

5: Magnanimity

We have examined the basis for Aquinas's ethics involving the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who brings both the seven virtues and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit that enable them in the life of the believer. We then looked in detail at the virtue of justice and more specifically at its facet of almsgiving. In this last lecture on Aquinas's ethics, we turn to the somewhat opaque virtue of magnanimity, and then we will touch upon the sins.

I. Magnanimity as Part of Courage: Magnanimity as a virtue is attached at the end of the gift of courage. A magnanimous person strives after honor by spending generously. This seems strange in the midst of Aquinas's list of virtues, so we will be unpacking the concept and its origins at length.

Magnanimity is a concept originating with Aristotle. Aristotle's definition of a magnanimous man is a rich man who seeks honor by spending his vast wealth on projects (e.g., public buildings) that benefit the city. The magnanimous man is aloof, a beneficiary of the city, but not the kind of individual who speaks openly to ordinary people lacking his wealth, position, and honor.

In light of Aristotle's concept of magnanimity, it is hard to see how this would fit into a picture of Christian virtues (this looks a lot like the sin of pride). The key to Aquinas's take on magnanimity is that it is attached to the gift of courage. One must also ask what the magnanimous man is spending generously, and what honor he is pursuing.

II. An Excursus on the Seven Deadly Sins: In light of the difficulty in the term magnanimity thus far, it will be helpful to talk briefly about sin, which will hopefully illumine the conversation. Parallel to the seven virtues are seven primary sins (often called the seven deadly sins): Pride – Envy – Wrath – Sloth - Avarice
Gluttony - Lust

These sins are called deadly because they are toxic to the spiritual health and will eventually kill one who does not repent of them. They are listed from worst/most dangerous to least dangerous, with pride being the oldest and most inwardly focused of all. With each of these sins, something is in the way of our love of God, whether it be desire for another person, desire for the pleasures of this life, etc.

III. Pride vs. Magnanimity: The problem is that magnanimity seems very similar to pride. Pride is opposed to humility, and at the surface it appears that magnanimity is as well.

There are four subtypes of pride that people fall into: Thinking that I have an excellence that I do not actually have. Thinking that an excellence I do have I got or achieved for myself. Thinking that an excellence that I have was given to me by God, but that it was given to me because I am good. Thinking that an excellence I do have was given to me by God because God is good, but then not wanting others to have it. e.g., the Pharisee praying in the temple, thanking God that he is better than others.

Aquinas's understanding of magnanimity differs from Aristotle's in two important ways: Aristotle's magnanimous man spends his money lavishly hoping to gain honor; Aquinas's magnanimous man spends himself generously. Aristotle's magnanimous man is seeking honor in the eyes of the city. He is placing himself above others. Aquinas's magnanimous man seeks honor from God, not from other people.

So Aquinas's view of magnanimity as a virtue is not incompatible with humility because one with magnanimity spends oneself generously seeking the honor of God (and what is more honorable than to be loved by God?). Here we are brought back to the connection between magnanimity and courage. God is with us and so we can be completely courageous - we can magnanimously spend ourselves in pursuit of the honor and love of God without fear.

Reflection Questions

1. What distinguishes Thomas Aquinas's conception of magnanimity from the original idea he borrowed from Aristotle?
2. Sin is sin and thus bad, but why are the seven deadly sins considered mortal, or especially dangerous (particularly in their ascending order)?
3. How does the connection between courage and magnanimity alter what it is to be magnanimous?