

4: Justice & Almsgiving

Justice and almsgiving play a pivotal role in understanding Aquinas's ethics. Almsgiving is a particular aspect of the infused virtue of justice. Almsgiving will be the primary focus of this lecture, but before we can address it properly we must first detail how Aquinas more broadly understands justice as a whole. Then we will pursue Aquinas's understanding of almsgiving and the corporal and spiritual almsdeeds.

I. Two Kinds of Justice: Justice is one of the infused virtues discussed in a prior lecture. An interesting nuance of Aquinas's definition of justice is that in his understanding, justice implies a degree of equality between all people that governs what it is to act justly.

According to Aquinas, there are two kinds of justice that play a role in our lives: *Commutative* justice is the form of interpersonal justice that governs our relations as individuals with other individuals. This form of justice stems from the fact that each person is radically equal, being a child of God, equally worthy of the respect they are due. *Distributive* justice is the form of macro-level justice dealing with just distribution throughout the community as a whole, taking into account the amount of work put into the system. An example of this would be different students in a classroom receiving different grades for different amounts of work put in.

II. The Seven Corporal Almsdeeds: Almsdeeds are a facet of justice in Aquinas's understanding. Therefore, they are not optional or beneficial, but required for the person of faith. Aquinas sees seven corporal and seven spiritual almsdeeds. The seven corporal almsdeeds are as follows: Feeding the hungry - Giving drink to the thirsty - Clothing the naked - Sheltering the homeless - Visiting the sick - Ransoming the captive - Burying the dead

It is important to note that these corporal almsdeeds are a component of justice, and as such are required to live justly. It follows that it is unjust not to perform these actions - inaction is an injustice, and thus sinful. These can be done in a direct manner, or indirectly (e.g., one can take food and water to the homeless directly, or one can help at a shelter or even lobby with a government to ensure that such things are provided). God created the earth to provide for our needs, and when that is not met for all of God's children, it is a sign that something is amiss. It then becomes a matter of justice because what is owed to a party is not given. This is why inaction is injustice.

III. The Seven Spiritual Almsdeeds: In a manner of speaking, the spiritual almsdeeds parallel their corporal counterparts. They are as follows: Instructing the ignorant - Counseling the doubtful - Comforting the sorrowful - Fraternal correction - Forgiving trespasses - Bearing with those who trouble us - Praying for others

These almsdeeds care for a separate - but equally important - set of needs from those covered by the corporal, or bodily almsdeeds. Like the corporal almsdeeds, the spiritual almsdeeds are a matter of justice, and therefore are mandatory. As an example, we are called to forgive the trespasses of others, even though in trespassing they have worked an injustice against us and they have no right to our forgiveness. The reason for this is we are obliged in love to forgive others. We are required to love all God's children. Love is a matter of justice too, and if we have not love - the heart of Aquinas's whole system of virtues - then we lack all the virtues.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the difference between commutative and distributive justice, and why are they important?
2. Why are almsdeeds a matter of justice, and why does Aquinas view them as mandatory?