

QUESTION 133

Pusillanimity

Next we have to consider pusillanimity or faint-heartedness (*pusillanimitas*). And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Is pusillanimity a sin? (2) Which virtue is pusillanimity opposed to?

Article 1

Is pusillanimity a sin?

It seems that pusillanimity is not a sin:

Objection 1: Every sin is such that some evil is effected by it, just as every virtue is such that some good is effected by it. But as the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 4, “A pusillanimous individual is not evil.” Therefore, pusillanimity is not a sin.

Objection 2: In the same place the Philosopher says, “A pusillanimous individual seems to be one who is worthy of great goods and yet does not think of himself as worthy of them.” But no one who is not virtuous is worthy of great goods, since, as the Philosopher says in the same place, “In accord with the truth, only a good individual is to be honored.” Therefore, a pusillanimous individual is virtuous. Therefore, pusillanimity is not a sin.

Objection 3: As Ecclesiasticus 10:15 says, “The beginning of every sin is pride.” But pusillanimity does not proceed from pride, since the proud individual puffs himself up beyond what he really is, whereas the pusillanimous individual removes himself from those things of which he is worthy. Therefore, pusillanimity is not a sin.

Objection 4: In *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says that an individual is called pusillanimous “if he deems himself worthy of less than what he is in fact worthy of.” But sometimes saintly men deem themselves worthy of less than they are worthy of; this is clear in the case of Moses and in the case of Jeremiah, who were worthy of the calling that they were receiving from God and yet, as Exodus 3:2 and Jeremiah 1:6 testify, both of whom were in their humility reluctant. Therefore, pusillanimity is not a sin.

But contrary to this: The only thing to be avoided in human behavior is sin. But pusillanimity is to be avoided; for Colossians 3:21 says, “Fathers, do not provoke your sons to anger, lest they develop a timid spirit (*pusillo animo fiant*).” Therefore, pusillanimity is a sin.

I respond: Everything that is contrary to a natural inclination is a sin, since it is contrary to a law of nature. But as is clear in the case of all natural things, both living and non-living, in each entity there is a natural inclination to carry out an action that is commensurate with its power.

Now just as through *presumptuousness* an individual *exceeds* the measure of his power when he tries to do greater things than he is capable of, so, too, the pusillanimous individual *falls short* of the measure of his power when he refuses to tend toward what is commensurate with his power. And so, just as *presumptuousness* is a sin, so, too, is *pusillanimity*. And thus it is, as we read in Matthew 25:14ff. and in Luke 19:12ff., that the master punishes the servant who buried the money he had received from his master and who, because of the sort of fear that belongs to *pusillanimity*, did not do anything with it.

Reply to objection 1: The individuals whom the Philosopher calls bad are those who inflict harm on their neighbors. Accordingly, the pusillanimous individual is not called bad, since he does not inflict harm on anyone—except incidentally (*nisi per accidens*), viz., insofar as he withholds the actions by which he could help others. For in *Pastoralis* Gregory says, “If those who decline to do good to their neighbors were to be judged strictly in our preaching, their degree of guilt would be proportionate to the good that they could have done if they had been more forthcoming (*venientes ad publicum*).”

Reply to objection 2: Nothing prevents one who has the habit of a virtue from sinning—either *venially*, even while the habit remains, or *mortally*, along with the corruption of the very habit of a virtue that flows from grace (*cum corruptione ipsius habitus virtutis gratuita*). And so it can happen that (a)

because of the virtue that he has an individual is worthy to do certain great things that are worthy of great honor and yet that (b) he sins—sometimes by a venial sin and sometimes by a mortal sin—because he does not focus on using the virtue.

An alternative reply is that the pusillanimous individual is worthy of great things because of the *capacity for virtue* that exists within him, either because of a good disposition of his nature or because of knowledge or because of exterior fortune, all of which are such that when he refuses to use them for the sake of attaining virtue, he is rendered pusillanimous.

Reply to objection 3: There is a way in which even pusillanimity can arise from pride, viz., when an individual relies excessively on the judgment of his own by which he thinks of himself as insufficient for those things with respect to which he in fact has sufficiency. Hence, Proverbs 26:16 says, “The sluggard seems wiser in his own mind than seven men who speak with discernment.” For nothing prevents him from depreciating himself with respect to certain things and puffing himself up to the sky with respect to other things. Hence, in *Pastoralis* Gregory says of Moses, “Perhaps he would have been proud if he had undertaken the leadership of his people without trepidation, and, again, he would have been proud if he had refused to obey the command of his creator.”

Reply to objection 4: It was because of God’s grace that Moses and Jeremiah were worthy of the calling for which they were chosen by God. But considering the insufficiency belonging to their own weakness, they were reluctant (though not obstinately so), lest they should fall into pride.

Article 2

Is pusillanimity opposed to magnanimity?

It seems that pusillanimity is not opposed to magnanimity:

Objection 1: In *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says, “The pusillanimous individual is ignorant of himself; for he would desire the goods that he is worthy of if he knew himself.” But ignorance of oneself seems to be opposed to *prudence*. Therefore, pusillanimity is opposed to prudence.

Objection 2: In Matthew 25:26 our Lord calls the servant who out of pusillanimity refused to make use of his money “wicked and lazy (*malum et pigrum*).” Likewise, in *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says that pusillanimous individuals “seem lazy.” But as was established above (q. 47, a. 9), laziness or slowness (*pigritia*) is opposed to solicitude (*sollicitudo*), which is an act that belongs to prudence. Therefore, pusillanimity is not opposed to magnanimity.

Objection 3: Pusillanimity seems to proceed from a disordered fear; hence, Isaiah 35:4 says, “Say to the fainthearted (*pusillanimes*): ‘Take courage and fear not’.” It also seems to proceed from a disordered anger—this according to Colossians 3:21 (“Fathers, do not provoke you sons to anger, lest they become discouraged (*ut non pusillo animo fiant*)”). But disordered fearfulness is opposed to *fortitude*, and disordered anger is opposed to *mildness* or *meekness* (*mansuetudo*). Therefore, pusillanimity is not opposed to magnanimity.

Objection 4: A vice that is opposed to a virtue is such that the worse a vice it is, the more dissimilar it is to the virtue. But pusillanimity is more dissimilar to magnanimity than presumptuousness is. Therefore, if pusillanimity were opposed to magnanimity, then it would follow that pusillanimity is a worse vice than presumptuousness. But this is contrary to what is said in Ecclesiasticus 37:3: “O most wicked presumptuousness, where did you come from?” Therefore, it is not the case that pusillanimity is opposed to magnanimity.

But contrary to this: As is apparent from their names, pusillanimity and magnanimity differ as regards greatness and smallness of spirit (*secundum magnitudinem et parvitatem animi*). But *great* and *small* are opposites. Therefore, pusillanimity is opposed to magnanimity.

I respond: There are three ways to think about pusillanimity:

First, *in its own right (secundam seipsam)*. And on this score it is clear that pusillanimity is opposed to magnanimity by its own nature and that it differs from magnanimity in accord with the difference between greatness and smallness with respect to same thing. For just as a magnanimous individual tends toward great things because of his greatness of spirit, so the pusillanimous individual shies away from great things because of his smallness of spirit.

Second, pusillanimity can be thought of *as regards its cause*, which on the part of the *intellect* is the individual's ignorance of his own condition and which on the part of the *appetite* is the individual's fear of failing in those matters that he falsely judges to exceed his own capacity.

Third, pusillanimity can be thought of *as regards its effect*, which is the individual's shying away from the great things of which he is worthy.

However, as was explained above (q, 127, a. 2), a vice's opposition to a virtue has more to do with its proper species than with its causes or effects. And so pusillanimity is directly opposed to magnanimity.

Reply to objection 1: This argument goes through for pusillanimity as regards the cause which it has in the intellect.

And yet it cannot properly be claimed that pusillanimity is opposed to *prudence* even as regards its cause, since the sort of ignorance in question proceeds not from a lack of wisdom but rather from laziness either in considering one's own power, as *Ethics 4* asserts, or in executing what is subject to one's power.

Reply to objection 2: This argument goes through for pusillanimity as regards its effect.

Reply to objection 3: This argument goes through as regards the cause [of pusillanimity]. And yet the fear that causes pusillanimity is not always fear of the danger of death. Hence, even on this score pusillanimity does not always have to be opposed to *fortitude*.

Moreover, given the nature of anger's proper movement, by which an individual is carried upward toward vindication, anger is not a cause of pusillanimity, which casts the spirit downward rather than carrying it upward. However, anger is conducive to pusillanimity by reason of the *causes* of anger, which are inflicted injuries by which the recipient's spirit is cast downward.

Reply to objection 4: Pusillanimity is by its proper species a more serious sin than presumptuousness, since through pusillanimity a man recedes from goods, which, as *Ethics 4* asserts, is worse. On the other hand, presumptuousness is said to be very wicked because of the pride from which it proceeds.