

## Acceptance Speech

Dr Eleonore Stump  
Professor of Saint Louis University

I am grateful to this great university and its community for the award of this honorary doctorate. I am grateful for the confidence that the university has placed in me in granting me this honor, and I am pleased that it establishes a permanent connection between me and the university.

In gratitude for this honorary doctorate, I thought I might 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, of course. For some people, humility appears to be an obnoxious human trait, an oily 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. 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 doesn't seem to fit well with other virtues. The most obvious of these is magnanimity. As Aristotle describes him, the magnanimous man is willing to spend large sums of his own money on public works because of his great-hearted desire for honor. So, for Aristotle, magnanimity is a matter of striving for honor, and being willing to spend money to get it. 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 small mountain of secondary literature trying to explain how a thinker like Aquinas could accept magnanimity as a virtue. To see 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.

The first kind is a *childish* pride. It is a matter of thinking you have an excellence you don't have. A person Joseph 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 Joseph 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 Joseph 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 Joseph 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 Joseph had the resources of character to use this excellence well, unlike others who do not – then Joseph 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 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 Joseph 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 basketball skills or hopes that others fail in their basketball careers, then he has this fourth kind of pride.

The nature of humility emerges readily from this account of the four species of pride. The opposite of all these kinds of pride in a person Joseph is Joseph's 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 Joseph interacts with others, then, it will be with a recognition of the excellences he does have. He may see that some others lack the excellences he himself has, but nothing about this attitude will incline him to any sense of superiority over the others. There will be no basis for him to have smugness, self-righteousness, 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. 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. So a person who has humility also has courage; and he 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.<sup>i</sup>

If we think of the courage shown in the ordinary circumstances of life and contrast it with the courage 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. 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 magnanimous 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. 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 Joseph seeks will be given for something that is a gift of God's to Joseph. So here is what the Thomistic virtue of magnanimity will be for Joseph: 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 Joseph as long as Joseph does not reject God's gifts. So, even on Aquinas's account, Joseph 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. Joseph'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.

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 can be 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, Joseph can be both humble and magnanimous if in second-personal loving relationship with God and in gratitude for the gifts he has been given Joseph 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 strives for great honor through 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, you might say, and still count as humble.

Aquinas's idea of magnanimity is further illuminated by considering its opposite vice, pusillanimity. 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 take care 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. 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 four greatest poets of antiquity. Dante the poet writes that those great ancient poets welcomed Dante the traveler as the fifth 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.

---

<sup>i</sup> See, for example, ST II-II q. 139 a.1.