

QUESTION 130

Presumptuousness

Next we have to consider the vices opposed to magnanimity: first, those vices that oppose it by way of *excess*, which are three, viz., *presumptuousness* (*praesumptio*) (question 130), *ambition* (*ambitio*) (question 131), and *vainglory* (*inanis gloria*) (question 132); and, second, a vice which opposes it by way of deficiency, viz., *pusillanimity* (*pusillanimitas*) (question 133).

Concerning presumptuousness there are two questions: (1) Is presumptuousness a sin? (2) Is presumptuousness opposed to magnanimity by way of excess?

Article 1

Is presumptuousness a sin?

It seems that presumptuousness is not a sin:

Objection 1: In Philippians 3:13 the Apostle says, “Forgetting the things that are behind, I stretch myself forth toward things that are more advanced (*ad anteriora*.)” But it seems to involve presumptuousness for someone to tend toward things that are beyond him (*supra seipsum*). Therefore, presumptuousness is not a sin.

Objection 2: In *Ethics* 10 the Philosopher says, “We should not act in accord with those who would persuade us that, being human, we are to savor human things, and, being mortal, mortal things, but instead we should savor what is immortal insofar as it is possible.” And in *Metaphysics* 1 he claims that a man should direct himself toward divine things as much as he can. But divine and immortal things seem most of all to be beyond man. Therefore, since it belongs to the nature of presumptuousness that one strives for things that are beyond him, it seems that presumptuousness not a sin but is instead something praiseworthy.

Objection 3: In 2 Corinthians 3:5 the Apostle says, “... not that we are sufficient to think anything of ourselves, as if it were from ourselves.” Therefore, if presumptuousness, in accord with which one strives toward that for which one is not sufficient, is a sin, then it seems that a man cannot licitly think about any good. But this is absurd. Therefore, presumptuousness is not a sin.

But contrary to this: Ecclesiasticus 37:3 says, “O wicked presumptuousness, where did you come from?” The Gloss on this passage replies, “From the evil will of the creature.” But everything that proceeds from the root of a bad will is a sin. Therefore, presumptuousness is a sin.

I respond: Since those things that are in accord with nature are ordered by God’s reason, which human reason ought to imitate, anything done by human reason which is contrary to the order commonly found among natural things is defective and a sin (*est vitiosum et peccatum*).

Now it is commonly found among all natural things that every action is proportioned to the power of the agent, and no natural agent tries to do what exceeds its power. And so it is defective and sinful, in the sense of being contrary to the natural order, for someone to presume to do something that lies beyond his power. This is what the nature of presumptuousness involves, as its very name makes clear. Hence, it is obvious that presumptuousness is a sin.

Reply to objection 1: Nothing prevents it from being the case that something lies beyond the *active power* of a natural thing which does not lie beyond the *passive power* of that same thing; for instance, there is in [the element] air a passive power by which it can be transmuted into having the action and movement of fire—something that exceeds the active power of air.

So, too, it would be defective and presumptuous for someone who was in a state of imperfect virtue to try to acquire instantly what belongs to perfect virtue; however, if someone were trying to make progress toward perfect virtue, then this would be neither presumptuous nor defective. And it is in this latter way that the Apostle was stretching himself forth toward “things that are more advanced,” viz.,

through continual progress.

Reply to objection 2: Divine and immortal things lie beyond man according to the order of nature, but there is within man a certain natural power, viz., the intellect, through which he can be joined to what is immortal and divine. And it is on this score that the Philosopher says that a man should stretch himself toward what is immortal and divine—not, to be sure, in order that he might do what it is fitting for God to do, but in order that he might be united to God through his intellect and will.

Reply to objection 3: As the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 3, “What we can do through others we can in some sense do through ourselves.” And so, since we can think of and do good with God’s help, this does not wholly exceed our power. And so it is not presumptuous if one intends to do a virtuous work. However, it would be presumptuous if he were to aim for this without confidence in God’s help.

Article 2

Is presumptuousness opposed to magnanimity by way of excess?

It seems that presumptuousness is not opposed to magnanimity by way of excess:

Objection 1: As was established above (q. 14, a. 1 and q. 21, a. 1), presumption or presumptuousness (*presumptio*) is posited as a species of “the sin against the Holy Spirit.” But the sin against the Holy Spirit is opposed to *charity* rather than to *magnanimity*. Therefore, presumption or presumptuousness is not opposed to magnanimity, either.

Objection 2: Magnanimity involves an individual’s deeming himself worthy of great things. But someone is called presumptuous even if he deems himself worthy of little things, as long as this exceeds his power. Therefore, presumptuousness is not directly opposed to magnanimity.

Objection 3: A magnanimous individual thinks of exterior goods as small things. But according to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 4, for the sake of exterior fortune presumptuous individuals “despise others and do harm to them”—as if they are thinking of exterior goods as something great. Therefore, presumptuousness is opposed to magnanimity only by way of deficiency and not by way of excess.

But contrary to this: In *Ethics* 2 and 4 the Philosopher says that the one opposed to the magnanimous individual by way of excess is the *chaunus*, i.e., the madman (*furiosus*) or conceited one (*ventosus*), whom we call ‘presumptuous’.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 129, a. 3), magnanimity consists in a mean—not, to be sure, a mean measured by the quantity of what it tends toward, since it tends toward the greatest. Instead, it is set up in a mean according to the proportion to the individual’s power, since the [magnanimous] individual does not tend toward things that are greater than what is appropriate for him.

Now as regards what he tends toward, the presumptuous individual does not go beyond the magnanimous individual and sometimes falls far short of him. However, he does exceed him according to the proportion of his power, since the magnanimous individual does not exceed this proportion. And it is in this sense that presumptuousness is opposed to magnanimity by way of excess.

Reply to objection 1: Not every instance of presumption or presumptuousness is a sin against the Holy Spirit, only one by which an individual disdains God’s justice out of a disordered confidence in God’s mercy. And this sort of presumption, by reason of the subject matter—viz., insofar as something divine is disdained by it—is opposed to *charity* or, better, to *the gift of fear*, by which one reveres God.

Still, to the extent that disdain of this sort exceeds the proportion of one’s own power, this sort of presumption can still be opposed to *magnanimity*.

Reply to objection 2: Like magnanimity, presumptuousness seems likewise to tend toward something great, since it is not very common to call someone presumptuous if he exceeds his own powers in some ordinary matter. Still, if such an individual *is* called presumptuous, then this sort of

presumptuousness is not opposed to magnanimity; instead, as has been explained (q. 129, a. 2), it is opposed to that virtue which has to do with ordinary honors.

Reply to objection 3: No one attempts anything beyond his power except insofar as he thinks that his power is greater than it actually is. There are two ways in which one can be mistaken in this regard:

In one way, just with respect to the *quantity of the power*—as when someone thinks that he has more power or knowledge or something of this sort than he actually has.

In the second way, with respect to the *genus of the subject matter*—as when someone deems himself great or worthy of great things because of what is not great or worthy of greatness, e.g., because of wealth or because of goods of fortune. For in *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says, “Those who have things of this sort without virtue do not justifiably deem themselves worthy of great things and they are not correctly called magnanimous.”

Similarly, what someone tends toward beyond his own powers is sometimes great in reality and absolutely speaking, as is clear in the case of Peter, who intended to suffer for the sake of Christ—which was beyond his power. By contrast, sometimes the thing in question is not great absolutely speaking, but is great only according to the opinion of fatuous people, e.g., wearing expensive clothes, or despising others and inflicting harm on them, etc. This involves an individual’s going beyond magnanimity not in reality but according to opinion. Hence, in *De Quatuor Virtutibus* Seneca says, “When magnanimity exceeds its own measure, it will make a man menacing, inflated, haughty, restless, bent on excelling in all things, whether in words or in deeds, neglectful of uprightness, and hasty.” And so it is clear that the presumptuous individual sometimes falls short of the magnanimous individual in reality, but gives the appearance of behaving in a way that goes beyond the magnanimous individual.