

Magnanimity: Aquinas' Examination of the Aristocratic Virtue

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According to Aristotle, a man's economic and political status characterizes him in one of two ways: common or wealthy. Both classes possess the capacity to acquire all of the moral virtues (except one) by way of habituation, and the possession of these virtues makes a man good. However, magnanimity is a moral virtue that arises accidentally and is not part of the inherent moral paradigm within the species man, a paradigm that gives each man equal right to virtue. The common man is relegated to cultivating the set of moral virtues that include liberality; only the wealthy man can ascend into the domain that includes magnanimity. Aquinas believes he can reconcile this seemingly problematic dichotomy that elevates the virtue and honor of the rich man above that of the poor man. Although Aquinas attempts to alleviate this problem by showing how magnanimity is consigned to one of the four cardinal virtues, thus not placing it in as prominent of a position as Aristotle, who designates it "the crown of the virtues," he still seems too over-accommodating toward the Aristotelian definition. This article will attempt to show how Aristotle's definition of magnanimity creates two domains of virtue ethics and how Aquinas' attempt at modification ultimately fails.

Defining Magnanimity

The magnanimous man, according to Aristotle, is worthy of great things and rightly claims them as his due, knowing that he is worthy of them. In the Aristotelian scheme, magnanimity is a moral virtue as it is a middle state between vanity, which is deeming oneself unjustifiably worthy of great things, and smallness of spirit, being worthy of great things but not claiming them. The former (the vain

man) does not possess the amplitude of spirit to wield the most obstinate powers on earth and should not boast as if he could, while the latter, out of some defect of character, does not claim them. The magnanimous man, on the other hand, is extreme in the greatness of his claims but a mean in the rightness of them—he claims what is in accordance with his merit.¹ The more unfortunate man, he who has not been blessed with the fortune of an aristocratic pedigree, is confined to the limitations of the small spirit that nature has given him—a limitation that is given to all men who are not born at the top of the political hierarchy. The common man, with the common small spirit, is virtuous when he is concerned with the small things that his soul is meant to handle. Nature, as it were, blessed the common man with a small place in society compatible with his small spirit. He, according to Aristotle, all other virtues being equal, is of the same nature as the great spirited man insofar as the nature of his character is the same—claiming that of which he is worthy.²

There is a noticeable aristocratic bias in Aristotle's language as economic status appears to be the sole polarizing factor that delimits the average man from the excellent. In the other virtues, like courage for instance, the man possessing small strength can be considered equally courageous with he who possesses great strength. The former attacks weaker forces on the field of battle while the latter contends with the mightiest. There is no differentiation—both are equally courageous, possessing this particular virtue equally. This is not the case with the virtue magnanimity; it is categorically outside the domain of the average man. Courage, along with every other virtue, is accessible to any man who habituates his character to respond as the virtue demands, but the virtue concerned with wealth and political power involves a distinct class separation exonerating an external state of affairs and not an inner disposition acquired via habituation. The problem with this virtue, as compared to courage, is that there are two scales. Two men of differing strengths can be considered equally courageous, but two men of differing social status cannot be equally virtuous overall, since magnanimity as a moral virtue is considered superior to liberality.

Given the interwoven relationship of ethics, politics, and economics in Aristotle's works, coupled with a rigid, nonupwardly mobile political (and economic) structure, one might be correct in thinking that the ethos concerned with politics and economics would be rigid as well. In other words, the virtue must not be upwardly mobile either; rather, it must be fixed—if one is liberal, he will never be magnanimous for it is a boundary he cannot cross given the political-economic structure. As a result, the average man, with a fixed income and soul size, can be like his magnanimous counterpart in all of the virtues except the one that stabilizes and justifies the political-economic system, the one that is the

crown of the virtues. This aspect of Aristotle's ethical system seems to be more a product of the political-economic system (of course ethics, politics, and economics are inseparable according to Aristotle). In Aristotle's ethical framework, "concern for individuals physically, mentally, or economically incapable of this happiness is noticeably absent."³ Given Aristotle's empirical method, and given the culture he had access to study, it is reasonable to suspect that this aspect of his ethics is a product of the Greek, aristocratic society in which he lived.

Aquinas, from what I can tell, does not question the economic-political-ethical system that may have been molding the virtue into its Aristotelian form. Rather, he agrees with Aristotle that magnanimity is a necessary and special virtue required to withstand the inherent difficulty that a select group of men must face when wielding exceeding amounts of wealth and honor. Every virtue, according to Aquinas, is a perfection of a power, or more specifically, the extreme limit of that particular power. When a power is exercised, it is not the case that the extreme limit or perfection of that power is exerted with every instance of its use. Powers must be used on simple and ordinary things, like the liberal man does with simple and ordinary amounts of money, but the extreme limit of a power is its perfection. Hence, Aquinas believes that magnanimity solidifies a man in dealing with the extreme limits of external goods—a normal virtue (and the normal man) will not suffice.⁴ In this regard, Aquinas affirms Aristotle's ontological hierarchy that places men relative to the extreme limit of virtue, which can only be attained with the accompaniment of magnanimity and, thus, great wealth and power.

Aquinas attempts to define at least a part of magnanimity in terms of an internal disposition rather than have it so heavily dependent upon externals. He claims that all virtues are connected in principle but not according to their acts. Not every man has the material cause, namely money and resources, to be competent in terms of practicing all of the acts of virtue. Thus, though all of the virtues are connected, not every virtuous man can perform the acts of magnanimity, which is concerned with very large amounts of resources; only great men can perform the acts of magnanimity.⁵ Aquinas further believes that because the virtues are connected according to their principles, their habits reside together in the soul. As a result, one may have the principle or habit of magnanimity but not be competent for the act—the same one is, however, disposed to practice the act of magnanimity in different circumstances.⁶ It is the inward choice that is the primary act of virtue, which means even a poor man can be disposed to magnificence. However, magnificent acts must be accompanied by money as an instrument to the accomplishment of its production.⁷ Here, Aquinas is attempting to show how all men can possess the inner capacity for magnanimity but not have

the outer capacity, which, in theory, one would presume, does not count against them. Even if this is true, Aristotle does not make this concession. Aquinas still holds that magnanimity is needed in dealing with the extreme limit of external resources, so that it seems that the acts of magnanimity are still needed for the man to achieve the extreme limits of virtue. If this is the case, there is no real difference between the two definitions thus far; wealth still aids in facilitating virtue and is necessary for achieving the most excellent level of virtue. The two domains remain.

Crown of the Virtues or Cardinal Virtue?

Though Aquinas agrees with the Aristotelian definition, he does not believe it is incompatible with a Christian ethical framework. He does this primarily by relegating magnanimity to one of the four cardinal virtues—fortitude (Aristotle does not relegate it to anything—it is the crown of the virtues). Aquinas is able to subordinate the virtue magnanimity to the virtue fortitude because of his premise that it is necessary for every virtue to be able to stand firm against its corresponding evil and that a virtue is extraordinarily commendable when its primary function is in dealing with something that is very difficult to stand firm against. The more difficult it is to stand firm in some situation, the more principal (essential, dominant, primary, important) is the virtue that is needed to be used to stand firm. Aquinas further asserts that it is most difficult to stand firm in danger and in death, and in these situations fortitude is needed in order to stand firm. It is less difficult to stand firm when one is hoping for or obtaining the greatest goods, which is when magnanimity is needed to solidify the mind. The reason is man values and loves his life more than all else and is prone to fleeing death and danger more than anything else. Thus, magnanimity is similar to fortitude in that it solidifies the mind in regard to something difficult, but it is inferior because it confirms the mind in something that is easier to stand firm against. Thus, for Aquinas, magnanimity is a part of fortitude.⁸

Further, according to Aquinas, magnanimity is connected to fortitude in that the passions have an opposition to the moderating influence of reason. Moderation must be applied to the passions as the passions resist reason, which does the applying. Just as a calm person can be a calming influence in a tumultuous environment in virtue of their calmness, resisting chaos through the application of their calm disposition, so, too, reason calms and moderates the tumultuousness of the passions. The passions have a natural inclination to resist reason, and the power to do so comes in two forms. The first, according to Aquinas, are the passions

themselves, but the passions are weak at this, unless extremely violent, because the passions are naturally subject to reason even though they desire to break its yoke. When the passions become very violent, the virtues that are needed to resist them are fortitude, which resists the greatest fear and danger; temperance, which resists the greatest pleasure; and meekness, which resists the greatest anger. Thus, reason is able to control the weak and moderate amounts of the passions themselves because the passions are subject to reason, but fortitude, temperance, and meekness control the limits and extremes of the passions.⁹

The other power to resist reason, according to Aquinas, comes from the objects of the passions. Things existing outside the soul, such as riches and honors, present a greater difficulty in regulating. Aquinas believes that anger and fear in small amounts are not difficult to handle through reason alone; thus, not needing a virtue for the moderate amounts, but even small amounts of wealth can cause the desire to err from moderation because these things are desirable and necessary for life.¹⁰ As a result, a virtue is needed to regulate and solidify the will in terms of this tempting object. Reason alone is insufficient in regulating things existing outside of its domain, namely the soul; it needs help from a virtue, and just as reason resists and controls the moderate amounts of passion, so, too, there must be a virtue to control the desire for moderate amounts of external objects. The virtue to control the desire for little or moderate sums of money is, according to Aristotle, liberality. The virtue that controls the desire of large sums of money and honor is of course magnanimity. This definition of magnanimity, fortifying the mind in regard to the extreme limits of wealth and power, is basically an exposition of Aristotle's. If this definition of magnanimity is correct, there is no fundamental difference from the Aristotelian definition—there are still two distinct domains arising as a result of fortune, with one class of men superior to the other. If a virtue of this sort is going to be compatible with Christian ethics, there needs to be one term that covers all men regardless of their fortune, as is the case with courage in regard to strength. With this type of definition, there would only be one domain, and rich and poor could participate equally in the extreme limits of virtue.

Redefining Magnanimity

Now that we have an idea of the way in which Aristotle views magnanimity, namely the crown of the virtues, to the way in which Aquinas tries to relegate it to fortitude, a few examples will show other ways in which Aquinas unsuccessfully tries to redefine the Aristotelian definition while at the same time staying

true to it. Aristotle believes that magnanimity breeds a dignified attitude toward men of high position and an unassuming one toward those of the middle class. He states that “a lofty bearing over the former is no mark of ill-breeding, but among humble people is as vulgar as a display of strength against the weak.”¹¹ Aristotle also believes that the magnanimous man must be open in his hate and love, for he who conceals his feelings and cares less for the truth than what others think is a coward. He must speak and act openly; he is free of speech because he is contemptuous. He is given to telling the truth, except when he speaks in irony to the vulgar and is not given to admiration, for nothing is great to him. “He must be unable to make his life revolve around another, unless it is a friend, for this is slavish, and for this reason all flatters are servile and people lacking in self-respect.”¹² As is described here, the poor man cannot possess this moral virtue; he cannot survive long when speaking contemptuously and openly to the elite and other power contenders. The virtue is outside the realm of the common and one cannot universalize it.

Aquinas attempts to temper the above description of magnanimity by asserting that it and humility, although they appear to be contrary to one another, only proceed according to different considerations of the nature of man. On the one hand, the magnanimous man deems himself worthy of great things in light of the gifts that he has been given by God. On the other hand, according to Aquinas, humility makes him think little of himself in light of the deficiencies that accrue to all men through the weakness of nature. Humility also causes him to honor others as greater than himself in that they display God’s gifts in them. At the same time, magnanimity causes him to despise others insofar as they fall away from the gifts of God, causing him not to think too highly of others as to do something wrong for their sake. Aquinas uses Psalm 15:4 “In his sight a vile person is contemned, but he honoreth them that fear the Lord.”¹³ One who possesses magnanimity is further justified in despising others in light of the reality that the virtues can only be fully honored by God, man cannot sufficiently honor virtue. Because the magnanimous man knows that he is worthy of the greatest honors that can come from men, he does not deem it above him when it is offered, but at the same time, he despises it because it is significantly less than that which God confers. This perspective allows him to despise and not be affected by dishonor from other men because he knows that he does not deserve it.¹⁴

Aquinas further redefines magnanimity, insofar as it tends to things involving excellence, as being concerned with beneficence, generousness, and gratefulness (these of course may have nothing to do with money); thus, a magnanimous man would always be ready to perform these acts. Aquinas believes that thinking too much of external goods or evils so that a man abandons justice or virtue

is an example of acts that are defective, which the magnanimous man shuns. Any concealment of truth indicates defect as it seems to be the outcome of fear, so, too, complaining indicates defect in that the man who does it is giving in to external evils. The magnanimous man avoids these things because it is contrary to his excellence.¹⁵

Godlikeness

When one couples the inherent freedom of the magnanimous man due to his place in society, with the highest degree of virtue, the result is a godlike character among men. This is one of the keys to understanding this virtue. The Christian ethicist might not find it difficult to believe that one of the corrupting influences of sin produces an unhealthy desire in men to be godlike. One way that men can be godlike is by answering and granting requests (or prayers to use religious language). Thus, to be a benefactor is an illustrious honor that man can have in common with God, for both sought for help, which signifies and creates dependence, and both have the means to grant it, creating praise and further honor. In this way, the magnanimous man is primarily concerned with honor because it is what is rendered to the gods and is thus the greatest external good. In this, the magnanimous man is striving for something divine insofar as he is striving for that which is rendered to the gods. His chief interest is in god emulation, and this is only accomplished with resources. Not many requests are answered without power. The magnanimous need their political and economic power to be benefactors, revealing one of the unfortunate aspects of the virtue—the man who has the most is in a superior position, morally speaking, relative to him who has acquired little.

Aristotle believes that honor, not praise, is rendered to the gods for being benefactors and for being perfectly happy. Praise is an expression of opinion and is expressed toward something that contributes to obtaining an end. It is like a cheerleader cheering the players on for their success, as praiseworthy play is the means to victory, which is the end of the game. Because happiness is the final end and aim of all actions, happiness is superior to the praiseworthy for happiness is the end (victory in the game) while the praiseworthy are the good feats during the game that have the potential to contribute to victory. Thus, praiseworthy things are not desired for their own sake. Things desired for their own sake are honored and those who possess things that are desired for their own sake are honored, not praised, for being happy.¹⁶ Human virtue is a means to an end, which means it is praiseworthy. If the gods are praiseworthy, then they must be capable of achieving a good, being a means to an end, for humans.

Aristotle thinks then that it is absurd to praise the gods because things praised are subsidiary to that which is honored. What is praised is imperfect, but happiness and the gods are perfect and thus honored. Because prayers are requests, it implies that the petitioner believes that the petitionee (either a god or another man) is capable of granting beneficence.¹⁷ It is the magnanimous man who is capable of granting beneficence in that he has the power to spend money on expenditures that cannot be met by ordinary citizens: funding the military, entering foreign ambassadors, funding public entertainment, and so forth. “He is above the concern of more ordinary mortals, toward whom he is effortlessly superior; he speaks with a slow, calm and deep voice.”¹⁸ D. S. Hutchinson believes that the magnanimous man assumes the responsibility of using his resources prudently, not only for his family and friends but by fulfilling his duties as a patron-savior of his city.¹⁹ In this, the magnanimous man seeks to emulate the gods by being the object of request (prayer)—thus, he is above all a benefactor.²⁰

Godlikeness reveals an apparent hierarchy in Aristotle’s thought that Aquinas never challenges; in fact, through his interpretation he seems to affirm it. The natural hierarchy, combining Aristotle’s and Aquinas’ ethics has God at the top, a few magnanimous men in the middle, and every other man at the bottom. The common men look up to and make requests to the magnanimous man and God. The magnanimous man looks up to God only. All men seek to honor their superior and receive honor from their inferior. In this way, magnanimity is tied to religion in that honoring and making sacrifices to a superior, especially God, is the greatest good. According to Aquinas, sacrifices to God are the most commendable expenditures, thus the chief object of magnificence is sacrifice to God. In this way, the liberal man is like his magnanimous counterpart in that he sacrifices to God, but of course he cannot sacrifice on the same sacrificial scale. Thus, magnificence is connected to holiness, and its chief end is religion.²¹ Of course, it seems that he who has the most can be holier; he can sacrifice more. Aquinas does not disagree, for he says that honor is its matter and the accomplishment of something great is its end and that good fortune is conducive to both of these. Because honor is conferred on the virtuous, fortune is a useful instrument for acts of virtue for it is easier to accomplish things with resources. Virtue is self-sufficient and does not need any external goods, but virtuous acts can be done more expeditiously with money.²²

Final Remarks

It could be the case that some are confused as to what amount of wealth one needs in order to be magnanimous. Some believe that just because a man throws a nice wedding or buys a nice house that the average man is similar to, even perhaps is, the magnanimous man. What fails in this account is the degree and magnitude to which these events are accomplished. Though spending \$20,000 on a wedding and buying a \$750,000 home are certainly similar to magnanimous acts, they are not the same in scale as a \$750,000 wedding and \$20,000,000 house. These modern examples are more in line with magnanimity—and it would be impossible to get exact numbers. Suffice it to say that it would have to be an aristocratic system wherein the majority would never have the opportunity to compete on the same level—it is simply anachronistic to compare the scale of weddings and homes in the fourth century BC to those of current proportions, as does Hughes.²³ In fact, a modern free-market society, most may agree, proves Aristotle's definition of magnanimity wrong. Even though there are numerous contrary cases, many men have gone from the proverbial rags to riches while conducting themselves excellently and virtuously, proving it is possible for the liberal to become magnanimous—the common do not have a limited soul preventing them from handling large sums of resources (Aristotle would not have seen this in his rigid society).

“Does Aristotle actually tie one's moral status to one's reception of honors (wealth and acclaim)?”²⁴ Understanding the two predominant, conflicting, beliefs of magnanimity during Aristotle's life could help shed some light on the issue. The Homeric hero valued honor, greatness, and grandeur; the Socratic hero was concerned with virtue alone, not external rewards. The difference is between deserving honor, Plato's concern, and receiving honor, the Homeric ideal. The magnanimous person is “one who recognizes accurately and esteems sufficiently his ability to accomplish extraordinary actions of virtue, and handles well his success in accomplishing them.”²⁵ Because excellent action is how Aristotle's hero exemplifies virtue, the above definition of magnanimity ties the Homeric and Socratic views because it focuses upon excellent actions, not simply deserts.²⁶ The Aristocratic hero is great and grand but ultimately more concerned with being virtuous than with receiving the rewards of excellent action. The problem is not the distinction between ability or desert but with the means of accomplishing extraordinary acts of virtue. Although he may be more concerned with virtue than with receiving honor, it is difficult to see how the two are separable, given that wealth and power (catalysts for honor) take a man to the extreme limits of virtue. If one is truly concerned with being as virtuous as possible, he

will necessarily care about wealth. I believe David Homer's attempt to show reconciliation between the conflicting views of the Homeric and Socratic view through magnanimity fails.

Conclusion

The virtues (magnanimity and liberality) that tie together ethics, economics, and politics reveal that both Aristotle and Aquinas think that wealth creates two distinct domains of virtue—one for the common person and the other for the aristocratic. This dichotomy between liberality and magnanimity is incompatible with Christian ethics. If there were one virtue, as is the case with courage, wherein all men could be weighed in the balance equally, the problem would be resolved. As Aristotle and Aquinas have described it, it is archaic and antiquated; an aristocratic virtue reflecting an attitude unfamiliar with the modern free markets that have revealed each class of men possessing the capacity to act virtuously when acquiring the opportunity, with the most important responsibilities.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), 89.
2. Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1835), 338.
3. Joseph Owens, "Aristotle and Aquinas," *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 42.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981), q. 129, art. 2.
5. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 129, art. 3
6. *Ibid.*
7. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 134, art. 3.
8. *Ibid.*, q. 129, art. 5.
9. *Ibid.*, q. 129, art. 2.
10. *Ibid.*, q. 129, art. 2.
11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 93.

12. Ibid., 93.
13. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 129, art. 3.
14. Ibid., q. 129, art. 2.
15. Ibid., q. 129, art. 4.
16. Harry V. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism: A Study of the Commentary by Thomas Aquinas on the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 116–17.
17. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, 118.
18. Gerald J. Hughes, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle on Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 212.
19. D. S. Hutchinson, “Ethics,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathon Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 226.
20. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, 120.
21. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 134, art. 2.
22. Ibid., q. 129, art. 8.
23. Hughes, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook*, 178.
24. David A. Homer, “Aristotle and Aquinas on Magnanimity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998): 421.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.