

THOMAS AQUINAS ON MAGNANIMITY AND ITS VICES

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In Question 129, Articles 1-8, of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologicae* (ST), *Secunda Secundae Partis*, St. Thomas defines magnanimity, considers its status as a special virtue, examines its relationship to fortitude, and outlines the qualities that belong to it. The definition of magnanimity is key, for although he draws from Aristotle's consideration of magnanimity from Book IV of *Nicomachean Ethics*, St. Thomas creates a revised definition of magnanimity for a very different, Catholic world.

Magnanimity is also called "greatness of soul," because Aristotle describes it as the great deeds performed by socially well-placed men, who receive great honors, have a deservedly high opinion of themselves, and thus know that they are deserving of great honors. There is a significant element of pride involved in Aristotle's definition; great deeds for Aristotle do not need to be performed in secret or with humility. The performance of great deeds was reserved for important, influential, and wealthy men, because it was only such men who had the time and resources for greatness. Otherwise, one was probably a workman, a slave, or a woman, and could only perform limited acts of generosity. There is more to Aristotle's magnanimous man, however. He must be a truly virtuous man, who distains material goods (even though they are essential to him), and who considers the great deeds performed through "action according to virtue" more worthy than those performed for external honors.¹ St. Thomas agrees with much of

¹ Helen Cullyer, "The Social Virtues," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Ronald Polansky (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 140-142.

what Aristotle has to say; however, he describes a somewhat different kind of man who is seeking shared honors of a very different kind, as truly magnanimous.

The first question that St. Thomas addresses is whether magnanimity is about honors or great honors. St. Thomas assigns magnanimity to the irascible appetite, since honor is achieved by accomplishing great things that are difficult. He acknowledges that some acts are “great” in a proportionate way if one makes the best use of a small thing. An accomplishment, however, is truly great when it makes the “best use of the greatest thing,” and that best use is achieved through great difficulty. True magnanimity concerns the perfection of virtue and the performance of something that is worthy of great honor, not necessarily for the receipt of great honors. He highlights the importance of despising riches, but warns of despising honor, since that may lead a man to avoid honorable deeds. A truly magnanimous man inclines himself to the performance of deeds which warrant great honors for which he knows he is worthy, but for which his excellence may not be rewarded or recognized.

We see in St. Thomas’ discussion of humility in connection with magnanimity a departure from Aristotle because of the divergent expectations of honor between a Christian man and a citizen of ancient Athens. Humility for Aristotle is a virtue for small-minded people, because “a high-minded person is justified in looking down upon others” (Nicomachean Ethics [NE] 1124b5).² Aristotle’s magnanimous man cannot adjust his life to anyone other than a friend, because such an adjustment would be “slavish.” (NE 1125a1-2). St. Thomas on the other hand follows St. Paul in insisting that we become a “slave to all” for the benefit of others and the

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1999), 96.

Glory of God, and not for personal glory (1 Corinthians 9:19-11:1).³ If we accept Aristotle's definition, magnanimity is hardly appropriate for a Christian and certainly should not be considered a Christian virtue. St. Thomas however sees humility and magnanimity, not as opposed to each other as Aristotle does, but as complementary⁴ and he goes on to examine the legitimacy of magnanimity's inclusion as a virtue. On the one hand, magnanimity does seem to require an inordinate amount of pride in one's capabilities and accomplishments. St. Thomas explains that man should understand that the abilities that make him able to do great things are gifts from God, and it is a weakness of human nature for man to take inordinate personal pride in those abilities. Magnanimity requires that one's acts involve the perfection of a good, particularly the perfection of virtue. In order to do great things through great virtue, a man must not only make appropriate use of God's gifts, but he must already have developed, through habit, those virtues which ensure that the performance of great deeds is within his reach. However morally virtuous he may be through his own efforts, the magnanimous man is always humble, because he understands his human frailties and knows that nothing great is ever accomplished solely through his own efforts. If he should find himself in receipt of praise or reward, he will take no pleasure in it until he has expressed his gratitude by repaying such honors with greater honors. St. Thomas cautions, however, that humility does not involve saying derogatory things about oneself that are not true or refusing to accept praise for those things which are truly praiseworthy. That does not mean, however, that one should seek flattery and reward by announcing one's great deeds to others (another departure from Aristotle). While the

³ Mary M. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 159-160.

⁴ Keys, 160.

magnanimous man should associate with all appropriately, he must conduct himself in as unassuming a manner as possible.

St. Thomas does note that magnanimity, as a virtue, must not be considered on its own. Magnanimity is dependent for its perfection on the development of the other virtues. St. Thomas highlights prudence, accompanied by God's grace, as critical to making progress in the perfection of magnanimity. Conversely, the development of magnanimity is necessary for the perfection of the works of all the other virtues. Since magnanimity is about excellence and the greatness of one's deeds, it adds the element of greatness to the performance of all the other virtues. He does caution that one cannot determine if one is magnanimous by the performance of one great act. It is the habit of magnanimity that represents the virtue.

While magnanimity is a "special virtue" because of its special matter which is great honors, it is not a cardinal virtue, that is, equal to fortitude, prudence, temperance and justice. It must, therefore, be classified under one of the cardinal virtues. Although St. Thomas assigns magnanimity to the irascible appetite, he does not see it as the equal of fortitude. While the performance of great deeds does involve difficulty and can involve danger, steadfastness in the face of danger and evil is not its principal aim. In fact, magnanimity can exist in matters that are easier to face than evil or death. It thus falls under the greater virtue, fortitude.

If courage in the face of evil or death does not necessarily belong to magnanimity, what qualities do belong to it? St. Thomas cites confidence, security, and goods of fortune as part of magnanimity, but not without qualification. St. Thomas defines confidence as something more than certitude about one's own talents and abilities. He notes that the root of the word "confidence" is *fides* or faith in Latin, but he sees it as faith in the sense of hope. A man is confident when his hope is based on the belief in the promise of help from another or the hope

that he will receive a certain good. Such hope often comes from seeing something in another that assures us that the help or the good will be forthcoming. St. Thomas believes that it is important to have confidence in the others around you, and the magnanimous man will make sure that only those who are worthy of his confidence are in his orbit. The confidence he has in others supports the confidence he has in himself. Confidence is therefore a part of magnanimity.

St. Thomas has already established that magnanimity does not characteristically mean greatness in the face of fear and danger, which belongs to fortitude. Since danger is not a requirement for magnanimity, security would also seem optional. St. Thomas acknowledges that security belongs most appropriately to fortitude, whereas confidence belongs to magnanimity. Security has another role, however, in the removal of despair. In that case, security also belongs to magnanimity.

St. Thomas then asks if the goods of fortune are appropriate to magnanimity. Since magnanimity inspires greatness in the other virtues, it might seem that goods of fortune would be contrary to its goals. St. Thomas, on the other hand, sees the goods of fortune as conducive to magnanimity. Goods of fortune, for example money, power, and well-placed friends, can make the performance of great deeds easier or even make them possible. Certainly the goods of fortune should not be considered the end of magnanimity, since, for St. Thomas, performing a great deed does not necessarily mean one will be acknowledged or rewarded for it. On the other hand, he does not mean that a man should despise external goods. A man must not be bound to them or think too much of them, yet he understands that external goods can facilitate his goals.

Magnanimity, however, is fraught with temptations and stumbling blocks, of which lack of humility is only one example. St. Thomas points out that magnanimity can lead to the sin of presumption (ST II, II, Q 130, A1-2). In one's zeal to perform great deeds, it is important not to

take any action or make promises beyond one's power and abilities. To do so, according to St. Thomas, is "vicious and sinful," because it is "contrary to the natural order." The sin of presumption can stem from one of two errors. A man can believe he has greater virtue or ability than he actually has, or he can believe himself to be greater and more worthy of great things than he is. It is natural to use one's God-given talents and abilities in the pursuit of great deeds, but to endeavor to do great deeds that exceed one's ability is not. Moreover, when a man attempts deeds that are beyond the grasp of his abilities, it leads to pride, restlessness, and smugness, which are contrary to virtue. As it is not sinful to solicit the help of others in achieving a goal, it is also not presumptuous to put one's confidence in God's help. In fact, it would be presumptuous to assume that anything great can be done without His assistance.

Ambition is another trait that can have a negative impact on magnanimity. St. Thomas defines ambition as a desire for honor. Desire for honor can be a product of the sin of pride or a motivating influence for the performance of great deeds. For St. Thomas, honor bears witness to one's excellence, but that excellence does not belong to man alone. It is the divine within him, given by God, which is responsible for excellence. If a man's ambition is to benefit others and glorify God, the receipt of an honor should be pleasing to him and may well facilitate other opportunities for excellence. The desire for honor must be tempered, however, so that it doesn't become inordinate. A man may not desire reward for a quality he does not have. The attachment to honor also becomes inordinate when a man fails to refer that honor to God or if his ambition leads to desiring honor to benefit himself rather than to benefit others. The magnanimous man, because he is dealing with great things, honors and rewards, must be vigilant for any sign that his attempts at magnanimity are leading him down a precarious path. For St. Thomas, the word "ambition" itself denotes excess. Magnanimity implies that the desire for

honor has been moderated by an accurate assessment of one's capabilities and the potential good the honor will provide others. Ambition puts the emphasis on the honor to be achieved and the good of the recipient.

Another threat to magnanimity is vainglory or the desire for glory. St. Thomas views the word "glory" from two different perspectives. St. Augustine uses it as a synonym for clarity, by which he means that one's good is able to be identified and acknowledged by many. St. Thomas proposes that a proper definition of glory must also allow for the belief that one's own good is worthy of praise. He does not see this as necessarily a bad trait if knowing and approving one's own good includes an acknowledgement that good things are given to us by God. It is the desire for empty glory, vainglory, or vanity that is sinful. The desire for empty glory can be demonstrated in three ways, by desiring glory for something that is unworthy, by desiring it from someone who is unworthy, or by desiring glory for the sake of glory itself rather than for an appropriate end. An appropriate end includes the honor of God and the welfare of others. It is possible to do good things for the purpose of obtaining human glory, but such deeds cannot be called virtuous. In fact, it is not necessary that man's good works be known and approved by others, unless that acknowledgement in some way serves God. Desire for glory regardless of its ultimate goal is best avoided because, per Cicero, it can enslave the mind. St. Thomas points out, however, that if honor can be used in moderation, so can glory. It is inordinate desire for honor or glory that is sinful. It is likely that for most human beings an excessive desire for glory may be easier to achieve than moderation. Cicero's point, therefore, is worth due consideration.

If vainglory is a sin, can it be considered a mortal sin or a capital vice? For St. Thomas mortal sin is a sin against charity. Vainglory is not always contrary to charity, but it is when it affects our love of God. To glory in something false is to rob God of the reverence due to him.

The same is true of accepting personal glory for something which is a gift from God or sacrificing God's approval for that of man. Vainglory is also contrary to charity when man perceives the receipt of glory as a last end for which he performs all his acts of charity and virtuous deeds. In so doing he is allowing his desire for glory to replace the love he owes to God. The inclusion of vainglory as a capital vice/sin is open to discussion. Some have said that pride is the capital vice, not vainglory. St. Gregory the Great disagrees and sees vainglory as the first offspring of pride and, therefore, a capital vice. St. Thomas supports St. Gregory by explaining that pride stems from an inordinate desire for excellence. It is true that, no matter the good one is seeking, the perfection and excellence of that good is also desired. The key here, once again, is inordinate desire. Pride is the result of inordinate desire for excellence compounded by an inflated sense of self-worth and an inordinate desire for glory. As such, it is a capital vice, and vainglory falls under it.

As vainglory springs from pride, vainglory can be the catalyst for other vices. Since the end of vainglory is to establish one's excellence through glory, vainglory can lead to boastfulness and hypocrisy. The need for a man to display his excellence and to establish his lack of inferiority to another can lead also to obstinacy or too much regard for his own opinion, discord or the inability to give up his own will in order to agree with another, contention, and disobedience. Vainglory does not often stand alone.

As it is sinful to attempt more than you are capable of, it is just as sinful to refuse to do those great deeds that are in accord with one's talents and abilities. Pusillanimity (ST II, II Q 133 A1-2) includes not only fear of failure and lack of confidence in one's own abilities but also laziness. Whereas presumption, vainglory and ambition imply excess, pusillanimity implies a deficiency in magnanimity. The components of pusillanimity at first blush seem like small defects of

character, not sins. Lack of confidence and fear of failure might be seen as the opposite of pride. Objection 4 to Article 1 suggests that the truly holy will see themselves as less worthy than they are and therefore they are surely exhibiting a praise-worthy lack of pride, not sinful behavior. St. Thomas responds that only what is sinful ought to be avoided, and since pusillanimity is to be avoided, it is, therefore, sinful. He cites the parable in Mathew 25 and Luke 19 that tells of the servant who buried his master's money in the earth fearing to invest or trade it to earn his master more. That servant was punished for faint-heartedness, which is the sin of anyone who minimizes or refuses to use his own potential. It is a sin of omission. Doing nothing is a sin if doing nothing means you did not take an opportunity to use your gifts to benefit others. St. Thomas quotes St. Gregory in saying that the guilt incurred by so doing is proportionate to the good that might have been done. St. Thomas again points out that it is a law of nature that we take all actions commensurate with our powers. Pusillanimity can be an act of pride when a man sees himself as incapable of doing something for which he is fully competent, because he is too proud to revise his own opinion of himself.

To objections that pusillanimity is more logically opposed to prudence or fortitude than magnanimity, St. Thomas responds that pusillanimity, as littleness of soul, is the direct opposite of magnanimity's greatness of soul. There are deficiencies that can inaccurately appear to be pusillanimity, for example, a lack of intellect that makes it difficult to identify one's strengths and abilities. True pusillanimity's greatest flaw is that it is the sin of little souls who have the ability and responsibility to be better. In fact, St. Thomas considers it a greater sin than presumption, because to avoid good things is a "great evil," which has as its source, "wicked" pride.

In Aristotle's time and place magnanimity and great deeds had to be reserved to the rich, powerful, and socially well situated. Like the pursuit of happiness, contemplation, and the other goods of life, the ability to perform great deeds did not simply require money, status, and power, but also leisure time. As Christians, however, we know great deeds can be performed by those who have little status, power, or money but have great holiness and humility. Saints like Maximilian Kolbe, Therese of Lisieux, Catherine of Sienna, and Thomas Aquinas himself demonstrate how much working for the greater glory of God can achieve. Magnanimity as St. Thomas sees it is the result of moral and intellectual excellence. While the development of virtue to Aristotle is conducive to the pursuit of happiness and the requirement to provide for the good of the *polis*, St. Thomas sees the goal of magnanimity as something greater. It places the divine in good works, acknowledges the work of God in human excellence, and demonstrates that perfect happiness is within reach through love of God and obedience to his will.

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