

+JMJ

## Thankfulness or Gratitude

By Sr. Louis Marie Zogg, OP

Note: I will comment in order on articles 1-4, and then 6. 5 is interspersed as its main points I found helpful in clarifying the other articles (Article 5 whether in giving thanks we should look at the benefactor's disposition or at the deed? Is helpful when trying to figure out in what way moral debt of gratitude ought to be repaid)

In her article "Gratitude and Obligation," Claudia Card takes issue with the debtor paradigm of gratitude which she finds to be paradoxical: "if that for which gratitude is due was neither for sale nor a mere loan but was in some sense *gratis*, what sense does it make to feel indebted for it? How can one repay such a debt without transforming the transaction into one in which gratitude has no place? What kind of *debt* is this?"<sup>1</sup> Here I would like to present Aquinas' notion of moral debt, particularly as it is characterized through gratitude, and explore how his treatment of this virtue gives us at least a start in answering these questions.

Overarching questions: What is moral debt, in what way is it repaid (or can it be repaid), and to whom is it due? Aquinas indicates that the potential parts of justice in some way fall short of justice itself; several of these virtues "fall short" in that they regard a moral debt (*debitum morale*) which is closely linked with the rectitude of virtue (*honestate virtutis*).<sup>2</sup> The question which I would like begin to address is: in what way does a moral debt, here regarding the debt of gratitude, oblige us towards our benefactors? Stephen Theron suggests, in his article "Justice: Legal and Moral Debt in Aquinas," that giving what is morally due is binding not legally but as regards decency of character which he links with Thomas' use of the word *honestas* which recurs

---

<sup>1</sup> Claudia Card, "Gratitude and Obligation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (1988): 115

<sup>2</sup> II.II q. 80 a. 1

several times within Question 80 on potential parts and throughout specific treatments of various potential virtues of justice.<sup>3</sup> By restoring, in some sense, equality in our moral debts, we build up our decency or rectitude of character.

First, let's examine how this moral debt is distinguished from legal debt. I will review with you how Aquinas has situated the virtue of gratitude within his discussion of the potential parts of justice in question 80. According to Aquinas, a potential virtue of any principal virtue has two characteristics, first, that the potential virtue has something in common with the principal, and second, that it defects from the principal virtue's perfection.<sup>4</sup> The potential parts of justice are similar to justice in being directed toward the other and are, therefore, fittingly annexed to justice.<sup>5</sup> However, they fall short of the perfection of justice in the second characteristic that is, in rendering to another his due according to equality of proportion. The potential parts fail in this sense in two distinct ways: first, in equality and second in the sense of debt.

Virtues that fall short in equality may make an advance in rendering another his due, but are unable to ultimately satisfy the debt. The primary examples of these we have already discussed: religion, piety and observance. In these virtues, there is no sense of satisfaction of debt or rendering equal due. So these virtues are potential since they fall short of true justice in rendering equal due. Aquinas maintains that these virtues still regard legal debt since it is commanded at least by the divine law, and in certain states perhaps even the human law.

Gratitude, however, regards the second way in which the potential virtues fall short of justice, that is, by the sense of debt since it regards moral debt rather than legal. Aquinas

---

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Theron, "Justice: Legal and Moral Debt in Aquinas," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (2004): 559-71.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.II.80.1

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, II.II.80.1

comments on the two senses of debt in Question 80, article 1. The legal debt, which binds one according to legal obligation that is the central concern of the virtue of justice is distinguished from the moral debt which binds one in respect of the rectitude of virtue (*debet ex honestate virtutis*).<sup>6</sup> Moral debt is the obligation of such virtues as gratitude, truth, affability, and liberality. Further, moral debt has two degrees of necessity which distinguishes it from legal debt which has no degrees. All legal debts must be paid off in order to be a just man. Such is not the case with moral debt. Moral debt's first degree of necessity is that the *honestas* (rectitude or decency of a man) cannot be ensured without the virtues of truth and gratitude; and the second degree of necessity is such that *honestas* is increased, but may be preserved without these virtues such as affability and liberality. So now we turn our attention to gratitude, a potential part of justice which is concerned with moral debt of the primary degree, that is, that which is necessary for *honestas*, rectitude or decency of character.

#### II.II.106.1-Whether thankfulness is a special virtue, distinct from other virtues?

In the first article, Aquinas distinguishes gratitude from religion, piety, and observance. In the main body of his argument, Aquinas references question 60 in the prima secundae which state that moral virtues that are about operations, though similar in respect of the notion of justice, that is, something due another, differ in respect of the *convenientiam rei*, that is, the “becomingness of the thing.” From this “becomingness,” the character of due is derived. Therefore, each moral virtue of operations rectifies a unique, particular kind of due. The differences in debt are of two aspects: “to whom” and “for what.” “To whom” may be a superior, an inferior, an equal and the “for what” may arise from the terms of the relation such as

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, II.II.80.1

a contract, promise or favor conferred. As such, each moral virtue relating to operations pertains to a distinct type of debt; for example, in “religion” we pay our debt to God for all things, “piety” to our parents or country for our life and upbringing, and “gratitude” we repay our benefactors, who are in some sense our equals, for a particular favor conferred.

In this article, Aquinas also distinguishes between legal debt of commutative justice from moral debt. In his reply to objection 2, Aquinas makes two points. First, it seems that while legal debt is to be repaid proportionately, the debt of gratitude which is a moral debt is not paid proportionately in the same mathematical way encountered in the principal parts of justice. Second, this *debitum honestatis* is to be repaid spontaneously in order to avoid constraint. From this arises two questions, can this moral debt be satisfied, and if so, how is it satisfied? Second, what is meant by “spontaneity”? We will return to these questions.

II.II.106.2-Whether the innocent is more bound to give thanks to God than the penitent?

In article 2, Aquinas gives some direction as to how we are to “measure” the moral debt of gratitude. He says that our thanks ought to “look back upon” the favor of the giver and correspond with this. In this sense, there is a certain proportionality between gift and the thanks: the greater the gift, the greater the thanks owed. Now in determining the greatness of the gift, there are two things to consider: the quantity and the quality of the “gratis” with which it is bestowed. In the first respect, the innocent man is more indebted to God since his righteousness is the greater in quantity, and, therefore, he owes greater thanks. However, in quality of “gratis,” the penitent owes greater thanks since it is out of a greater gratuitousness that God has forgiven Him. This quality of gratuitousness in the gift of forgiveness *outweighs* the gift of righteousness which is absolutely speaking greater in quantity. It would seem then, that not only is quality of the gratuitousness important to be evaluated when “calculating” gratitude owed, but it actually

*trumps* consideration of the quantity of the favor. The innocent man does indeed receive a greater gift than the penitent sinner, however, the gratuitousness of the gift is much greater in the sinner's case and so he owes a greater debt of gratitude. Therefore, in the determination of the debt of gratitude, one must consider carefully the giver himself, that is, his disposition (*affectus*). Aquinas also more explicitly states this in the main body of Article 5 where in distinguishing gratitude from friendship and justice in how it repays favors he says: "Since gratitude regards the favor inasmuch as it is bestowed gratis, and this regards the disposition of the giver, it follows again that repayment of a favor depends more on the disposition of the giver than on the effect."

Though Aquinas begins to answer here how the debt is to be determined, our question remains since strict calculations of gratuitousness in a disposition seem beyond the scope of human capacity in most ordinary interactions. It seems that only God can look into the heart of the giver and know the extent of the gratuitousness. Aquinas responds to this objection in Article 5 reply to objection 3 that while it is true that God alone sees man's disposition in itself, "in so far as it is shown by certain signs, man also can know it." These signs are manifested in the way he does the action (ex. Joyfully and readily). For example, I think that I know when someone begrudgingly gives me the last cookie, and when she is happy to give it to me. Whether or not we can indeed "know" the gratis of a gift or the disposition of the giver, Article 3 may relieve a beneficiary somewhat of this admittedly vague calculation by making it less necessary.

II.II.106.3-Whether a man is bound to give thanks to every benefactor?

Aquinas, in the main body of this article, says that the natural order requires the repayment of a favor to a benefactor as every effect turns naturally to its cause. Thus, by his favor, the benefactor is in some sense the cause or principle of the beneficiary's current state so

that naturally he turns to repay the favor, *according to the mode of each*. This phrase (“according to the mode of each”) removes from the picture the need for a calculation of real arithmetic mean as we saw in commutative justice and invites the “spontaneity” which was called for in article 1. “The mode of each” gives repayment of gratitude an individual character that would make legal regulation of gratitude a laughable suggestion that would obviously lead to the “constraint” Aquinas mentioned in article 1.

Also in this article, Aquinas indicates that gratitude’s essential form is honor and reverence for the benefactor, but accidentally entails assistance and support when necessary. Since such is the case, even a poor man is able to discharge this moral debt. In his reply to objection 5, Aquinas states that since a favor depends more “in affectu” (trans. by Benzinger Brothers as “heart”) than “in effectu” (trans. as “deed”) so also gratitude is returned from the heart. This means that no matter how rich the benefactor and how poor the beneficiary, the debt of gratitude can always be repaid according to “the mode of each,” and one does not have to wait until his benefactor becomes needy or in distress to repay him. Further in his reply to objection 4, Aquinas maintains that the manner, intention, and rank of the benefactor do not affect the moral debt owed by the beneficiary so that even a slave deserves gratitude if he has performed an act of kindness gratuitously.

Card proposes that one problem with a common understanding the debts of gratitude as moral-bookkeeping is that repayment of this particular debt must be made from gratitude and not from duty since “doing it from duty seems to betray absence of gratitude.”<sup>7</sup> I think Aquinas would agree that duty-based ethics would conflict with a robust understanding of gratitude which ultimately “depends chiefly on the heart” (*magis in affectu consistit*) (reply to obj. 5).<sup>8</sup> And yet,

---

<sup>7</sup> Card, 117.

<sup>8</sup> II.II.106.a3.RO5

what if I find the deed was not done for me, but for some other reward or ulterior motive? Card suggests that “gratitude is a response to another’s benevolence, more specifically, to the valuing of oneself presupposed in another’s benevolence: gratitude acknowledges and reciprocates that valuing.”<sup>9</sup> This also seems to resonate with Aquinas’ formulation which regards the disposition of the giver toward the recipient primarily over and above the gift itself which he discusses in Article 5. In his reply to objection 1 of Article 5, Aquinas states that “Every moral act depends on the will. Hence a kindly action, in so far as it is praiseworthy and is deserving of gratitude, consists materially in the thing done, but formally and chiefly in the will.” Therefore, gratitude’s repayment regards favors that are gratuitous, and thus, regards as primary the disposition of the giver to the secondary effect. Therefore, as Aquinas writes in reply to obj 2 of article 3, while a man ought not withhold thanks to a grumpy giver, “Yet he owes less thanks than if the favor had been conferred duly.” (Note: I would like to ask, what is the difference in Aquinas’ use of the word will here (voluntas) and affectus or disposition which he had been referring to? In either case, it is some internal character from which the person acts with gratitude)

#### II.II.106.4-Whether a man is bound to repay a favor at once?

In article 4, the spontaneity of article 1 is further split into two parts. Since repayment mirrors the favor and there are two parts to the favor: the affection of the heart and the gift itself (this was expressed in article 2), so too, the repayment responds in similar fashion. The repayment of affection of the heart is appropriately made at once, however, to repay by reciprocal gift ought to be done at a convenient time for the benefactor. If repayment be made too soon, it would seem to be constrained. This uncouth insistence on “making good the debt of gratitude” quickly without regard for the comfort of the benefactor seems to indicate less virtue

---

<sup>9</sup> Card, 117.

rather than more, that is, such a man is an “unwilling debtor.” A truly grateful man would not be irritated by being so indebted. Here Aquinas emphasizes, again, the affection over the reciprocal gift since this aspect not only can, but *ought* be returned immediately. Here more questions arise. What does this return of affection of the heart look like? Is affection of the heart a general good-will or a disposition that prepares for repayment or a feeling of love toward the benefactor? In what sense can this be conjured up by a person if it is not felt spontaneously?

In his reply to objection 1, another helpful distinction between legal and moral debt is made. A legal debt must be paid within a determined timeframe as we have said. The moral debt, however, is demanded of the rectitude of the debtor (*ex honestate debentis*) who is sensitive to the appropriateness of timing. Such a description not only conforms to the human experience of gratitude, but also illumines its beauty. I would like to consider what is perhaps meant by the rectitude of virtue that is so lovely when this debt is gracefully discharged. Regarding other human beings, gratitude is not due legally, but morally, and yet, the temptation to claim that as such it is merely optional, is not at all Aquinas’ position since it is a demand of the decency of character. Theron, maintains that in a certain sense we are legally obliged to discharge even moral debt, but that the legal obligation is not to human law, but is to God Who is the authority of moral duty. We are enjoined, therefore, to discharge our moral debts, not to avoid punishment of law, but to attain divine perfection: “It is in this way that the New Testament command of love, say, or the command “Be ye perfect” might be understood . . . one needs to see, on this view, that the term “command,” . . . is better used analogically. God does not really legislate. Otherwise one goes on to argue, with Kant or Kierkegaard, that Christian love, since it is commanded, can have nothing to do with the affections . . . Aquinas, in contrast, saw the

Christian life of grace as a process of refinement of the affections.”<sup>10</sup> Since it is to the acts of virtue or moral character that we are commanded, “rather than to some materially specified task or omission, then the field is left open for the acting person to identify these acts as and when their possibility arises.”<sup>11</sup> A man’s gratitude is, on this account, beautiful only if it he does not understand himself as simply obliged to and by the other, but obliged by his own decency or growth in perfection before God. Thus, Aquinas in article 4, quoting Seneca, observes that someone unwilling to be a debtor or “obliged,” who therefore dispenses his debt quickly, is graceless and ungrateful.

#### II.II.106.6-Whether the repayment of gratitude should surpass the favor received?

In Article 6, the virtue of gratitude departs from the mathematical equality of justice, but not from equality altogether. Since the benefactor gives in gratis, the beneficiary ought to return thanks in gratis. In order to, in fact, return the favor as such he must “exceed the quantity of the favor received” or he would not return gratis for gratis, but only the amount he had received. In this sense, equality is maintained since the thanks mirrors the disposition with which the gift was given. In the repayment of the debt, as in the giving of the gift, the deed must be considered alongside the disposition of the agent of gratitude (reply to objection 1). Therefore, the will of the repayer (as in the case of a son who cannot repay his father) can overcome the debt and even pay back something greater by the greatness of his desire or will to pay it back. Hence the debt of justice considers an equality of valuable goods and the debt of gratitude regards an equality of wills (Reply to Obj. 3).

Though it may seem that by setting up this equality of wills as the measure of repayment in gratitude that debts of gratitude can indeed be “repaid,” reply to objection 2 seems to make

---

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Theron, “Justice: Legal and Moral Debt in Aquinas,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 562.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 564.

this repayment ambivalent (both satisfied in some way and yet unsatisfied). Aquinas says here this “obligation of gratitude has no limit” since it flows from charity. Kant also considered the debt of gratitude to be impossible to repay, but for him this was insufferable: “If I accept favours, I contract debts which I can never repay, for I can never get on equal terms with him who has conferred the favours upon me . . . I shall always owe him a debt of gratitude, and who will accept such a debt? For to be indebted is to be subject to an unending constraint.”<sup>12</sup> How does Aquinas avoid such terrible suffocation? For him the moral debt is in freely bestowed good will on both sides such that both the benefactor and the beneficiary are moved by the affection of the heart, without constraint and with spontaneity, out of decency of character. In other words, this debt is not a duty in the strict sense, but the natural human response to the graciousness of the benefactor. For Kant, both benefactor and beneficiary act mechanically from duty.

So if moral debt is not based on strict duty, but is somehow necessary for moral decency, if it is not necessarily discharged, yet in some sense, it is repaid, if it depends more on the affection of the heart than on any particular act, how are we to understand such a debt of gratitude? Although it appears that Card did not know of Aquinas’ treatment of gratitude, she, like Aquinas, also suggests a model beyond the typical debtor’s paradigm which encompasses the nuanced expression of gratitude that I think is helpful. She suggests a trustee paradigm where the benefactor’s gift is a deposit which obligates the other less as a debtor and more as trustee or guardian of the benefactor’s gift, that is, as an equal participating in a relationship. As such, the obligation of safe-keeping is not necessarily ever discharged, and yet the obligation is one of maintaining a relationship so as to give the benefactor no cause to regret his trust. In this sense, “the responsibilities of trusteeship and guardianship are not closely correlated with others’

---

<sup>12</sup> *Lectures on Ethics*, quoted by Claudia Card, 118

rights.”<sup>13</sup> This is because gratitude is not a legal duty such that if the duty is not carried out, others may justifiably feel their rights have been wronged. That is not to say that it does not reflect poorly on the obligated person if they fail in gratitude without adequate explanation or compensation, but simply that “being obligated [to be grateful] does not imply that others are free to pull strings.” Paradoxically, this freedom from constraint does not tend to decrease the sense of obligation in decent men and women, but actually heightens it since now the beneficiary’s responsibility is increased, and he acts to, not only make a return to his benefactor, but further his personal decency (*honestas*). We have already considered a similar suggestion from Theron above, however, recall that he made a weightier connection to man’s personal growth in holiness or perfection before God that is furthered by satisfying the moral debt of gratitude. Considering our mutual dependence upon one another in any society, our constant need for the good-will favors of others, materially, spiritually, and emotionally, the necessity of gratitude is a reality written into the human condition, into the nature of things. A morally decent man recognizes his need for others’ support, and does not disdain nor ignore the favors of others, but with gratitude, seeks to fulfill his moral obligation to the other.

A final consideration, in paying a legal debt, a man certainly discharges his obligation and is no longer bound to his creditor. However, to say that a man somehow completely “pays” a moral debt of gratitude, must be only by analogy and this is because it flows from charity as Aquinas says in Art. 6, reply to obj. 2, since *the bond between benefactor and beneficiary is usually strengthened not dispensed of in the truly sincere and mutual acts of beneficence and gratitude*. A loving gesture is met by a loving response such that this relationship between

---

<sup>13</sup> Card, 121.

benefactor and beneficiary may serve as the basis for further relationship perhaps turning into or strengthening a more perfect friendship.