

STEFANO PERFETTI

Girded Loins: Albert the Great on Concupiscence, Physiology, and Moral Vigilance in Luke 12:35

³⁵ Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning; ³⁶ be like those who wait for their master when he returns from the wedding, so that when he comes and knocks, they may open to him at once. ³⁷ Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes; truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them (Luke 12:35-37).

Chapter 12 of Luke's Gospel contains some of Jesus's most vivid teachings. Thousands gather to hear the Nazarene master, pressing so closely together that they trample one another. They all want to hear his open-air psychotherapy. Through parables, he teaches them to see the world anew and to access an existential fullness hitherto unknown. Jesus urges them to be ready for the Kingdom and prepare for the *parousia*, and he does so in his characteristic manner, through similitudes: the lilies of the field neither toil nor spin, yet they are dressed more beautifully than Solomon, because it is God who adorns them; likewise, true disciples understand that God provides for their essential needs. He speaks of a treasure stored in heaven and not on earth. He recounts the parable of watchful servants who remain awake through night, their lamps burning and their loins girded, awaiting their master's sudden return. In the Vulgate, verse 35 commands: « sint lumbi vestri praecincti et lucernae ardentes in manibus vestris ».

This call to be ready to recognize the messianic signs of the Kingdom is interpreted by Albert the Great, in his *Super Lucam* (1264-1268)¹, by a conceptual disarticulation of its wording. Each term becomes the starting point for a moral meditation on the control of carnal passions and on the risks of « na-

¹ For the chronology of Albert's works, unless otherwise indicated, I refer to H. MÖHLE ET AL., *Zeittafel (Chronologie nach derzeitigem Forschungsstand)*, in ALBERTUS-MAGNUS-INSTITUT hrsg., *Albertus Magnus und sein System der Wissenschaften*, Aschendorff, Münster 2011, pp. 28-31.

turae perversitas» — the dangerous inversion in which «caro imperat et ratio obedit», whereas «in ordinata [...] natura ratio imperat et caro obedit»².

Albert prepares his examination of verse 12:35 by outlining a series of interlocking dichotomies that map the theme conceptually³. It is enough here to trace those that bear directly to our topic.

Jesus's speech addresses those capable of recognizing the signs and admonishes them to be *solliciti et suspensi*, that is, zealous, cautious about the Lord's return, and suspended in vigilant expectation. The path of *sollicitudo* comprises three stages: [i] *vitiorum carnalium cohibitio et restrictio*; [ii] *bonorum meritorum perfectio*; and [iii] *attentio*, that is, vigilant waiting for the expected return⁴. In this framework, the verse «sint lumbi vestri praecincti» is understood by Albert as a figurative expression of the first negative moment — namely the *cohibitio* and *restrictio* of carnal vices, the restraint of incontinence in the face of bodily stimuli. Each term of the verse is conceptually overdetermined by the Dominican, according to the following scheme:

Sint	<i>praeceptum auctoritatis</i>
Lumbi	<i>radix et principium concupiscentiae carnalis</i>
Vostri	<i>subiectio eiusdem sub facultate nostrae potestatis</i>
Praecincti	<i>modus restrictionis</i>

Consequently, Albert gives each of the four terms an intensive conceptual exegesis. *Sint*, a jussive subjunctive (translating the imperative ἑστωσαν), expresses the *imperium/praeceptum auctoritatis* to «contain carnal enticements». Far from being arbitrary, this command rests on five reasons: carnal enticements are «impure in themselves», «contrary to the spirit», «derived from a corruption of human nature», «impediments to the good studies of wisdom», and «intrinsically evil, contrary to God and to the Kingdom»⁵. Each of these points is then elaborated in theoretical terms and supported with scriptural parallels.

1. GIRDING ONE'S LOINS OR HAVING THEM WRAPPED BY APHRODITE ?

The Dominican first focuses on the term *lumbi* and builds on it a psycho-physiological reflection on temptation, concupiscence, and sin — a line of

² ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Lucam*, ad loc., in *Opera omnia*, 23, *Enarrationes in secundam partem Evang. Lucae* (X-XXIV), ed. A. BORGNET, Vivès, Paris 1895, p. 239a.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 238b.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 239a.

thought, as we shall see, close to certain passages in his *Super Iob* (1264-74)⁶ and to his analyses on voluntariness, *incontinentia*, *concupiscentia*, and *bestialitas* in the *Ethica* (ca. 1262).

In the *Super Lucam*, Albert immediately specifies that:

«Lumbi sunt instrumenta et loca carnalium passionum et concupiscentiarum, infernus respectu luminum coelestium, receptacula venereorum, juncturae superiorum et inferiorum, vasa illusionum, loca corruptionum et infectionum serpentinarum»⁷.

This provides the outline of a theology of concupiscence attentive to physiological dynamics, which the Dominican develops immediately thereafter.

The initial claim that the loins are «instruments and sites of carnal passions and desires» is explained by recalling *Job* 40:16 [Vulg. 11], where, regarding Behemoth, it is said «Fortitudo eius in lumbis eius et virtus illius in umbilico ventris eius». According to most contemporary biblical scholars, the term 'Behemoth' alludes to a primeval mythical animal, similar to a hippopotamus⁸. Albert, however, (here as in the *Super Iob*) treats the mysterious primeval animals, Behemoth and Leviathan, as symbols of our bodily dynamics of concupiscence⁹. Within this anthropological framework, he applies a conceptual exegesis to the Old Testament passage under consideration. Beginning from the grammatical structure of the verse, he arbitrarily separates the referents of the two identical pronouns 'eius': *his* strength refers to the devil, while in *his* loins refers to man — specifically, to every human male. Then, when the verse continues «et virtus illius in umbilico ventris eius»,

⁶ Regarding the dates of composition and completion of Albert's *Super Iob*, various hypotheses have been proposed (1262? 1264-68? 1272-74?). An overview may be found in S. PERFETTI, *Biblical Exegesis and Aristotelian Naturalism: Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and the Animals of the Book of Job*, «Aisthesis», 11/1, 2018, pp. 81-97: 83.

⁷ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Lucam*, ed. BORGNET, p. 239b.

⁸ See, e.g., J. DAY, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, pp. 76-77; B. BREED, *Behemoth*, in ID. ET AL. eds., *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, 3, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin - New York 2010, s.v.

⁹ Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Iob = Commentarii in Iob*, ed. M. WEISS, Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1904, p. 476, 36-42: «Ecce, quasi dicat in evidenti est causa subversionis tuae, *Vehemoth* quod animal interpretatur, hoc est animalis et brutalis natura, quae in te est, quem feci tecum, ut non tantum esses intellectus purus, sed haberes intellectum animale» ; p. 484, 1-10: «Sicut per *Vehemoth* sensualitas intelligitur in homine, quae est animalis vita, hoc est, qui fertur in delectabilia quique sensuum dissoluta lascivia, quam intra metas suas spiritus rector non continet, ita per *Leviathan* infectio primi serpentis intelligitur, quae sicut venenum infusa in Evam primam matrem in totum genus humanum sicut in mare quoddam redundavit». Cf. PERFETTI, *Biblical Exegesis and Aristotelian Naturalism* cit., pp. 88-93.

his prior conviction that *umbilicus* is a euphemism for the female genitals¹⁰ leads him to refer the pronouns *illius* and *eius* to woman, in a complementary parallelism: just as the loins of men, so the navel of women is a bodily locus of concupiscence and a path of diabolical temptation¹¹.

A second characterization follows: the *lumbi* are an 'infernus', a low level of reality, « respectu luminum coelestium ». Albert explains this by interweaving Platonic doxography¹² with three biblical references: the brazen and restless woman of *Proverbs* 7:10-11, symbolizing the humors, heats, fumes, and libidinous impulses that impede modesty and chastity; Job's foolish wife in *Job* 2:10, who urges her husband — afflicted in the flesh — to curse God; and the passage from *Proverbs* 30:15-16, according to which, among the « things that are never satisfied », one finds « infernus et os vulvae ». From this, Albert takes his cue for a discourse on the infernality not so much of the *lumbi* as of the navel (the « umbilicus ventris eius »): « Infernus quidem propter concupiscentiae profunditatem. Os autem vulvae quod a volvendo dicitur propter insatiabilem libidinem »¹³.

¹⁰ This is a patristic conviction already attested in Jerome's well-known letter to the virgin Eustochium: HIERONYMUS, *Epistolae*, XXII, 11 (PL 22, coll. 400-401): « Job, Deo carus et testimonio ipsius immaculatus et simplex, audi quid de diabolo suspicetur: "Virtus ejus in lumbis, et potestas ejus in umbilico". Honeste viri mulierisque genitalia immutatis sunt appellata nominibus ». That is: « Job was dear to God, his purity and frankness witnessed by God's own testimony; yet hear what he thinks of the devil: "His strength is in the loins and his force is in the navel". The words are used for decency's sake, but the male and female generative organs are meant » (SAINT JEROME, *Select Letters*, with an English translation by F. A. WRIGHT, Heinemann - G. P. Putnam's Sons, London - New York 1933, p. 77).

¹¹ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Lucam*, ed. BORNET, p. 240a: « Ostendit enim per hoc quod virtus concupiscentiarum per quas diabolus decipit homines, in viris quidem sit in lumbis, in foeminis autem in umbilico: in quibus membris concupiscentia principaliter dominatur ». In reality, in the Hebrew text of *Job* all the pronominal suffixes are clearly masculine and refer to Behemoth, including the final attribute « his force is in the muscles of his belly » (ve- 'ono bišrire viṭno); similarly, the LXX has only the masculine αὐτοῦ. The Latin of the *Vulgata*, however, introduces ambivalence in the pronominal forms, thereby giving room for multireferential interpretations.

¹² *Ibid.*: « Quod autem infernus sint respectu luminum coelestium dicit expresse Plato, qui dicit in lumbis quasi inferno concupiscentiam esse demersam, et ideo tantae esse perversitatis, quod corrigi non potest, quia procul a lumine rationis et mentis relegata ». I have not found the exact source in Plato. I suspect that it is a Calcidius-derived trace that has passed through some Chartrean metamorphosis, as the commentary of William of Conches on the *Timaeus* may suggest: « [...] voluit Socrates in arce civitatis esse senatum ut in arce capitis est sapientia; sub isto esse milites ut in corde animositatem, sub quibus sunt cupidinarii ut in lumbis est concupiscentia » (GUILLAUME DE CONCHES, *Glosae super Platonem*, ed. É. JEANNEAU, Vrin, Paris 1965, §. xv, p. 75. See also the sources set out *ad locum* by the critical editor).

¹³ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Lucam*, ed. BORNET, p. 240a. Cf. also p. 396b, where, while commenting on the parable of the prodigal son, Albert quotes the same passage from *Proverbs*, and glosses: « Juxta Platonem, concupiscentia sepulta est in inferno: et ideo voracitas concupis-

The third point in the rubric states that the *lumbi* are also «receptacula venereorum, quoniam ibi totum est regnum Veneris». The notion of the ‘venereal’ here functions on two registers. The first is biblical, with a reference to *Sirach* 47:19-20 (*Vulg.* 21-22), where Solomon is reproached for having succumbed to lust. The second is classical — indeed, Homeric — clearly mediated by Aristotle’s mention of the famous girdle of Venus, which binds one in concupiscence and deprives even the wise of their wisdom¹⁴.

«Lumbi etiam sunt receptacula venereorum, quoniam ibi totum est regnum Veneris. Unde, *Eccli.* XLVII, 21 et 22, impropere Salomoni: ‘Inclinasti femora tua mulieribus, potestatem habuisti in corpore tuo, dedisti maculam in gloria tua, profanasti semen tuum’. Femur enim et lumbus idem est: nisi quod unum dicitur ad latus, alterum autem ad dorsum: et unum ad extra, et alterum ad intus. Haec igitur inclinare mulieribus, est ista venereis exhibere. Potestatem autem in corpore habere cum enervatione mentis, est Veneris sequi concupiscentias. Quia sicut Homerus in versu graeco dicit: “Veneris corrigia”, stringens in concupiscentia, “furatur mentem valde sapientum”»¹⁵.

This triangulation that connects the Homeric citation mediated by Aristotle, passages from *Sirach*, and the theme of concupiscence constitutes an argumentative pattern that recurs several times in Albert’s works. Indeed, it shows close parallels with a passage in Book VII of his *Ethica*, in which, following Aristotle’s reasoning, the manifest eruption of anger is contrasted with the more covert ways in which one yields to concupiscence.

centiae dicitur infernus. Os autem vulvae (a volvendo dictum) vocatur delectatio ligans mentem, quae non satiatur, sed per rememorationem semper similes suscitatur appetitus». Cf., additionally, Albert’s *Super Ieremiam*: «Vulva a volvendo dicitur, eo quod semper vult per concupiscentiam irascibilem: radices figurat peccatorum». The lesson ‘volvendo’, as reported by the first editor (G. MEERSSEMAN O.P., *De S. Alberti Magni Postilla inedita Super Ieremiam*, «Angelicum», 9/1, 1932, pp. 3-20: 18) becomes ‘volendo’ in the later Cologne edition: *Postillae super Ieremiam [...] fragmenta*, ed. H. OSTENDLER, in *Opera omnia*, XIX, Aschendorff, Münster 1952, p. 637, 65-67. Both read the same ms. Brügge (Bruges), Bibliothèque du Séminaire 103/129.

¹⁴ ARISTOTELES, *Ethica Nicomachea*, VII, 6, 1149b15-18.

¹⁵ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Lucam*, ed. BORGNET, p. 240b (with small formal changes). I would translate it as follows: «The loins are also the receptacles of venereal matters, because the whole realm of Venus is there. For this reason in *Sirach* 47:21-22 Solomon is reproached: “You have bent your thighs [*femora*] to women, you have been overpowered in your body, you have stained your glory, you have profaned your seed”. For thigh [*femur*] and loin [*lumbus*] are the same thing: only, one refers to the side, the other to the back; and one refers to the outside, the other to the inside. Therefore, to bend these parts to women means to offer them to venereal matters. To be dominated in one’s body through the weakening of the mind means to follow the concupiscences of Venus. For, as Homer says in a Greek verse, “the girdle of Venus”, tightening in concupiscence, “steals the mind even of the very wise”. The final quotation echoes *Il.* XIV, 214-215 and 217, drawing on the Latin versions of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

«Concupiscentia autem et maxime quae est venereorum, insidiatrix est: primo enim venatur amorem et familiaritatem, quo trahat eam quam concupiscit, quemadmodum Homerus et alii poetae dicunt de Venere, quod insidiatrix sit. Homerus enim dicit quod deceptio propria est ‘dolosae Cyprigenae’, hoc est, Veneris de Cypro natae. Et hanc deceptionem dicit esse “corrigiam” Veneris “valde variam”, per quam fraus est, et ‘alligavit sibi intellectum’ sive rationem “spisse sapientis”, hoc est, profunde prudentis. Sicut dicit Sapiens, quod “Vinum et mulieres apostatare faciunt etiam sapientes” [Eccli. XIX, 2] »¹⁶.

As is evident, this passage too, which traces the dynamics of concupiscentia back to the yielding of the mind (*enervatio mentis*) and to its being bound (*alligatio intellectus sive rationis*), draws from Aristotle the vivid image of the cunning (*insidiatrix*) Aphrodite’s variegated ensnaring girdle and connects it to the biblical condemnation of lustful conduct in the wisdom book of *Ecclesiasticus* (or *Sirach*).

Despite these close parallels between the *Super Lucam* and the *Ethica*, the latter does not explicitly mention the *lumbi*. This occurs extensively, instead, in Albert’s commentary on the *Book of Job*, where the loins are designated as « loca delectationum » (p. 208, 46, on *Job* 16:13 [Vulg. 14]); as a bodily region that must be tightly girded in order to dissipate the « spirits of concupiscentia » (p. 473, 7-11, on *Job* 40:7 [Vulg. 2], where God commands Job, before interrogating him, « Accinge sicut vir lumbos tuos »¹⁷); and finally, when

¹⁶ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Ethica*, VII, 1, 9, in *Opera omnia*, 7, *Ethicorum lib. X*, ed. A. BORGNET, Vivès, Paris 1891, p. 486b (with modifications in the internal quotations). I would translate it as follows: « Concupiscentia, however, especially that linked to the pleasures of the flesh, is deceitful: at first it hunts for love and familiarity in order to attract the one it desires, as Homer and other poets say that Venus is deceitful. Homer indeed says that deception is proper “to the Cyprian weaver of wiles”, that is, to Venus born in Cyprus. And he says that this deception is “the embroidered girdle” of Venus, through which she accomplishes her fraud, and has bound to herself “the intellect”, or reason, “of the intensely wise”, that is, deeply prudent. As the biblical Wise affirms, “Wine and women lead even the wise astray” [Sirach 19:2]. In fact, only the second quotation is Homeric; the first is of uncertain origin.

¹⁷ And Albert comments on it (*Super Iob*, ed. WEISS, p. 443, 12-28): « Accinge sicut vir lumbos tuos. Vir est virens intus et virilis et vim et virtutem habens. [...] Lumbi autem loca sunt delectationum et concupiscentiarum, qui, nisi accingantur et restringantur, emittunt concupiscentiarum fluvios, quae impediunt intellectum ab electione boni in moribus, ita quod non videt eligibile, quemadmodum oportet videre eum, ut scilicet verum et bonum eligat, et non bonum detestetur. Prv XXXI, (17): “Accinxit fortitudine lumbos suos”. Eph VI, (14): “State ergo succincti lumbos vestros in veritate”, Lc XII, (35): “Sint lumbi vestri praecincti” ». The Dominican completely ignores the original ironic tone of the verse, subjects the term *vir* to an etymological-alliterative hypersemanticization, and finally brings the biblical figure of « girding one’s loins » into the Aristotelian ethical agenda. In reality, this figure — well known to biblical scholars — refers to the ancient military practice, widespread in the Near East, of tucking the

commenting on *Job* 40:16 [*Vulg.* 11], which is part of Behemoth's physical description, the *lumbi* become a coded reference to male concupiscence, while the *umbilicus* functions as a complementary reference to the belly, understood as the female erogenous zone. The parallels with the earlier texts are immediately apparent, both in physiological framing — of Aristotelian-Avicennian coloring — and in the shared Aristotelian and biblical citations.

« Et subdit compositionem membrorum in quibus magis dominatur, primo in masculo, secundo in femina. Et hoc est: "Fortitudo eius in lumbis eius", quantum ad masculum. In lumbis enim nervi sunt sensitivi per quos semen a cerebro et a corpore descendens et tangens intima nervorum titillando libidinem concitat et vi delectationis sapientiae mentem inclinat et subvertit. Et hoc est quod dicit Aristoteles in VII *Ethicorum* ex Homero: "Doli complicatrix Venus sive Cypris » et "cingulum Veneris furata est mentem valde sapientum". *Eccli.* XIX <2-3>: "Vinum et mulieres apostatare faciunt etiam sapientes et arguent sensatos. Et qui se iungit fornicariis, nequam erit". "Et virtus illius", hoc est ultimum potentiae illius, "in umbilico ventris eius", quantum ad feminam. Matrix enim, cuius nervos tangit semen susceptum in coitu, conum habet ad umbilicum, et dum illi nervi tanguntur, femina intense delectatur »¹⁸.

For Albert, the description of Behemoth in *Job* 40 symbolizes the physiology of human sexuality, where sin inhabits the lower level of our animal nature: « 'Behemoth', which means animal, is the animal and brutal nature in you, "which I made with you", so that you would not be pure intelligence alone but would also be endowed with animal intellect »¹⁹. Accordingly, the traditional link between loins (*lumbi*) and lust (attested, for example, in Gregory the Great²⁰) receives here, as in Thomas's coeval commentary²¹, an in-

tunic into the belt in order to prepare for action; cf. H. WOLF, אָזָר ('āzar) to gird, clothe, in R. LAIRD HARRIS ET AL. eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, Moody Press, Chicago 1980, pp. 29-30.

¹⁸ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Iob*, ed. WEISS, p. 477, 7-31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 476, 36-42 (cf. *supra*, n. 9)

²⁰ Cf., e.g., GREGORIUS MAGNUS, *Moralia in Iob*, XXVIII, iii, 12, ed. M. ADRIAEN, *Libri XXIII-XXXV*, Brepols, Turnhout 1985 (CCSL), p. 1402: « Lumbos uero accingere est uel in opere luxuriam uel in cogitatione refrenare. Delectatio namque carnis in lumbis est. Vnde et sanctis praedicatoribus dicitur: "Sint lumbi uestri praeacincti et lucernae ardentes". Per lumbos enim luxuria, per lucernas autem bonorum operum claritas designatur. Iubentur ergo lumbos accingere et lucernas tenere ».

²¹ Already Aquinas, in his almost contemporary commentary on *Job* (1261-4), softens the references to the *lumbi* in a naturalistic and physiological direction. Cf., e.g., THOMAS DE AQUINO, *Expositio super Iob ad litteram*, cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, (*Opera omnia*, t. 26), Sanctae Sabinae, Romae 1965, p. 103, 173-178: « convulneravit lumbos meos, quasi dicat: [...] vulnera pervenerunt usque ad interiora in quibus delectabatur, quae per lumbos significantur in quibus est delectatio vel etiam generationis origo »; p. 217, 325-329 (referring to Behemoth):

terpretation cast in more markedly physiological terms. «Fortitudo eius in lumbis eius», («his strength is in his loins» (40:16a [Vulg. 11a]), alludes to the male, in whose loins are found «sensitive nerves; when the semen, descending from the brain and from the body, touches the inner part of the nerves, this stimulation arouses libido and, through the force of pleasure, bends and subverts that part of the mind that should be devoted to wisdom»²². The subsequent «virtus illius in umbilico ventris eius» (40:16b [Vulg. 11b]) refers, conversely, to the female: her «uterus, whose nerves are stimulated by the semen received during coitus, has a cone reaching the navel; when these nerves are stimulated, the woman experiences intense pleasure»²³.

2. TAKING CONTROL OF OUR LOINS

We may return to the *Super Lucam*, where the Dominican ponders why the Gospel text specifies that the loins are *vestri*, that is, *nostri*, ‘ours’: «Nostri dicuntur hi lumbi non quia partes sunt corporis» — which is self-evident — «sed quia passio lumborum in nostra est potestate. [...] hoc est, ad dominium rationis, in cuius dominio petulantia est carnis. Sic ergo nostri sunt lumbi»²⁴. The *lumbi*, understood as a metaphor for carnal desires, become ‘ours’ only when they are *praecincti*, and to gird them means to exercise control over them.

Yet the very notion of full control over the *lumbi* and their *concupiscentiae* may seem an unattainable ideal. An *opponens* — a hypothetical objector — with even a modest familiarity with Aristotle might raise the following objection:

«objicitur id quod Aristoteles disputat in libro VII *Ethicorum*, ubi determinat Philosophus quod tales operationes tractae passionibus concupiscentiae non omnino sunt in nostra potestate, sed sunt mixtae: partim tractae per concupiscentias, et partim voluntariae. Sic videtur quod non bene dicitur: *Lumbi vestri*»²⁵.

«Describit autem coitum elephantis primo quidem quantum ad principium libidinis ex qua animalia commoventur ad coitum, cum dicit “Fortitudo eius in lumbis eius”: nam ex lumbis sive ex renibus semen ad membra genitalia derivatur».

²² ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Iob*, ed. WEISS, p. 477, 10-16.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 477, 24-29.

²⁴ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Lucam*, ed. BORGNET, p. 241b.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241b. What is referred to here is not mixed actions in the proper sense — treated in *Eth. Nic.*, III, 1 — but Book VII, where Aristotle discusses incontinence (ἀκρασία), intemperance (ἀκολασία), the passions and the relationship between reason and desire, and the fact that the incontinent individual act against their own rational judgment.

In other words: one might object that Aristotle, in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, when discussing incontinence, specifies that « actions driven by the passions of concupiscence are not entirely in our power, but are mixed: partly driven by concupiscence and partly voluntary ». In that case, moral responsibility would be only partial and thus inadequately expressed by the formula « your loins ». The objection, bordering on religious impertinence, since it implicitly calls into question the justice of divine precept, raises a substantive issue: how can a precept be meaningful and just if it demands something not fully within our power? If the loins — i.e., the interplay between ethical deliberation and bodily desire — were, at least in part, structurally beyond our complete control, then the Gospel precept, as Albert has just interpreted it, would be impracticable. The Dominican's reply is swift:

« Sed ad hoc dicendum quod Aristoteles ibi loquitur de proprietate incontinentis in quantum incontinens est. Incontinens autem est qui rationem quidem in faciendis et eligendis habet sanam, sed concupiscentiam habet passionibus attractam. Et in quantum est in tali statu ille incontinens, non habet actiones et electiones suae, rationis liberas omnino, quia immersus est concupiscentiae passionibus. Non tamen habet coactas, sed potius coactione habet liberas, quamvis non habeat eas liberas ab infectione. Et hoc est quod dicit: *Lumbi vestri*, quia in nostra sunt potestate quantum ad coactionem »²⁶.

Albert's reply here simplifies the refined analyses he himself had undertaken in Book VII of his *Ethica* concerning the coexistence, in the same agent, of imperfect practical syllogisms in which an erroneous situational assessment at the level of the minor premise neutralizes the universal norm expressed in the major premise²⁷ — along with his subtler discussions of continence and incontinence, temperance and intemperance, and bestiality²⁸. In the *Super Lucam* the account is more schematic. Albert explains that in the passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* invoked by the hypothetical *opponents*, Aristotle is describing the profile of the incontinent precisely as he is, so to speak, in the exercise of incontinence. In such a condition, his otherwise

²⁶ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Lucam*, ed. BORNET, pp. 241b–242a. I would translate it as follows: « In those passages Aristotle speaks of the condition of the incontinent as *incontinent*. Now, the incontinent person is one whose reason is sound in deliberation and in choice, but whose concupiscence is swept away by the passions. Insofar as the incontinent person is in such a condition, his actions and the choices of his reason are not entirely free, since he is submerged by the passions of concupiscence. Nevertheless, they are not compelled; indeed, they are free from coercion, though not free from infection. And this is what the expression means: “Your loins”, because “actions and choices” are within our power as regards non-coercion ».

²⁷ Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Ethica*, VII, 1, especially chapters 4–5, ed. BORNET, pp. 471b–476b.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, chapters 6–14, ed. BORNET, pp. 477a–499b.

sound cognitive capacity «concerning actions and choices» is muddled by his «concupiscence carried away by the passions». Here, then, is the mixed condition in which the voluntary and the passionate coexist.

Albert has just scored his first point, beginning with the human type most distant from the virtuous person, namely the incontinent. Even the habitual sinner, after all, retains certain levels of freedom: he is free from external coercion, and he still possesses sound reason. What he lacks is balance in the sphere of *concupiscentia* — which bears the mark of the *infectio*, the embodied trace, like a scar, of the sin of the first parents. But Albert immediately moves further and shows that this imbalance between the ethical sphere and the sphere of immediate desires can be worked through and corrected by different classes of moral subjects, corresponding to distinct degrees in the perfection of our human integrity. In other words, «*lumbi sunt nostri plus et minus in nostra existentes potestate*»²⁹.

Albert's solution, inspired by a dynamic and transformative conception of human anthropology, proposes that the precept of *Luke* 12:35 does not demand a single, perfect, definitive mode of control. Rather, it can be fulfilled in four ways, corresponding to four ascending levels of self-control and freedom.

(i) Even the sinner and the incontinent person (still a *homo damnatus* — a man given over to sin) may discern a minimal trace of dominion over the *lumbi* «per libertatem a coactione», since he retains within himself a core of awareness that reflects freedom from external coercion: «passione carnali sine gratia mens trahitur et vincitur, sed non cogitur». This aligns with the tensional anthropology drawn by Paul in *Romans* 7:18-19: «For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot perform it; for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want»³⁰.

(ii) The person who has begun a path of awareness and repentance (*incipiens*) starts to possess the *lumbi* «per restrictionem a mala actione», insofar as he restrains evil action (which he can nevertheless conceive). This human type marks the beginning of moral recovery. Interweaving *Sirach* 30:20-21 and *Wisdom* 3:14, Albert compares him to the eunuch who «has unmanned himself with respect to the act of concupiscence, yet still bears within himself, in the concupiscence of willing, the price of iniquity in the pleasures desired; thus he embraces a maiden — the matter of desire in his concupiscence — and sighs for her, but does not *know* her». To repress and control external action is, therefore, the partial victory of a will still immersed in concupiscence³¹.

²⁹ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *Super Lucam*, ed. BORNET, p. 243a.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 242a.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 242a-b.

(iii) In the advanced (the *proficiens*), dominion over one's impulses becomes more radical. It occurs, as in the remission of a disease, «per libertatem a vitii infectione», despite the occasional presence of «fumi quidam evaporantium concupiscentiarum». He is being freed from vice not by heroic individual achievement but because he recognizes in wisdom a gift granted by God to those who pray for it, as Albert argues on the basis of *Wisdom* 8:21³².

(iv) The final degree — the full mastery of one's loins — belongs to those who are perfect, inasmuch as «liberi sunt a tentatione, et adepti sunt libertatem gratiae»³³.

Thus, the *lumbi*, the loins, are 'ours' on a four-degree scale, ranging from the condition of sin irredeemable without grace to that of virtue perfected through freedom from temptation (with intermediary conditions of one beginning to withdraw from evil action and one progressing along a path of liberation from vice). Clearly, this reflection on the route of human perfectibility, while grounded on conceptual and analytical premises developed in dialogue with Aristotelian ethics, yet surpasses both their object and method, for it seeks to accompany the human journey beyond the limits of earthly experience toward a destination of sanctity.

3. PATHS OF HUMAN RECONSTITUTION

The journey we have traced thus far offers a clear illustration of the circularity between anthropological and physiological themes in Albert's thought, unfolding through a sustained dialogue between his philosophical works and his biblical-exegetical commentaries. From the four-stage ascent toward self-mastery articulated in the commentary on *Luke* 12:35 — where the *lumbi* emerge as the contested site of human freedom and moral reconstitution — to the analysis of concupiscence's insidious operations in the *Ethica*, and finally to the multivalent symbolic and physiological analysis of the loins in the commentaries on *Job* and other biblical texts, Albert constructs an integrated framework in which the physiological mechanisms of concupiscence, the biblical imagery of girding one's loins, and the classical motif of Venus's ensnaring girdle all contribute to a single, coherent understanding of human moral and spiritual transformation.

The *lumbi*, in this synthesis, function simultaneously as anatomical reality, symbolic locus of fallen human nature, and terrain of ascetic struggle — a microcosm of the broader human condition that must be progressively rein-

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 242b-243a.

tegrated through the convergence of natural virtue and divine grace. Inter-connecting diverse sources and registers, Albert aims at a vision of human nature that is at once analytical and transformative, grounded in both the empirical side of natural philosophy and the redemptive horizons of Christian theology.

Albert's reading of a single Gospel verse thus opens onto a coherent and ambitious vision of what it means to be human after the Fall: not irremediably broken, but not self-sufficient either. The loins — at once anatomical site, biblical symbol, and philosophical problem — condense within themselves the entire drama of postlapsarian existence: the persistence of concupiscence, the possibility of freedom, and the need for grace. To gird them, in Albert's interpretation, is not merely an ascetic gesture but an ongoing act of self-constitution — the slow, effortful, and grace-assisted work of becoming what one, in principle, already is.

What the taxonomy of *Luke* 12:35 ultimately reveals is not a static ladder of moral types but a dynamic anthropology of reconstitution — one in which the self is neither simply given nor permanently lost, but perpetually in the process of being reclaimed. The four degrees of dominion over the *lumbi* are less a classification of persons than a map of possible trajectories, each marking a different relationship between freedom, desire, and grace.

The strategy of the *incipiens* is essentially negative: a holding action against the body's insurgency rather than a transformation of it. Although this strategy may mark the beginning of self-reappropriation and self-control, it remains an unstable and laborious solution, for concupiscence continues to thrive in the appetites and the inner conflict endures. Its fragility lies precisely in this: the will suppresses what the appetite continues to desire, so that the inner conflict is not resolved but merely managed — and management, as Albert implicitly recognizes, is not yet freedom.

The advanced (*proficiens*), by contrast, undertakes a deeper mental, moral, and spiritual work of self-transformation through the progressive purification of appetite by virtuous exercise and the invocation of grace. Despite the residual presence of «certain vapors of desires in the process of drying out», this is a genuine path of moral progress that integrates effort, the recovery of one's own nature, and openness to grace, with a view toward qualitative, not merely behavioral, transformation. This is the stage at which Aristotelian moral psychology and Christian theology most visibly converge in Albert's thought. The progressive purification of appetite through virtuous habituation recalls Aristotle's account of character formation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; yet Albert inserts into this framework the recognition that virtue, at a certain depth, can no longer sustain itself by its own resources alone. The

invocation of grace is not a theological afterthought but the acknowledgment of a structural limit within human moral effort itself.

On a higher threshold stands the *perfectus*, who has achieved an integrative model, transforming the appetite itself so that it now orients directly toward the good through an intimate adhesion to divine grace. This regulative idea shapes the fullness of authentic human freedom and displays the ultimate goal of Christian anthropology: not the suppression but the transfiguration of corporeality. The *perfectus* does not represent an abolition of the body but its reorientation: appetite is not suppressed but transfigured, desire not extinguished but redirected toward its proper end. If this condition is rarely attained in earthly life, that rarity is itself theologically significant — it marks the horizon toward which the entire itinerary is oriented, the regulative ideal that gives meaning to every earlier and more laborious stage.

ABSTRACT

Girded Loins: Albert the Great on Concupiscence, Physiology, and Moral Vigilance in Luke 12:35

This article examines Albert the Great's interpretation of concupiscence in his *Super Lucam* (1264–1268), focusing on the exegesis of Luke 12:35 (« *Sint lumbi vestri praecincti* »). Albert dissects each term of the verse to construct a multi-layered anthropological and moral analysis of human desire, deeply informed by Scripture, patristic tradition, and Aristotelian ethics and psychology. The *lumbi* — the 'loins' or bodily seat of concupiscible impulses — serve as a symbolic and physiological locus for the dynamics of temptation, moral weakness, and spiritual vigilance. Drawing on biblical passages and Aristotelian motifs, Albert develops a stratified taxonomy of human moral states, ranging from the sinner dominated by passion to the *perfectus* who attains freedom from temptation through grace.

KEYWORDS : Albert the Great, Concupiscence, Moral psychology, Physiology of desire, Self-mastery

STEFANO PERFETTI, Università di Pisa
stefano.perfetti@unipi.it

