

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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OF MERCY (FOUR ARTICLES) [*The one Latin word "misericordia" signifies either pity or mercy. The distinction between these two is that pity may stand either for the act or for the virtue, whereas mercy stands only for the virtue.]

We must now go on to consider Mercy, under which head there are four points of inquiry:

[\(1\)](#) Whether evil is the cause of mercy on the part of the person pitied?

[\(2\)](#) To whom does it belong to pity?

[\(3\)](#) Whether mercy is a virtue?

[\(4\)](#) Whether it is the greatest of virtues?

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Whether evil is properly the motive of mercy?

Objection 1: It would seem that, properly speaking, evil is not the motive of mercy. For, as shown above ([Question \[19\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#); [FS, Question \[79\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#), ad 4; [FP, Question \[48\]](#), [Article \[6\]](#)), fault is an evil rather than punishment. Now fault provokes indignation rather than mercy. Therefore evil does not excite mercy.

Objection 2: Further, cruelty and harshness seem to excel other evils. Now the Philosopher says (Rhet. ii, 8) that "harshness does not call for pity but drives it away." Therefore evil, as such, is not the motive of mercy.

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS030.html](#) as the Philosopher states (Rhet. ii, 8). Therefore evil, properly speaking, is not an incentive to mercy.

On the contrary, Damascene says (De Fide Orth. ii, 2) that mercy is a kind of sorrow. Now evil is the motive of sorrow. Therefore it is the motive of mercy.

I answer that, As Augustine says (De Civ. Dei ix, 5), mercy is heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succor him if we can. For mercy takes its name "misericordia" from denoting a man's compassionate heart [miserum cor] for another's unhappiness. Now unhappiness is opposed to happiness: and it is essential to beatitude or happiness that one should obtain what one wishes; for, according to Augustine (De Trin. xiii, 5), "happy is he who has whatever he desires, and desires nothing amiss." Hence, on the other hand, it belongs to unhappiness that a man should suffer what he wishes not.

Now a man wishes a thing in three ways: first, by his natural appetite; thus all men naturally wish to be and to live: secondly, a man wishes a thing from deliberate choice: thirdly, a man wishes a thing, not in itself, but in its cause, thus, if a man wishes to eat what is bad for him, we say that, in a way, he wishes to be ill.

Accordingly the motive of "mercy," being something pertaining to "misery," is, in the first way, anything contrary to the will's natural appetite, namely corruptive or distressing evils, the contrary of which man desires naturally, wherefore the Philosopher says (Rhet. ii, 8) that "pity is sorrow for a visible evil, whether corruptive or distressing." Secondly, such like evils are yet more provocative of pity if they are contrary to deliberate choice, wherefore the Philosopher says (Rhet. ii, 8) that evil excites our pity "when it is the result of an accident, as when something turns out ill, whereas we hoped well of it." Thirdly, they cause yet greater pity, if they are entirely contrary to the will, as when evil befalls a man who has always striven to do well: wherefore the Philosopher says (Rhet. ii, 8) that "we pity most the distress of one who suffers undeservedly."

Reply to Objection 1: It is essential to fault that it be voluntary; and in this respect it deserves punishment rather than mercy. Since, however, fault may be, in a way, a punishment, through having something connected with it that is against the sinner's will, it may, in this respect, call for mercy. It is in this sense that we pity and commiserate sinners. Thus Gregory says in a homily (Hom. in Evang. xxxiv) that "true godliness is not disdainful but compassionate," and again it is written ([Mt. 9:36](#)) that Jesus "seeing the multitudes, had compassion on them: because they were distressed, and lying like sheep that have no shepherd."

Reply to Objection 2: Since pity is sympathy for another's distress, it is directed, properly speaking, towards another, and not to oneself, except figuratively, like justice, according as a man is considered to have various parts (Ethic. v, 11). Thus it is written (Ecclus. 30:24): "Have pity on thy own soul, pleasing God" [*Cf. Question [106], Article [3], ad 1].

Accordingly just as, properly speaking, a man does not pity himself, but suffers in himself, as when we suffer cruel treatment in ourselves, so too, in the case of those who are so closely united to us, as to be part of ourselves, such as our children or our parents, we do not pity their distress, but suffer as for our own sores; in which sense the Philosopher says that "harshness drives pity away."

Reply to Objection 3: Just as pleasure results from hope and memory of good things, so does sorrow arise from the prospect or the recollection of evil things; though not so keenly as when

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Whether the reason for taking pity is a defect in the person who pities?

Objection 1: It would seem that the reason for taking pity is not a defect in the person who takes pity. For it is proper to God to be merciful, wherefore it is written ([Ps. 144:9](#)): "His tender mercies are over all His works." But there is no defect in God. Therefore a defect cannot be the reason for taking pity.

Objection 2: Further, if a defect is the reason for taking pity, those in whom there is most defect, must needs take most pity. But this is false: for the Philosopher says (*Rhet. ii, 8*) that "those who are in a desperate state are pitiless." Therefore it seems that the reason for taking pity is not a defect in the person who pities.

Objection 3: Further, to be treated with contempt is to be defective. But the Philosopher says (*Rhet. ii, 8*) that "those who are disposed to contumely are pitiless." Therefore the reason for taking pity, is not a defect in the person who pities.

On the contrary, Pity is a kind of sorrow. But a defect is the reason of sorrow, wherefore those who are in bad health give way to sorrow more easily, as we shall say further on ([Question \[35\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#), ad 2). Therefore the reason why one takes pity is a defect in oneself.

I answer that, Since pity is grief for another's distress, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), from the very fact that a person takes pity on anyone, it follows that another's distress grieves him. And since sorrow or grief is about one's own ills, one grieves or sorrows for another's distress, in so far as one looks upon another's distress as one's own.

Now this happens in two ways: first, through union of the affections, which is the effect of love. For, since he who loves another looks upon his friend as another self, he counts his friend's hurt as his own, so that he grieves for his friend's hurt as though he were hurt himself. Hence the Philosopher (*Ethic. ix, 4*) reckons "grieving with one's friend" as being one of the signs of friendship, and the Apostle says ([Rm. 12:15](#)): "Rejoice with them that rejoice, weep with them that weep."

Secondly, it happens through real union, for instance when another's evil comes near to us, so as to pass to us from him. Hence the Philosopher says (*Rhet. ii, 8*) that men pity such as are akin to them, and the like, because it makes them realize that the same may happen to themselves. This also explains why the old and the wise who consider that they may fall upon evil times, as also feeble and timorous persons, are more inclined to pity: whereas those who deem themselves happy, and so far powerful as to think themselves in no danger of suffering any hurt, are not so inclined to pity.

another's defect as one's own, through being united to him by love, or on account of the possibility of suffering in the same way.

Reply to Objection 1: God takes pity on us through love alone, in as much as He loves us as belonging to Him.

Reply to Objection 2: Those who are already in infinite distress, do not fear to suffer more, wherefore they are without pity. In like manner this applies to those also who are in great fear, for they are so intent on their own passion, that they pay no attention to the suffering of others.

Reply to Objection 3: Those who are disposed to contumely, whether through having been contemned, or because they wish to condemn others, are incited to anger and daring, which are manly passions and arouse the human spirit to attempt difficult things. Hence they make a man think that he is going to suffer something in the future, so that while they are disposed in that way they are pitiless, according to Prov. 27:4: "Anger hath no mercy, nor fury when it breaketh forth." For the same reason the proud are without pity, because they despise others, and think them wicked, so that they