

QUESTION 113

Self-depreciation

Next we have to consider self-depreciation (*ironia*). On this topic there are two questions: (1) Is self-depreciation a sin? (2) How does self-depreciation compare with boasting?

Article 1

Is self-depreciation a sin?

It seems that self-depreciation (*ironia*), by which someone thinks poorly of himself (*per quam aliquis minora de se fingit*), is not a sin:

Objection 1: No sin proceeds from one's being strengthened by God, which is what someone's speaking poorly of himself proceeds from (*ex qua procedit quod aliquis de se minora dicat*)—this according to Proverbs 30:1-2 (“Here is the vision that was described by a man with whom God abides and who, strengthened by God, says, ‘I am the most foolish of men’”). And Amos 7:14 says, “Amos replied, ‘I am not a prophet.’” Therefore, self-depreciation, through which someone speaks poorly of himself, is not a sin.

Objection 2: In his letter to Augustine, the bishop of the English, Gregory says, “It is the mark of good minds to acknowledge their sins (*culpae*) when there are no sins.” But every sin is incompatible with a good mind. Therefore, self-depreciation is not a sin.

Objection 3: It is not a sin to avoid pride. But as the Philosopher points out in *Ethics* 4, some speak poorly of themselves in order to avoid being puffed up (*fugientes tumidum*). Therefore, self-depreciation is not a sin.

But contrary to this: In *De Verbis Apostoli* Augustine says, “When you lie for the sake of humility, if you were not a sinner before you lied, you will have become one by lying.”

I respond: There are two ways in which it can happen that someone speaks poorly of himself (*quod aliqui minora de se dicant*):

In one way, *in order to preserve the truth (salva veritate)*, viz., when he is reserved about the things that are better in himself and discloses instead the worse things, which he professes about himself but which he recognizes as being in himself. And to speak poorly of oneself in this sense does not pertain to self-depreciation, and it is not a sin by its genus unless one of the circumstances is corrupted.

In the second way, someone speaks poorly about himself *by turning away from the truth (a veritate declinans)*—as, for instance, when someone asserts something bad (*aliquid vile*) about himself which he does *not* perceive within himself, or when someone denies of himself something great which he nonetheless *does* perceive to exist within himself. And so understood, this pertains to self-depreciation and is always a sin.

Reply to objection 1: There are two kinds of wisdom and two kinds of foolishness.

For there is a certain sort of *wisdom with respect to God* that has a corresponding human or worldly stupidity—this according to 1 Corinthians 3:18 (“If anyone among you seems to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise”).

The other sort is *worldly wisdom*, which, it is added in the same place, “is foolishness in the eyes of God.”

Therefore, an individual who is strengthened by God will confess that he is extremely foolish according to what men think (*secundum reputationem humanam*), since he disdains the worldly things that the wisdom of men seeks after. Hence, in the same place it is added, “... and I do not have the wisdom of men,” and afterwards he adds, “... I have known with the knowledge of the saints.”

An alternative reply is what is called the wisdom of men is a wisdom that is acquired by human reason, whereas the wisdom of the saints is a wisdom that is had by divine inspiration.

Now Amos denied that he was a prophet *by origin*, since he did not belong to a family of prophets. That is why he adds in the same place, “I am not the son of a prophet.”

Reply to objection 2: What belongs to a good mind is that a man be tending toward the perfection of uprightness. And so he counts it as a sin (*culpa*) not only if he falls short of ordinary uprightness, but even if he falls short of perfect uprightness, which is in some cases not a sin. But he does not describe as a sin what he does not see as a sin—which is what the lie of self-depreciation involves.

Reply to objection 3: A man should not commit one sin in order to avoid another sin. And so he should not lie in any way in order to avoid [the sin of] pride. Hence, in *Super Ioannem* Augustine says, “Arrogance is not to be avoided in such a way that truth is left behind.” And Gregory says, “They are recklessly humble who entangle themselves in lies.”

Article 2

Is self-depreciation a lesser sin than boasting?

It seems that self-depreciation is not a lesser sin than boasting:

Objection 1: Both of them are sins insofar as they turn away from truthfulness, which is a certain sort of balance. But it is not the case that one who exceeds the balance falls further from being truthful than one who falls short of it. Therefore, self-depreciation is not a lesser sin than boasting.

Objection 2: According to the Philosopher, self-depreciation is sometimes an instance of boasting. But boasting is not an instance of self-depreciation. Therefore, self-depreciation is a more serious sin than boasting.

Objection 3: Proverbs 26:25 says, “When he speaks in a low voice, do not trust him; for there are seven types of iniquity in his heart.” But speaking in a low voice pertains to self-depreciation. Therefore, there are multiple types of iniquity in it.

But contrary to this: In *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says, “Self-depreciators and those who speak poorly of themselves seem more gracious in their manners.”

I respond: As was explained above (q. 110, aa. 2 and 4), one instance of lying is more serious than another—sometimes (a) because of the *matter* that the lying is about, in the way that lying that is done in the case of religious doctrine is the most serious of all, and sometimes (b) because of the *motive* for sinning, in the way that pernicious lying is more serious than useful or humorous lying.

Now self-depreciation and boasting, whether by words or other kinds of exterior signs, lie about *the same thing*, viz., the overall condition of the person (*circa conditionem personae*). Hence, they are equal on this score.

However, most of the time boasting proceeds from *a more shameful motive*, viz., from a desire for money or honor, whereas self-depreciation arises from an individual’s (albeit disordered) reluctance to become burdensome to others by being uppity (*ironia vero ex hoc quod fugit, licet inordinate, per elationem aliis gravis esse*). And on this basis the Philosopher claims that boasting is a more serious sin than self-depreciation.

Still, it sometimes happens that an individual speaks poorly of himself from some other motive—e.g., in order to craftily deceive someone—and in such a case self-depreciation is the more serious sin.

Reply to objection 1: This argument goes through for boasting and self-depreciation insofar as the seriousness of the lying is thought of in its own right or with respect to its matter. For it has been explained that the two sins are equal on that score.

Reply to objection 2: There are two kinds of excellence, viz., excellence in temporal things and excellence in spiritual things. Now it sometimes happens that an individual pretends to be lacking in

exterior things, e.g., by wearing shabby clothing, and thereby intends to show off some spiritual excellence—in the way that in Matthew 6:16 our Lord says of certain individuals that “they disfigure their faces in order to appear to men to be fasting.” Hence, they simultaneously incur both the vice of self-depreciation and the vice of boasting (though in different ways), and because of this they sin more gravely. This is why the Philosopher likewise says in *Ethics* 4 that “both exaggeration (*superabundantia*) and understatement (*valde defectus*) belong to boasters.” For the same reason it is said of Augustine that he did not want to have clothes that were either too costly or too shabby, because men seek glory in both of these.

Reply to objection 3: As Ecclesiasticus 19:23 says, “There are those who humble themselves in an iniquitous manner, and their interior life is full of deceit.” And this is why Solomon speaks of one who lowers his voice with a deceitful humility.