

NOTRE DAME GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

MAGNANIMITY AND HUMILITY:
OF VIRTUES AND IMPOSTERS

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO DR. KRISTIN BURNS
IN COMPLETION OF
PHIL 602 PHILOSOPHY OF GOD AND MAN

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Business owners who want to turn a profit in retail are counseled to beware of counterfeit money. Cashiers need to be trained to detect fake bills. On their website, the United States Secret Service gives this telling admonition: “Compare a suspect note with a genuine note of the same denomination and series... look for differences, not similarities.”¹ Then, they proceed to give actual examples of the discrepancies by pictures and explanations.

Similarly, in the realm of virtue and vice, there are many vices that can appear as virtues and also many virtues that at first glance seem to be a species of vice. For example, pusillanimity can often masquerade as humility and the virtue of magnanimity can often be mistaken for the vice of pride!

In order to understand correctly so as to act correctly, one could take the sound advice of the secret service men and apply it to the study of humility, pusillanimity, magnanimity and pride: look for the differences! Like the renowned federal law enforcement agency, this paper will attempt to point out the distinctions between the authentic and the phony by way of an extended analogy about a business corporation, based on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*.

A Tale of Two Virtues

At a specific yet unnamed moment in the universe, a new business came into being: that of Soul and Body Substantial Unity, Inc. (SABSU). Now SABSU was a very productive and successful company, producing many good acts by way of all the good habits called Virtues who worked there, regulating the intellect, the rational appetite and the sensitive appetites, both the concupiscible and the irascible, with wondrous self-mastery.

¹http://www.secretservice.gov/money_detect.shtml United States Secret Service 24 October 2011.

One of the prominent reasons for their magnificent success was the savvy business sense and dedicated work of their four major departments that regulated the intellect and the three appetites (I-II, 65, 1, resp). Prudence, the Chief Executive Officer of SABSU, wisely ruled, directed and guided all the other departments with hitherto-unknown wisdom, and made the long and short range plans for the entire company. Of course, this wisdom would have been ineffective in the realm of action unless the Operations Department, headed by Justice, had actually executed the strategies of Prudence. On the third floor was the Fortitude department, which was the fire behind all the company's numerous advances and improvements. Now the employees in the Temperance department were known as the pragmatists and most measured executives in the establishment. Some of the personnel did not always want members of the Temperance department at their company meetings because they always curbed any desires or plans of a colleague if these exceeded a just measure (I-II, 61, 2, resp). But deep down all the Virtues who worked at SABSU were grateful because they knew that without the Temperance department, their desires would be out of control and their success would slowly begin to disintegrate. And the one nonnegotiable policy that every department followed without fail, and which was posted on the wall of every cubicle and in every department, was this: "Soul and Body Substantial Unity Incorporated employees always act in accord with right reason." This principle was so deeply ingrained in the members that it unified the various departments as one, and all worked in this manner without fail.

Now while the concupiscible appetite, ruled so wisely by the virtues in the Temperance department, was the subject mainly of the physical desires for food, drink and propagation (II-II, 141, 4, resp), it was also the subject of other desires that needed careful regulation. Thus in addition to the offices of the Temperance Department itself, another group of workspaces called

the Potential Parts of Temperance were also found on the Temperance floor of SABSU Inc. Here, the virtues of Continenence, Humility, Meekness and Modesty awaited the many requests for help that came to them, and almost daily broke new company records for the timely and firm moderation of the most unruly passions (II-II, 143, 1).

Modesty, who was generally in charge of moderating unreasonable desires that were outside the physical realm, was very happy to be the supervisor of Humility, whose essential task it was to moderate the desire for excellence, which in fact very often proved to be difficult to regulate (II-II, 160, 2, resp). At team meetings the various executives often bickered about whether Humility should be considered as working in the Temperance department or in the Fortitude Department, because although her mode of acting was chiefly as a moderator of desire (which properly belonged to the regulation of the concupiscible appetite), the matter of this regulation was a difficult good (excellence), which was the object of the irascible appetite (II-II, 161, 4, ob 2). Fortunately, the two departments agreed that in some way she belonged to both of their divisions, albeit in different ways (II-II, 161, 4, ad 2 and 3), but Temperance continued to have the honour of Humility's name being officially listed within her own branch of SUBSU Inc. (II-II, 161, 4, resp).

Humility, although a wonderful and modest worker, was also highly misunderstood by many. Newly-hired Virtues in the Fortitude department at first thought that she would be working against them and that she was holding the company back from striving mightily for excellence. For example, because Humility esteemed all others as better than herself, her co-workers assumed she was breaking the company policy of always being in accord with right reason, and reported this to her supervisor. Modesty calmly explained that Humility was not breaking policy, for she held all others to be better than herself as regarding the gifts of God in

them and her own deficiencies in herself (II-II, 161, 3, resp). So it was that new employees learned that Humility, although very unassuming, was actually the greatest virtue in their company, after Prudence, Justice and the Theological Virtues (II-II, 161, 5, resp).

One of the virtues from the department of Fortitude, named Magnanimity, was very much impressed by his colleague Humility and arranged to have a business meeting with her. Magnanimity saw that together they could achieve great excellence and work together in an unparalleled way, so he brought his ideas to her.

“Humility,” he said, “I would like to make a proposal. As you know, the matter with which we both deal is the difficult good. However, you also know that while I strive towards it, you restrain movement towards it. I have to tell you the truth: many of my co-workers laughed when I told them that I had a proposal to work with you because we seem utterly incompatible (161, 1, ob 3). However, I don’t think we are. While it is true that I move towards the difficult good while you restrain movement towards it, we have the same motivation and rule of decision: that we move or not move in accord with right reason. If we are able to balance on both sides towards right reason, there will never be any fear of deviating from the rule of reason (II-II, 161, 1, ad 3). Would you like to be my permanent business partner?”

Humility replied, “I would be happy to work with you. Of course, I am nothing of myself, but with God I can do all things. Let us begin and never cease producing good acts!” So from that day forward, Humility and Magnanimity were inseparable.

For a time, all was going well. Humility would restrain desires for excellence that were out of line with right reason, and Magnanimity would strive for honor and excellence in great things in accord with right reason. Everything was perfect. But this glorious harmony was about to be disrupted.

What most of the executives never knew was that Humility was the secret victim of envy. Her evil twin sister, Pusillanimity, decided one day that she would like that nice cozy office for herself. Having gotten into the SABSU building because of her striking, almost-perfect, outer resemblance to her sister, Humility, she waited for her opportunity. One evening, Humility had to remove the previous year's filing and bring it to the basement storage room. Pusillanimity followed her quietly and locked her in. Likely no one would notice Humility for days... maybe even weeks! Maybe her sister would even die. "Good," she thought. Now she could enjoy that cubicle. Surely no one would ever suspect a thing!

Now Humility's marching orders had been to moderate the desire for excellence in accordance with right reason, and especially not in excess if it (II-II, 161, ad 3). Her evil twin Pusillanimity, however, because of her own feelings of inadequacy (II-II, 161, 2, ad 2), refused to tend even to what is in accord with right reason; she set her aim so low that her performance in the corporation was well below that of which she was capable (II-II, 133, resp). After a couple of weeks, the executives from all the departments began to think that Humility was acting very strangely. They decided that Magnanimity should talk to Humility and encourage her to return to her normal behavior.

So Magnanimity pleaded with Pusillanimity (pretending to be Humility) earnestly not to obliterate, but rather just to continue to moderate, her desire for excellence in accord with right reason, just as she used to do. Now Pusillanimity knew that sooner or later her true identity would be discovered, so she had a plan ready.

"Magnanimity," she began, "While I appreciate your concern, I have something to tell you. I am not Humility, but rather her evil twin sister, Pusillanimity. And your time here is finished too! I would like you meet someone that you know very well."

Magnanimity could not believe his eyes, for there before him was his own evil twin brother, Pride. Pride, with an arrogant smirk said, “So, are you glad to see me?” Magnanimity told his brother, “No, and you are about to leave.” “Wrong,” said Pride. And without further warning he bound Magnanimity and took him down the elevator and threw him into the same storage room as Humility.

It was a perfect plan. Pusillanimity and Pride were practically identical to Humility and Magnanimity in appearance, and nobody seemed to notice a thing the first week. After all, Pride had just as great a desire and striving for his own excellence as Magnanimity (II-II, 162, 1, ad 2 and 129, 1, resp), and his spunk in overcoming difficulties inherent in his job was also incredibly convincing (II-II, 162, 3, resp). However, not too long afterwards, some of Magnanimity’s co-workers began to notice what they thought to be changes in his attitude and behavior, for they did not yet know of the secret exchange. First of all, the changed Magnanimity (Pride) always seemed to overestimate how good he was (II-II, 162, 1, resp), whereas the old Magnanimity, although striving for excellence and greatness, never used to err by thinking himself or the company better than they were (II-II, 161, 1, resp). Also, Pride took to himself all the credit for any good thing the company achieved, as if he were the cause of it and not any other, even God (II-II, 162, 4, resp)! This made him odious to some of the other executives, who began to think that perhaps their former colleague had turned into a self-inflated, egotistical vice. However, some of his associates were not only oblivious to the difference, but also began to be infected themselves by Pride’s disordered appetite for his own excellence. The cunning vice was pleased about this, and had known this would take place if he had ever managed to get his foot in the door of this company (II-II, 162, 2, resp). For indeed, he had been sent to SABSU in order to

sabotage their entire operation and throw it into disarray, being in actuality the CEO of Non Serviam Inc.

Pride lost no time in producing the fruits of his wickedness in regards also to his partnership with Pusillanimity (II-II, 133, 1, ad 3). He mentored her by encouraging her (II-II, 133, 2, ad 3) in her self-absorbed fear of failure (II-II, 133, 2, resp), and by affirming her in her decision to bury her talent in the ground like the servant in the Gospel (II-II, 133, 1, resp). He told her that her chorus of “I’m no good, I’m no good” sounded so much like the sayings of the Saints that surely nobody would ever figure out how different she really was from Humility. “It is true,” thought Pusillanimity, “I did hear Humility say things like that before we relocated her.” Now Humility was prone to say such things; Pusillanimity was right. However, Humility always said them with her own defects in mind, and yet in her heart retained a great confidence because she knew that God could do all things in her (161, 2, ad 2). Pusillanimity focused only on her own weakness, mindless of her dignity and of God’s all-powerful help. So in order to pass her time, she thought she would sharpen pencils, not just when they needed sharpening, but rather all day long. She did this from fear of failure at anything else, and from an under-estimation of her abilities. This new pastime of one who apparently was the formerly-productive and wonderful virtue Humility sounded the warning to all at SABSU that something was seriously wrong.

Several employees decided things were serious enough to speak in person to Prudence, who they hoped would decide on a plan of action to be undertaken by Justice of the Operations Department. When the situation had been described in detail, including all the recent behavior traits, attitudes and characteristics of Pride and Pusillanimity (whom all thought to be Humility and Magnanimity) the CEO said firmly, “I think that what we are dealing with here is a case of infiltration by vice.” There was a gasp of horror, for one need remember that this was the best

company known at that time. Nothing would have been more hideous to them than to know that their foundation was weakening. “However,” continued Prudence, “It is not too late to remedy the situation. We have always worked together harmoniously to perform good acts and the good act we need to perform now is to extirpate the vices from our company, and from the world, if possible.” He directed Justice to send Patience and Perseverance from the Fortitude department to search for the lost virtues. “Beware of trouble from Pride, who I am sure is behind this. If he catches wind of our plan, he will certainly try to block us. Don’t worry about Pusillanimity, our Humility’s poor imitation. I’m sure she will continue to sharpen pencils until we are ready to deal with her.” After these words, the meeting adjourned and the assigned virtues set out on their quest.

After many hours of searching, they found both Magnanimity and Humility in the storage room, where they had been locked. They were both in good spirits, but certainly would be in need of recuperation time, for every Virtue knows that lack of use decreases his ease, promptness and delight in operation. Surprisingly, Pride did not know that his number was up. For he was so inflated and inebriated with his own excellence, cleverness, and many other outstanding qualities perceived by his exaggerated ego, that he failed to detect that perhaps others were smarter and more capable than he thought them to be, for he generally held all other people in contempt (II-II, 162, 4, resp). The virtues from the Fortitude department came upon him in his office, picked him up decisively, without fear, and tossed him into the outer darkness, from where he could slink back to Non Serviam Inc. As was suspected, Pusillanimity was still in Humility’s cubicle, listlessly sharpening pencils. However, Justice sent Clemency to take her away, and the decision was made to send her to Vice Reformation Training, where she might be transformed into the true interior likeness of her sister, Humility; for Pusillanimity was not as

malicious as Pride, but rather she lacked the confidence to do anything. After she was sent away, Humility said, “But for the grace of God, there go I. I wish her well.”

After the terrible ordeal had passed and everything was back to normal at the corporation, Prudence held a company-wide conference to evaluate their recent experience and draft new policies and procedures so that this would not happen again.

They all came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to have absolute certainty of not being infiltrated by the wicked vice of Pride again, because Pride was very tricky to detect, often being hidden (162, 6, ob 1). Prudence warned them, “Any one of us could have the misfortune of falling into vice; yes, any virtue here. Whatever leads to disordered self-esteem could lead us to pride. Although many of us have supervisory roles that include observing the faults of others, we all need to be careful not to let it be an occasion of our downfall by growing in contempt for others (162, 3, ad 2).” Everyone thought this wise advice. As well, just as some modern workplaces in our day have a “Signs of a Stroke” poster on their Health and Emergency bulletin board, so too at SABSU Inc., there was a new “Signs of Pride” poster distributed to every level, for as was mentioned earlier, Pride could strike anywhere. The poster read:

Are you infected with Pride?

Look for these external warning signs:

- Boasting
- Ingratitude
- Despising others

Internal symptoms are more difficult to detect.

If you or another employee suspect infection, please reform immediately.

Thank you for your cooperation. (II-II, 162, 4, resp and ad 2 and 3)

And so the virtues at Soul and Body Substantial Unity Inc. grew wiser and became more aware of the cunning of their enemies, increasing their vigilance against future attacks and regaining their full operational capacity. Productivity of good acts continued to increase with every day, and Humility and Magnanimity regained their former positions, returning to their

mutual tasks with joy. Right reason would always guide them, if God gave them grace. The company continued in this manner until the Parousia and eschatological consummation of all things. The End.

Commentary on the Partnership of Magnanimity and Humility

Upon first being introduced to the structure and relationship of the virtues, one to another, one may well ask himself: do magnanimity and humility really belong together? What do an ambitious marketing representative and a prudent, measured board member have in common? As was shown in the above tale, they balance each other out for a wonderful result. Another analogy that might help a person understand the relationship between these virtues is that of a pacemaker. The pacemaker's function is to regulate the heart: if the heart beats too slowly, the pacemaker quickens the pace; if the heartbeat is too rapid, the pacemaker steadies it down to a more measured and peaceful rate. If the pacemaker only had the function of speeding up the heartbeat, what would happen if the heart was already too rapid? Certainly it would be of no use to the patient. And of course if the device was only designed to slow the heart down, how would it be if the rate was already dangerously low? Both functions of the pacemaker are to regulate the heart in accord with the correct rate. So too with magnanimity and humility, they both regulate the desire for excellence in accord with right reason. Magnanimity goads the desire for excellence on harder when it would shrink in the face of difficulty, while humility moderates that desire for excellence when it goes beyond that which is in accord with right reason. St. Thomas, in II-II, 161, 1, resp, talks about the two-fold virtue for the difficult good and explains this unique relationship. Another image that may help someone is a team of horses being driven to a location. When the horses lag, one might crack a whip, or say "Giddyap". This would be akin to

the action of magnanimity, urging forward. Now if your horses were so spirited they were out of control and going too fast, one would rein them in with the harness and shout, “Whoa!” This is more of the function of humility, whose task it is to harness or moderate those desires for one’s own excellence.

Another Shock

It would seem that many people today have a mistaken notion of humility. As in *A Tale of Two Virtues*, frequently it is thought that every person who says, “I’m no good, I’m no good” is a humble person. However, the pusillanimous person errs by considering themselves below their merits, for they entirely ignore God’s help and consider only their own misery. Humility, on the other hand considers both one’s own misery and God’s aid. If the Blessed Virgin Mary had told the Angel Gabriel that she didn’t think that she was worthy and therefore that he should leave and tell God to find someone else, this would have been a pusillanimous way of acting. However, while knowing her own nothingness, but relying entirely on God for whom nothing is impossible she said, “Be it done to me according to thy word.” This is the response of humility. A humble person does not forget his dignity as being made in the image and likeness of God, nor does he forget God’s sustaining and strengthening grace and aid. Another great example of what humility is not, is put forth by St. Thomas, and mentioned in the above tale: Our Lord’s parable of the servant hiding the coin in the ground. This man at first glance seems to be humble. It seems that he did not feel he measured up to the standards of his overseer who he knew was a “harsh man,” and so he decided not to act, not even to try. St. Thomas points out that this servant was punished for failing to act (II-II, 133, 1, resp). This is an instance where one sees clearly that pusillanimity is a vice displeasing to God. The other servants did what they were

asked to do and did not let fear of failure prevent them from acting. The distinction between pusillanimity and humility must be recognized by Christians, so that they can grow in true, and not counterfeit, virtue.

Magnanimity and Pride

In *A Tale of Two Virtues*, we encounter a virtue that is not too frequently discussed at length: magnanimity. This too is a misunderstood virtue, for many people think that all striving for excellence and honor may be a sign of pride, whereas in reality it can be a very great virtue. For the magnanimous person strives for great things on account of the gifts of God that he recognizes in himself, and not for anything that he ascribes to himself as cause. In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, two characters in particular seem to embody very vividly the virtue of magnanimity and the vice of pride: the mouse, Reepicheep, and the White Witch. Reepicheep is a character of great honor, courtesy, and bravery born of a desire for greatness; he is magnanimous (Magnanimous Mouse!). When he is offered the opportunity to carry on alone into Aslan's country, he affords it as the greatest honor and volunteers himself readily for it. He is always ready to seek honor and give it where due. He is noble and courageous. While only fictional, he does give us a good idea of the attractiveness of magnanimity as a virtue. On the other hand the White Witch is a proud person and very unattractive in herself, while at the same time very seductive. When her true colors show, she is seen as exalting herself above all the others, holding them in contempt, and seeking power inordinately for herself at all costs. Everything revolves around her perception of her own excellence, and her appetite for her own excellence is dangerously out of control, to the great harm of all. Therefore, one can clearly see that while magnanimity and pride may at first seem similar, they are in fact worlds apart.

Conclusion

Without clear ideas about the true nature of the various virtues, one is not able to recognize the difference between a virtue and a look-alike vice, and thus a person's progress in virtue will ultimately be stunted. This is clear for all the virtues, including humility and magnanimity. St. Thomas has clearly explained these, as well as the other virtues and vices in his *Summa Theologiae*. It is hoped that many persons in our day will take up the Summa once again as a guide in this area, for growth in their knowledge and practice of virtue. With this impressive manual in hand, we will have the tools to detect an imposter – and replace it with true virtue.