A Reply to Mary Keys’s Monkish Virtue

Author: Michael P. Foley (---.uchicago.edu)
Date: 06-01-04 17:03

In “A ‘Monkish Virtue,’” Mary M. Keys offers a new installment of her ongoing and fascinating work into the civic value of humility as articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas. Contrary to Hume, Keys contends that the monkish virtue of humility is one which all human beings, both inside and outside the cloister, would do well to possess. To support this claim, Keys examines 1) Aquinas’ peculiar endorsement of St. Benedict’s Twelve Degrees of Humility, 2) Aquinas’ argument for the compatibility of magnanimity and humility, and 3) the “magnanimous humility” of twentieth-century political dissidents. For the sake of discussion I wish to raise a question or two about each of these points, but like Aquinas’ handling of the twelve degrees, I wish to do so in reverse order.

Keys’s turn to the example of Václav Havel, Lech Walesa, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, etc. as experiential proof of the compatibility between magnanimity and humility – to say nothing of humility’s great political value – is one of the most original and I daresay ingenious applications I have ever seen in an exposition of Thomistic ethics. I wonder, however, to what other conclusions these inspiring examples will lead us and whether these conclusions will be in tension with Keys’s remarks about the “humanity of humility.” Both Walesa and Solzhenitsyn, for instance, took their bearings from a specifically Catholic or Orthodox worldview, and it seems clear from Aquinas and Keys that humility is an essentially religious virtue. Does this mean, then, that the thoughts and deeds of Havel et al. argue more for the beneficial impact that Christian believers have on politics than for a generic humanity of humility? Does it mean that the ongoing health and integrity of the polis can only be safeguarded by the Christian faith? In asking these questions I do not think I am fundamentally disagreeing with any of Keys’s contentions; rather, I am trying to ascertain the further inferences to be drawn from them.

Regarding Keys on the “twin virtues” of magnanimity and humility, I recommend to any reader who has more questions about this topic to turn to her lucid article, “Aquinas and the Challenge of Aristotelian Magnanimity,” which appeared in the Spring 2003 issue of _History of Political Thought_. It is there that Keys unfolds at greater length Aquinas’ fascinating reconciliation of pious lowliness and political high-mindedness.

Perhaps because I am already familiar with the piece in _HPT_, it was Keys’s new reflections on Aquinas’ use of Benedict about which I found myself thinking the most. Keys addresses two peculiarities in Thomas’ treatment, the reversal of the order of Benedict’s twelve degrees and the softening of them – both, Keys argues, for the sake of making them more applicable to the non-monastic life. Aquinas’ inverted presentation is indeed unusual, and I find Keys’s explanation of it convincing. Benedict arranged his degrees of humility from the most rudimentary levels to the most advanced, with the fear of God as the necessary starting point and “fixing one’s eyes on the ground” its most mature fruit. For Benedict, the degrees are like the rungs of Jacob’s ladder, each one bringing the believer closer to spiritual perfection and eternal bliss (_Rule_, 7). Aquinas’ reversed order, on the other hand, lacks this ascending telos. By beginning with “fixing one’s eyes on the ground” and ending with the fear of God, Aquinas is moving not from less perfect to more but from external actions to internal dispositions – in other words, he is laying out a schema for cultivating the habit of humility.
one that can be understood as any other acquired virtue.

That said, I still find it odd that after initially listing them in reverse order in one of the objections (II-II.161.6.obj. 1), Aquinas goes on in the body of the article to explain the degrees according to Benedict’s order; I wonder what, if anything, we are to make of this.

The more intriguing question, however, surrounds what Keys calls Aquinas’ “translation” of Benedict’s degrees, with “fixing one’s eyes on the ground” now being explained as avoiding “haughty looks” and so on. That Aquinas felt compelled to make such a translation in the first place implies two things: 1) humility as it is practiced by God’s servants in a monastic setting is not entirely compatible with the exigencies of life outside the cloister; 2) that nevertheless, the kernel of monastic, and hence Christian, humility is. I suppose the interesting thing left to determine, then, is where one draws the line. In thinking about this problem I am reminded of another famous list of do’s and don’ts, George Washington’s fifty-seven “Rules of Conduct.” Like Aquinas, Washington took many of the rules which were to shape his character from a religious – and surprisingly, Catholic – source, that of sixteenth-century French Jesuits. As a stimulus for further discussion I invite us to compare and contrast some of these items:

“To be humble not only in heart, but also to show it in one’s person” (Aquinas #1), vs. “In your apparel be modest, and endeavor to accommodate nature, rather than to procure admiration” (Washington #24).

“To speak few and sensible words, and not to be loud of voice” (Aquinas 2), vs. “Be not tedious in discourse” (Washington 50).

“Not to be easily moved and disposed to laughter” (Aquinas 3), vs. “Break not a jest where none takes pleasure in mirth; laugh not aloud, nor at all without occasion” (Washington 31).

“To subject oneself to a superior” (Aquinas 10), vs. “Strive not with your superiors in argument, but always submit your judgment to others with modesty” (Washington 15).

“Not to delight in fulfilling one’s desires” (Aquinas 11), vs. “Make no show of taking great delight in your victuals” (Washington 52).

“To fear God and always be mindful of everything God has commanded” (Aquinas 12), vs. “Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire, called conscience” (Washington 57).

Washington, who from his youth was clearly keen on becoming magnanimous, apparently saw no contradiction between humility (or at least modesty) and personal or political greatness. That in itself is telling, and should be acknowledged. On the other hand, Washington’s rules seem to have somewhat lower standards than Aquinas’. Consider the difference between not delighting in the satisfaction of desire (Aquinas, #11) and not appearing to delight excessively in the satisfaction of desire (Washington, #52). Granting Keys’s main point that humility is not detrimental to the polis, is it still fair to ask whether the polis expects or requires less humility than the monastery, and if so, how much less?

I do not know what the answers to any of my questions are, but I am certainly grateful to Keys for inspiring me to think about them. At the risk of undermining humility in the author, Mary Keys is to be congratulated for her keen observations, thoughtful conclusions, and exquisitely-framed inquiry.
There is much to admire in Mary Keys’ essay, but in particular I’d like to commend her lucid and persuasive explanation of the way Thomistic humility and magnanimity are complementary virtues, and for emphasizing Aquinas’s need to break with Aristotelian megalopsuchia in order to generate that conclusion.

Before saying anything at all about humility, one always needs to clarify that humility not self-deprecation or even a negative appraisal of one’s value simpliciter. Although Keys did not belabor the point, humility is understood by Aquinas to rest fundamentally on a truthful view of oneself in relationship to God. Let me briefly expand on these two aspects of the virtue.

Humility depends on a truthful appraisal of the self. It is not to be confused with thinking, talking, or behaving in ways that underestimate or disparage one’s true personal or moral worth. The primary ‘defect’ it recognizes in all human beings alike regards their standing before God as creatures before their Creator. Humility essentially depends on seeing the creature’s utter dependence and deficiency in comparison with God. Thus humility, as Robert C. Roberts notes (1), is not based on a person’s human-to-human comparative value; rather, humility is based on a view of self as related to God. (When it does compare itself to others, this is a secondary movement which is motivated by one’s reverence toward God as one’s superior.)

In selecting Hume—a secular, naturalistic utilitarian—as her primary objector, Keys has identified an important (perhaps the most important) rival position, one that definitely threatens the Thomistic view. The main question I had about Keys’ essay was prompted by this conception of humility as i) truthful and ii) concerning the human-God relation first and foremost.

First, while I grant that humility’s truthful self-assessment and consequent submission can have social value or utility, I am concerned that to meet a Humean opponent on his or her own territory is already to concede too much ground. Social or political utility, as Hume conceives of it, is a human measure of one’s practical worth to other human beings by other human beings. Havel’s comments about politics seem to echo the idea that we are in the realm of humanly measurable enterprises (see Keys, footnote 8: “politics as practical morality, as service to the truth, as essentially human and humanly measured care for our fellow humans”). It is not strictly inconsistent to say, as Keys does, that there is humanly measurable utility in a virtue that does not measure the value of human beings in terms of humanly measurable utility. But it might well require practical inconsistency to get a Humean who denies any transcendent measure of human worth to practice humility him- or herself by subjecting him- or herself to God. I’m inclined to think all we could persuade a Humean objector to believe is that Christians who have humility (because of their deluded beliefs about a transcendent God) might have some social value after all. This is by no means a trivial concession for a Humean, of course, but neither does it reach Keys’ more ambitious conclusion that humility could count from within that sort of view as a generically human virtue. From a Humean perspective, humility is essentially divorced from truthfulness about the human condition (it results from “delusive glosses of superstition and false religion”), since there is no transcendent God to
It is certainly possible that non-Humeans like Havel may recognize enough of the transcendent and hence, the human condition before it, to endorse and practice humility as a virtue. But if Keys’ argument is an attempt to respond to Hume and those like him on their own terms, I can’t see that it is finally persuasive.

As a second way of addressing the question whether we have conceded too much by defending humility in terms of its social utility, I want to ask whether this is always, or usually the case. It might be true that subjecting oneself to God, and to others for God’s sake, might have social value, but I wonder whether this is social value recognizable to a Humean detractor of humility. Mary the mother of Christ is a supreme example of humility, but did her humility “advance [her] fortune in the world,…render [her] a more valuable member or society;….qualify [her] for the entertainment of company, [or] increase [her] power of self-enjoyment”? That is to say, to whom is her ‘social utility’ discernible and by what measure? A Christian might argue that Mary’s humble assent to be the mother of the Son of God had more social utility than any other single choice known to humanity, but would Mary’s neighbors from Nazareth be able to see this? Likewise, the “hubris” (Keys, p. 2) that needs restraining in scientific matters isn’t even recognizable as hubris from within a purely naturalistic worldview (like Hume’s). In fact, it is precisely the fundamental commitments of such a worldview that prevent its adherents from seeing their need for a virtue that requires the abandonment of that worldview.

More pointedly, would it be surprising for Christians if humility turned out to have almost no social value, on the usual utilitarian measures? Jesus himself, the paradigm of humility (according to Philippians 2) whom Christians are called to imitate in virtue, appeared to threaten many dimensions of the social and political order of the day; that’s why in the end almost everyone wanted to kill him. The truth he embodied proved neither “useful” nor “agreeable” to the ruling ideologies of the day, whether religious or political. Keys acknowledges (p. 8) that humility only submits to the rule of true law, which restricts the virtue’s submission to moral laws in accord with God’s law. But if the reigning culture is a secular, naturalistic, and utilitarian one, might the “true law” qualification give humble people a duty quite opposite of being peace-loving and law-abiding citizens who “harmonize well with the whole”? (Keys 8)?

As Keys’ own example of the solidarity movement in Eastern Europe illustrates, the need for, or the social value of, humility may be argued for effectively from outside a view of reality lacking a transcendent God. What I can’t find is a reason to endorse humility as Aquinas understands it from within such a perspective. Without reference to the common human position as creatures before God, subjection to other human beings becomes vicious indeed (4).

If Aquinas’s account is correct, then, humility’s social value might be not in what we conventionally understand by subjection to the rule of (human) law, but rather in its politically subversive power, a feature which is highly valuable in combating tyranny and corrupt ideologies. This conclusion, however, rather than consoling Hume, might well make those who define virtue in terms of socially approved pleasure and utility even more wary of MacIntyre’s new St. Benedict.

On a more exegetical note, whether Aquinas himself could countenance a non-theological view of humility raises an interesting but difficult interpretive issue of its own. There is an important distinction in Aquinas’s ethics, noted by Keys (p. 5), between acquired and infused virtues: the former are acquired by human agency, the latter by divine agency (grace). In which category does humility properly fit? Its status as a moral virtue...
doesn’t settle the question, since other moral virtues like courage apparently have both acquired and infused forms for Aquinas, and some moral virtues (e.g. patience and perseverance) have only infused forms (see S.T. II-II q.136, a.3 and q.137, a.4). One might argue that humility can be a humanly acquired virtue since Aquinas also recognizes a virtue he calls “religion” which acknowledges a being who is, under the ‘thin’ description, “a first principle of our being and governance” who is owed worship as such (God is described in theological terms as “creator” in S.T. II-II q. 81, a. 3 but later as mere “first principle” in II-II q. 101, a.1, adding to the ambiguity). He explicitly describes religion’s external acts of worship as part of the natural law, which means knowledge of these duties are in principle available to human beings unaided by special grace or revelation (see S.T. II-II q.85, a.1).

On the other hand, it’s not clear from humility’s relationship to the virtues of magnanimity and hope that it can be attained without the help of special grace. Magnanimity is defined as the virtue which strengthens us, in light of “a consideration of God’s gifts in us,” to attempt great acts of virtue (S.T. II-II q.129, a.3 ad 4). According to Aquinas, these virtuous acts are the means by which we, with divine assistance, realize our ultimate and supernatural end, which is the object of the supernatural virtue of hope. Especially if we hope to mark magnanimity’s contrast with the Aristotelian form of the virtue, as Keys does (following Aquinas’s own distinction in S.T. II-II q.17, a.5 ad 4), we may find its theological dimension indispensable. Note, for example, Aquinas’s remarks comparing magnanimity with presumption, one of its opposing vices:

"As the Philosopher says (NE iii.3), ‘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." (S.T. II-II q. 130, a.1 ad 3)

Passages like these may be troublesome for a straight reading of magnanimity as a human, political virtue. Thus Keys would favor the former interpretation, I think, while my own more Augustinian leanings would favor the latter. The evidence in Aquinas, however, is by no means unambiguous on this point.

Notes
2. Although I am less familiar with Spinoza, the prospects here look just as dim, but the Creator-creature distinction is rejected for different and more complicated reasons.
3. Note that his use of the word “Nature” and it’s “mystery” need not indicate that we’re close enough to a concept of the transcendent to count; the Romantic movement used similar language and lacked such a concept, I think.
4. Aquinas’s correlation of magnanimity and humility goes a long way to correct the traditionally gendered reading of submission and its requirements, but I think the human-God relationship is still a crucial component of getting humility right in human-human relations.
In arguing that humility is a virtue of civic and not simply of religious importance, Mary Keys makes what promises to be a significant contribution to contemporary political philosophy. Her proposal resonates with Jeffrey Stout’s retrieval, in _Democracy and Tradition_, of the virtue of piety as “just or appropriate response to the sources of one’s existence and progress through life”(1). Whereas Stout understands himself to be recovering a virtue shared by Christians and pagans, Keys strives to make an archetypal Christian virtue available in a broader social context. Both, however, perceive that political communities will be strengthened by an acknowledgement of our limitedness, our lack of autonomy and self-sufficiency, our deep dependency on others. This acknowledgement need not be peculiarly Christian, though it is not surprising that it has been more readily accepted by Christian thinkers than by pagans like Aristotle or skeptics like Hume.

One of the important contributions made by Aquinas’ reflections on humility is the fact that he regards humility as complementary to, rather than opposed to, the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity. Magnanimity had long been a poster child for the conflict between pagan and Christian ethics, so in order to baptize magnanimity, to render it a properly Christian virtue, Aquinas had substantially to reinterpret it (2). An entry point for such reinterpretation already existed, though, in the form of internal tensions within Aristotle’s own understanding of magnanimity.

Aristotle’s magnanimous person is one who possesses all virtues, knows this, and knows himself therefore to be worthy of all honor (NE 1123b3; 1123b25). Magnanimity has thus centrally to do with truthful self-assessment, a task at which both the vain and the pusillanimous fail (NE 1125a20-35). Why would it not be better, though, for the virtuous person to be self-forgetful? Why devote time and energy to reflecting on one’s own worth, rather than dedicating oneself wholesale to virtuous activity? Aristotle does not answer this question directly, so we must speculate. Certainly it is the case that Aristotle is concerned with proper naming—we must call a spade a spade. And yet, one cannot be magnanimous by rightly assessing one’s _lack_ of courage or temperance. The capacity for accurate self-assessment is singled out for praise only when it is an accurate assessment of one’s own greatness in virtue. So perhaps what we might say is that by reflecting on and affirming his own worth, the magnanimous person is helping to sustain the communal understanding of virtue (3). Only those who actually possess great virtue are capable of fully grasping their achievement. Were these few not to reflect on their own virtue, the community as a whole would suffer a loss of reflective understanding of moral excellence.

In this way, the magnanimous person’s self-preoccupation might be seen as serving the community. But Aristotle also tells us that the magnanimous person is reluctant to receive goods from others and to acknowledge goods received, since such acknowledgment undermines the godlike self-sufficiency at which the magnanimous person aims (NE 1124b12). Aristotle is elsewhere, though, quite attentive to the fact that much luck is involved in whether one succeeds or fails in developing a virtuous character. Having a good upbringing is absolutely crucial (NE 1103b23). This in turn means that any person who possesses a virtuous character is
deeply indebted to those involved in that process of character formation: to family, teachers, community, laws. Aristotelian magnanimity then in fact involves serious self-deception, inasmuch as the magnanimous person fails to acknowledge the goods she has received from others and thus arrives at a false estimate of her own self-sufficient greatness. Ironically, then, magnanimity, which Aristotle claims is constituted by proper self-knowledge, an accurate estimate of one’s own moral greatness, involves a falsifying denial of one’s own dependency on others. Moreover, if ordinary people accept the magnanimous person’s claim to self-sufficiency, they will themselves be even less capable of forming virtuous character in their own children, students, and fellow citizens, since they will fail to grasp that virtue emerges through relationships of dependency and interdependency.

In arguing that humility and magnanimity are in fact complementary virtues, Aquinas was not, therefore, solely noting how a pagan ethic had to be reconstrued in light of Christian theological commitments. He could also plausibly argue that his reformulation of magnanimity and its marriage to humility in fact better served Aristotle’s own concern for proper self-assessment by the virtuous and the contribution this makes to sustaining communities of virtue. What Aristotle had to give up in order to resolve the tensions in his account of magnanimity—and what Keys rightly urges us to give up today—were false claims to godlike self-sufficiency. It may well be, though, that it is difficult to give this up, to sustain a truthful acknowledgement that even our own moral character is not, strictly speaking, our own achievement, if we share Aristotle’s conception of divinity as self-sufficient (or Hume’s conception of divinity as absent or indifferent). Magnanimous humility need not be solely a Christian virtue, but it is surely enabled by a Christian understanding of the divine as overflowing gift, seeking relationship rather than autonomy.

(2) Keys hints at this reformulation in the essay we have before us, but offers a much fuller discussion in “Aquinas and the Challenge of Aristotelian Magnanimity,” _History of Political Thought_ 24 (2003): 37-65. My discussion of Aristotelian magnanimity in what follows differs in its emphases from her own account, but is compatible with it.
(3) I am indebted to John Infranca for conversations on this issue.

Jennifer A. Herdt
University of Notre Dame