

QUESTION 131

Ambition

Next we have to consider ambition (*ambitio*). And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Is ambition a sin? (2) Is ambition opposed to magnanimity by way of excess?

Article 1

Is ambition a sin?

It seems that ambition is not a sin:

Objection 1: Ambition implies a strong desire for honor (*cupiditas honoris*). But honor is a good in its own right and is the greatest of the exterior goods, and this is why those who do not care about honor are found blameworthy. Therefore, ambition is not a sin, but is instead something praiseworthy insofar as it is praiseworthy to desire a good (*secundum quod bonum laudabiliter appetitur*).

Objection 2: Anyone can without fault desire what is owed to him as a reward. But as the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 1 and 8, "Honor is a reward for virtue." Therefore, ambition for honor is not a sin.

Objection 3: That by which a man is impelled toward virtue and turned back from evil is not a sin. But men are impelled by honor toward what is good and drawn back from what is bad; as the Philosopher explains in *Ethics* 3, "It seems to be among the most courageous individuals that the timid are dishonored, whereas the courageous are honored." And in *De Tusculanis Quaestionibus* Tully says, "Honor sustains the arts." Therefore, ambition is not a sin.

But contrary to this: 1 Corinthians 13:5 says, "Charity is not ambitious and does not seek what belongs to it." But only sin is incompatible with charity. Therefore, ambition is a sin.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 103, aa. 1-2), honor implies a reverence for someone that is shown in testimony to his excellence. Now with respect to a man's excellence there are two things that have been noted:

The first is that the thing in accord with which a man excels is such that the man does not have it from himself, but instead *has it as something divine within himself*. And so because of this the honor is due mainly to God and not to himself.

The second thing to consider is that what a man excels in is given to the man by God *in order that he might benefit others by it*. Hence, the testimony to a man's excellence that is shown to him by others should please him to the extent that it provides him with a path toward doing good for others.

Therefore, there are three ways in which the desire for honor can be disordered:

(a) in one way, by *someone's desiring testimony to an excellence which he does not have*, i.e., by his desiring honor beyond his measure (*supra suam proportionem*).

(b) in a second way, by *someone's desiring honor for himself without referring it to God*.

(c) in a third way, by *someone's desire coming to rest in the honor itself, without referring the honor to its usefulness for others*.

Now ambition implies a disordered desire for honor. Hence, it is obvious that ambition is always a sin.

Reply to objection 1: A desire for something good must be regulated by reason, and if such a desire goes beyond the rule of reason, then it will be defective (*vitiosus*). And it is therefore defective for someone to desire honor in a way that does not accord with reason.

On the other hand, the ones who are blamed are those whose not caring about honor does not accord with what reason dictates, viz., that they should avoid those things that are contrary to honor.

Reply to objection 2: Honor is not a reward for virtue *from the perspective of the virtuous individual himself (quoad ipsum virtuosum)*, i.e., in the sense that he ought to be seeing honor as his

reward. For it is *beatitudo*, which is the end of virtue, that he seeks as his reward.

Instead, it is *from the perspective of others (ex parte aliorum)*, who do not have anything greater than honor with which to repay the virtuous individual, that honor is said to be a reward for virtue; for honor has its greatness by the very fact that it bears witness to virtue.

Hence, it is clear that, as *Ethics 4* puts it, “[Honor] is not a sufficient reward.”

Reply to objection 3: Just as through a desire for honor, when it is desired in the right way, some individuals are impelled toward what is good and turned back from what is bad, so, too, if honor is desired in a disordered way, it can become for a man an occasion for doing many bad things, viz., when he does not care about how it is that he might gain honor. Hence, in *De Coniuratione Catilinae* Sallust says, “The good and the wicked alike covet glory and honor and power for themselves, but the one,”—viz., the good one—“relies on the path of truth, whereas the other”—viz., the wicked one—“through lack of good habits, fights with deceits and falsehoods.”

And yet those who do good deeds or avoid evil deeds *solely* for the sake of honor are not virtuous; this is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics 3*, where he claims that those who do courageous deeds for the sake of honor are not truly courageous.

Article 2

Is ambition opposed to magnanimity by way of excess?

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

Objection 1: Only a single extreme is opposed to a single mean from a single direction. But as has been explained (q. 130, a. 2), presumptuousness is opposed to magnanimity by way of excess. Therefore, ambition is not opposed to magnanimity by way of excess.

Objection 2: Magnanimity has to do with honors (*honores*). But ambition seems to involve positions of importance (*dignitates*); for 2 Maccabees 4:7 says, “Jason ambitiously sought (*ambiebat*) the high priesthood.” Therefore, ambition is not opposed to magnanimity.

Objection 3: Ambition seems to involve outward splendor; for Acts 25:23 says that Agrippa and Bernice entered the auditorium “with great pomp” (*cum multa ambitione*), and 2 Paralipomenon 16:14 says that over the body of the dead Asa they burned spices and ointments “with extravagant pomp” (*ambitione nimia*). But magnanimity is not about outward splendor. Therefore, ambition is not opposed to magnanimity.

But contrary to this: In *De Officiis* 1 Tully says, “As someone proceeds to excel by the greatness of his soul, he wants more than anything to be the ruler of all.” But this involves ambition. Therefore, ambition involves an excess of magnanimity.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), ambition involves a disordered desire for honor. But magnanimity has to do with honors, and it makes use of those honors in the way it should. Hence, it is clear that ambition is opposed to magnanimity in the way that what is disordered is opposed to what is well-ordered.

Reply to objection 1: There are two things that magnanimity looks to:

One of them it looks to as *its intended end*, and this is some *great work*, which the magnanimous individual focuses on in accord with his ability. And on this score what is opposed to magnanimity by way of excess is *presumptuousness*, which focuses on a great work that is beyond one’s ability.

Magnanimity looks to the second thing as *the subject matter* which it makes use of in the right way, viz., *honor*. And on this score what is opposed to magnanimity by way of excess is *ambition*.

Nor is it impossible for there to be more than one type of excess for a single mean in different respects.

Reply to objection 2: Because of a certain excellence in their status, honor is due to those who are set up in an position of importance. And, accordingly, a disordered desire for positions of importance involves ambition. For if someone had a disordered desire for a position of importance not because of the honor, but rather because of the proper exercise of the position, which exceeded his ability, then he would not be ambitious but would instead be presumptuous.

Reply to objection 3: The very formality of stylish outward dress (*ipsa solemnitas exterioris cultus*) pertains to a certain sort of honor, and so honor is commonly given to such individuals. This is what is signified by James 2:2-3: “If a well-dressed man wearing a gold ring comes into your assembly ... and you say to him, ‘Have a seat here, please ...’.” Hence, ambition has to do with outward apparel only insofar as the outward apparel pertains to honor.