

**AQUINAS'S VIRTUES OF ACKNOWLEDGED DEPENDENCE:  
A NEW MEASURE OF GREATNESS**

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This paper compares Aristotle's and Aquinas's accounts of the virtue of magnanimity specifically as a corrective to the vice of pusillanimity. After defining pusillanimity and underscoring key features of Aristotelian magnanimity, I explain how Aquinas's account of Christian magnanimity, by making human dependence on God fundamental to this virtue, not only clarifies the differences between the vice of pusillanimity and the virtue of humility, but also shows why only Christian magnanimity can free us from improper and damaging forms of dependence on the opinions and standards of others, enabling us to avoid the moral pitfalls of both pusillanimity and presumption.

**I. Introduction**

Almost a decade ago, I headed off to graduate school in philosophy. My first year was something approaching sheer misery—due partly to the extremely challenging and high-pressure work. But the worst of my misery was self-inflicted: I battled, for most of that first year, an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. As a result, I spoke in class only when I was forced to give a presentation, plagued by fears that others would think my ideas were silly, or stupid, or both.

When I later confessed this to a colleague, he said he felt the same way in grad school. (Why didn't anyone warn me?) He also told me the official name for my neurosis: 'Imposter Syndrome'. When afflicted, you are certain that you were accepted (for graduate studies or a new job or whatever) by some terrible mistake. It is therefore only a matter of time before everyone realizes that you are in fact completely unqualified to be there. So you slink around trying to stay unnoticed lest you be unmasked as the imposter that you are and summarily dismissed in disgrace.

It might be easy to dismiss this sense of inadequacy as a part of any normal learning experience—or part of the sometimes painful process of ‘growing up’ that we all have to do. Unfortunately, it continues to plague some people well beyond the crucible of self-formation that is our college or grad school experience. And while I have a hunch that this area of struggle may be exacerbated in gender-specific ways and perhaps also by certain theological emphases, it remains a general moral danger. When Imposter Syndrome becomes a chronic condition, rather than a passing episode, it can cripple our ability to use our gifts and fulfill our potential for worthwhile achievements. We become habitual self-underestimators, we believe our self-disparaging comments about our worth and abilities, and as a result, we fail to live up to all we are called to be.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas calls this condition the vice of pusillanimity. Pusillanimity means “smallness of soul”; its “faintheartedness” shrinks back in the face of challenge and difficulty. Its main effect is inaction: we neglect to develop our talents and fail to stretch ourselves toward the fulfillment of our potential. If you are sure you can never achieve anything worthwhile, much less something great, then why bother even to try?

Pusillanimity may seem like a mere problem of misperception rather than a moral vice. As Aristotle describes them, the pusillanimous “seem not to be evil people, since they are not evil-doers, but to be in error.” Nevertheless, he continues, “this belief of theirs actually seems to make them worse. For people seek what they think they are worth; and these people hold back from fine actions and practices...because they think they are unworthy of them.”<sup>1</sup> The problem with the misperception is that we tend to live up to—or in this case, down to—our self-image.<sup>2</sup>

Adding to this problem, many of those plagued by a chronic sense of inadequacy think of their condition as a form of humility. I will argue that pusillanimous despair over one’s worth

and abilities should not be mistaken for the virtue of humility, especially since pusillanimity can be as morally and spiritually dangerous for some as presumption and pride are for others.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, I will show that pusillanimity and presumption, unlike humility, both ultimately depend on an untruthful view of the human person.

My task in this essay is to analyze pusillanimity and to recover the virtue that provides a remedy for it. Aristotle includes this vice and its opposing virtue, magnanimity (megalopsuchia), in his catalogue of moral habits; Aquinas follows suit in the Summa theologiae. One might reasonably expect that Aquinas, as a Christian theologian working with a very different list of virtues and vices and an equally different vision of human moral perfection and our means to it, would have an account bearing little if any similarity with that of a pagan philosopher, even prima facie. Yet Aquinas is clearly indebted to Aristotle's discussion of these traits, to the point of modeling his cure for pusillanimity on that paragon of Aristotelian pride, the megalopsuchos or great-souled man. What a deeper look at these two thinkers will reveal is how radically transformed the initially similar accounts of these moral habits become in the context of Aquinas's Christian commitments. In that context, Aristotelian magnanimity—notwithstanding its merit in counteracting pusillanimity—will turn out to be more a vice than a virtue, and Christian humility—which Aristotle cannot countenance as anything but baseness and vice—becomes for Aquinas not only a virtue but an essential complement to magnanimity.

The key transformative feature of Aquinas's account of pusillanimity and magnanimity is its acknowledgement of our fundamental relationship of dependence on God. Only an acknowledgement of our dependence enables us to grasp the true worth of the self and to live up to our full potential. It is precisely this feature, unavailable to Aristotle, which yields a full remedy for pusillanimity.

First I will lay out a three-fold analysis of the vice of pusillanimity. Then I will consider Aristotle's insights about it and the virtue which is its remedy, insights which Aquinas's account can also affirm and incorporate. Finally, I will consider how locating this set of traits in a Christian context nevertheless demands a further and quite radical transformation of magnanimity from its Aristotelian form, a transformation in which magnanimity partners with humility to yield a fuller and more final cure for both its opposing vices, pusillanimity and presumption.

## **II. Pusillanimity: Diagnosing the vice**

In Aquinas's account of pusillanimity, he uses the parable of the talents in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to illustrate it.<sup>4</sup> We have has certain resources or gifts or talents which we neglect to use. We keep them buried in the ground where no one can benefit by them, including ourselves. What would motivate us to do this? Three fundamental reasons, I think, which partner with fear and despair to hold us back from worthwhile achievements and cripple us in the face of challenges.

First, pusillanimity results from measuring our value in comparison to others, and negatively so. The faint-hearted person is one who, when considering some action, looks around, sees others doing a much better job, is certain that she will look inferior in comparison or fare poorly by their standards or expectations, and therefore decides not to make the attempt. She shrinks back from acting because her measure of herself and her contributions depends on a 'horizontal' standard of comparison. Moreover, her worries about others' opinions and expectations of her can additionally trap her into measuring her worth by the wrong standards of greatness. According to both of these comparative measures, she finds herself wanting.

Further, pusillanimity results from the wrong sort of self-reliance. In contemporary America, independence is the premier virtue. Each of us is valuable and valued for ‘autonomous’ achievement, not for depending on others for help. For the pusillanimous person to ask for assistance—and therefore to admit that she needs it—would be to admit her inadequacy to others, something which she cannot bear to do. Yet because she is certain that she could never act successfully on her own either, she shrinks back from the attempt altogether. Her insistence on a completely individualistic ideal of human action, coupled with her negative comparisons of herself with others and her dependence for esteem on their apparently unachievable standards of worthiness, cripples her incentive to act.

### III. Aristotle’s Remedy: Megalopsuchia

In both Aristotle and Aquinas, the vice of pusillanimity is opposed to the virtue of magnanimity by way of deficiency. Faintheartedness is opposed to magnanimity’s greatness of heart, its confidence in facing difficult achievements, and its love of truth that blocks fear about what others might think. According to Aristotle’s account of megalopsuchia, there are three key ways the magnanimous person differs from his pusillanimous counterpart.

First, the magnanimous person aims at great acts of virtue, and his desire for honor spurs him on to attempt things genuinely worthy of honor. (On this, both Aquinas and Aristotle agree.) However, the magnanimous person is not a slave to the desire for human honor and acclaim—in fact, he despises them if they come from unworthy sources or for things for which honor is not genuinely due. He attempts and achieves great things because they are appropriate expressions of the excellence that he has, not because he craves affirmation from others or desires glory.<sup>5</sup> The Philosopher’s view of magnanimity simply does not make much of human

opinion. In his commentary on Aristotle's Ethics, Aquinas's gloss says that the magnanimous person "is more solicitous about truth than about human opinion... He does not depart from what he ought to do [either by excess or deficiency] because of what others think."<sup>6</sup> Because of his allegiance to truth, including the truth about himself, the magnanimous person rises above the anxieties of a comparative view of his own worth.

Further, Aristotle emphasizes that honor is genuinely due to moral excellence—great deeds of virtue—rather than wealth, good birth, or power.<sup>7</sup> The magnanimous person has a "moderate attitude" about riches and the like, because he "does not regard honor as the greatest good", but rather the virtue which makes one genuinely worthy of it. Greatness is not measured by celebrity status or by how much the hoi polloi are impressed by one's wealth; Aristotelian magnanimity has a more noble view of what makes one truly great.

Lastly, Aristotle's magnanimous person is not the Lone Ranger when it comes to accomplishing great acts of virtue. Without a doubt, the magnanimous person seeks to be self-sufficient, but self-sufficiency in Aristotelian terms contrasts sharply with an American-style denial of our dependence on others. Human excellence depends on receiving a good upbringing in a city with good laws and cooperating with others to rule and defend the city. Even in the limit case of contemplation, Aristotle says it is more easily sustained in the company of friends who share one's good character.<sup>8</sup> To be human is to be social by nature, and our acts of virtue find their place in this structure of human interdependence.

In summary, Aristotle's magnanimous person acknowledges that he depends on others to become virtuous and to exercise virtue, but he is appropriately independent of their opinions and their standards of greatness in assessing his own worth. Because of this, he is able to avoid the damaging forms of comparative self-value and self-reliance that are the pitfalls of pusillanimity.

And yet, the magnanimous person, on Aristotle's account, does not give us a model of virtue that a Christian could embrace. Although Aristotle's megalopsuchos moves beyond a comparative self-value in one way, and certainly beyond a negative comparative self-assessment, his sense of his own excellence still depends on thinking of himself as superior to others. For example, the magnanimous person likes to do favors for others but not to receive them, because benefiting others is a sign of his superiority while receiving help is "slavish" and "inferior". He is patronizing in his behavior toward others who are beneath him. As Aristotle says in the Eudemian Ethics: "Contempt seems particularly the special characteristic of the magnanimous man...He would be pained if denied honor and if ruled by one undeserving."<sup>9</sup> It is, therefore, no accident that in Aristotle's world the megalopsuchos must be a man.

Thus, even though he measures greatness primarily in terms of virtue, the magnanimous man's excellence is still valued at least in part because it supercedes that of others whom he outdoes, despises, and condescends to, so that even his gait and tone of voice show him to be above their help, their daily concerns, and their frivolous opinions. The measure of greatness remains inherently comparative, and the standard of comparison is still emphatically horizontal. Further, while he is loyal to the truth about himself above unworthy human opinions, the truth in question is still the truth according to unaided human wisdom, which remains fundamentally incomplete.

Finally, although the magnanimous man's self-sufficiency is defined, for Aristotle, within the parameters of human beings' social and interdependent nature, Aristotle's paragon of virtue never gets beyond an ethic of human self-reliance. Individualistic autonomy is left behind, but human autonomy remains. Virtue is achieved with the help of others who provide good legislation and good upbringing, but this human effort, here collectively considered rather than

narrowly individualized, is both necessary and sufficient for the greatest achievements of human excellence.<sup>10</sup>

#### **IV. Aquinas and Acknowledged Dependence**

Aquinas, as a Christian thinker, cannot therefore merely subsume Aristotle's account of the moral virtues into his own. His commitment to a creative, providential, and redeeming God demands a transformation of this Aristotelian virtue. A comparison of the two accounts will show why Aquinas, as a Christian, concludes that Aristotle's remedy for pusillanimity—for all its truth and moral insight—nevertheless fails to liberate the self from a fundamentally comparative self-value and from limiting and incomplete measures of greatness.

From the perspective of a Christian moral vision like Aquinas's—one that comprehends more than human wisdom and human agency—Aristotelian magnanimity fails to go far enough to ultimately free the self from the improper dependence on human standards and the opinions of other people which are pusillanimity's main pitfalls. In another way, however, from this perspective the Aristotelian virtue also goes too far in claiming independence for the self and falls into pusillanimity's opposite vice, presumption. While pusillanimity claims too little for the self; presumption claims too much, neglecting to acknowledge that its virtuous achievements are the fruit of an unmerited gift and that the self is ultimately dependent on one greater than itself for all its worth and goodness.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically enough, Aquinas uses Aristotle's own notion of friendship to explain how Aristotelian magnanimity is actually presumption:

As the Philosopher says (NE iii.3 1112b25), 'What we can do by the help of others we can do by ourselves in a sense.' Therefore since we can think and do good by the help of God, this is not altogether above our ability. Hence it is not presumptuous for a person to attempt the accomplishment

of a virtuous deed; but it would be presumptuous if one were to make the attempt without confidence in God's assistance.<sup>12</sup>

**Aquinas's Remedy: Magnanimitas.**

While Aquinas draws heavily on Aristotle and his insights in constructing his own account of Christian magnanimity, his insistence on human beings' fundamental relation of dependence on God transforms this virtue and provides the key to fully overcoming pusillanimity. For Aquinas, magnanimity is only a virtue, and only compatible with Christian humility, when it is a virtue of acknowledged dependence on God. In contrast, pusillanimity and presumption are both failures—albeit in different directions—to depend on God in our attempts to do good.

Magnanimity is a wholehearted readiness to attempt the great acts of virtue to which we are called, however impossible or daunting the task may seem and however much the attempt may 'stretch' us. According to Josef Pieper's description, magnanimity "always ... decides in favor of what is, at any given moment, the greater possibility of human potentiality for being."<sup>13</sup>

The main difference between Aristotelian and Thomistic magnanimity is that for Aquinas, this virtue and its operation are possible only through God's gift of grace—a gift for which we are dependent on a God who is greater and more powerful than we are. Magnanimity is thus fundamentally conceived in terms of vocation and stewardship: it is a response to God's call, and willingness to use his gifts. As Aquinas says: "Magnanimity makes us deem ourselves worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts we hold from God; thus if our souls are endowed with great virtue, magnanimity makes us tend to perfect works of virtue..."<sup>14</sup> The apostle Paul expresses the heart of magnanimity when he says, "I can do everything—through Christ who gives me strength."<sup>15</sup>

With this general conception in mind, we can see how Aquinas's account of magnanimity transforms Aristotle's understanding of self-reliance, self-value, and the measure of greatness.

Self-reliance. In the *prima secundae*, Aquinas privileges Augustine's definition of virtue: it is "a good quality of the soul by which we live rightly...which God works in us without our help."<sup>16</sup> Virtue, for Aquinas, is a gift of grace, not something we accomplish on our own. So when he frames magnanimity as a part of fortitude, he describes the confidence of a magnanimous person as a hope and faith in someone who is willing to help us.<sup>17</sup> We can have hope about accomplishing good, especially when this is difficult, because we need not make the attempt relying solely on our own power. Thus even as he uses Aristotle's account of magnanimity, Aquinas consistently emphasizes God's power to work good in and through us, and not our own ability.<sup>18</sup> Like Aristotle, he assumes that one needs to be a person of great resources to have this virtue, but the nature of those resources—i.e., grace—and the sense in which they can be our own—i.e., through the friendship of charity—become radically different.

Magnanimity thus requires trust, not in ourselves, but in God's assistance. As Dietrich von Hildebrand puts it,

The question whether I feel worthy to be called is beside the point; that God *has* called me is the one thing that matters. Having abandoned all pride and all craving for being something of my own resources, I shall not doubt that God, from whom I receive everything, also has the power to lift me up and to transform any darkness into light.<sup>19</sup>

For God's power in us to be efficacious, we must be willing to receive God's gracious assistance, to receive it as a gift, and to trust that what is needful will be given. Precisely because magnanimity depends on God's power and trusts his goodness, it protects us from smug presumption on the one hand and pusillanimous despair on the other. Both vices are caused by a view of the self and its accomplishments without the aid of grace. The first takes the form of thinking our own power is sufficient for goodness so that we are independently worthy of honor; the second thinks that since we are absolutely helpless and hopeless on our own there is no

reason to even try to be good. Thus to the presumptuous person, God says, “You cannot do this on your own”; and to those overwhelmed by a sense of their own inadequacy, God says, “You don’t have to do this on your own.”<sup>20</sup>

Following Aquinas’s reconception of magnanimity in terms of vocation and stewardship, this virtue points beyond the self in two ways. First, we are gifted by God because we are called for service in his kingdom, according to his purposes. The gifts are given, not just for us, but also for God and for others.<sup>21</sup> When the pusillanimous person shrinks back from using her gifts, this may have more than personal repercussions: if her calling is to use her gifts to help others and meet their needs, then her neglect will be their loss as well. Pusillanimity makes the world a poorer place.

And furthermore, because the magnanimous person depends on God’s power and goodness for her great achievements, she must also give credit where credit is due. Her greatness points to God’s greatness and gives God glory. What is repugnant to many of us in Aristotle’s portrait of the magnanimous man—the way he glories in his own “self-produced”<sup>22</sup> superiority—is thus rejected on Aquinas’s account.

The false sense that when it comes to virtue and the pursuit of a vocation, we are on our own, for better or worse, leads to presumption or pusillanimity. If, on the other hand, we position ourselves as dependent on God and assess our abilities in terms of his gifts to us, we avoid both forms of improper independence. So much for self-reliance.

Self-value. Turning to our second point, Aquinas’s account of magnanimity also radically undermines the comparative value of the self<sup>23</sup> that even Aristotle’s account does not fully escape. The standard of comparison on Aquinas’s account is emphatically ‘vertical’: the measure of our worth does not ultimately depend on how we stack up against others. When we

see ourselves in relation to God, we realize that both magnanimity and its complementary virtue of acknowledged dependence, humility, are necessary for living in accord with a truthful view of ourselves.

As Aquinas puts it, “There is in us something great which we possess as a gift from God, and something defective which accrues to us through the weakness of our nature”.<sup>24</sup> As to our weakness and inadequacy, humility lives in acknowledgement that human beings are separated from God by an almost unbridgeable chasm between Creator and creature. God is the source of all being and goodness; without God, we are not just defective—we are nothing at all.

But importantly, for Aquinas, this is not the whole story about us. Human beings are also the crown of creation and can participate in the divine life of God himself. With God’s power and grace, we are capable of moving mountains, raising the dead, truly loving another person. To live according to this view of ourselves is magnanimity. Both virtues are required to tell the whole truth about us.

Both virtues tell the truth about us by positioning us first and foremost in a relationship of acknowledged dependence on God, not in a relationship to other people. Humility says, “apart from [God],” I am nothing and “[I] can do nothing”; magnanimity says, “He has called me by name, and I am his”; therefore, he is “able to do immeasurably more than all I ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within me”.<sup>25, 26</sup>

What magnanimity and humility do together, through their recognition of who we are with and without grace, respectively, is to free us from measuring our ultimate worth in terms of how we compare with others.<sup>27</sup> If my ultimate accountability is to God, then any assessment of my worth and abilities vis-à-vis others is conditioned and limited by my standing before him.

Acknowledging this new ‘vertical’ measure of our worth and works relieves the anxiety and despair that paralyzes the pusillanimous person into inaction.<sup>28</sup>

The measure of greatness. The third and last point at which Aquinas moves beyond Aristotle’s account regards the measure of greatness. Just as the measure of our self-worth and our capacities was transformed by grounding magnanimity in our dependent relationship with God, so also is the standard of what counts as greatness. Part of the problem for the pusillanimous person lies in the standard of greatness by which she measures her abilities. Magnanimity is not about doing great things as the world defines greatness. The great-heartedness of the Christian does not seek honor on the world’s terms, and it does not need to showcase its achievements for the world to applaud. It ultimately seeks the glory of God, and appreciates human honor only insofar as it bears witness to true virtue. Our greatest achievements are the ones to which God responds, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”<sup>29</sup>

A supernatural perspective is crucial here, because being great for God may very well cost us dearly in terms of worldly greatness. Christ’s greatness was shown through the way he dignified women and children, the sick, the sinful, the lowborn and the poor—the very ones Aristotle’s megalopsuchos disdains and seeks to rule over and outdo. Measuring ourselves ultimately by God’s standard of greatness allows us to break from seeking the approval of others when this is necessary, for the world sometimes mistakenly heaps shame on those deserving of great honor, and may even mistake virtue for vice.<sup>30</sup>

Aquinas has Christ himself in mind as the exemplar of virtue as he writes the ethical portion of the Summa theologiae.<sup>31</sup> But I think it might also be helpful to think of the example of Mary at the annunciation<sup>32</sup> when trying to understand how Christianity transforms Aristotelian magnanimity. Her example helps us see how magnanimity is not only a virtue of acknowledged

dependence, but also one compatible with humility, which the Greeks thought of as mere debasement. Using this example also provides a stark contrast to the classism and sexism inherent in the Greek account: Christian magnanimity is not only for a male, upperclass, moral elite; great acts are now open to anyone willing to answer God's call and accept his grace.<sup>33</sup>

At the annunciation, Mary shows us that true greatness comes from looking to God for one's ultimate sense of worthiness, and the greatest achievements of virtue come from relying on God's power working in us. Paradoxically, Mary is greatest, most favored, and capable of both great virtue and great suffering for God's sake when she recognizes her absolute dependence on God, her status as a handmaid.<sup>34</sup> She does not even refer to herself by her own name in the Magnificat and most of her song relates the great deeds of God. Yet at the same time she proclaims without hesitation that all generations to come will call her blessed—more honor and glory than any of the rest of us is likely to achieve.

Throughout the account, Mary's source of self-appraisal is emphatically vertical: Elizabeth, moved by the Holy Spirit, confirms Mary's favor with the Lord and honors her for the greatness of her position,<sup>35</sup> as was previously announced by the angelic messenger from God.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, her reputation in her lifetime was likely of little account (she was from Nazareth in Galilee, of all places), if not shameful because of her pregnancy out of wedlock. Mary sees herself rightly when she looks to the true source of her worthiness, her honor, and her ability to do great things. She is great on account of what the Lord has done for and through her. And she proclaims it in vibrant song.

The mistakes of the pusillanimous person are threefold: to whom they are listening, against whom they are measuring themselves, on whom they are relying. In contrast, Mary could privilege Elizabeth's words of honor over the shame from her townsfolk because she knew

where she stood before God. Greatness for her was fundamentally defined by God's favor and not by the expectations of others. Moreover, she accepted the great task to which she was called out of absolute trust in God's power and dependence on God's grace.

To conclude, the effect of Aquinas's transformation of Aristotelian magnanimity is to turn our eyes beyond human power and (mere) human opinion. Aquinas introduces into magnanimity a new kind of other-relatedness and another layer of dependence that transforms both our view of ourselves and our relationships with others. Rather than claiming for itself a false independence from God which denies that virtue is a gift, Christian magnanimity finds in its dependence on God freedom from improper and damaging forms of dependence on the opinions and standards of others. God's estimation of us is the most important measure of who we are and what we can (and cannot) do. Without this measure, our comparisons of ourselves with others can lead to faint-hearted pusillanimity as easily as to the presumptuous superiority of Aristotle's megalopsuchos. In the end, the comparison between Aristotle's paragon of virtue and Christ—the perfect exemplar of Christian virtue—is about as striking as one could imagine. Servais Pinckaers' description of Christ is especially for the pusillanimous among us:<sup>37</sup>

Jesus had a far keener understanding of human nature than did the legalistic Pharisees. This is revealed in his way of treating the sick, whom he cured even on the Sabbath, in his attitude toward sinners (for whose sake he risked his reputation), and toward the children who were being brushed aside by his disciples...

In each one—in the rich Zacchaeus as in the thief on the cross—Jesus sought what we might call the primordial human being, even as he [or she] has come forth from the hands of the Creator, an image to be restored... He would have us understand what we too easily forget—the innate nobility of ourselves and others...

[In each of us, Jesus sees] with kindness and clear-sightedness, the person in whom weakness and sin are countered by divine potentialities.<sup>38</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nichomachean Ethics iv.3, 1125a20-25. Trans. T. Irwin. Hereafter NE.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony J. Hoekema describes this as a problem especially for Christians in The Christian Looks at Himself (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1975), chapter 1. For the point made specifically here, see p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Aquinas and Aristotle both argue that the vices opposed to magnanimity by excess are closer to the mean of virtue than the vice of deficiency (pusillanimity), as is also the case for Aquinas with fortitude in general. Also, I am here glossing over the differences between pride and presumption. Technically, pride is opposed to humility, and has primarily to do with the desire for excellence, while presumption is opposed to magnanimity and is about attempting acts of virtue that are proportionate to our power. As with pusillanimity and its root, acedia (the capital vice of sloth), however, there are intimate links. (For instance, pusillanimity's inaction is listed as a 'daughter' sin of acedia in Summa theologiae II-II 35, 4 (hereafter S.T.); nowadays we mistake the effects of acedia for sloth itself). Interestingly, pusillanimity and acedia can both be rooted in a kind of obstinacy that results from pride—where we privilege our opinion of ourselves and our worth over God's. For humility and pride, see S.T. II-II 61-62; for acedia, see S.T. II-II 28 and 35; for magnanimity and its opposed vices, see S.T. II-II 129-133. There are also links to the theological virtue of hope here, as it lies in a mean between presumption and despair (S.T. II-II 20-21) with respect to the divine good (our end). Acts of virtue, which are magnanimity's primary concern, are goods that are means to the end.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 24 and Luke 19. All Scripture references are from the New International Version, unless otherwise indicated. For Aquinas's own reference to these texts, see S.T. II-II 133 resp.

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Especially when one takes ‘talents’ in the wider modern sense, I think this parable is an excellent way to capture magnanimity and pusillanimity. Of special note is that in one version of the parable, the allotment of talents is the same, and in the other gospel version, the allotment is unequal, although the conclusion of both parables is the same: God expects us to use whatever gifts are given for him.

<sup>5</sup> In NE lect. x [779].

<sup>6</sup> In NE lect. x [773]; NE iv.3, 1124b25-30.

<sup>7</sup> NE iv.3 1124a20-25.

<sup>8</sup> NE x.7, 1177b1; NE ix.9, 1169b15 ff.

<sup>9</sup> EE iii.5; 1232b10 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Necessary and sufficient in terms of agency, that is; of course the ‘assistance’ of external goods and some good fortune is also required for virtue and eudaimonia. I say ‘the greatest’ because magnanimity is, for Aristotle, the ‘crown’ of the moral virtues (NE iv.3, cf. S.T. II-II 129, 4 ad 3).

<sup>11</sup> There is a difficult question here about whether the virtue of magnanimity, on Aquinas’s account, is possible only for the Christian (or less restrictively, only the theist). I think a plausible case can be made for both sides. (No less than basic theism will suffice, however, given that magnanimity requires acknowledging one’s dependence for the gifts received on God (S.T. 129, 3 ad 4).)

On the one hand, Aquinas’s magnanimity might be possible for non-Christian theists. Aquinas categorizes the virtue of ‘religion’ as a moral virtue, and places it under the cardinal virtue of justice (paying what is due) which has both an acquired and a grace-infused form. Religion’s principle acts include acknowledging through sacrifice and devotion that one owes

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one's being and governance to a higher being or first principle (S.T. II-II 81 ff.; sacrifice itself is described as required by the natural law) so the sense of dependence acknowledged in these acts may be enough to make magnanimity possible even for a basic theist. In his definition of virtue (S.T. I-II 55, 4) and his discussion of whether true virtue is possible without charity (S.T. II-II 23, 7), Aquinas deliberately includes acquired virtues in his catalog of human perfections through the use of virtue as an analogous term.

On the other hand, in Aquinas's own presentation of it, magnanimity looks very much like it will only comfortably fit those who are Christians. In the virtue of religion the dependence regards one's existence itself, not the gifts and talents that accrue in addition, and the latter is the focus of magnanimity. Aquinas's own examples of magnanimity are evidence that he is thinking of magnanimity's 'gifts' (where 'gift' contrasts with what is by 'nature'—see II-II 129, 3 ad 4) in terms of those bestowed not as part of our created nature but by the special aid of grace. Moses is called, for example, despite his stuttering (a natural defect) and equipped with miraculous powers (beyond the power of his nature) to deliver God's commands to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Magnanimity is also essentially partnered with humility, which is often touted as an exclusively Christian virtue, and which is explicitly patterned after Christ's own example (Philippians 2). Moreover, the treatise on courage itself, in which Aquinas's account of magnanimity is located, explicitly stresses the role of grace in acting according to virtue (see n. 18 below).

My own conclusion is that even if there are reasons to think that basic theism might be sufficient for magnanimity on Aquinas's account, his own view that true virtue in the strict sense is informed by charity, a theological virtue surpassing our natural powers and infused only by grace (S.T. II-II 23, 2 and 7), combined with his choice of examples and his idea, taken from

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Aristotle, that magnanimity is about acts of great virtue (see also notes 13 and 22), leads me to conclude that he is thinking of magnanimity as pertaining to gifts ‘that surpass our nature’, that is, those that are given as a special dispensation of grace.

<sup>12</sup> S.T. II-II 130, 1 ad 3; my emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> Pieper, On Hope. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 28. I think the best way to read this sense of possibility is in agent-relative terms, rather than limiting magnanimity to the disposition to perform acts at the limit of human power in general. Aquinas’s account of the virtues consistently opens them up to a wider range of practitioners—for example, courage as endurance and suffering rather than military aggression is now available not only to the strong, but also to the powerless. Making the measure of possibility agent-relative would make magnanimity a virtue for all of us, saint and novice alike. Widening the range of possible practitioners would also rightly cut against Aristotle’s implicit restriction of this virtue to free, educated, upperclass males only. I readily acknowledge that Aquinas himself may not have fully grasped just how radical a change his account makes possible.

<sup>14</sup> S.T. II-II 129, 3 ad 4; my emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Philippians 4:13; my emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> S.T. I-II 55, 4.

<sup>17</sup> S.T. II-II 129, 6; emphasis added. Here Aquinas echoes the treatise on the passions: “Since hope regards a possible good, there arises in a person a twofold movement of hope; for a thing may be possible to one in two ways, *viz.* by one’s own power, or by another’s. . . . Properly speaking, he is said to await that which he hopes to get by another’s help as though to await (exspectare) implied keeping one’s eyes on another (ex alio spectare), insofar as the apprehensive power, by going ahead, not only keeps its eye on the good which one intends to

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get, but also on the thing by whose power he hopes to get it...” (S.T. I-II 40, 2 ad 1). In ad 3 he clarifies the connection between hope and confidence, describing the latter as a “movement of the appetite” that follows upon one’s belief that one can get that for which one hopes.

<sup>18</sup> This is a theme already developed in his account of principal act of fortitude—namely, martyrdom—which gives endurance priority over aggression, and requires the “copious assistance of divine grace” not only to perform the act but also to take delight in it. For a more detailed discussion, see my “Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas’s Transformation of the Virtue of Courage”, forthcoming in Medieval Philosophy and Theology.

<sup>19</sup> Humility: Wellspring of Virtue (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1990), p. 51-2, published as an excerpt from his book, Transformation in Christ.

<sup>20</sup> Magnanimity and humility together give us realistic hope: as Josef Pieper writes, “Magnanimity directs...hope to its true possibilities; humility, with its gaze fixed on the infinite distance between God and [human beings], reveals the limitations of these possibilities and preserves them from sham realization” (On Hope, p. 29).

<sup>21</sup> In his commentary on Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics, Aquinas describes the magnanimous person’s “attention” as “taken up with the good of the community and God” (lect. x [779]).

<sup>22</sup> The term is David Horner’s, in “What it Takes to be Great: Aristotle and Aquinas on Magnanimity.” Faith and Philosophy 15:4 (Oct. 1998), pp. 415-444. Horner makes much of the ‘stewardship’ reading of magnanimity, a reading with which I concur, but he does not appear to extend the range of practioners of this virtue as I do, since on his description the magnanimous are those capable of “extraordinary acts of virtue” (p. 421).

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<sup>23</sup> On this point I am particularly indebted to Robert C. Roberts, Spirituality and Human Emotion (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982). In chapter 5, “Humility as a moral project”, he challenges the idea that “the way to self-value is the achievement of comparative excellence” (p. 70).

<sup>24</sup> S.T. II-II 129, 3 ad 4.

<sup>25</sup> John 15:5; Isaiah 43:1, paraphrased; Ephesians 3:20-21.

<sup>26</sup> The verses from Ephesians are particularly evocative of magnanimity, as they brings the concepts of glory and honor into relation with magnanimity’s proper source and end—God. (“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”) Both Aquinas’s and Aristotle’s accounts center this virtue on the proper desire for honor, a desire that occasions special moral difficulty. Presumption, the first vice opposing magnanimity by way of excess, is concerned with power. But the other two vices opposed to magnanimity by way of excess concern honor (ambition) and glory (vainglory) specifically. The fact that there are three vices of excess in Aquinas’s account is a clue that magnanimity, with its regulation of the desire for power, honor, and glory, addresses areas of perennial and serious human weakness.

In contrast to Aristotle’s exclusive focus on honor, Aquinas’s account also changes the focus of magnanimity by defining it as a part (integral and potential) of the cardinal virtue of fortitude, which is concerned with fear and daring and located in the irascible appetite (along with humility and the natural passions of hope and despair).

<sup>27</sup> For a hilarious and brutally honest account of comparative self-value, and how it can block one’s ability to fulfill one’s vocation, see Anne Lamott, Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life (New York: Pantheon, 1994), p. 116, especially this excerpt in which she

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describes the inner voices that hinder her from writing: “If you are not careful, [radio] station KFKD will play in your head twenty-four hours a day, nonstop, in stereo. Out of the right speaker in your inner ear will come the endless stream of self-aggrandizement, the recitation of one’s own specialness, of how much more open and gifted and brilliant and knowing and misunderstood and humble one is. Out of the left speaker will be the rap songs of self-loathing, the list of all the things one doesn’t do well, of all the mistakes one has made today and over an entire lifetime, the doubt, the assertion that everything one touches turns to shit, that one doesn’t do relationships well, that one is in every way a fraud, incapable of selfless love, that one has no talent or insight, and on and on and on.”

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas follows Aristotle in saying that magnanimity deals properly with the desire for honor, since honor attends great works of virtue. Notably, however, in Aquinas’s account, honor loses much of its status as a competitive good, following the emphasis on measuring the self by a vertical, rather than a horizontal standard. So, Aquinas says, honor is to be accorded to all people, and not just those who excel others in some way. He quotes Paul’s famous exhortation to imitate the humility of Christ (Phil 2; cf. also 1 Peter 2:17) to argue that there is always some basis for honoring another. As David Horner puts it, Aquinas adds to Aristotle the concept of “respect[ing] the worth and dignity of a human being simply qua human being” (p. 424). Others are to be honored, Aquinas says (*S.T.* II-II 103, 2 resp.) “simply on account of some excellence they have, which is honored for itself, and not in a comparative way”. Moreover, if all are worthy of honor in some respect, then all should ultimately refer their honor to God as the ultimate source of our being and goodness.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 25:23.

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<sup>30</sup> Examples abound: Christ himself was mocked by Roman soldiers before his crucifixion; David Hume calls humility a “monkish virtue”—i.e., a vice; for the ancient Greeks tapeinos indicated debasement (humility was a kind of slavishness), and so on. Aquinas himself uses Augustine’s analysis of the Roman virtues as splendid vices in Civitas Dei chapter V when discussing vainglory. He also warns of overly esteeming the opinions of others in S.T. II-II 129, 3 ad 4 where he says that we shouldn’t honor others so much that we fail to do what we ought or do something we ought not to do for their sake or approval.

<sup>31</sup> As he says in IIIa, Prologue: Christ “showed unto us in his own person the way of truth...”.

<sup>32</sup> Luke 1.

<sup>33</sup> Aquinas does not use Mary as an example. (In the treatise on grace he uses Peter (S.T. I-II 111, 4 *ad* 1) as an example of one receiving a gift that “surpassed his nature” as he delivered his Pentecost sermon; he also uses Peter as an example of presumption (S.T. II-II 130, 2 ad 3) and Moses as an example of avoiding pusillanimity (S.T. II-II 133, 1 ad 4)). If the example of Mary is plausible, it supports my move to ‘open up’ this virtue further than Aquinas himself did explicitly, making it available not only to males and moral saints, but to all Christians, both male and female, both novice and saint. I also address the point of opening up the virtue of fortitude in the final section of my “Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas’s Transformation of the Virtue of Courage”, forthcoming in Medieval Philosophy and Theology.

<sup>34</sup> The Greek, doula, can literally be translated “slave” or “servant”.

<sup>35</sup> “Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (cf. Luke 1: 41-45).

<sup>36</sup> Luke 1:28-30. As the example of Elizabeth shows us, listening to God and his voice can mean listening to others through whom God speaks. What magnanimity frees us from is merely

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human opinions and standards. Thanks to Lambert Zuidervaart for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>37</sup> Sources of Christian Ethics, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p. 89-90, my emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> I am grateful for helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper offered by my colleagues at Calvin College, and especially John Hare; the constructive criticisms of two anonymous referees; the comments of conference participants at the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture conference of Nov.-Dec. 2001 where I first presented the paper; and the work of Mary Keys and John O'Callaghan, whose reflections on this topic have enriched my own.