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Resisting the Less Important: Aquinas on Modesty

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IN OUR LIBIDINOUS AGE – and the corresponding umbrage it occasions – it is perhaps unsurprising that the virtue of modesty has been reduced to an almost exclusively sexual virtue. Popular books like Wendy Shalit's *A Return to Modesty*[1] or David and Diane Vaughan's *The Beauty of Modesty*[2] essentially view modesty as a woman's decision to avoid sexually provocative practices, particularly in matters of apparel. We find the same characterization with scholars. The second volume of Peschke's *Christian Ethics* presents modesty as a matter of sexual decency and decorum.[3] Nor is this a purely contemporary phenomenon. Tertullian's classic work *On Modesty* is concerned mostly with sins of the flesh.[4] Even in the *Catechism*, we find modesty relegated to the ninth commandment, where it is interpreted as an injunction against lust.

> Purity requires *modesty,* an integral part of temperance. Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden. It is ordered to chastity, to whose sensitivity it bears witness. It guides how one looks at others and behaves toward them in conformity with the dignity of persons and their solidarity... Modesty is decency. It inspires one's choice of clothing. It keeps silence or reserve where there is evident risk of unhealthy curiosity. It is discreet. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church,* nos. 2521-2522)

Happily, a little further the *Catechism* provides a more expansive portrayal of this virtue:

> There is a modesty of the feelings as well of the body. It protests, for example... the solicitations of certain media that go too far in the exhibition of intimate things. *Modesty inspires a way of life which*

[1] Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).
[2] David and Diane Vaughan, *The Beauty of Modesty* (Tennessee: Cumberland, 2005).
[3] Karl H. Peschke, S.V.D., *Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, vol. 2 (Alcester, Ireland: C. Goodliffe Neale, 1993), 411-14.
[4] Tertullian, *On Modesty,* www.newadvent.org/fathers/0407.htm.

> *makes it possible to resist the allurements of fashion and the pressures of prevailing ideologies* (no. 2523).

The last line clearly hints at the profoundly influential role modesty should play in the Christian life. A virtue that can offer sanctuary against the perpetual onslaught of trends and popular opinion doubtless consists in more than a sense of what to wear.

Thomas Aquinas follows this latter emphasis. When he discusses modesty, he devotes a significant number of questions to it, with only the last pertaining to matters of costume. The different modes of self-restraint which converge in constituting modesty yield a portrait of a person grounded in truth and defended from superficial influence. In this paper, I present Thomas's understanding of modesty as a holistic resistance to substitutes for genuine greatness. To assist in teasing out the distinctive properties of modesty, I propose further to contrast and compare modesty with Aquinas's discussions on vanity and magnanimity respectively. This may seem a strange medley of virtues and vices to consider concurrently, but all three are linked in delineating how to pursue depth and greatness, while avoiding shallowness. As I argue in the conclusion, in the current atmosphere of communications technology, Thomas's understanding of modesty – and its inseparability from magnanimity – takes on a special urgency.

MODESTY

Placing it at the tail end of the treatment on the virtues, Aquinas uses modesty as a kind of miscellaneous category under which to file the various forms of temperance not yet considered. Modesty comprises a set of "secondary virtues, those concerned with less difficult matters."[5] The result, at first glance, is a kind of hodgepodge of character traits that seem not to be easily relatable: *humility, studiousness, temperance in outward movements* and *temperance in apparel* (ST II.II, q. 160, a. 2). Putting these four elements together, however, ends up giving us a magnificently robust conception of what modesty should look like.

Humility, which the contemporary reader is likely to associate already with the term "modest," is a realistic recognition of one's proper limits. It restrains the impulse to make too much of oneself.[6] As Joseph Pieper elegantly puts it, "The ground of humility is man's

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[5] Stephen J. Pope, "Overview of the Ethics of Aquinas" in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 45.

[6] Cf., Aquinas, *Summa,* II-II, q. 161, a. 2: "It belongs properly to humility that a man restrain himself from being borne towards that which is above him. For this purpose he must know his disproportion to that which surpasses his capacity."

estimation of himself according to truth. And that is almost all there is to it."[7] Humility prevents the vicious self-promotion which runs so counter to our picture of the modest person. Everyone recognizes, in principle at least, the ugliness of someone pretending to an excellence not possessed: someone talking authoritatively about a topic without knowing much about it, or a tone-deaf person insisting on being given a solo in the church choir. These and other ludicrous incongruities are mercifully precluded by a temperance born of accurate self-assessment.

And yet humility is also a far cry from the fawning, pathetic self-deprecators. One thinks of the Charles Dickens's character Uriah Heep, in *David Copperfield,* whose constantly describes himself as humble – or "Umble," – while his bogus humility is simply a camouflage for mean-spiritedness.[8] Quite the contrary, Aquinas is quick to point out that humility, like modesty as a whole, does not preclude the longing and hope for greatness – indeed, it makes greatness all the more attainable.[9]

Studiousness, the second component, seems further afield from modesty, but if truth is necessary for humility (modesty's primary ingredient) then the consequent necessity of studiousness becomes more intuitive. Studiousness is the virtue responsible for resisting curiosity, which is in turn the vice of inquiring about what one has no business inquiring about (ST II.II, q. 166, a.2, ad. 3; q. 167, a. 1). An easy illustration of intemperate inquisitiveness would be pursuing information which is demeaning, or unedifying, or directly contrary to the good of some relationship, like indulging one's morbid interest in certain torture procedures or seeking out gossip. When dealing with curiosity, Thomas seems less concerned with what the person *is* attending to and more concerned with what the person *is failing* to attend to, which is to say that the damage done is more related to the aspect of omission than of commission. Curiosity is deadly primarily as a distraction from one's obligations or from contemplating God or ultimately from doing or learning anything useful (ST II.II, q. 167, a. 1 and 2). It is the relative *triviality* of the intellectual content, not so much any spiritual toxicity which makes curiosity so malignant, and, by implication, studiousness becomes an important moral preventative.

With almost ubiquitous access to the internet, the virtue of focusing on what we should requires almost ceaseless vigilance. Everyone who sits down to a computer has to struggle, often minute-by-minute, against the lure of a limitless supply of unimportant but entertaining

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[7] Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 189.
[8] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
[9] Cf., Aquinas, *Summa,* II-II, q. 161, a. 1, c. and ad. 3.

discoveries on blogs, Google, YouTube, Facebook or Wikipedia. This has bearing not only on our various individual projects but on the common human call to true wisdom. As Pope Francis noted in *Laudato Si',* "True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution" (no. 47).

In any case, the truth which is required for humility cannot be found through indulgent entertainment, nor will modesty be encouraged by squandering time on superficialities. Studiousness, the governance of where we direct our own attention, the mainstay against mental pollution, is vital for the depth of character to which modesty pertains. Appetition follows apprehension, and, if we fail to keep focused on the important things, the truths that matter, our passions and choices will be similarly disconnected from the ultimate goods on which our lives are meant to be centered.

Thirdly, modesty pertains to outward movements. If humility is inner modesty, then that modesty should be expressed externally; the body should express the person. Aquinas cites various authorities to corroborate this principle.

> Outward movements are signs of the inward disposition, according to Ecclesiastes 19:27, "The attire of the body, and the laughter of the teeth, and the gait of the man, show what he is," and Ambrose says that "the habit of mind is seen in the gesture of the body," and that "the body's movement is an index of the soul" (ST II.II, q. 168, a.1, ad. 1).

Probably we all know someone whose habits of manner or even whose style of walk seems calculated to draw attention. Interestingly, Aquinas devotes special attention to the examples of an excessively grave or excessively frivolous demeanor (ST II.II, q. 168, a.3 and a.4). One imagines the person who laughs and talks far too loudly at a party or who goes from one theatrical gesture to another. In any case, it is not enough to think or feel modestly about ourselves. We have to act modestly, have to temper the distinctive aspects of our personality that might be unpleasant or unedifying to others or makes us stand out disproportionately from others.

Naturally, a general norm about self-presentation will include precepts related to attire, since what we wear is perhaps the most vivid (although perhaps not the most profound) way human beings manage the way others view them. Thus, the fourth and final component of modesty is the habit of being balanced with respect to clothing. For Aquinas, modesty of clothing is neither directed exclusively to women nor predominantly against sexual provocation. While these issues

emerge in the second article of the *Summa's* question on modesty of apparel (ST II.II, q. 169, a. 2), in the first article Thomas is concerned with people generally (*homo* – not *vir* or *mulier*), and primarily people who simply care too much about their clothing, who are too attached to comfort in clothing, or who even think about their clothing too much. With a fine psychological touch, Aquinas criticizes specifically those who inordinately hope for the good opinion of others by dressing well, and those who inordinately hope for the good opinion of others by dressing badly (ST II.II, q. 169, a. 1). Regarding the former, he cites Gregory to the effect that men only buy overly expensive clothing out of vainglory. In other words, the cause of their immodesty is vanity, a disordered preoccupation with what other people think of them. This introduction of vanity at the conclusion of Thomas's treatment of modesty suggests the profitability of transitioning here to spend some time unpacking his insights on the moral disorder of vanity – which we would instinctively recognize as opposed to modesty since, while modesty resists disproportionate self-promotion, vanity revels in the spotlight.

VANITY AND MAGNANIMITY: A CONTRASTAND COMPARISON WITH MODESTY

Vanity, like modesty, has undergone a historical reduction in connotation to the point that it now often refers merely to matters of physical appearance. A vain person is commonly regarded as someone who cares too much about how he or she looks. But traditionally the vice, like the virtue, enjoyed a much broader scope. Aquinas presents vanity (or vainglory) as being a disordered desire for the manifestation of one's own goodness. It occurs when one inordinately yearns for or delights in praise. This definition not only goes well beyond matters of physical appearance but also precludes any confusion between vanity and pride. Pride is the fundamental and universal sin, a disordered desire for some excellence, which Thomas says is essentially equivalent to disordered self-love (ST I.II, q. 84, a. 2, ad. 3). Vanity, like every sin, flows from pride, but vanity is specified by being directed to the praise or good estimation of others.

Granted, praise and the good estimation of others are not to be despised in themselves. What makes vanity sinful, what makes vainglory vain, is that the praise one desires is pointless: "The judgment of those thinking well of one so belongs to vainglory when one desires it without spiritual benefit to others or oneself" (*De Malo,* q.9, a. 1, ad. 8). Here we return to a theme already familiar from studiousness and modesty in apparel. Attention to what does not matter, like trivia, clothing, and what random people think of us, is a misdirection of our psychic energy. There is nothing inherently important in being noticed by others, and so we should not act like it is important: "It is requisite for man's perfection that he should know

himself; but not that he should be known by others, wherefore it is not to be desired in itself" (ST II.II, q.132, a.1, ad. 3).

Simply because praise is not intrinsically valuable does not mean it is never valuable. Thomas enumerates three potential advantages of praise: first, when it gives greater glory to God; second, when it serves to edify one's neighbor; thirdly, when it encourages the recipient of the praise to continue in the good and strive to advance in virtue (ST II.II, q.132, a.1, ad. 3). Thus, we need not be indifferent to all compliments or contemptuous of all recognition. There is no need to brush aside every nice thing someone says about us. If being praised leads to any of these three goods, we can rejoice in it without guilt.

It is useless praise, notoriety that does no good, that we should guard against. This includes being praised for an excellence we do not possess—"glory in something false"—or being praised for something petty—"glory in a good that easily passes away" (*De Malo,* q. 9, a. 1). In the end, Aquinas is clear that being esteemed by others is, at best, only a means to some further good, and when desired for itself degenerates into a vice which leaves a trail of further vices in its wake.[10]

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Thomas's discussion of vainglory is the way he places vanity in stark contrast to magnanimity, the virtue whereby a person desires the greatness which may be expected of him, a greatness that is actually worthy of honor. Aquinas explains the contrariety between vainglory and magnanimity as follows:

> To think so much of little things as to glory in them is itself opposed to magnanimity. Wherefore it is said of the magnanimous man that honor is of little account to him. In like manner he thinks little of other things that are sought for honor's sake.... Again it is incompatible with magnanimity for a man to glory in the testimony of human praise, as though he deemed this something great; wherefore it is said of the magnanimous man that he cares not to be praised (ST II.II, q.132, a. 2, ad. 1).

Common sense tells us that recognition, when divorced, as it so often is, from genuine merit, is the quintessence of triviality and superficiality. A person who cares about what matters will not care much about being known, being noticed, being celebrated. A person who cares about what matters will not be vain.

The contrast between vanity and magnanimity, however, is not quite as simple as it may first appear. The vice of vanity, as we have seen, is a preoccupation with praise from others, but St. Thomas

[10] Aquinas lists the effects or 'daughters' of vainglory in *de Malo* q.9, a.3.

begins his description of magnanimity by saying that it is essentially "about honors." Whence, then, the contrast, if both magnanimity and vanity are about what other people say and think? One of these objections in fact appears in the first article on magnanimity, arguing that magnanimity, if it is really a virtue, cannot be about honors, since "the virtuous are not praised for desiring honors, but for shunning them" (ST II.II, q. 129, a. 1, obj. 3). Aquinas's response is to articulate more precisely in what sense the magnanimous person is concerned with honor:

> Those are worthy of praise who despise honors in such a way as to do nothing unbecoming in order to obtain them, nor have too great a desire for them. If, however, one were to despise honors so as not to care to do what is worthy of honor, this would be deserving of blame. Accordingly magnanimity is about honors in the sense that a man strives to do what is deserving of honor, yet not so as to think much of the honor accorded by man (ST II.II, q. 129, a. 1, ad. 3).

The great-souled individual, the person who yearns to be excellent, is perfectly justified in taking honor or praise as a normative principle as long as the praise in question is not the actual praise that society may or may not be pleased to grant, but the ideal praise proportionate to greatness. The virtuous evaluation of an act or a resolution does not involve asking, "Will I be admired for this?" but instead "Is this admirable?"[11]

It is not praise that matters, it is *being worthy of praise*, and praise and being worthy of praise are far from coextensive. This is the distinction which prompts Thomas to explore the relationship between magnanimity and humility (which is again, the chief component of modesty), both of which must ultimately be based on truth. With regard to oneself, magnanimity recognizes one's perfections and capacities; humility recognizes one's deficiencies and weaknesses. With regard to others, magnanimity recognizes that our neighbors are, like us, poor sinners whose judgment or character must not be mistaken as being absolute: thus "he does not think so much of others as to do anything wrong for their sake" (ST II.II, q. 129, a. 3, ad. 4). Humility, however, recognizes too that our neighbors have themselves

[11] Cf. Aquinas, *Summa,* I-II, q.2, a.3. Here, of course, God's estimation of our character is to be valued in a radically different way than the estimation of human beings, and that for two reasons. Firstly, because God's estimation of us is supremely accurate, whereas that of human beings is not. If God thinks we're excellent and happy, then we surely are; if men and women think we are excellent and happy, there is a good chance we are not – as the tragic personal histories of smiling celebrities so often illustrate. Secondly, for Thomas, God's knowledge is different from a human being's insofar as the way things are determines creaturely knowledge, while God's knowledge determines the way things are. In other words, God knowing that we are excellent and happy is what *makes* us excellent and happy.

been endowed by God, and, in that respect, we adopt towards them a deferential attitude.

Again, the criterion for the virtues is truth; "Hence it is clear that magnanimity is not opposed to humility: indeed, they concur in this, that each is according to right reason" (ST II.II, q. 161, a. 1, ad. 3). Where is human greatness to be found and where the deficiency? What is of great worth, and what is to be disdained? What matters, and what does not? Someone asking these questions, and living accordingly, will be automatically directed away from vanity, and towards modesty.

MODESTY TODAY

The practical directives of modesty along the lines indicated by Aquinas are fairly straightforward: resist disordered self-promotion; resist giving the mind over to irrelevancies; resist cultivating a style of self-deportment that attracts undue attention; avoid excessive anxiety regarding matters of wardrobe, or regarding what others think about something as relatively unimportant as clothing. Over and against these directives are the temptations of vanity, which prompt an overemphasis on superficialities, and in particular on what others think of us.

At the risk of sounding reactionary, it seems plain to me that the transformation of our own particular culture by communications technology has brought with it a radical challenge to the virtue of modesty, a challenge made not less comprehensive by being largely unconscious. If modesty is a holistic resistance to substitutions for genuine greatness, it appears the digital age is a time of unique inundation with temptations away from greatness and towards triviality.

We celebrate celebrities for being celebrities. Social networking platforms encourage us to share any thought or event, no matter how banal, with the world. Self-promoting references are affixed to what we used to think of as tools for contact with others. Advertisers or newsmakers sensationalize the patently insignificant simply through the raw force of repeated exposure, and we ourselves spend hours browsing through "friends" photos simply because we happened to be curious about their recent activities. We take and post pictures of ourselves wherever we go, at a restaurant or the Grand Canyon or a papal or presidential address. Also, the pictures which we post are almost uniformly flattering, and when anyone else posts more realistic pictures of us we remove them from our pages instantly. These are not cultural phenomena indicative of humility, studiousness, modesty of movement, or modesty of dress. They represent vanity blown to proportions that only mass media and digital reality could sustain.

And the strain tells. We worry that others will fail to appreciate our deeper value, and at the same time cheapen ourselves by posting shockingly intimate information (and sometimes images). We worry about peer pressure and do nothing to build up the defensive line of modesty against it, blaming peers instead of our sensitivity to pressure. Most of all, perhaps, we worry that our relationships are shallow, that friendships of real mutual understanding are growing rarer, as we say over and over, to an increasingly indiscriminate audience, "Look at me!"

Clearly, it is imperative to restore modesty to its rightful place and to stem the tide of vanity. As our discussion of Thomas suggests, magnanimity will play a fundamental role in that process. The virtue of magnanimity reminds us that greatness, excellence, the distinction between what people might think and what people should think are an indispensable aspect of this reform. Most crucially, magnanimity reminds us of the distinction between the important and the unimportant. God's estimation is important, and human attention is less important. The divine image in our neighbor is important, and how our neighbor looks or dresses is less important. Answering the big questions is important, and an entertaining two-minute video or 140-character status update is less important. Only when these relative value scales are recognized will love of what is praiseworthy yield a wholesome love of obscurity.[12] Only then may we expect the reappearance of modesty. M

[12] Ronald Knox, in a magnificent homily entitled "The Charm of Our Obscurity," stated, "The point is that it is the instinct of the Catholic genius at its highest to court obscurity, to shun publicity, and, if it can do so without prejudice to the salvation of souls, to live and to die unknown." In *Pastoral and Occasional Sermons*, ed. Philip Caraman, S.J. (California: Ignatius Press, 2002), 223.