

**Comments on Lindsay Cleveland’s “A Defense of Aristotelian Magnanimity against the
Pride Objection with the Help of Aquinas”**

I am in substantial agreement with Lindsay Cleveland’s defense of magnanimity. Her central claims that magnanimity as Aristotle conceives it is—in its essentials—a true virtue, that some elements of Aristotle’s description of magnanimity are problematic insofar as they indicate that an element of pride has been annexed to magnanimity, and that Aquinas is able to rectify these elements in such a way as to rescue the virtue from its association with pride, all seem correct to me. Furthermore, her criticisms of Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung’s and David Horner’s accounts are on target and helpful. I do, however, want to draw attention to three issues.

First, Lindsay Cleveland, following David Horner, identifies two essential conditions of Aristotelian magnanimity. First, that one think himself worthy of great things. Second, that one is actually worthy of great things. It is on the basis of these two conditions that she grounds her claim that Aquinas’ *magnanimitas* is in its essentials the same as Aristotle’s *megalopsuchia*. I think more needs to be said about the essential nature of magnanimity. In particular, both Aristotle and Aquinas identify *honor* as magnanimity’s object. What is the relationship between honor as the object of magnanimity and these two conditions?

The magnanimous person is in the mean with regard to great honors. This is, in fact, the essence of magnanimity. The magnanimous person desires honor neither too much nor too little, just as the temperate person desires food neither too much nor too little. But the magnanimous person desires very great honor, and considers himself worthy of it. So how is he in the mean with regards to honor? Being in the mean signifies desiring in accord with right reason, and right reason directs us to desire the right amount, at the right time and place, and *in the right way*.

Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.5 that honor cannot be the end of *praxis*, and is rather to be desired as a *sign* of excellence. Aristotle's magnanimous person does not desire honor for its own sake, but as a sign of his own excellence, and thus he does not desire any honor that he is not worthy of. To desire honor for its own sake, or to desire honor that he is not worthy of, would be to desire it too much, insofar as he would be desiring honor in a way that he was not supposed to desire it.

Honor is identified by Aristotle as the greatest of external goods. Aristotle argues that external goods are needed instrumentally for virtuous activity.¹ One cannot perform acts of magnificence, for example, unless one has sufficient financial resources. In what way does honor enable virtuous activity? In at least two ways.

First, to desire honor as a sign of one's own excellence is seemingly to desire honor as a means of strengthening and confirming one in virtuous activity. Given the social nature of human beings, a person needs some confirmation that he is on the right track if he is to persevere in virtuous activity. If *no one* thinks well of one, it is very difficult—perhaps impossible without special grace—to remain confident that one is on the right track. Hence honor preserves excellence. However, the life honored by popular culture is very widely different from the virtuous life. So it is necessary to seek honor from the right source, from people of excellence, even though they are few. In the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle says that “a magnanimous man would consider more what one virtuous man thinks than what many ordinary people think, as Antiphon after his condemnation said to Agathon when he praised his defense speech.”²

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.8

² Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, III.v, 1232b6–9. I have used H. Rackham's translation (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), but modified it slightly.

Secondly, among honors, political offices, professorships, lecture invitations, awards, etc. must be counted. Those who receive such honors, if they are worthy of them and do not desire them for their own sakes, can use them to perform great acts of justice, generosity, and other virtues, actions of a kind and scale that it would be impossible to perform if one were not honored with such awards and posts.

Thus the *megalopsuchos* desires honor in the right way, namely as a means of confirming him in his own excellence, as putting him in a position to perform great acts of virtue, and perhaps also as a spur to becoming even more excellent. The majority of the character traits included in Aristotle's portrait of the magnanimous person become intelligible on these grounds, and it becomes quite clear that magnanimity, in its essentials, is a true and necessary virtue. Aquinas' account of magnanimity preserves and even makes explicit this essential nature of Aristotelian magnanimity. He says that "magnanimity regards two things, honor as its matter, and accomplishing something great as its end."³

I turn now to the second issue. Lindsay Cleveland expresses doubt about whether Aristotle's *megalopsuchos* does or does not act for self-aggrandizing reasons. She refers to this as the second part of the pride objection. I too have some doubts about this, but I think that the grounds for absolving Aristotle of this part of the pride objection are weaker than she makes them out to be. She points to the fact that in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle claims that magnanimity disposes one to do good to others on a large scale, and draws further support from Aristotle's claim at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the good of the city is more divine than

³ Aquinas, *STh* II-II, q. 129, a. 8, c. I have used the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, but modified it slightly.

the good of an individual. She suggests that for Aristotle, the magnanimous person “is characterized by a motivation to pursue the good of others above his own good.”

However, to say that the common good is greater than the good of an individual still leaves it an open question whether one’s motivation in promoting the common good is or is not a desire to maximize one’s own excellence, to be the one who saves the community, so to speak.

In fact, Aristotle seems to say just that in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.8:

It is quite true that, as they say, the excellent person labors for his friends and for his native country, and will die for them if he must; he will sacrifice money, honors, and contested goods in general, in achieving the fine for himself. . . . He is also ready to sacrifice money as long as his friends profit; for the friends gain money, while he gains the fine, and so he awards himself the greater good. He treats honors and offices in the same way; for he will sacrifice them all for his friends, since this is fine and praiseworthy for himself. . . . It is also possible, however, to sacrifice actions to his friend, since it may be finer to be responsible for his friend’s doing the action than to do it himself. In everything praiseworthy, then, the excellent person awards more of the fine to himself. In this way, then, we must be self-lovers, as we have said. But in the way the many are, we ought not to be.⁴

This, when coupled with the more disturbing elements of Aristotle’s portrait of the magnanimous person—such as his unwillingness to be a beneficiary—does certainly give the impression that *megalopsuchia* involves an inordinate desire for one’s own excellence above all things. Thus *megalopsuchia*—as described but not in its essential core—does seem to involve pride under *both* aspects discussed by Lindsay Cleveland.

Aquinas, however, avoids egocentrism insofar as he explicitly and repeatedly states that virtue requires loving the common good above oneself. One must subordinate his own excellence to the common good, ultimately to God. And hence pride, an inordinate desire for one’s own

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.8, 1169a19–1169b2. I have used Terence Irwin’s translation (2nd edition, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999)).

excellence which leads one to be unwilling to subordinate that excellence to another, is the “beginning of all sin” for Aquinas.

I turn now to my third and final point. Lindsay Cleveland rightfully criticizes DeYoung’s paper for failing to take into account Aquinas’ distinction between infused and acquired virtues. DeYoung claims that, for Aquinas, virtuous magnanimity can only be infused, and is thus not a natural virtue. Lindsay Cleveland, however, points out that Aquinas has parallel sets of moral virtues, infused and acquired, the former supernatural and directed to a supernatural end, and the latter natural and directed to a natural end. She applies this to humility, delineating an acquired humility and an infused humility. She seems, however, to believe that for Aquinas there is *only* a *natural*, acquired magnanimity, not an infused magnanimity, the latter’s place being taken by the theological virtue of hope. But that does not seem right to me.

The whole structure of the moral part of the *Summa* indicates that for every natural moral virtue there is an infused counterpart. For the most part, Aquinas’ discussions of the individual virtues do double duty. In the case of magnanimity in particular, there must be an infused magnanimity distinct from the theological virtue of hope. Hope has God for its immediate object. It leads us to hope firmly for union with Him heaven, and to hope to be able to live in such a way as to receive that reward. But some Christians are called to do great things in the Church, for example, to take up a position of leadership as a priest guiding a flock, or to become a bishop, or to found a religious order and initiate a process of renewal in the Church. An infused virtue of magnanimity, distinct from the theological virtue of hope, seems necessary for this.

Aside from these comments, Lindsay Cleveland’s paper is on target and serves as a helpful corrective to the earlier contributions she cites, and I thank her for it.