

A “Monkish Virtue” outside the Monastery:
On the Social and Civic Value of Humility

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If David Hume had had the opportunity to read Alasdair MacIntyre’s philosophical blockbuster *After Virtue*, one can imagine the mixture of ridicule and contempt with which he would have responded to the book’s concluding statement: that in the cultures and intellectual worlds of late modernity, “[w]e are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict” (MacIntyre 1980, 263). To invoke the founder of Western Christian monasticism would signal for Hume and his fellows in the Enlightenment a return to the very darkest “dark ages” of morality and political society, out of which MacIntyre’s new Benedict would yet claim to lead us.

Among the virtues proposed by the original St. Benedict for his monks to cultivate, both personally and collectively, a prominent place is held by humility. Yet as Hume would have it, humility is a “monkish virtue,” *useless* to both persons and polities outside the monastery. Therefore, it should be classified among the vices rather than the virtues. In general, at the genesis of modern thought one finds some striking critiques of humility, from Machiavelli’s implicit assault to the explicit attacks of Spinoza and Hume. Interestingly enough, in disputing the social value of humility some contemporary

scholars of ancient political philosophy have concurred, judging humility at best as a religious add-on to the classical (or natural, or pagan) ethic (see for example Casey 1992, Jaffa 1952, and Arnhart 1983). These theorists are most concerned that humility jeopardizes a correct estimation and valuation of magnanimity—high-mindedness or greatness of soul, a crucial character trait for outstanding citizens and statesmen to possess. Universalized as a human virtue and theorized as necessary to all men and women, humility emerges not merely as useless but in certain critical respects as harmful for political society.

Yet in recent decades other scholars and practitioners of politics, from Václav Havel to Michael Sandel, from Mahatma Gandhi to George W. Bush, have invoked humility as a positive social value against the perceived hubris of modern scientific rationalism and Western or American arrogance in foreign affairs. Is there a coherent *theoretical* account of humility as a *virtue* that can support this new appreciation of its social and civic value?

In my view, one very helpful resource for recovering and reappraising humility is Aquinas's account of that virtue in the *Summa Theologiae*. In this paper I will start from that part of Aquinas's exposition that is most vulnerable to Hume's contention: Aquinas's invocation of St. Benedict as an "authority" (*auctoritas*) in his text. Does this indicate an exclusively "monkish" view of the virtue, lacking, as Hume claims, this-worldly utility? While Aquinas's account is open to that objection, I will argue that it also underscores some significant social advantages offered by humility. Aquinas's humility is a fundamentally religious virtue, yet he sees in it a powerful aid to peace and justice by disposing persons to "law-abidingness," as well as the indispensable "twin virtue"

(*duplex virtus*) of magnanimity. Here is Aquinas's paradox: no humility, no true or full magnanimity; no magnanimity, no true or full humility. To conclude, I will take a lead from Václav Havel in his dissident days to suggest that humility's role in buttressing justice and greatness of soul should not seem too far-fetched to us today. Ample experiential evidence suggests that humility is not only a "monkish virtue," but a broadly human virtue with social and civic value far beyond the monastery walls.

Beyond the Monastery: Thomas Aquinas's Theory of Humility as a Human Virtue

One point in early modern thought where Spinoza's "geometric" ethics and Hume's emotive "common sense" variant converge is in their rejection of humility as a virtue. In his "Proof" of ethical "Proposition 53," Spinoza takes himself to demonstrate that "humility, or the pain which arises from a man's contemplation of his own infirmity, does not arise from the contemplation of reason, and is not a virtue but a passion" (Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, prop. liii). In an analogous though not identical manner, Hume catalogues humility as an "indirect" passion of self-depreciation, caused by a confluence of impressions and ideas producing in the self a sensation of pain, on account of its (perceived) negative qualities. Only a fool could mistake this negative passion, prolonged so as to appear a character trait in an individual, for a virtue. Common sense would instead recognize humility avowed or prolonged as a vice, if only religious superstition and its distorting practices did not intervene. Hume's paradigm for humanity so deluded is the Christian monastery:

[A]s every quality, which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or others, is, in common life, allowed to be a part of personal merit; so no other will ever be received, where men judge of things by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion. Celibacy, fasting,

penance, mortification, self-denial, *humility*, silence, solitude, and the whole train of *monkish virtues*; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they *serve to no manner of purpose*; neither to advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all those desirable ends; stupefy the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices; nor has any superstition force sufficient among men of the world, to pervert entirely these natural sentiments (Hume, *Essay Concerning the Principles of Morals*, IX, "Conclusion"; emphasis added).

Thomas Aquinas's contention that humility is a preeminent ethical virtue certainly places him among the deluded, superstitious Christians Hume sets out to refute by "natural" or common sense perception of pleasure, utility, and their opposites. That humility's status as a human virtue or excellence is not self-evident is acknowledged by Aquinas in the question he poses to open the section on humility in the *Summa Theologiae*: "Whether Humility is a Virtue?" (*ST II-II 161, 1*). That humility may appear a "monkish" virtue is also acknowledged, implicitly at least, in the concluding discussion of this same section: "Whether the Twelve Degrees of Humility Are Fittingly Distinguished in the Rule [for monastic life] of the Blessed Benedict?" (*ST II-II 161, 6*). The status of Benedict's authority for Aquinas is indicated by the absence of a *sed contra* [*on the contrary*] section to this argument: the reader familiar with Aquinas's mode of proceeding mentally adds the expected "On the contrary stands the authority of Benedict" for him or herself. Hume, not likely in any event to distinguish friars from monks for his purposes, would thus find ample evidence of a (false, superstitious) religious and "monkish" perspective on humility in Aquinas's writing.

According to Aquinas, humility is a virtue because, like all the properly ethical or moral virtues, it disposes desire or appetite to be guided by the rule of reason. Reason

directs human beings to realize that they are not God, that they are subordinate to God and subject to “the divine rule or measure” (see *ST II-II* 162, 5, c.). Therefore they should not aim “inordinately” at being like God (see *ST II-II* 163, 2).¹ Humility assists humans to live according to these aspects of right reason by moderating the spirited or “irascible” passion for great things, and *specifically for one’s own excellence*, as a consequence of acknowledging God’s transcendent greatness, holiness, and sovereignty (*ST II-II* 161, 1, 2, and 4). Humility is thus (in our terminology, not Aquinas’s) a *religious* virtue in that it flows from “reverence for God” (*ST II-II* 161, 1, ad 5; 2, ad 3; and 3, c.) and removes obstacles that keep us from advancing along the road to our “spiritual welfare,” ultimately to God himself (*ST II-II* 161, 5, ad 4). By expelling pride, humility opens up an interior space that God can fill with his grace and the “infused” moral virtues (in Aquinas’s terminology, ethical virtues that are gifts from God accompanying faith, hope, and charity, and which enable humans to live facing God and for God in all the varied activities of their daily lives; see *ST I-II* 63, 3-4 and *II-II* 161, 5, ad 2). The essentially religious character of humility does not, however, mean for Aquinas that it is proper only to monks or clerics in the “religious” state of life, or that it has no role to play in humans’ search for peace and happiness in ordinary human societies and political communities. On the contrary.

As I read the article in the *Summa* where Aquinas comments approvingly on the distinction of twelve degrees of humility elaborated by Benedict in his monastic rule², it

¹ Immediately after the questions on humility and pride, Aquinas discusses the sin of Adam and Eve, concluding that our first parents’ sin was one of pride against humility, of “inordinately” seeking likeness to and even equality with God, “wishing to rely on [themselves] in contempt of the order of the Divine rule” (*ST II-II* 163, 2, c.).

² As Aquinas quotes them, these are: first, “to be humble not only in heart, but also to show it in one’s person, one’s eyes fixed on the ground”; second, “to speak few and sensible words, and not to be loud of voice”; third, “not to be easily moved, and disposed to laughter”; fourth, “to maintain silence until one is

often appears that Aquinas purposefully alters Benedict's monastic examples and modifies his monastic tone. Aquinas cites and comments on Benedict's text here because, presumably, he thinks there is something all his readers can learn from this monastic founder that should find echo far beyond the monastery. Accordingly, Aquinas "translates" Benedict's language into phrasing more appropriate and appealing to a greater variety of readers. So, for instance, where Benedict counseled his monks to "walk with eyes fixed on the ground," Aquinas's paraphrase instead exhorts his readers to avoid "haughty looks." Aquinas silently glosses over Benedict's instructions to "maintain silence until one is asked" and to "do nothing but what is exhorted by the common rule of the monastery," for these are too particularistic to apply to the many other ways of life human beings and Christians legitimately follow. Where Benedict exhorts his monks to "think oneself worthless and unprofitable for all purposes," Aquinas relays the importance of "acknowledging and avowing one's own shortcomings." Even as he learns from Benedict, Aquinas's commentary thus points beyond Benedict's painting of humility in a particularistic monastic setting towards a more universal account of humility's value, intelligible and potentially attractive to persons in other forms of religious life, and in the midst of society and the world. Besides modifying Benedict's tone and content, Aquinas in fact relates Benedict's twelve degrees of humility in reverse order to that found in Benedict's actual rule (see p. 1847, note † of the Dominican Fathers translation of *ST*). I am inclined to think that Aquinas did this purposefully, to emphasize

asked"; fifth, "to do nothing but to what one is exhorted by the common rule"; sixth, "to believe and acknowledge oneself viler than all"; seventh, "to think oneself worthless and unprofitable for all purposes"; eighth, "to confess one's sin"; ninth, "to embrace patience by obeying under difficult and contrary circumstances"; tenth, "to subject oneself to a superior"; eleventh, "not to delight in fulfilling one's desires"; and twelfth, "to fear God and to be always mindful of everything that God has commanded" (*ST* II-II 161, 6, obj. 1).

the humanity of humility, and specifically the need for personal effort and free cooperation with divine grace in living this virtue: Aquinas himself notes that the order in which the degrees are given in his text reflects the order of active *human* agency in acquiring a moral virtue (see *ST II-II* 161, 6, ad 2).

According to Aquinas, as we have seen, this human virtue of humility first and foremost reverently regards God; then it conduces to clearer self-knowledge, self-appraisal, and appropriate self-love. Finally, humility improves one's character as a social being and inclines its possessor to relate better to others: "Humility...regards chiefly the subjection of man to God, *for Whose sake he humbles himself by subjecting himself to others*" (*ST II-II* 161, 1, ad 5; emphasis added). For Aquinas, this placing oneself beneath others in order to esteem and serve them is applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to all persons in society, rulers and ruled alike. In checking pride, humility curbs a powerful motive of both tyranny and sedition and a clever defender of injustice. Positively speaking, Aquinas contends that seemingly fragile humility actually buttresses social justice and the common good, disposing to peace through law-abidingness: "Now humility makes a man a good subject to ordinance of all kinds and in all matters; while every other virtue has this effect in some special matter. Therefore, after the theological virtues [faith, hope, and charity], after the intellectual virtues which regard the reason itself, and after justice, especially legal justice [justice aiming at the common good], humility stands before all others" (*ST II-II* 161, 5, c.).³ (Here when Aquinas exhorts to humble following of the law, it is important to recall that in his view, to be fully

³ Where the Dominican Fathers translate "man" and "he," etc., in these passages, Aquinas almost invariably has used the inclusive *homo, hominis* rather than the male *vir, viri*.

deserving of the name “law” a political or human ordinance must be in accord with natural law and divine law.)

So Aquinas sees humility as socially advantageous or, to borrow a phrase from Hume, as rendering a person “a more valuable member of society,” insofar as it helps her to “harmonize well with the whole,” respect lawful authority, and seek the common good in part through obeying just public ordinances. Aquinas thus links humility, which did not appear in the *Nicomachean Ethics*’ list of virtues, in an important way with general or legal justice, one of the twin pinnacles of ethical excellence in Aristotle’s classic account. In the remainder of this paper I will turn to consider Aquinas’s case for humility’s link to the virtue of magnanimity, arguably the other peak of human excellence in Aristotle’s *Ethics*. In so doing I approach the problem of humility’s social and civic functions from another angle, that of spiritedness or irascibility, the self-sufficiency and self-confidence needed to achieve great things for one’s communities. This need magnanimity appears to meet, and humility rather to impede.

Humility *cum*, not *contra* Magnanimity: Aquinas’s Unlikely Twin Virtues⁴

Aristotle defines *megalopsychia* or magnanimity variously as the virtue concerned with the proper attitude towards the great honors that an agent deserves, and as the disposition to benefit others on a grand scale. This socially significant virtue bespeaks self-confidence and self-sufficiency on the part of its possessor. If magnanimity constitutes a virtue it appears that humility cannot. First and foremost, humility seems to

⁴ Except for some minor alterations and additions, the text of this section is taken from my article “Aquinas and the Challenge of Aristotelian Magnanimity,” *History of Political Thought* XXIV (1), Spring 2003, 37-65; please see that piece for a much fuller account of the argument I am sketching here. I am grateful to the publishers of *HPT* for permission to use text from the article here.

work directly against magnanimity, to incline the agent to move in the opposite direction. In the question of the *Summa* inquiring “Whether Humility Is a Virtue?” the third “objection” is precisely humility’s seeming opposition to magnanimity, which Aquinas has already discussed and established as a particularly excellent virtue (*ST* II-II 129). “[N]o virtue is opposed to another virtue. But humility is apparently opposed to the virtue of magnanimity, which aims at great things, whereas humility shuns them” (II-II 161, 1, obj. 3; cf. *ST* II-II 160, 2). If humility is an ethical virtue at all it must be the proper “excellence” of small, un-spirited souls, just as silence is said by classical authors to be a virtue in women (cf. *NE* 1123b 5-7 with *Politics* 1277b 17-25).

In responding to this objection, that humility opposes magnanimity and hence cannot be a virtue, Aquinas contends that humility and magnanimity are actually complementary virtues. Although “they *seem* to tend in contrary directions” (*ST* II-II 129, 3, ad 4; emphasis added), both actually incline moral agents to attitudes and actions in accord with the order of right reason (*ST* II-II 161, 1, ad 3; cf. 161, 2 and 6; 162, 3, ad 2), which is the overarching function of human virtue. Humility moderates excessive or misplaced hope, curbing the “impetuosity” of that passion and hence removing an obstacle to prudence (*ST* II-II 161, 2 and 4). Magnanimity arouses and nurtures hope, motivating and directing a person to attempt the good of which he or she is capable. Every human being, mortal and limited and fallible, needs both of these character traits in order to act well on a consistent basis (see *ST* II-II 161, 1, ad 4).

In addressing what Aquinas regards as the humble person’s characteristic habit of esteeming virtually all other humans (whereas Aristotle’s magnanimous man despises most humans; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3 with *ST* II-II 161, 3) and placing him or

herself at their service whenever possible, Aquinas makes one of the most radical among his many famous distinctions: “We may consider two things in man, namely, that which is God’s, and that which is man’s.” The Aristotelian magnanimous man could not be too pleased to learn that what is properly speaking *his*, or anyone’s for that matter, is “defect” and “destruction,” while “whatever pertains to man’s welfare and perfection is God’s” (*ST II-II* 161, 3; cf. Hosea 13:9, and *ST II-II* 129, 3, ad 4).⁵ If a person considers what is properly “his” in comparison with what his neighbor has from God, he cannot go wrong in esteeming his neighbor, whomever he may be, as superior. This does not detract from the honor due to God, Aquinas contends, but rather is a concrete way of showing him respect: “We must not only revere God in himself, but also that which is his in each one, although not with the same measure of reverence as we revere God. Wherefore we should subject ourselves with humility to all our neighbors for God’s sake, according to 1 Pet 2:13, ‘Be ye subject...to every human creature for God’s sake’; but to God alone we owe the worship of *latria* [adoration]” (*ST II-II* 161, 3, ad 1; cf. *II-II* 84).

Conclusion: Twentieth-Century Rediscovery of Civic Humility against Hubris

Aquinas’s “embodied” natural law teaching implies that different socio-political contexts tend to obscure some content of the natural law, and hence of human virtue, even while illuminating other aspects. To give Hume the benefit of the doubt, perhaps Europe’s theological-political muddle and the world-denying or hypocritical manner he sensed some Christians in the world living what they considered “humility” prevented

⁵ But cf. *ST II-II* 130, 1, ad 3, treating presumption as a vice opposed to magnanimity: “As the Philosopher says (*NE III.3*), ‘what we can do by the help of others we can do by ourselves in a sense.’ Hence 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 man 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.”

him from seeing humility as demeaning, debilitating passion. In our times, however, the moral sensibility shown by dissenters in the former Soviet Union and its satellites offers strong experiential support—generally from outside Thomist circles and often from non-Christians—for the *humanity* of humility, and its role in forming the character of the truly magnanimous person. In a 1984 essay entitled “Politics and Conscience,”⁶ to give one powerful example, Václav Havel urges jaded modern men and women to recover their primordial awareness of their “life-world” or “the natural world,” together with the sense of ethical responsibility this dimension of humanness enjoins. This task entails recovering the simplicity, humility, and capacity for wonder manifested by small children:

They are still rooted in a world which knows the dividing line between all that is intimately familiar and appropriately a subject of our concern, and that which lies beyond its horizon, that before which we should bow down humbly because of the mystery about it... [This ‘natural world’] is the realm of our inimitable, inalienable, and nontransferable joy and pain, a world in which, through which, and for which we are somehow answerable, a world of personal responsibility... At the basis of this world are values which are simply there, perennially, before we ever speak of them, before we reflect upon them and inquire about them. It owes its internal coherence to something like a “pre-speculative” assumption that the world functions and is generally possible at all only because there is something beyond its horizon, something beyond or above our grasp but, for just that reason, firmly grounds this world, bestows upon it its order and measure, and is the hidden source of all the rules, customs, commandments, prohibitions, and norms that hold within it. The natural world, in virtue of its very being, bears within it the presupposition of the absolute which grounds, delimits, animates, and directs it, without which it would be unthinkable, absurd, and superfluous, and which we can only quietly respect. Any attempt to spurn it, master it, or replace it with something else, appears, within the framework of the natural world, as an expression of *hubris* for which humans must pay a heavy price, as did Don Juan and Faust (Havel 1991, 250-251).

⁶ Havel wrote this as a speech to be delivered on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Toulouse in May 1984, but at the time he was prohibited from traveling abroad (Havel 1991, 249).

In the conclusion of this essay, Havel alludes to the surprising impact of the “antipolitical politics”⁷ practiced by dissidents as diverse as physicist Andrei Sakharov, novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, philosopher Jan Patočka, and leader of the Solidarity Trade Union Lech Walesa, whom Havel could then describe as a “simple electrician with his heart in the right place, honoring something that transcends him and free from fear” (Havel, 270-271). The writings and even more so the lives of these heroes of Central and Eastern Europe have much to teach us Westerners, Havel suggests: “I am convinced that what is called ‘dissent’ in the Soviet bloc is a specific modern experience, the experience of life at the very ramparts of dehumanized power. As such, that ‘dissent’ has the opportunity and even the duty to reflect on this experience, to testify to it and to pass it on to those fortunate enough not to have to undergo it. Thus we too have a certain opportunity to help in some ways those who help us, to help them in our deeply shared interest, in the interest of mankind” (269-270; cf. Pangle 1992). One of the “essential and universal truths” in the dissidents’ experiences is the personal, social, and political importance of a courageous, magnanimous humility: “We must draw our standards from our natural world, heedless of ridicule, and reaffirm its validity. We must honor *with the humility of the wise* the limits of that natural world and the mystery which lies beyond them, admitting that there is something in the order of being which evidently exceeds all our competence. We must relate to the absolute horizon of our existence which, if we but will, we shall constantly rediscover and experience” (267, emphasis added).

From such evidence I conclude that Aquinas’s ethic of humility-informed magnanimity is *not* one with which, humanly speaking, “the facts [of our moral

⁷ Havel loosely defines this concept as “politics as one of the ways of seeking and achieving meaningful lives, of protecting them and serving them...politics as practical morality, as service to the truth, as essentially human and humanly measured care for our fellow humans” (1991, 269).

experience] soon clash” (*NE* 1145b and ff.; cf. Jaffa 1952, 22 and 27-29). On the contrary, our memories of a “century of sorrows”⁸ suggest that humility constitutes a more central political virtue than even Thomas Aquinas recognized (cf. *ST* II-II 161, 1, ad 5).

⁸ The phrase is from another former Soviet-bloc dissident, Karol Wojtila or Pope John Paul II, in his *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization*, October 5, 1995, § 16-17: “In order to recover our hope and our trust at the end of this century of sorrows, we must regain sight of that transcendent horizon of possibility to which the soul of man aspires... *We can and we must do so!* And in so doing, we shall see that the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit” (italics in original).

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