

QUESTION 31

Beneficence

We next have to consider the exterior acts or effects of charity (questions 31-33): first, beneficence (question 31); second, almsgiving, which is a certain part of beneficence (question 32); and, third, fraternal correction, which is a certain sort of almsgiving (question 33).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Is beneficence an act of charity? (2) Is it necessary to do good to everyone? (3) Should good be done more to those who are more closely connected with us? (4) Is beneficence a special virtue?

Article 1

Is beneficence an act of charity?

It seems that beneficence, or the act of doing good to someone (*beneficentia*), is not an act of charity:

Objection 1: Charity is had especially in relation to God. But we are not able to do God any good—this according to Job 35:7 (“What will you give Him? Or what will He receive from your hand?”). Therefore, beneficence is not an act of charity.

Objection 2: Beneficence consists especially in the giving of gifts. But this belongs to [the virtue of] generosity (*liberalitas*). Therefore, beneficence is an act of generosity and not of charity.

Objection 3: Everything that one gives is given either (a) as something owed (*debitum*) or (b) as something not owed. But a benefit that is given as something owed pertains to justice, whereas a benefit given as something not owed is given gratuitously and accordingly pertains to mercy. Therefore, every act of doing good (*omnis beneficentia*) is either an act of justice or an act of mercy. Therefore, it is not an act of charity.

But contrary to this: As has been explained (q. 23, a. 1), charity is a sort of friendship. But in *Ethics* 9, one of the acts of friendship that the Philosopher posits is “doing good to one’s friends,” i.e., benefitting one’s friends (*amicis benefacere*).

I respond: Beneficence implies nothing other than doing good to someone. But the good in question can be thought of in two ways.

In one way, it can be thought of in accord with the *general notion* of the good. And this belongs to the *general notion* of beneficence, which is an act of friendship and thus of charity. For as was explained above (q. 23, a. 1 and q. 27, a. 2), benevolence, through which one wills good for his friend, is included in the act of loving. Now the will effects what it wills, if the ability to do so is present. And so, as a result, doing good to one’s friend follows from the act of loving. For this reason, beneficence in its general notion is an act of friendship or of charity.

However, if the good that one does to another is taken under some *specific notion* of the good, then beneficence will take on this specific notion and pertain to some special virtue.

Reply to objection 1: As Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, “Love moves the things that are ordered toward a mutual relationship, and it turns the lower things toward the higher things in order that they might be perfected by them, and it moves the higher things to provide for the lower things.” And it is in this last respect that beneficence is an effect of love. And so our role is not to do good to God, but instead to honor Him by being subject to Him, whereas His role is to do good to us out of His love.

Reply to objection 2: There are two things to consider in the giving of gifts: one of them is the thing given exteriorly, whereas the other is the interior passion which one who is pleased with his wealth has toward that wealth.

Now it belongs to generosity to moderate the interior passion, so that one is not excessive in his

desire for and love of wealth; for a man thereby becomes more prompt in bestowing gifts. Hence, if a man makes some large donation and yet has the desire to keep that gift for himself, then his giving is not generous.

On the other hand, as regards the exterior thing that is given, the giving of a benefit pertains in general to friendship or charity. Hence, it does not detract from friendship if someone wishes to retain the thing that he gives to someone out of love; instead, the perfection of his friendship is shown by this.

Reply to objection 3: Just as, in the benefits given, friendship or charity looks to the common notion of the good, so justice looks to the notion of what is owed, whereas mercy looks to the notion of alleviating unhappiness or need.

Article 2

Is it necessary to do good to everyone?

It seems that it is not necessary to do good to everyone (*non sit omnibus benefaciendum*):

Objection 1: In *De Doctrina Christiana* 1 Augustine says, “We cannot benefit everyone.” But a virtue does not incline us toward what is impossible. Therefore, it is not necessary to do good to everyone.

Objection 2: Ecclesiasticus 12:5 says, “Give to the good and receive not the sinner.” But many men are sinners. Therefore, it is not necessary to do good to everyone.

Objection 3: As 1 Corinthians 13:4 puts it, “Charity does not act perversely.” But to do good to everyone is to act perversely—for instance, if one does good to the enemies of the republic, or if one does good to someone who has been excommunicated, since he thereby communicates with him. Therefore, since to do good is an act of charity, it is not necessary to do good to everyone.

But contrary to this: In Galatians 6:10 the Apostle says, “While we have time, let us do good to all men.”

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1), beneficence follows upon love in that aspect of love by which it moves higher things to provide for lower things. Now among men the levels are not unchangeable, as they are among the angels, since men are able to suffer from multiple defects, and so someone who is higher in one respect is or is able to be lower in some other respect. And so, since the love of charity extends to everyone, beneficence likewise ought to extend to everyone, yet at the appropriate times and places. For all the acts of the virtues are fixed in accord with the appropriate circumstances.

Reply to objection 1: Absolutely speaking, we are unable to do good to everyone individually (*in speciali*)—and yet everyone is such that a situation might occur in which it is necessary to do good to him even as an individual. And so charity requires that even if a man does not actually do good to someone, he nonetheless prepares his mind in such a way that he will do good to anyone if the time for it arrives.

Still, there are some benefits that we are indeed able to offer to everyone—if not individually, at least in general—as when we pray for all believers and non-believers.

Reply to objection 2: There are two things in a sinner, viz., his sin and his nature. Therefore, the sinner is to be helped with respect to sustaining his nature, but he is not to be helped with respect to fomenting his sin. For the latter would be to do something bad to him rather than something good.

Reply to objection 3: Benefits should be taken away from excommunicants and the enemies of the republic to the extent that these individuals are thereby prevented from sinning. However, if some exigency were threatening the demise of their nature, they would have to be helped, though in an appropriate manner—for instance, if they were going to die of starvation or thirst, or if they were going

to suffer some other loss of that sort, unless this suffering were in accord with the order of justice.

Article 3

Should those who are more closely connected with us be benefitted more?

It seems that those who are more closely connected with us should not be benefitted more:

Objection 1: Luke 14:12 says, “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or relatives or those you are acquainted with.” But these are the individuals who are connected with us in special ways. Therefore, it is not those who are more closely connected with us who should be benefitted, but rather needy strangers. For the passage continues, “But when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled ...”

Objection 2: The greatest benefit is to help someone in war. But a soldier in battle ought to help a stranger who is fighting on his side rather than a relative who is fighting for the enemy. Therefore, benefits are not to be bestowed more on those who are more closely connected with us.

Objection 3: Debts should be repaid before gratuitous benefits are bestowed. But it is because of a debt that one should offer a benefit to someone from whom he has received a benefit. Therefore, one should do good to his benefactors more than to those close to him.

Objection 4: As was explained above (q. 26, a. 9), parents are to be loved more than children. But as 2 Corinthians 12:14 says, the children are more to be benefitted, because “children ought not to save up for their parents.” Therefore, it is not the case that those who more closely connected are to be benefitted more.

But contrary to this: In *De Doctrina Christiana* 1 Augustine says, “Since you are unable to do good to everyone, you ought mainly to consider those who, by reason of place and time or of some other circumstance, are—as it were, by lot—closely connected with you.”

I respond: Grace and virtue imitate the natural order, which has been instituted by God’s wisdom. But the natural order is such that every natural agent first of all diffuses its action more intensely to the things that are closer to it, in the way that fire gives warmth to a greater degree to a thing that is closer to it. And, similarly, God diffuses the gifts of His goodness in the first place and more copiously to the substances that are closer to Him; this is clear from Dionysius in *De Coelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 4.

Now the giving of benefits is an act of charity that is directed toward others. And so we must be more beneficent to those who are more closely connected with us. But the closeness of one man to another can be thought of as relative to the diverse ways in which men share their lives with one another, e.g., as relatives by natural sharing, as citizens in a city, as believers in spiritual matters, and so on for the others. And corresponding to these diverse connections, there are different benefits to be given in different ways. For, absolutely speaking, each individual is to be given more of the benefit that pertains to that matter according to which he is more closely connected with us. Yet this can vary, depending on the time and place and situation. For in some instances a stranger should be helped more than even one’s own father—say, if the stranger is in extreme need and one’s father is not suffering such great need.

Reply to objection 1: Our Lord is not commanding us absolutely speaking not to invite our friends and relatives to dinner; rather, He is commanding us not to invite them with the intention of “having them invite you in return.” For this would be disordered desire (*cupiditas*) and not charity. Still, it can happen in a given case that, because of greater need, strangers are more to be invited.

For one must understand that those who are more connected with us should be benefitted more, *all other things being equal*. But if one of two individuals is more closely connected with us and the other is more needy, then there is no universal rule by which it can be determined which one should be helped more, since there are diverse degrees of both need and closeness. Rather, this requires the judgment of

prudence.

Reply to objection 2: The common good of the many is more divine than the good of a single individual. Hence, it is virtuous for one to expose even his own life to danger for the sake of the common good of the republic, whether the spiritual republic or the temporal republic. And so, since common life in the military is ordered toward the conservation of the republic, a soldier who offers assistance to his fellow soldier offers it to him as someone who is helping the whole republic and not as someone who is helping a private person. And so it is no surprise that in this case a stranger is preferred to a blood relative (*coniuncto secundum carnem*).

Reply to objection 3: There are two types of debt.

One type of debt is to be counted not among the goods that belong to the one who owes the debt, but rather among the goods of the one to whom the debt is owed. For instance, if someone has money or some other property that belongs to another, regardless of whether it has been stolen or received as a loan or as a deposit or in some similar way, then the man is more obligated to pay the debt than to use it to do good to someone who is connected with him, unless perhaps there were such a great need that he would be permitted to use even the property of another in order to help the one who was experiencing the need—unless, again, the one to whom the debt is owed were himself in similar need. Yet in this latter case the condition of both of them, with their different circumstances, would have to be taken into account by the judgment of a prudent man, since, as the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 9, in such matters no universal rule can be given because of the variety of the individual cases.

The other type of debt is a debt that is counted among the goods that belong to the one who owes the debt and not to the one to whom the debt is owed—as, for instance, if the debt is owed not out of an obligation of justice, but out of a certain sort of moral equity, as happens in the case of benefits that are received gratuitously. Now no benefactor's gift is as great as that of one's parents, and so in the repayment of benefits one's parents are to be preferred over all others—unless a need from another source takes precedence—or some other consideration, e.g., the common advantage (*communis utilitas*) of the Church or of the republic. However, in other cases an estimation has to be made of both the closeness of the connection and the benefit that has been received. This, once again, cannot be determined by a general rule.

Reply to objection 4: Parents are like higher individuals, and so the parents' love is ordered toward doing good, whereas the children's love is ordered toward honoring their parents. And yet in a case of extreme necessity it would be permissible to leave one's children on their own (*deserere filios*) rather than one's parents, whom it is not in any way permissible to leave on their own, because of the obligation incurred by benefits received. This is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 8.

Article 4

Is beneficence a special virtue?

It seems that beneficence is a special virtue:

Objection 1: As is explained in *Ethics* 2, precepts are ordered toward the virtues, because legislators intend to make men virtuous. But precepts are given from above concerning beneficence and love; for Matthew 5:44 says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who have hated you." Therefore, beneficence is a virtue distinct from charity.

Objection 2: Vices are opposed to the virtues. But opposed to beneficence are certain special vices through which harm is inflicted on one's neighbor, e.g., plundering, theft, and other vices of this sort. Therefore, beneficence is a special virtue.

Objection 3: It is not the case that charity is divided into many species. But beneficence seems to

be divided into many species, corresponding to the different species of benefits. Therefore, beneficence is a virtue distinct from charity.

But contrary to this: An interior act and exterior act do not require diverse virtues. But beneficence and benevolence differ only as an exterior act and interior act, since beneficence is the execution of benevolence. Therefore, just as benevolence is not a virtue distinct from charity, so neither is beneficence.

I respond: Virtues are distinguished in a way that corresponds to the diverse notions of their objects. Now the formal notion of the object of charity is the same as the formal notion of the object of beneficence, since, as is clear from what was said above (a. 1), both have to do with the common notion of the good. Hence, beneficence is not a virtue distinct from charity, but denominates a certain act of charity.

Reply to objection 1: The precepts are given about acts and not about the habits of the virtues. And so the diversity of the precepts signifies diverse acts and not diverse habits of the virtues.

Reply to objection 2: Just as, insofar as all the benefits given to one's neighbor are thought of under the common notion of the good, they are traced back to love, so, too, insofar as all the harms are considered under the common notion of the bad, they are traced back to hate.

On the other hand, insofar as benefits and harms are thought of in a way corresponding to certain special notions of the good or the bad, they are traced back to special virtues or vices. And it is in this regard that there are diverse species of benefits.

Reply to objection 3: The reply to the third objection is clear from this.