

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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OF BENEFICENCE (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must now consider the outward acts or effects of charity, (1) Beneficence, (2) Almsdeeds, which are a part of beneficence, (3) Fraternal correction, which is a kind of alms.

Under the first head there are four points of inquiry:

[\(1\)](#) Whether beneficence is an act of charity ?

[\(2\)](#) Whether we ought to be beneficent to all?

[\(3\)](#) Whether we ought to be more beneficent to those who are more closely united to us?

[\(4\)](#) Whether beneficence is a special virtue?

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Whether beneficence is an act of charity?

Objection 1: It would seem that beneficence is not an act of charity. For charity is chiefly directed to God. Now we cannot benefit God, according to Job 35:7: "What shalt thou give Him? or what shall He receive of thy hand?" Therefore beneficence is not an act of charity.

Objection 2: Further, beneficence consists chiefly in making gifts. But this belongs to liberality. Therefore beneficence is an act of liberality and not of charity.

benefit conferred as being due belongs to justice while a benefit conferred as not due, is gratuitous, and in this respect is an act of mercy. Therefore every benefit conferred is either an act of justice, or an act of mercy. Therefore it is not an act of charity.

On the contrary, Charity is a kind of friendship, as stated above ([Question \[23\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#)). Now the Philosopher reckons among the acts of friendship (Ethic. ix, 1) "doing good," i.e. being beneficent, "to one's friends." Therefore it is an act of charity to do good to others.

I answer that, Beneficence simply means doing good to someone. This good may be considered in two ways, first under the general aspect of good, and this belongs to beneficence in general, and is an act of friendship, and, consequently, of charity: because the act of love includes goodwill whereby a man wishes his friend well, as stated above ([Question \[23\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#); [Question \[27\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)). Now the will carries into effect if possible, the things it wills, so that, consequently, the result of an act of love is that a man is beneficent to his friend. Therefore beneficence in its general acceptation is an act of friendship or charity.

But if the good which one man does another, be considered under some special aspect of good, then beneficence will assume a special character and will belong to some special virtue.

Reply to Objection 1: According to Dionysius (Div. Nom. iv), "love moves those, whom it unites, to a mutual relationship: it turns the inferior to the superior to be perfected thereby; it moves the superior to watch over the inferior:" and in this respect beneficence is an effect of love. Hence it is not for us to benefit God, but to honor Him by obeying Him, while it is for Him, out of His love, to bestow good things on us.

Reply to Objection 2: Two things must be observed in the bestowal of gifts. One is the thing given outwardly, while the other is the inward passion that a man has in the delight of riches. It belongs to liberality to moderate this inward passion so as to avoid excessive desire and love for riches; for this makes a man more ready to part with his wealth. Hence, if a man makes some great gift, while yet desiring to keep it for himself, his is not a liberal giving. On the other hand, as regards the outward gift, the act of beneficence belongs in general to friendship or charity. Hence it does not detract from a man's friendship, if, through love, he give his friend something he would like to keep for himself; rather does this prove the perfection of his friendship.

Reply to Objection 3: Just as friendship or charity sees, in the benefit bestowed, the general aspect of good, so does justice see therein the aspect of debt, while pity considers the relieving of distress or defect.

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Whether we ought to do good to all?

Doctr. Christ. i, 28) that we "are unable to do good to everyone." Now virtue does not incline one to the impossible. Therefore it is not necessary to do good to all.

Objection 2: Further, it is written (Ecclus. 12:5) "Give to the good, and receive not a sinner." But many men are sinners. Therefore we need not do good to all.

Objection 3: Further, "Charity dealeth not perversely" ([1 Cor. 13:4](#)). Now to do good to some is to deal perversely: for instance if one were to do good to an enemy of the common weal, or if one were to do good to an excommunicated person, since, by doing so, he would be holding communion with him. Therefore, since beneficence is an act of charity, we ought not to do good to all.

On the contrary, The Apostle says ([Gal. 6:10](#)): "Whilst we have time, let us work good to all men."

I answer that, As stated above ([Article \[1\]](#), ad 1), beneficence is an effect of love in so far as love moves the superior to watch over the inferior. Now degrees among men are not unchangeable as among angels, because men are subject to many failings, so that he who is superior in one respect, is or may be inferior in another. Therefore, since the love of charity extends to all, beneficence also should extend to all, but according as time and place require: because all acts of virtue must be modified with a view to their due circumstances.

Reply to Objection 1: Absolutely speaking it is impossible to do good to every single one: yet it is true of each individual that one may be bound to do good to him in some particular case. Hence charity binds us, though not actually doing good to someone, to be prepared in mind to do good to anyone if we have time to spare. There is however a good that we can do to all, if not to each individual, at least to all in general, as when we pray for all, for unbelievers as well as for the faithful.

Reply to Objection 2: In a sinner there are two things, his guilt and his nature. Accordingly we are bound to succor the sinner as to the maintenance of his nature, but not so as to abet his sin, for this would be to do evil rather than good.

Reply to Objection 3: The excommunicated and the enemies of the common weal are deprived of all beneficence, in so far as this prevents them from doing evil deeds. Yet if their nature be in urgent need of succor lest it fail, we are bound to help them: for instance, if they be in danger of death through hunger or thirst, or suffer some like distress, unless this be according to the order of justice.

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Whether we ought to do good to those rather who are more closely united to us?

closely united to us. For it is written ([Lk. 14:12](#)): "When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, nor thy kinsmen." Now these are the most closely united to us. Therefore we are not bound to do good to those rather who are more closely united to us, but preferably to strangers and to those who are in want: hence the text goes on: "But, when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed," etc.

Objection 2: Further, to help another in the battle is an act of very great goodness. But a soldier on the battlefield is bound to help a fellow-soldier who is a stranger rather than a kinsman who is a foe. Therefore in doing acts of kindness we are not bound to give the preference to those who are most closely united to us.

Objection 3: Further, we should pay what is due before conferring gratuitous favors. But it is a man's duty to be good to those who have been good to him. Therefore we ought to do good to our benefactors rather than to those who are closely united to us.

Objection 4: Further, a man ought to love his parents more than his children, as stated above ([Question \[26\]](#), [Article \[9\]](#)). Yet a man ought to be more beneficent to his children, since "neither ought the children to lay up for the parents," according to 2 Cor. 12:14. Therefore we are not bound to be more beneficent to those who are more closely united to us.

On the contrary, Augustine says (De Doctr. Christ. i, 28): "Since one cannot do good to all, we ought to consider those chiefly who by reason of place, time or any other circumstance, by a kind of chance are more closely united to us."

I answer that, Grace and virtue imitate the order of nature, which is established by Divine wisdom. Now the order of nature is such that every natural agent pours forth its activity first and most of all on the things which are nearest to it: thus fire heats most what is next to it. In like manner God pours forth the gifts of His goodness first and most plentifully on the substances which are nearest to Him, as Dionysius declares (Coel. Hier. vii). But the bestowal of benefits is an act of charity towards others. Therefore we ought to be most beneficent towards those who are most closely connected with us.

Now one man's connection with another may be measured in reference to the various matters in which men are engaged together; (thus the intercourse of kinsmen is in natural matters, that of fellow-citizens is in civic matters, that of the faithful is in spiritual matters, and so forth): and various benefits should be conferred in various ways according to these various connections, because we ought in preference to bestow on each one such benefits as pertain to the matter in which, speaking simply, he is most closely connected with us. And yet this may vary according to the various requirements of time, place, or matter in hand: because in certain cases one ought, for instance, to succor a stranger, in extreme necessity, rather than one's own father, if he is not in such urgent need.

Reply to Objection 1: Our Lord did not absolutely forbid us to invite our friends and kinsmen to eat with us, but to invite them so that they may invite us in return, since that would be an act not of charity but of cupidity. The case may occur, however, that one ought rather to invite strangers, on account of their greater want. For it must be understood that, other things being equal, one ought to succor those rather who are most closely connected with us. And if of two, one be more closely connected, and the other in greater want, it is not possible to decide, by any general rule, which of them we ought to help rather than the other, since there are various degrees of want as well as of connection: and the matter requires the judgment of a prudent man.

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individual. Wherefore it is a virtuous action for a man to endanger even his own life, either for the spiritual or for the temporal common good of his country. Since therefore men engage together in warlike acts in order to safeguard the common weal, the soldier who with this in view succors his comrade, succors him not as a private individual, but with a view to the welfare of his country as a whole: wherefore it is not a matter for wonder if a stranger be preferred to one who is a blood relation.

Reply to Objection 3: A thing may be due in two ways. There is one which should be reckoned, not among the goods of the debtor, but rather as belonging to the person to whom it is due: for instance, a man may have another's goods, whether in money or in kind, either because he has stolen them, or because he has received them on loan or in deposit or in some other way. In this case a man ought to pay what he owes, rather than benefit his connections out of it, unless perchance the case be so urgent that it would be lawful for him to take another's property in order to relieve the one who is in need. Yet, again, this would not apply if the creditor were in equal distress: in which case, however, the claims on either side would have to be weighed with regard to such other conditions as a prudent man would take into consideration, because, on account of the different particular cases, as the Philosopher states (Ethic. ix, 2), it is impossible to lay down a general rule.

The other kind of due is one which is reckoned among the goods of the debtor and not of the creditor; for instance, a thing may be due, not because justice requires it, but on account of a certain moral equity, as in the case of benefits received gratis. Now no benefactor confers a benefit equal to that which a man receives from his parents: wherefore in paying back benefits received, we should give the first place to our parents before all others, unless, on the other side, there be such weightier motives, as need or some other circumstance, for instance the common good of the Church or state. In other cases we must take to account the connection and the benefit received; and here again no general rule can laid down.

Reply to Objection 4: Parents are like superiors, and so a parent's love tends to conferring benefits, while the children's love tends to honor their parents. Nevertheless in a case of extreme urgency it would be lawful to abandon one's children rather than one's parents, to abandon whom it is by no means lawful, on account of the obligation we lie under towards them for the benefits we have received from them, as the Philosopher states (Ethic. iii, 14).

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Whether beneficence is a special virtue?

Objection 1: It would seem that beneficence is a special virtue. For precepts are directed to virtue, since lawgivers purpose to make men virtuous (Ethic. i 9,13; ii, 1). Now beneficence and love are prescribed as distinct from one another, for it is written ([Mt. 4:44](#)): "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you." Therefore beneficence is a virtue distinct from charity.

certain vices whereby a hurt is inflicted on our neighbor, for instance, rapine, theft and so forth. Therefore beneficence is a special virtue.

Objection 3: Further, charity is not divided into several species: whereas there would seem to be several kinds of beneficence, according to the various kinds of benefits. Therefore beneficence is a distinct virtue from charity.

On the contrary, The internal and the external act do not require different virtues. Now beneficence and goodwill differ only as external and internal act, since beneficence is the execution of goodwill. Therefore as goodwill is not a distinct virtue from charity, so neither is beneficence.

I answer that, Virtues differ according to the different aspects of their objects. Now the formal aspect of the object of charity and of beneficence is the same, since both virtues regard the common aspect of good, as explained above ([Article \[1\]](#)). Wherefore beneficence is not a distinct virtue from charity, but denotes an act of charity.

Reply to Objection 1: Precepts are given, not about habits but about acts of virtue: wherefore distinction of precept denotes distinction, not of habits, but of acts.

Reply to Objection 2: Even as all benefits conferred on our neighbor, if we consider them under the common aspect of good, are to be traced to love, so all hurts considered under the common aspect of evil, are to be traced to hatred. But if we consider these same things under certain special aspects of good or of evil, they are to be traced to certain special virtues or vices, and in this way also there are various kinds of benefits.

Hence the Reply to the Third Objection is evident.