a way (*via*) so that the redeemed could pass free (*ut transirent liberati*)<sup>40</sup>, Albert marvelously writes: *in the sea, i.e., in the world, the Lord provided all His followers with the way so that they can pass free (ut transeant liberati); this is the way of spiritual commitment, far removed from mundane thoughts*<sup>41</sup>. It is likely that the term *mare* (sea) evokes in the mind of the Dominican, who was particularly fond of assonances between words, the adjective *amarus* (bitter), as it does in fact in several other contexts. This could explain why, ruminating on Is 51:10, Albert interprets the sea as the present world: indeed, what is it if not a place of bitterness (*amaritudo*), a place of struggle, pain, and suffering? Luckily, however, the Lord comes to our rescue, showing us the path that sets us free from all that. The liberty we can thus obtain is evidently the one guaranteed by Christian faith, but it is not difficult to imagine, especially in the light of what we saw, that Albert thought it to be in perfect harmony with the *ordo animae* favored by Aristotelian philosophical ethics.

<sup>40</sup> Is 51:10: *Numquid non tu siccasti mare, aquam abyssi vehementis; qui posuisti profundum maris viam, ut transirent liberati?*

<sup>41</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Lucam*, 1 ... cit., col. 138a: *in mari, hoc est, in mundo, dedit [Dominus] viam omnibus suis ut transeant liberati: et hoc per viam studii spiritualis, cui nihil adhaeret de cogitationibus saeculi.*