

## St. Thomas Aquinas

# The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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### OF MEANNESS\* (TWO ARTICLES) [\*"Parvificentia," or doing mean things, just as "magnificentia" is doing great things.]

We must now consider the vices opposed to magnificence: under which head there are two points of inquiry:

(1) Whether meanness is a vice?

(2) Of the vice opposed to it.

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### Whether meanness is a vice?

**Objection 1:** It seems that meanness is not a vice. For just as vice moderates great things, so does it moderate little things: wherefore both the liberal and the magnificent do little things. But magnificence is a virtue. Therefore likewise meanness is a virtue rather than a vice.

**Objection 2:** Further, the Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 2) that "careful reckoning is mean." But careful reckoning is apparently praiseworthy, since man's good is to be in accordance with reason, as Dionysius states (Div. Nom. iv, 4). Therefore meanness is not a vice.

**Objection 3:** Further, the Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 2) that "a mean man is loth to spend money." But this belongs to covetousness or illiberality. Therefore meanness is not a distinct vice from the others.

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**I answer that,** As stated above ([FS, Question \[1\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#); [FS, Question \[18\]](#), [Article \[6\]](#)), moral acts take their species from their end, wherefore in many cases they are denominated from that end. Accordingly a man is said to be mean [parvificus] because he intends to do something little [parvum]. Now according to the Philosopher (De Praedic. Cap. Ad aliquid.) great and little are relative terms: and when we say that a mean man intends to do something little, this must be understood in relation to the kind of work he does. This may be little or great in two ways: in one way as regards the work itself to be done, in another as regards the expense. Accordingly the magnificent man intends principally the greatness of his work, and secondarily he intends the greatness of the expense, which he does not shirk, so that he may produce a great work. Wherefore the Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 4) that "the magnificent man with equal expenditure will produce a more magnificent result." On the other hand, the mean man intends principally to spend little, wherefore the Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 2) that "he seeks how he may spend least." As a result of this he intends to produce a little work, that is, he does not shrink from producing a little work, so long as he spends little. Wherefore the Philosopher says that "the mean man after going to great expense forfeits the good" of the magnificent work, "for the trifle" that he is unwilling to spend. Therefore it is evident that the mean man fails to observe the proportion that reason demands between expenditure and work. Now the essence of vice is that it consists in failing to do what is in accordance with reason. Hence it is manifest that meanness is a vice.

**Reply to Objection 1:** Virtue moderates little things, according to the rule of reason: from which rule the mean man declines, as stated in the Article. For he is called mean, not for moderating little things, but for declining from the rule of reason in moderating great or little things: hence meanness is a vice.

**Reply to Objection 2:** As the Philosopher says (Rhet. ii, 5), "fear makes us take counsel": wherefore a mean man is careful in his reckonings, because he has an inordinate fear of spending his goods, even in things of the least account. Hence this is not praiseworthy, but sinful and reprehensible, because then a man does not regulate his affections according to reason, but, on the contrary, makes use of his reason in pursuance of his inordinate affections.

**Reply to Objection 3:** Just as the magnificent man has this in common with the liberal man, that he spends his money readily and with pleasure, so too the mean man in common with the illiberal or covetous man is loth and slow to spend. Yet they differ in this, that illiberality regards ordinary expenditure, while meanness regards great expenditure, which is a more difficult accomplishment: wherefore meanness is less sinful than illiberality. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. iv, 2) that "although meanness and its contrary vice are sinful, they do not bring shame on a man, since neither do they harm one's neighbor, nor are they very disgraceful."

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**Objection 1:** It seems that there is no vice opposed to meanness. For great is opposed to little. Now, magnificence is not a vice, but a virtue. Therefore no vice is opposed to meanness.

**Objection 2:** Further, since meanness is a vice by deficiency, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), it seems that if any vice is opposed to meanness, it would merely consist in excessive spending. But those who spend much, where they ought to spend little, spend little where they ought to spend much, according to Ethic. iv, 2, and thus they have something of meanness. Therefore there is not a vice opposed to meanness.

**Objection 3:** Further, moral acts take their species from their end, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)). Now those who spend excessively, do so in order to make a show of their wealth, as stated in Ethic. iv, 2. But this belongs to vainglory, which is opposed to magnanimity, as stated above ([Question \[131\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)). Therefore no vice is opposed to meanness.

**On the contrary,** stands the authority of the Philosopher who (Ethic. ii, 8; iv, 2) places magnificence as a mean between two opposite vices.

**I answer that,** Great is opposed to little. Also little and great are relative terms, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)). Now just as expenditure may be little in comparison with the work, so may it be great in comparison with the work in that it exceeds the proportion which reason requires to exist between expenditure and work. Hence it is manifest that the vice of meanness, whereby a man intends to spend less than his work is worth, and thus fails to observe due proportion between his expenditure and his work, has a vice opposed to it, whereby a man exceeds this same proportion, by spending more than is proportionate to his work. This vice is called in Greek {banausia}, so called from the Greek {baunos}, because, like the fire in the furnace, it consumes everything. It is also called {apyrokalia}, i.e. lacking good fire, since like fire it consumes all, but not for a good purpose. Hence in Latin it may be called "consumptio" [waste].

**Reply to Objection 1:** Magnificence is so called from the great work done, but not from the expenditure being in excess of the work: for this belongs to the vice which is opposed to meanness.

**Reply to Objection 2:** To the one same vice there is opposed the virtue which observes the mean, and a contrary vice. Accordingly, then, the vice of waste is opposed to meanness in that it exceeds in expenditure the value of the work, by spending much where it behooved to spend little. But it is opposed to magnificence on the part of the great work, which the magnificent man intends principally, in so far as when it behooves to spend much, it spends little or nothing.

**Reply to Objection 3:** Wastefulness is opposed to meanness by the very species of its act, since it exceeds the rule of reason, whereas meanness falls short of it. Yet nothing hinders this from being directed to the end of another vice, such as vainglory or any other.