

Humility, Courage, Magnanimity: a Thomistic Account*

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Abstract. In these brief remarks, I sketch Aquinas's account of humility, courage, and magnanimity. The nature of humility for Aquinas emerges nicely from his account of pride, and it also illuminates Aquinas's view of magnanimity. For Aquinas, pride is the worst of the vices, and it comes in four kinds. The opposite of all these kinds of pride in a person is his disposition to accept that the excellences he has are all gifts from a good God and are all meant to be given back by being shared with others.

Aquinas believes that all the virtues come together as a set. Consequently, a person who has humility also has courage. Aquinas takes the deepest kind of courage as a gift of the Holy Spirit. On his view, taken as a gift, courage manifests itself in a disposition to act on the settled conviction that one will be united to God in heaven when one dies.

It is not easy to see how magnanimity could be a virtue if humility is. The solution is to see that for Aquinas the honor for the Christian virtue of magnanimity is not honor from human beings but honor from God. A person can have the virtue of humility and still strive for the greatest honors, as Aquinas sees it.

The conclusion of Aquinas's account of humility, courage, and magnanimity is this: it is morally obligatory to go for glory, because glory is a matter of being honored by God as faithful.

Keywords: Aquinas, humility, courage, magnanimity.

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These brief remarks were given on the occasion of my receiving an honorary degree from Austral University. In gratitude for this honorary doctorate, I wanted to say something about humility and courage and magnanimity as the great Catholic thinker Thomas Aquinas thought about these virtues.

Not everyone sees humility as a virtue (Button 2005), of course. For some people, humility appears to be an obnoxious human trait, an obsequiousness aimed at manipulation of others perceived to be more powerful than oneself. To some other philosophers, humility seems to be a false low estimation of oneself that is held in spite of readily available contrary evidence (Bommarito 2018). On this view of humility, one needs to be dishonest or self-deceived in order to exemplify humility. And so, for these or other reasons, some people have taken humility actually as a vice.

What troubles some others about humility is that it does not seem to fit well with other virtues. The most obvious of these is magnanimity (Marenbon 2019). As Aristotle describes him, the magnanimous man is willing to spend his own money on works that benefit the whole community because of his great-souled desire for honor. So, for Aristotle, magnanimity is a matter of desiring honor, and being willing to spend money to deserve it (EN IV, 3). Contrary to what one might suppose from this description, magnanimity counts as a virtue for Aquinas too. It is not so easy to see how magnanimity could be a virtue if humility is, and so there is a significant secondary literature trying to explain how a thinker like Aquinas could accept magnanimity as a virtue (ST II–II, q. 161 a. 1 obj. 3; Pine 2019).

To understand Aquinas's position, it is helpful to consider what he has to say about the vice contrary to humility, namely, pride. The nature of humility for Aquinas emerges nicely from his account of pride, and it also illuminates Aquinas's view of magnanimity.

For Aquinas, pride is the worst of the vices, and it comes in four kinds (ST II–II, q. 162, a. 4).

The first kind is a *childish* pride. It is a matter of thinking you have an excellence you do not have. A person who supposes he has outstanding

athletic ability just because he has led his football team to victory in the village football game has pride of this sort.

The second kind is the pride of *the self-made man*. It is a matter of thinking you have an excellence you do have but thinking you got it for yourself. If a person is right in supposing that he is very good at football but supposes that he owes nothing to anyone else for the fact that he has this excellence, then he has pride of this sort.

The third kind is the *self-righteous* kind of pride. It is a matter of thinking that you have an excellence you do have and recognizing that you have it because God gave it but thinking that God gave it to *you* and not to others because God recognized how good you are and how well you would use the gift. If a person is right in supposing that he is very good at football, and if he recognizes that he owes this excellence to God, but he supposes that God gave it to him over others because God recognized that he had the resources of character to use this excellence well, unlike others who do not – then he is self-righteous; and he has the third kind of pride.

The fourth and last kind of pride is a *malicious* pride. It is a matter of thinking that you have an excellence you do have, thinking that you have it because God gave it, and thinking that God gave it because God is good (and not because God knows that you are good) --- but relishing the fact that others do not have this excellence and hoping that they do not get it. If a person accepts his skill at football as a gift from a good God but he does what he can to undermine others in their development of their football skills or hopes that others fail in their football careers, then he has this fourth kind of pride.

The nature of humility emerges readily from this account of the four species of pride (ST II–II, q. 161; see especially a. 6). The opposite of all these kinds of pride in a person is his disposition to accept that the excellences he has are all gifts from a good God and are all meant to be given back by being shared with others. When he interacts with others, then, it will be with a recognition of the excellences he does have. He may recognize that some others lack the excellences he himself has, but nothing about this recognition will incline him to any sense of superiority over the others. There will be no basis for him to have smugness, self-right-

eousness, or arrogance because he will take all his excellences as free gifts from God, which are given him for the sake of sharing them with others who are as loved by God as he is.

In my view, this Thomistic account of humility has significant advantages over other accounts of humility in the contemporary literature (Roberts and Cleveland 2017).¹ It can explain, for example, how it is possible to be humble without any misrepresenting of the excellences one does have, without any low self-esteem, and without any kind of obsequious attitude towards others.

Aquinas believes that all the virtues come together as a set (ST I–II, q. 65). So, for example, a person who has humility also has courage. Aquinas takes the deepest kind of courage as a gift of the Holy Spirit (ST I–II, q. 68, a. 8). On his view, taken as a gift, courage manifests itself in a disposition to act on the settled conviction that one will be united to God in heaven when one dies (ST II–II, q. 139, a. 1).

If we think of the courage shown in the ordinary circumstances of life and contrast it with the courage, for example, of the Patristic Christian Polycarp, who endured being burned to death rather than renounce his faith, we can get a rough, intuitive feel for the idea of courage at issue for Aquinas. Polycarp had no fear of death because he had a settled conviction that death would bring him the greatest prize he could have and the thing he wanted most. It would unite him with God in love forever. A person who is not afraid of death for this reason will not be afraid of the challenging circumstances of life either.

As Aquinas understands it, magnanimity is actually a virtue annexed to courage (ST II–II, q. 128, a. 1). As Aristotle characterizes the magnanimous man, he knows his own worth; and he accepts as wholly merited the honor bestowed on him by others in his society. But that kind of honor is a good that diminishes when it is distributed, and so the magnanimous person as Aristotle describes him has to desire that others fail to get honor too or at least get less honor than he does. But then Aristotle's mag-

¹ Roberts and Cleveland also understand humility in opposition to pride, but their account of pride and therefore also their account of humility is significantly different from that of Aquinas. Aquinas's sophisticated and unified account of pride yields an equally sophisticated and philosophically powerful account of humility.

nanimous person seems to be a person who has the fourth and worst kind of pride. That is why it is not easy to see how humility could be a virtue if magnanimity is.

The solution is to see that for Aquinas the honor in question for the Christian virtue of magnanimity is not honor from human beings but honor from God (ST II–II, q. 129, a. 3 ad 4). Furthermore, given Aquinas's account of pride, the thing for which honor is given cannot be something that a person has gotten for himself. The honor that a magnanimous person seeks will be given for something that is a gift of God's to him. So here is what the Thomistic virtue of magnanimity will be for a magnanimous person: he will strive for honor from God as recompense and recognition for the gifts God has given him.

This idea would be somewhere between the unintelligible and the laughable if it were not for one last piece of Aquinas's ethics that is crucial here. For Aquinas, God will give moral and spiritual excellence as gift continually to a person as long as he does not reject God's gifts. So, even on Aquinas's account, a person is not without *any* role in the acquisition of the excellences he has. He cannot get them for himself, but he can refuse them when God offers them. A person's role in the acquisition of excellence, then, is to be open to the gifts of God. And when he is open to God in this way, then God will give him increasing excellence of one sort or another (Stump 2018, Chapter 7).

Consequently, a person can have the virtue of humility and still strive for the greatest honors, as Aquinas sees it. That is because the honor comes from God, as do the gifts for which one is honored. Furthermore, since this honor comes from God, it does not diminish when it is distributed. Every human person is of infinite value to God and so infinitely honored by God. The honor comes not in being elevated above other human beings, but in mattering to the omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good creator of everything there is.

For these reasons, then, a person can be both humble and magnanimous if in second-personal loving relationship with God and in gratitude for the gifts he has been given he is continually open to God and strives to give everything he receives from God in service to others.

So Aquinas's idea of magnanimity shares this with Aristotle's idea: in each case, the magnanimous person's striving for great honor includes great spending. But, for Aquinas, what one spends is oneself in service to others; money is not needed. And the honor in question comes from God and is not diminished if others have an equal amount of it. The result of magnanimity, as Aquinas understands it, is that a person can be both magnanimous, going for glory, one might say, and still count as humble.

Aquinas's idea of magnanimity is further illuminated by considering its opposite vice, pusillanimity (ST II-II, q. 133). The pusillanimous person thinks that he does not have great gifts, that he is not worthy of great honor, that he cannot accomplish great things, that he needs to be careful with the small gifts and goods he has so that he does not lose them or himself in the challenges of life. The pusillanimous person might seem to have the virtue of humility; but, as Aquinas sees it, the pusillanimous person is actually guilty of the worst of the sins, namely, pride (ST II-II, q. 133, a. 1 and especially a. 2 ad 4). That is because the pusillanimous person is assuming that the only goods he has are those that he has gotten for himself and that the only goods he will get in the future are also those that he himself can get. But this is a form of the vice of pride, the disposition to believe and to act on the belief that the good you have is the result of your own work. In the biblical parable of the talents, the servant who buried his one talent was punished for his pusillanimity. The talent-burying servant evaluated himself by a consideration only of himself and not as he is in relation to God, and that is why he was guilty of pride and injustice to those who might have been aided by his service.

So here is the conclusion of Aquinas's account of humility, courage, and magnanimity: on Aquinas's view, it is morally obligatory to go for glory, because glory is a matter of being honored by God as faithful. The gift of courage fuels this willingness. It is easier to go for glory if you assume that you have already won the greatest prize and the greatest victory you could have.

In his glorious work *The Divine Comedy*, the Italian poet Dante puts his character Dante the traveler into the company of the five greatest poets of antiquity (Dante, *Inferno*, IV.91–102). Dante the poet writes that

those great ancient poets welcomed Dante the traveler as the sixth in their company. With this poetic device, Dante the poet is implying that he is one of the greatest poets of all time. In my view, he is certainly right in this estimation. But Dante's recognizing his own excellence at poetry is compatible with humility, on Aquinas's ethics; and it is Dante's courage and Dante's magnanimity that open him to God's grace to such an extent that his poetry soars. In humility, courage, and magnanimity, Dante used the gifts he had been given in powerful ways that have benefited many people for centuries. And something analogous can be said about Thomas Aquinas himself too. The humility, courage, and magnanimity displayed in the lives of these men invite us all to live our lives in these virtues too.

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