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COMPARING ONESELF TO OTHERS AND ESTIMATING ONESELF IN THOMAS AQUINAS' MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Ritva Palmén[1]

Abstract: This paper, analyses the way in which Thomas Aquinas (1274) understood and explained our inclination to compare ourselves to other people. In addition to more general questions about comparison in Aquinas, it explores the various mechanisms that we use for estimating ourselves and how these estimations can be considered either successful or flawed. My claim is that combining elements from both Christian theology as well Aristotelian ethics, Aquinas' moral philosophy includes an important but thus far neglected implicit discussion of social comparison; in addition, it also comprises the idea of the need to estimate one's own capacities and abilities accurately.

Introduction

Measuring our own abilities and resources against those of other people is arguably one of the essential elements of social life. This measuring requires not only social assessment and comparison of other people's aptitudes to one's own but, crucially, appropriate evaluation of ourselves as well. Modern social psychologists, like Leon Festinger, have claimed in their foundational social comparison theories that individuals evaluate their own abilities by comparing themselves to others and then gradually end up defining themselves through this process.[2] Festinger holds that a dialogical relationship with significant others is a necessary requirement for one's positive relation to self and self-esteem. The motivational drive in this process is a prerequisite for achieving accurate self-evaluation. We want to know how good or bad we

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[2] For modern social comparison theories, see esp. Leon Festinger, 'A Theory of Social Comparison Processes', *Human Relations*, 7 (2) (1954), pp. 117–40; J. Suls, R. Martin and L. Wheeler, 'Social Comparison: Why, With Whom, and With What Effect?', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 11 (5) 2002, pp. 159–63; and *Handbook of Social Comparison: Theory and Research*, ed. Jerry Suls and Ladd Wheeler (New York, 2000). The most important finding in social comparison theories relevant for this article is the hypothesis developed by Leon Festinger, which holds that if objective, nonsocial means of comparison are not available, people evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparison to other people. Festinger also noted that the tendency to compare oneself to another person decreases if the difference between their opinions and abilities becomes more divergent. Festinger mentions motives relevant to social comparison, including self-enhancement, maintenance of a positive self-evaluation, components of attribution and validation, and the avoidance of closure among them. Depending on which strategy will further people's self-enhancement goals, they choose to make upward (comparing themselves to someone better off) or downward (comparing themselves to someone worse off) comparisons.

are at something in comparison with the other members of our relevant reference group. Accordingly, comparison seems to be an implicit requirement for the correct understanding of our status in society. Moreover, it helps us to accurately appraise our own resources in various circumstances.[3] As Susan Fiske puts this, 'we [humans] are comparison machines'.[4]

Intellectual historians have also recognized the theme of social comparison in historical sources, studying early modern thinkers like Rousseau, Malebranche and Hume, noting the essential role of self-comparison in their respective accounts of human nature. Gerald Postema has remarked that comparison and sympathy are fundamental for Hume's moral psychology, explaining the sociality and asociality of human beings and justifying the need and structure for justice in social life.[5] Heikki Haara has recently examined Samuel Pufendorf's ideas of social comparison in his discussion about *existimatio* (esteem), a term that conceptualizes a comparative moral value of individuals in relation to other human beings. Pufendorf thinks that value can be put upon things which can then be estimated and compares with each other in order to evaluate whether they are equal or unequal. This applies also to moral consideration of human beings; *existimatio* is a moral quantity of persons that serves as a currency for comparing and making distinctions among individuals who are otherwise equal.[6] Rousseau, in turn, is known for his negative evaluation of our tendency to compare ourselves to others (e.g. 'large, small, strong, weak, fast, slow, fearful, bold'), claiming that such comparisons lead to the wrong kind of self-love and pride. For Rousseau, societal life is a kind of theatre, where watching and being watched constitute false identities that betray the authentic nature of human beings. The only way out of the vicious social comparison is to develop virtues that compensate the vices, in particular the love of other human beings, which in turn evoke natural pity and a strong identification of self with others.[7] However, in spite of recent

[3] Festinger, 'A Theory of Social Comparison Processes', p. 118.

[4] Susan Fiske, *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us* (New York, 2011), p. 13. See also Susan Fiske, 'Envy up, Scorn Down: How Comparison Divides Us', *American Psychologist*, 65 (2010), pp. 698–706.

[5] See Hume's position in *Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects (1738)*, 3.3.2. For a detailed study of the subject, see Gerald J. Postema, 'Cemented with Diseased Qualities: Sympathy and Comparison in Hume's Moral Psychology', *Hume Studies*, 31 (2) (2005), pp. 249–98. See also Amy M. Schmitter, 'Family Trees: Sympathy, Comparison, and the Proliferation of the Passions in Hume and his Predecessors', in *Emotion and Cognitive Life in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Martin Pickavé and Lisa Shapiro (Oxford, 2012), pp. 256–77.

[6] For references and discussion of Pufendorf, see Heikki Haara, *Pufendorf's Theory of Sociability: Passions, Habits and Social Order* (Dordrecht, 2018), pp. 101–8.

[7] Rousseau, J.-J, 'The Second Discourse: Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind', in *The Social Contract: And, the First and Second Dis-*

research on the central role of comparison in early modern intellectual history, the idea of comparing oneself to others as developed by medieval thinkers has up to now remained surprisingly uncharted. While the emotional outcomes of comparisons of oneself to others, like the sin of pride or the virtue of humility, have been much discussed in medieval intellectual history, medieval conceptions of measuring oneself against others and the subsequent self-evaluation as well as the practical relation to self still requires more attention.

In this paper, I will analyse the way in which Thomas Aquinas (1274) understood and explained our inclination to compare ourselves to other people. By exploiting materials and ideas derived from Aristotle's ethical thinking, later Latin sources (Cicero, Macrobius), and Church Fathers (Augustine) Aquinas created a remarkable synthesis of natural virtue ethics and Christian moral theological thinking. However, while his moral philosophy has been under intensive study, the researchers have thus far failed to identify Aquinas' understanding of social comparison, the role of comparison in moral philosophical reasoning, and the subsequent influence of Aquinas in later philosophical and theological discussions related with social comparison. My claim is that combining elements from both Christian theology as well as Aristotelian ethics, Aquinas' moral philosophy includes an important but thus far neglected implicit discussion of social comparison; in addition, it also comprises the idea of the need to estimate one's own capacities and abilities accurately.[8]

While Aquinas does not offer an explicit and profuse examination of social comparison in his writings, his overall thinking about comparison is surprisingly coherent and conscientious throughout his works. I will base my argument on the examination of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, his treatise on Evil, *De malo*, the commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Ethica*, and his commentary on Paul's letter to the Philippians. I will focus on Aquinas' idea of pathological or sinful forms of self-evaluation manifested in the sins of pride, vainglory, arrogance and envy, but also explore his psychology of hope, which incorporates the idea of an ordered estimation of one's resources and abilities based on a person's previous experiences. I will conclude by briefly commenting on Aquinas' theory of shame, which shows how individuals are

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courses, ed. and trans. S. Dunn and G. May (New Haven, 2002), pp. 115–19. See the overview by Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago, 2008), pp. 283–9.

[8] My analysis is a first attempt to systematically address this issue in Aquinas' thought. Evidently, the examination remains preliminary and I acknowledge that many other issues could be included in this study, such as Aquinas' ideas on virtues like humility and temperance, analysis of indignation or his political and legal thought. A discussion about Aquinas' ideas of empathy or *misericordia* is also omitted from this paper, a topic that would fit well with the problem of comparison.

deeply sensitive about their position in the social hierarchy and moderate their behaviour on the basis of their evaluations of others and themselves.[9]

As my analysis will show, the theme of comparing oneself to others is often implicit in Aquinas' thinking and dealt with in fragments spread across his works. The vocabulary of comparison is rich and diffuse. Aquinas uses the interesting reflexive verb *se aestimare*, but also such verbs as *putare*, *credere*, *enuntiare* and *comparare*. He may refer to such terms as *existimatio*, *collatio* and *reputare* as well.[10] He discusses comparison frequently in different contexts, analyses its theological and philosophical implications, and more specifically, offers a variety of principles of comparison. He recognizes how people may compare their external qualities like social status, honours, material possessions, conduct, future prospects or abilities like intellectual performance to those of others. These external comparisons make manifest how Aquinas adopts and applies the Aristotelian conception of humans as naturally social animals. His examples of comparison underline the idea that society has a hierarchical nature comprising different statuses and solidified authorities. Since some people are naturally superior in knowledge and virtue, it is proper that they act as masters and use their abilities for the benefit of others.[11] By means of different abilities and statuses, people exercise their proper capacities in the community, aiming for a safe and orderly communal life.[12] Even in a state of innocence, there would have been some inequality between different people, at least regarding sex, age and bodily complexion.[13]

While people are sensitive of their external statuses, comparison can also be personal by pertaining to estimations of their inner qualities, like their moral righteousness or their level of virtuosity and spiritual advancement. It appears that social comparison and evaluation of one's spiritual state is more difficult than simply evaluating external qualities and statuses. The analysis of external qualities build on Aristotelian ethics, but the discussion of internal qualities and their comparison has recourse to Christian ethics, mostly Augustine's thinking. Following traditional Christian discourse, Aquinas remarks that assessing one's internal qualities is prone to inordinate or unbalanced outcomes like false self-evaluations and sins like pride. The two categories of comparing, external and internal, intersect with the dimensions of social conformity and aspiration for independence and moral autonomy. While Aquinas

[9] The writings of Aquinas are available online at http://www.corpusthomisticum.org; their standard English translations have been revised, when necessary, against the original. References are made by the part, question, article, objection or reply number. Abbreviations are as follows: *Quaestiones disputatae de malo* (*De malo*); *Sententia libri Ethicorum* (*Comm. NE*); *Sententia libri Politicorum* (*Sententia Politic.*); *Summa Theologiae* (*ST*); *Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Philipenses lectura* (*Comm. Phil.*).

[10] See, e.g., *Comm. Phil*. 2–1 and *ST* I, q. 83, a. 1 co.

[11] *ST* I, q. 96, a. 4 co.

[12] *Sententia Politic*., lib. 3 l. 3 n. 2.

[13] *ST* I, q. 96, a. 3; a. 4 co.

emphasizes the communal nature of human beings and the fact that human agency is radically dependent on divine sustenance, the comparisons also make us aware of the nature of our true selves. Accordingly, skilful social comparison is an essential requisite for the good knowledge of oneself and evaluation of one's abilities optimally. Seen from the moral psychological perspective, the accurate social comparison entails truthfulness for one's authentic self and requires self-trust and self-responsibility, both of which support a person's moral agency within their own community. Identifying these elements in Aquinas' thinking provides important background for understanding early modern accounts of how individuals relate to others as well as their communities by way of comparison.

I
Pride: Exalting Oneself above Others

The phenomenon of comparing oneself to others is most clearly addressed in Aquinas' moral philosophy, especially in his theory of vices.[14] However, the strong emphasis on the sinfulness of pride and its subspecies in Christian tradition and Aquinas' thinking has undermined the fact that comparing oneself to others and understanding oneself are not sinful acts in themselves. In fact, right estimation of one's measure is of significant importance, since deficiencies in assessing this measure lead to evil in the form of sins like pride. The recommendation for constant self-scrutiny and knowing oneself, which are deeply rooted ideas in Christian anthropology and moral teaching, underlie this.[15] Distorted evaluation of one's proper character is one of the most common flaws in a person's moral life, being either a symptom of self-deception or an incentive to hypocritical life.[16] The true knowledge of oneself is indeed an essential precondition for nurturing one's moral agency.

In Aquinas' writings, sins are often thought to be abuses or excessive versions of one's natural faculties or passions. Pride and envy are not simple feelings: both involve affective and cognitive factors, like comparative evaluations. If someone commits these sins, it is likely that he has distorted

[14] For a list of the seven capital sins and their subspecies and their placement in *Summa Theologiae*, see Eileen C. Sweeney, 'Aquinas on the Seven Deadly Sins: Tradition and Innovation', in *Sin in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: The Tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins*, ed. Richard G. Newhauser and Susan J. Ridyard (York, 2012), pp. 85–106.

[15] This idea is well presented in Aquinas' analysis of humility *ST* II, II, q. 161 a. 2 co.

[16] For the moral ambiguities, the constant need for self-examination and the problematics of vices masquerading as virtues, see Richard Newhauser, 'On Ambiguity in Moral Theology', in *Sin: Essays on the Moral Tradition in the Western Middle Ages* (London, 2007), I, pp. 1–26. For the intellectual history of imitating virtuous persons and creating semblances of virtues, see Herdt, *Putting On Virtue*.

conceptions of his place in the social hierarchy, his ability to compare himself to others functions improperly and his self-estimation is untruthful. The wrong evaluation is most clearly seen in the sin of pride, which involves comparative evaluation of one's superiority over others. While Aquinas considers pride to be the gravest sin one can commit, his analysis of pride not only explicitly includes discussion about the pathological version of comparing oneself to others, but also implicitly about the subtler issue of accurate evaluation of one's own abilities compared to those of others. As my following analysis will show, his account of pride is more complex than usually thought of and his accompanying discussion on social comparison in relation to magnanimity, humility and pusillanimity include elements like the need for self-evaluation and self-respect that became important topics in early modern philosophy.

Pride has a long negatively burdened history within both the classical Greco-Roman world as well as in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Augustine (d. 430) influentially advocated the idea that pride was the first sin of man, theologically and temporally. Pride made man turn away from God; pride is a perverse desire for height and undue exaltation of oneself.[17] Desert fathers like Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399) incorporated pride as part of their general schemes of vices. John Cassian (d. 435) transferred Evagrius' idea of listing capital sins into the Latin world. Gregory the Great (d. 604) later reworked the list by naming seven deadly sins and mentioned pride separately as the root of all these seven sins.[18] Aquinas' own relationship to the traditional conceptualizations of pride is complex: he exploits extensively patristic moral sources and monastic writings, as well as the Aristotelian idea of virtue as a mean between extremes, in which the excess or deficit of a given behaviour is considered a vice.[19] Pride is an inordinate desire for one's own excellence. It is not merely capital, but even the queen and mother of all sins. Pride is a capital sin because its end, the object of the prideful desire, is a mutable good, instead of an immutable true good.[20]

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[17] Augustine, *De Civ*. 12.13, 14.13.

[18] Matthew Baasten, *Pride According to Gregory the Great: A Study of the Moralia* (Lewiston NY, 1986), pp. 77–8; Carole Straw, 'Gregory, Cassian and the Cardinal Vices', in *In The Garden of Evil: The Vice and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Newhauser, (Toronto, 2005), pp. 35–58.

[19] For an interpretation and analysis of the historical background in Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle, see James C. Doig, *Aquinas's Philosophical Commentary on the Ethics: A Historical Perspective* (Groningen, 2001), pp. 215–20.

[20] *ST* II, II, q. 162, a. 8 co. Note that ordinate love of oneself as such is not sinful. While Aquinas holds that God should be loved more than oneself, self-love itself is a natural inclination of the human being and a root for love of neighbour. For Aquinas' idea of the natural love of God and love of self, see Thomas M. Osborne, Jr., *Love of Self and Love of God in Thirteenth-Century Ethics* (Notre Dame, 2005), pp. 69–112.

During the Middle Ages, the link between pride and social comparison was clear. For instance, Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), enumerated and examined twelve degrees or steps of pride, many of which make manifest the human disposition to compare oneself to others.[21] He straightforwardly reprimands self-exaltation and comparison:

> You run no risk therefore, no matter how much you lower yourself, no matter how much your self-esteem falls short of what you are, that is, of what Truth thinks of you. But the evil is great and the risk frightening if you exalt yourself even a little above what you are, if in your thoughts you consider yourself of more worth than even one person whom Truth may judge your equal or your better . . . So also, a man has no need to fear any humiliation, but he should quake with fear before rashly yielding to even the least degree of self-exaltation. So then, beware of comparing yourself with your betters or your inferiors, with a particular few or with even one.[22]

However, Aquinas' general approach towards social comparison is more nuanced than Bernard's and his other Christian predecessors. In his *De malo*, Aquinas explicitly discusses the idea of measuring and comparing the capabilities and resources that one has with those of others. Aquinas thinks that we all are capable of measuring goodness and our appetite naturally drives us towards what is good. Then, among the many good things, we tend to look for the perfect things. But how can we measure ourselves? In his answer, Aquinas refers to Corinthians (II, 10, 13) where we read '[b]ut we will not glory beyond our measure', as if against the measure of another's glory, 'but according to the measure of the rule which God has measured to us'. If a person practices good conduct, her appetite for good follows the rule of reason (*regula rationis*), which itself is in conformity with the law of God. In this case, the appetite is morally well directed and the person can be said to be magnanimous.[23]

Thus, the comparison has two guiding principles to follow: right reason and the divine law. Divine law prescribes we should tend to what is proportionate to us, and right reason allows us to determine what actually is proportionate to

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[21] Bernard of Clairvaux, *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae tractatus*, in *Opera Sancti Bernardi*, ed. Jean Leclercq, C.H. Talbot and H.M. Rochais (Rome, 1957–77), iii, 13–59, 39, 46: 'Monachus enim, qui sui negligens, alios curiose circumspicit, dum quosdam suspicit superiores, quosdam despicit inferiors, et in aliis quidem uidet quod inuidet, in aliis quod irridet.' Aquinas refers extensively to Bernard's work in *ST* II, II, q. 162, a. 4 ad 4.

[22] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*, in *Opera Sancti Bernardi*, ed. Leclercq, Talbot and Rochais, Vol. 1–2, 37, par 7, p. 13.

[23] *De malo* q. 8, a 2: 'Inter alia autem quae homo desiderat, unum est excellentia. Naturale enim est non solum homini, sed etiam unicuique rei, ut perfectionem in bono concupito desideret, quae in quadam excellentia consistit. Si quidem ergo appetitus excellentiam appetit secundum regulam rationis divinitus informatae, erit appetitus rectus et ad magnanimitatem pertinens.' See also *ST* II, II, q. 162, a. 1 co, ad 2.

us (which is always a mean between two extremes that can vary from individual to individual). The proud person aims higher than she is; she wishes to appear above what she really is. While reason acts like a neutral calculator of things, the moral gauge is founded on Christian theology, the measure of the rule that God has reckoned. Nevertheless, the following examination is firmly based on Aristotelian moral philosophy: failing to keep the rule means that one is incapable of finding a mean between extremes of conduct. If a person cannot follow the rule accordingly and measure the appropriate mean, he commits either the vice of pusillanimity or the vice of pride.

The very word pride (*superbia*) indicates that a proud person exceeds the appropriate measure in his desire for excellence.[24] Later in early modern philosophy, social comparison and pride are similarly connected, but pride is accepted as one of the natural basic human emotions. Gerald Postema argues that pride expresses 'self-liking', the innate principle that makes us prefer ourselves to others and value ourselves above our real worth. While pride is a sin in medieval communal life, in the early modern era self-liking and pride are motives for our cooperative behaviour and desire for association with others.[25] In the Middle Ages, however, the aim was to control the self-liking tendency and pride in order to maintain the communal equilibrium, foster a morally good life and secure the soul's salvation.

In Aquinas, the remedies for the inordinate love of one's own excellence are the virtues of humility and magnanimity. Humility is a basic Christian virtue, but magnanimity is derived from Aristotle's virtue ethics.[26] In traditional monastic parlance, humility arises from comparing one's own pitiable condition to the Divine. The awareness of one's inferior status compared to God serves as a great equalizing force in human relations, since the comparison between man and God becomes associated with comparing oneself unfavourably against other persons as well. However, while Aquinas endorses humility and its basic premises, his Aristotelian virtue ethics and emphasis on human sociability allows more discussion of interpersonal comparisons and analysis of qualitative differences between individuals.

The maintaining of these two partly converging tendencies appears within his original attempt to explain the interplay between humility and magnanimity. Commenting on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas reiterates that a magnanimous person considers himself worthy of great things (*dignum seipsum aestimat magnis*), meaning that he is able to perform great deeds and

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[24] *De malo* q. 8, a. 2.

[25] Postema, 'Cemented with Diseased Qualities', p. 250.

[26] *NE* 1123b–1125a. Aristotle claims that the 'great-souled person', or the 'magnanimous man' thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them. A magnanimous person deserves what he claims, never shirking from laying claim to what he deserves, since it is a vice to claim less than one deserves. It is equally wrong to claim more than one deserves, a vice that truly magnanimous people never fall into.

that great things should happen to him when he is worthy of them.[27] Humility acts as a moderator, guarding against the overestimation of one's abilities. If the mind tends to high things immoderately, humility tempers and restrains the mind; whereas magnanimity strengthens the mind against despair, urging it on to pursue great things according to right reason.[28] Estimating the right measure of one's worth is essential, but difficult. Aquinas writes that it is not easy to find an exact norm for appraising one's worth. It can go wrong in two ways: estimating one's abilities as either too high or too low. In the latter case, a person has too little self-esteem, which means that she is not trying to achieve great things that are within her reach. If a person fails to know her own worth in this way, she is called pusillanimous.[29] Customary self-appreciation is vicious rather than virtuous. But it is not sinful to know and approve of one's own good character and good works, indeed, self-knowledge is required for perfection.[30]

Magnanimity and humility are complementary virtues, spoiled respectively by pusillanimity and pride. Magnanimous people are willing to persevere in the face of difficulty for the sake of achieving great public worth, something that can win justified public praise. The magnanimous person knows her own worth and expects others to acknowledge it through honour, but still recognizes that God is vastly superior to any human being and every great deed and goodness come from him alone.[31] As Jennifer Herdt formulates this, the moral greatness of the magnanimous person is not an autonomous possession, but virtuousness remains always indebted to God. Honesty about the human condition requires a recognition of dependency.[32]

Hence, rational evaluation of one's resources and abilities is essential, but humility moderates the appetite towards a higher position. Aquinas' vocabulary indicates a reflective use of estimation. Humility observes the rule of right reason whereby a man has true self-estimation of himself (*veram existimationem de se habet*).[33] Markedly, the measuring of oneself against others is a relative phenomenon, since the measure is not the same for all, but varies from person to person depending on one's social role. One should know how to choose a proper range of commensurate people for comparison, that is, to understand one's reference group correctly. Aquinas approves the

[27] *Comm. NE* IV, l. 8, 736.

[28] *ST* II, II, q. 161, a. 1 ad 3. Cf. *Comm. NE* IV, 10, 762–6.

[29] *Comm. NE* IV, 8, 739–40: 'difficile est mensuram rectam attingere, ut aliquis non maioribus vel minoribus se ipsum dignum aestimet'.

[30] *ST* II, II, q. 132, a. 1 ad 3.

[31] *Comm. NE* IV, 8, 740, 742. For Aquinas' idea of a magnanimous person, see Mary M. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 144–53; Mary M. Keys, 'Aquinas and the Challenge of Aristotelian Magnanimity', *History of Political Thought*, 24 (2003), pp. 37–65.

[32] Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, pp. 78–80, 91.

[33] *ST* II, II, q. 162, a. 3 ad 2.

segmentation of society into groups and maintains that a person should compare herself in everyday life to people of her own group. A person's judgment about her current situation relates to her estimation of what she is capable of doing. This connection has a bearing on a person's outer behaviour.[34] As an example, Aquinas mentions bishops and lower prelates who should estimate themselves according to their current social status. If a representative of a lower prelate behaved according to the custom of a bishop, he would be considered a proud person; however, if a bishop exercised similar functions proper to his eminence, pride would not be imputed to him.[35]

Evaluating one's real resources includes understanding one's role in society correctly, but also a right assessment of one's individual abilities and strengths. What is required is a complex equation, with multiple variables. Some of these variables might even be unanticipated ones, like enjoying good fortune or encountering misfortune, both of which can unexpectedly change the relative position of a person. These sudden turns of events can also either extend or diminish one's relevant resources. The magnanimous person should show moderation even towards such occurrences.[36] If the benefits of good fortune, like riches or power, are accompanied by virtues, they add to the person's magnanimity. However, if these goods are enjoyed without virtue, they do not make one a great-souled person. If a person possesses virtue and the goods of fortune simultaneously, his worth in honour rises inasmuch both virtue and goods with accompanying with virtue are honourable. Therefore, even the goods of fortune may assist virtuous operations instrumentally.[37]

Since Aquinas thinks that measuring oneself requires the use of rational abilities, he is keen to explore what the cognitive and affective elements of pride are, and consequently whether pride resides in the irascible or rational part of the soul. As pride is the inordinate desire for supremacy, it mainly involves hope, which is directed at future goods which are hard to attain. Hope itself is classified as one of the irascible emotions, which concern good or bad objects that are hard to achieve or avoid, the other irascible emotions being despair, courage, fear and anger.[38]

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[34] Cf. Festinger, 'A Theory of Social Comparison Processes', pp. 120–1.

[35] *De malo* q. 8, a. 2: 'Et quia non est eadem mensura omnium, ideo contingit quod aliquid non imputatur uni ad superbiam quod alteri imputaretur; sicut episcopo non imputatur ad superbiam si exerceat ea quae ad propriam excellentiam pertinent: imputaretur autem hoc ad superbiam clerico, vel simplici sacerdoti, si ea quae sunt episcopi attentaret.'

[36] *Comm. NE* IV, 9, 754.

[37] *Comm. NE* IV, 9, 756.

[38] *De malo*, q. 8, a. 3 ad 1. For Aquinas' theory of emotions and his classification of emotions into irascible and concupiscible, see Peter King, 'The Taxonomy of Emotions', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford, 2012), pp. 209–26.

Aquinas' detailed analysis manifests how pride primarily includes inordinate or miscarried comparisons with other human beings. The following passage gives a fine example of the typical vocabulary that Aquinas uses in his explanation of comparison. He lists four corrupt self-estimations leading to pride: first, proud people estimate themselves (*se aestimat*) wrongly, thinking that the good they have comes from their own efforts; second, they believe that good is given to them from above, because of their own merits; third, they boast about having something they do not have; and fourth, they wish to be seen as having something unique. As Aquinas points out, this list includes elements that might suggest that reason is the subject of pride, since such acts as estimation (*aestimare*), thinking, believing and, particularly, comparing oneself to others (*se aliis comparare*) belong to reason.[39]

Later in the *De malo*, he responds that pride is part of the irascible power of the soul, explaining how various acts pertain to vices like pride. Acts are linked with vices in three ways: directly, antecedently and consequently. Within pride, the inordinate desire for excellence relates to pride directly and essentially, and belongs to the irascible power. However, if someone estimates that some excellence belongs to himself alone, he commits an antecedent act for pride, that is an act that is a necessary condition for committing the sin of pride. The consequential act of pride, that is the act that follows from the sin of pride itself, happens when someone manifests this estimation and desire in words and deeds, showing an inordinate desire for their own excellence. Both antecedent and consequent acts include an element of self-judgment, which, according to Aquinas, belongs to the rational part of a human being. The apprehension of reason precedes the appetitive movement, and the command of reason concerning its external execution follows it.[40]

In general, people may fail to estimate their measure in several different ways, which form various subspecies of pride.[41] As Aquinas reiterates, the proud person tends to her own excellence inordinately, like when she magnifies herself.[42] Above all, such a person first starts to entertain exalted beliefs about herself (*sentire de se altiora*), which is the first act of pride preceding the desire for excel-

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[39] *De malo* q. 8, a. 3 obj 7: 'Sed omnia ista pertinent ad rationem, scilicet aestimare, putare, credere, enuntiare, et se aliis comparare. Ergo superbia est in ratione.' Cf. *De malo* q. 8, a. 3 obj 11.

[40] *De malo* q. 8, a. 3 ad 7.

[41] *De malo* q. 8, a. 4 co: 'Sic ergo pertinet ad virtutem quod appetitus hominis feratur in aliquam excellentiam secundum regulam rationis et suam mensuram. Malum autem superbiae in hoc consistit quod aliquis in appetendo bonum excellens propriam mensuram excedit. Unde quot modis contingit excedere propriam mensuram in appetitu propriae excellentiae, tot sunt species superbiae.'

[42] *De malo* q. 8, a. 3 co: 'Manifestum est autem quod hoc proprie ad superbiam pertinet quod aliquis inordinate tendat in propriam excellentiam, quasi magnificando seipsum . . .'.

lence.[43] Such a person has a unidirectional drive upwards, an ambition to be better than the others with whom they compare themselves. She may also pretend that she is superior to others since, from the fact that she desires excellence and overestimates her measure, she also behaves exteriorly so as to surpass others and is then seen in the eyes of others as somehow better.[44]

It is interesting how the proud person trusts herself in almost everything, thinking highly of herself, but still puts more weight on others' opinions of her.[45] However, the constitution of the group of significant others whose opinion matters is not arbitrary. One of the main hypotheses in modern social comparison theories is that people tend not to evaluate themselves by comparison with others who are too different from them. People seem to have a self-imposed restriction in the range of people they elect to compare themselves with.[46] Students do not compare themselves to teachers, nor do beginners measure their skills against those of experts. Aquinas' moral philosophy accords with this idea. The sin of the proud person is that she does not follow this basic rule of social comparison but, driven by the desire for excellence, measures herself against the wrong people. The principle of selection of her objects of comparison is missing or distorted, the person refusing to share the same evaluative framework as others of her kind. The basic motivation is the desire to change one's position relative to others. The implicit assumption in the act of comparing is that it includes an element of competition, which may strengthen the disposition to commit vices like pride.

Aquinas' extended discussion about pride, humility and magnanimity reveals that his conception of comparison seems to include two differing, partly contradicting scales of measuring oneself. The more fundamental comparison highlights the importance of comparing oneself to the ideal moral performance and virtuosity where a person should truthfully estimate one's moral condition and then make necessary judgments and corrections within one's interior moral selfhood. The focus is on the inner moral qualities of a person. In addition to this first-order comparison, Aquinas identifies a kind of second-order comparison, which deals with comparisons and self-estimation of one's conduct within one's own social group. The main question concerns the socially acceptable behaviour of the person, which is determined according to the aims and needs of the specific social group, its hierarchies and statuses. While the inner qualities like virtuosity or intellectual performance can be important within this category as well, the exterior qualities and differences are also important. A typical example of second-order comparison concerns bishops and lower prelates who should estimate themselves according to their current social status. The

[43] *De malo* q. 8, a. 3 ad 11.

[44] *De malo* q. 8, a. 3 ad 10.

[45] Bernard makes this comment about the proud person's dependence on other people's opinions in *De gradibus*, 43, 49.

[46] Festinger, 'A Theory of Social Comparison Processes', pp. 120–1.

balancing between these two differing and sometimes conflicting scales of comparison open intriguing moral questions. What is the relation between a person's inner qualities, like virtuosity or intellectual abilities, and their social status? Is the social conformity within our own social group the best possible way to strive towards a morally virtuous life?

II
Vain Glory and Admiration: The Role of Audience in the Social Comparison

Social comparison is not a private and solipsistic phenomenon, but the audience made up by others has a significant role in the production of our inclination to make comparisons. Aquinas notes that a proud person not only desires to surpass others and estimate herself highly, but often wishes that this positive evaluation was made public, hoping that others would see her good abilities and deeds.[47] Thence arises one of pride's subspecies, i.e. vainglory (*vana gloria*, *inanis gloria*), which is also counted as one of the capital sins. While the proud person wants to be better than others, vainglory is about winning social advancement and acclamation. Vainglory's object is attention, approval or acknowledgement of what appears good to the audience.[48]

Markedly, the desire for glory is not itself a sin, but the desire for empty or vain glory is a sin. Glorifying is false when a man glories in a good that he does not have, the good is temporal, one's judgment is uncertain, or glory is not directed to its proper end. This happens when, for example, a person wishes to perfect her intellect and know things in order to be seen by others as deserving praise, not because of the knowledge itself.[49] At the root of both pride and vainglory sits an inordinate desire to cross the borders of one's social group and compare oneself with the wrong people or even with God. Aquinas explains that glory itself includes the idea that a person delights in the manifestation of her goodness to a multitude of people. However, sometimes even a few people or one's own eyes suffice for eliciting vainglory.[50] Self-reflective estimation of oneself makes this possible. However, people in general desire to be noticed (*velle videri*) by others and preferably singularly (*singulariter*).[51] The motivation for such vainglory is all too human:

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[47] For vainglory in Aquinas, see Rebecca Konyndyk deYoung, 'The Promise and Pitfalls of Glory: Aquinas on the Forgotten Vice of Vainglory', in *Aquinas's Disputed Questions on Evil: A Critical Guide*, ed. M.V. Dougherty (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 101–25.

[48] *Ibid*., pp. 105, 113.

[49] *De malo* q. 9, a. 1 co; *ST* II, II, q. 132, a. 1 co.

[50] *De malo* q. 9, a. 1 co.

[51] *De malo* q. 8, a. 4 obj 4: 'Praeterea, velle videri, ad inanem gloriam pertinet, quae non est superbia, sed filia eius, ut Gregorius dicit XXXIV Moralium. Non ergo debet poni species superbiae, quod aliquis singulariter velit videri.' The individuality of a

the person strives to show that she is not inferior to others. Usually the vainglorious person is reluctant to understand and accept her place in comparison with others. She may refuse to concur with the will of better people or is unwilling to subject her actions to the command of a superior.[52]

Recognizing the limits of one's social role is crucial for Aquinas, just like understanding one's position within theological and metaphysical settings more generally. In worldly kingdoms, honour and glory are distributed differently to kings and soldiers. Similarly, in the universe, special glory and honour are owed to God. The person practising the sin of vainglory wishes to attribute to herself (*attribueret sibi*) glory which belongs only to God.[53] In his discussion of whether vainglory is a mortal or venial sin, Aquinas also gives an intriguing everyday example: a person may glory in her singing and think that she sings well (*aestimans se bene cantare*) while others consider that she is actually a bad singer. This kind of flawed estimation of one's talents is a sin, but cannot be counted as a mortal sin.[54]

While the sins of pride and vainglory reveal our tendency for social comparison, Aquinas also refers to positive social comparison, which is not sinful as such. Occasionally, a person may receive admiration from others and thence become aware of their own goodness or greatness.[55] Furthermore, people may sometimes indeed be truly superior in virtue compared to other people. In his commentary on Philippians, Aquinas addresses this question directly. Paul's letter to the Philippians includes an admonition to be humble and count others as better than oneself: 'Do

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person is a theologically interesting question related to the phenomenon of social comparison. While Christian anthropology maintains that every rational human soul is individually created by God in a new and unique act of creation, one of the main features of the vices of pride and vainglory is the human urge for singularity; either a person wishes to be individually noted or desires to possess something exclusively. *De malo* q. 8, a. 4 arg: 'aut despectis ceteris singulariter videri appetunt'. Cf. *In moralia* XXIII, 6. For the idea of singularity as a vice in medieval monasticism, see Gert Melville, ' "Singularitas" and Community: About a Relationship of Community and Complement in Medieval Convents', in *Potency of the Common: Intercultural Perspectives about Community and Individuality*, ed. Gert Melville and Carlos Ruta (Berlin, 2016), pp. 189–200.

[52] *De malo* q. 9, a. 3 co; *De malo* q. 9, a. 3 ad 3.

[53] *De malo* q. 9, a. 2 rp 6: 'quod sicut in regno aliter debetur honor et gloria regi, aliter duci vel militi; ita etiam in universitate rerum aliqua gloria et honor soli Deo debetur; quam cum aliquis sibi usurpare vellet, attribueret sibi quod est Dei: sicut etiam si miles in aliquo regno appeteret gloriam quae regi debetur, ex hoc ipso sibi regiam dignitatem exoptaret. Non autem omnes qui inaniter gloriam concupiscunt, appetunt honorem et gloriam debitam soli Deo, sed quae debetur homini propter aliquam excellentiam.'

[54] *De malo* q. 9, a. 2 co.

[55] *ST* I, II, q. 32, a. 5 co: 'Et quia amor est alicuius boni, et admiratio est alicuius magni, idcirco amari ab aliis, et in admiratione haberi, est delectabile; inquantum per hoc fit homini aestimatio propriae bonitatis vel magnitudinis, in quibus aliquis delectatur.'

nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves (Phil. 2: 3).' The proud person extols herself above her deserts, whereas the meek restrains herself according to her limitations.[56] This entails both following the universal ideal of humbleness and being able to understand one's own measure.[57] Aquinas recognizes that evaluating oneself as superior may be inherently contradictory. Either the superior person does not know that she is superior and virtuous, in which case she is not virtuous after all because she is not prudent; or she does know her superiority, and then she cannot consider someone as superior to herself and is not able to follow the Bible's caution to be humble.

Aquinas tries to respond to this challenge by introducing a certain relativism in all comparison: no one is so good that there is no defect in him, or so evil that he has no good. While in some cases it truly seems that it is reasonable to consider oneself superior to others, one may still value or even prefer others above oneself because of the divine image which resides in every person. Every one of us bears a kind of double person, one's own and Christ's. Therefore, if someone cannot be preferred because of his person, it is possible to do so because of the divine image: 'Outdo one another in showing honour (Rom. 12:10).[58] Elsewhere Aquinas introduces very different examples of comparison between the good and worse people. After the Last Judgment the saints in heaven are able to delight more in their blessed status when they see the damned in Hell, because contraries placed beside one another become more obvious. The comparison is stronger and more obvious when such a principle of contrast is used.[59]

III
Envy: The Wish to Surpass Others

One of the seven capital sins is envy, which Aquinas defines as a sorrow for or avoidance of the good of another as harming one's own excellence.[60] Just like pride and vainglory, this vice also presupposes that people first compare themselves to others. Augustine claims that pride is the mother of envy:

[56] Aquinas, *Sup. Epistolam Ad Philippenses Lectura*, Cap. 2, lc. 1, ed. R. Cai (Turin, 1953), pp. 99–100. See also Carla Casagrande, 'Entre justice et humilité: Les vertus du respect chez Thomas d'Aquin', *Revues des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 101 (2017), pp. 219–37, at p. 233.

[57] *Comm. Phil*. 2–1: 'Sicut enim pertinet ad superbiam quod homo se extollat supra se, ita ad humilitatem quod homo se subiiciat secundum suam mensuram.'

[58] *Comm. Phil*. 2–1.

[59] *ST* III, Supp. q. 94, a. 1 and 3. See the discussion of this passage in Postema, 'Cemented with Diseased Qualities', p. 255.

[60] *ST* II, II, q. 36, a 1. For an analysis of Aquinas' definition of envy, see Timothy Perrine and Kevin Timpe, 'Envy and its Discontents', in *Virtues and their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd (Oxford, 2014), pp. 228–39; and Sweeney, 'Aquinas on the Seven Deadly Sins', p. 95.

anyone who loves his superiority will envy those who are his equals, those who are below him, and those who are superior to him.[61] Markedly, pride, vainglory and envy are all context-dependent vices.

As Gabriel Taylor remarks, envy rests on interpersonal relations.[62] The envious person is aware of the differences between people and is able to compare herself to others; these relative comparisons then lead to a sense of inferiority, which can in turn be damaging for the community and the self. It is possible that an envious person has a correct estimation of her own abilities and resources. However, the main issue in envy is not the miscalculation of one's abilities or accepting one's measure, but the negative affective response to the understanding of one's lower status, inferior resources or poorer abilities. The assessment is markedly reciprocal: the person not only observes the better things that others have, but thinks that the goods of others somehow lessen or distort one's own good.

Referring to Aristotle's definition of envy in his book of *Rhetoric*, Aquinas outlines that men are envious of those goods in which a good name consists, and about which men like to be honoured and esteemed.[63] In this definition, the importance of social comparison is made manifest since the very fact that someone is envious requires that a person understand her own social status, be aware of general social mechanisms, have some idea of how a good name can be achieved, and know how esteem can be sought. The ability to feel envy reveals that a person is alert to issues of social comparison. Since envy concerns another's good name as far as it diminishes the good name one desires to have, people envy only those whom they wish to rival or exceed in reputation. Envy may move us to diminish another's reputation, either secretly (rumours) or openly (detraction) and has thus a clear role in our social motivation.[64]

Aquinas adds an important precondition for envy. People do not compare themselves with those who are too far removed from them. It is insane to endeavour to surpass in reputation people who are clearly above oneself. As an example, a peasant does not compare himself to the king and envy him, nor should the king envy a peasant whom he clearly exceeds. We select for comparison and competition those whose performance and resources are close to

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[61] *Gn. litt*. 11.14.18. See Peter King, 'Augustine and Anselm on Angelic Sin', in *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Tobias Hoffman (Leiden, 2012), pp. 261–81, at pp. 263–4.

[62] Gabriel Taylor, *Deadly Vices* (Oxford, 2006), p. 41.

[63] *ST* II, II, q. 36, a. 1 co: 'Alio modo bonum alterius aestimatur ut malum proprium inquantum est diminutivum propriae gloriae vel excellentiae.' Cf. *Rhet*. ii,10.

[64] *ST* II, II, q. 36, a. 1 ad 2: 'Invidia est de gloria alterius inquantum diminuit gloriam quam quis appetit, consequens est ut ad illos tantum invidia habeatur quibus homo vult se aequare vel praeferre in gloria.'

ours.[65] One does not even strive to compete against someone who is vastly more capable than oneself.[66] In Aquinas' examples, it seems that envy may be aroused by the attributes another possesses and not that much by the things that others have.

The examination of envy takes into account a central qualification of social comparison, i.e. the condition under which one makes comparisons. Recent social comparison theories have noted that people are more affected by their immediate environments and direct interactions with other people than by people who are more distant. This is seen in the way envious feelings are intensified in direct interactions with others who are better off.[67] As Aquinas notes, distance in either place, time or status prevents envy. However, we compare ourselves to those who are presently close to us and envy those among them who we aim to rival or surpass.[68] This principle of proximity exists when a certain kind and degree of resemblance occurs between the envier and the envied. David Hume, among others, noted the same idea in his examination of sympathy and social comparison, remarking: 'A common soldier bears no such envy to his general as to his sergeant or corporal; nor does an eminent writer meet with so great jealousy in common hackney scribblers, as in authors, that more nearly approach him.'[69]

Timothy Perrine and Kevin Timpe have criticized Aquinas' view of envy for its lack of a sufficient notion of the perception of inferiority and a comparative notion of self-worth.[70] However, my reading of Aquinas' theory of envy

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[65] *ST* II, II, q. 36, a. 1 ad 2: 'Hoc autem non est respectu multum a se distantium, nullus enim, nisi insanus, studet se aequare vel praeferre in gloria his qui sunt multo eo maiores, puta plebeius homo regi; vel etiam rex plebeio, quem multum excedit.' Cf. *Rhet*. ii, 10. The idea that we choose for comparison and competition only those people whose performance, resources or abilities are not too far from ours, is clearly put in Festinger's theory; see Festinger, 'A Theory of Social Comparison Processes', p. 121.

[66] *ST* II, II, q. 36, a. 1 ad 3: 'Et ideo cum aliquis in hoc eum excedat, non invidet. Sed si modicum deficiat, videtur quod ad hoc pertingere possit, et sic ad hoc conatur.'

[67] Mark D. Alicke and Ethan Zell, 'Social Comparison and Envy', in *Envy: Theory and Research*, ed. Richard Smith (Oxford, 2008), pp. 73–93, at p. 77.

[68] *ST* II, II, q. 36, a. 1 ad 2: 'Et ideo his qui multum distant vel loco vel tempore vel statu homo non invidet, sed his qui sunt propinqui, quibus se nititur aequare vel praeferre.'

[69] Hume, *Treatise on Human Understanding*, 2.2.8.13. See the discussion in Postema, 'Cemented with Diseased Qualities', p. 284.

[70] Perrine and Timpe, 'Envy and its Discontents', pp. 231–2. Perrine and Timpe give four criteria for the perception of inferiority and the self-worth aspect of envy: (i) an evaluation of another's good, (ii) an evaluation of one's own good, and (iii) a comparison between the two evaluations in which (iv) a comparative notion of self-worth means that one perceives one's worth to be inferior as a result of the comparison. As my interpretation shows, Aquinas' combined theory on envy and emulation meets all these requirements.

argues against this claim, since although Aquinas does not directly mention an individual's estimation of herself, it seems that envying presupposes self-referring aspects. The perception that someone has more goods than oneself involves self-affliction, sorrow and a sense of inferiority, which can also be interpreted as a form of dissatisfaction with oneself. Aquinas' remarks on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* imply that an envious person is aware of his inferiority to others. This is manifested in the analysis of emulation. Following Aristotle's distinction between two kinds of sorrow over other people's abilities or resources, Aquinas thinks that it is possible to grieve over another's good in a praiseworthy manner. This activity is called spiritual emulation or zeal. In such a case, a person is aware and saddened by the fact that one lacks some laudable virtue or ability that someone more virtuous has.[71] In his *De malo*, Aquinas gives more emphasis to this comparing of one's resources or abilities to those of others, explaining that zealous people prepare themselves to obtain good things through emulation. Zeal is created when someone is saddened by the awareness of their inferiority with respect to others. It is praiseworthy if this understanding leads to striving to achieve the same level of knowledge or spiritual good that others possess.[72]

Aquinas does not limit his considerations of pride and envy simply to humans. The analysis of the angels' abilities and nature discloses that social comparison is a specifically human activity, based on our intellectual knowledge. In the first part of his *Summa*, Aquinas presents an interesting discussion about fallen angels and how their sins are pride and envy first and foremost, both of which are considered spiritual defects. In humans, these sins include inordinate desire for excellence, and an element of comparison. However, in this respect angels and humans differ since, unlike humans, angels do not make estimations or compare themselves to others.

Aquinas also points out that comparison is possible only if the agents of comparison share a similar nature. This idea is well in line with social comparison theories: overly divergent subjects present no ground for comparison or self-evaluation. Similarity with a superior target inspires envy if the inferior comparer can plausibly anticipate attaining the superior target's status.[73] Aquinas claims that a creature of a lower order cannot desire a higher nature; as an example, an ass does not wish to be a horse, since going through such a change, the ass would cease to be itself. The natures themselves cannot be altered and thus upgrade their position in the hierarchical structure of reality. However, individuals who share similar natures can compare themselves to one another, and their accidents can be compared, calculated and measured.

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[71] *ST* II, II, q. 36, a. 2.

[72] *De malo*, q. 10, a. 1 ad 11.

[73] Alicke and Zell, 'Social Comparison and Envy', p. 79.

Accidents can increase or decrease without the destruction of the subject, but a higher grade of nature cannot be attained without ceasing to exist. Since God surpasses the angels, not merely in accidents, but also in nature, it is impossible for an angel of lower degree to desire equality with a higher angel and even more to desire equality with God.[74]

Angels themselves have no occasion or need for comparison, since their intellectual activity is not discursive, but instantaneous.[75] People differ from angels in their ability to estimate in speculative matters; angels have no need to compare the different outcomes of their choices, as they choose by a sudden acceptance of the truth.[76] The comparison itself is how our intellect works; the soul rejoices in the collation of one thing with another; the comparison of one thing with another is a natural act of reason.[77] Then sinning through the untruthful estimation of oneself and comparison is also something that is reserved only to humans. To have free will is to be able to judge by rational comparison.[78] Successful human thinking requires continuous comparisons between things.[79]

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[74] *ST* I, q. 63, a. 3 co: 'Unde nulla res quae est in inferiori gradu naturae, potest appetere superioris naturae gradum, sicut asinus non appetit esse equus, quia si transferretur in gradum superioris naturae . . . Unde impossibile est quod Angelus inferior appetat esse aequalis superiori; nedum quod appetat esse aequalis Deo.'

[75] *ST* I, q. 63, a. 5 co. Cf. *ST* I, q. 58, a. 3. For the differences between angelic knowledge and human reasoning, see Harm Goris, 'Angelic Knowledge in Aquinas and Bonaventure', in *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Hoffman, pp. 167–73. As Goris shows, angelic knowledge is non-discursive and non-propositional. Anselm of Canterbury remarks that Lucifer does not have foreknowledge of his fall, he cannot know it through his estimation (*aestimatio*), i.e. assessing the value of something through calculation. See King, 'Augustine and Anselm', pp. 277–8.

[76] *ST* I, q. 59, a. 3 ad 1: 'Sicut autem aestimatio hominis in speculativis differt ab aestimatione Angeli in hoc, quod una est absque inquisitione, alia vero per inquisitionem; ita et in operativis. Unde in Angelis est electio; non tamen cum inquisitiva deliberatione consilii, sed per subitam acceptionem veritatis.'

[77] *ST* II, I, q. 32, a. 8 co. Aquinas also has an interesting discussion of animal estimation. Relying on Avicenna, he assigns estimative power (*vis estimativa*) to animals that use that power to strive to assess perceptions of intentions that other senses cannot perceive. The estimative power is called *cogitative* in humans. See *ST* I, q. 78, a. 4 co. For animal estimation in Aquinas, see Deborah L. Black, 'Imagination and Estimation: Arabic Paradigms and Western Transformations', *Topoi*, 19 (2000), pp. 59–75.

[78] *ST* I, q. 83, a. 1 co: 'Sed homo agit iudicio, quia per vim cognoscitivam iudicat aliquid esse fugiendum vel prosequendum. Sed quia iudicium istud non est ex naturali instinctu in particulari operabili, sed ex collatione quadam rationis; ideo agit libero iudicio, potens in diversa ferri.' On human freedom and cognitive powers in Aquinas, see Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae I, 75–89* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 220–33.

[79] Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, p. 294.

IV
Hope: Understanding One's Resources Correctly

The analysis of hope might seem to be a surprising way of examining how Aquinas understands social comparison and the evaluation of oneself.[80] However, his discussion of hope reveals interesting new aspects of how comparison may be presented in the context of everyday life, thus showing how Aquinas gives a prominent role to personal experiences, their evaluation and self-estimation for premeditating one's future prospects. In his analysis of hope, Aquinas has a pragmatic and naturalistic attitude. Among other commentators, Robert Miner has aptly discussed Aquinas' theory of hope, explaining how the adequate forming of hope needs to take into account the necessities of real life, the resources that one has and, interestingly, the experiences of life. However, researchers have thus far failed to recognize the extent the ordered hope includes an ability to evaluate one's own performance intersubjectively and social comparison.

The natural emotion of hope arises spontaneously when a human being encounters a good that is difficult to attain, but still reachable. Hope is a disposition towards good things that lie in the future. The attainability of these objects is an important factor for eliciting hope; the attainment of the good objects involves some difficulty — objects within easy reach are desired, not hoped for. However, a person must judge that the hoped-for reality lies within one's real or possible prospects. This careful calculation of right distance and the attainability of the possible objects of hope offer a good platform for comparing and measuring oneself against others and estimating one's abilities and resources. When someone desires something and then calculates that she can get it, she starts to believe that she can get it. The resulting appetitive movement of this belief is called confidence.[81]

Desire towards some object is accompanied by the estimation of oneself, since estimation of one's resources is important in deciding whether pursuing the desired object is a realistic option at all. The individual is not moved to something that she considers impossible to get. She should be aware of her own powers, and then calculate whether it is possible to attain the object of her hope. Animals cannot change the objects of their hope, but strive for the good

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[80] Note that here Aquinas' analysis concerns the natural passion of hope, not a theological virtue. Aquinas' ideas of hope have been much discussed in recent literature. See, e.g., Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 22–48* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 215–30. See also Romanus Cessario, 'The Theological Virtue of Hope', in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, 2002), pp. 232–43.

[81] *ST* II, I, q. 40, a. 1 ad 3: 'Nam appetitus est principium motionis, nihil autem movetur ad aliquid nisi sub ratione possibilis; nullus enim movetur ad id quod existimat impossibile adipisci. Et propter hoc, spes differt a desperatione secundum differentiam possibilis et impossibilis.' See also *ST* II, I, q. 40, a. 1 co; *ST* II, I, q. 40, a. 2 ad 2.

that they apprehend. Instead, humans can fix their goals but change them once they make new evaluations.[82]

Since the object of hope is a future good that is difficult to obtain but still within the reach of a person, calculation of possible future scenarios and risks, i.e. defining the limits of hope, is essential. Something may be the cause of hope for two reasons: either it enables a person to do something, or it makes her judge that something is possible for her (*facit eum existimare aliquid esse possibile*). In the first case, hope is caused by those things that make the person more powerful, which means that someone who has riches, strength or is experienced has good reason to be hopeful. In the second case, hope is caused by teaching and persuasion, both of which give one confidence that one has the necessary abilities and resources to obtain something.[83] The opinion of others matters, since other people's judgments and their views of us influence our estimation of our own abilities and set the limits of our understanding of what is possible for us. This social-referencing principle makes human beings dependent on the views of others for a coherent sense of themselves and their actual capacities.

Personal life experience is crucial: previous experiences may lead one to calculate future prospects. As Aquinas writes, experience generates estimation (*existimatio*). Experience may be the cause of hope, since by experience an individual may acquire the faculty of doing something easily, and the result of this is hope.[84] Experience can be the cause of hope, but it can also lead to a lack of hope in that experience can guide a person to think something possible that she had previously thought impossible; however, experience can equally lead a person to estimate (*existimatio*) that something is impossible for her which hitherto she had thought possible. This is why experience may lead someone to feel despair.[85]

Hope has its corresponding vices, which are despair arising from sloth and presumption arising from vainglory. In his *De malo*, Aquinas links pride and hope together, mentioning that both are related to desiring good things. Pride is an inordinate desire for excellence, whereas hope is related to a future good difficult to attain. In addition, hope can sometimes be immoderate since inor-

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[82] *ST* II, I, q. 40

[83] *ST* II, I, q. 40, a. 5 co: 'Alio modo est causa spei omne illud quod facit alicui existimationem quod aliquid sit sibi possibile. Et hoc modo et doctrina, et persuasio quaelibet potest esse causa spei.'

[84] *Ibid*.: 'Et sic etiam experientia est causa spei, inquantum scilicet per experientiam fit homini existimatio quod aliquid sit sibi possibile, quod impossibile ante experientiam reputabat.'

[85] *Ibid*.: *'Sed per hunc modum experientia potest etiam esse causa defectus spei. Quia sicut per experientiam fit homini existimatio quod aliquid sibi sit possibile, quod reputabat impossibile; ita e contra verso per experientiam fit homini existimatio quod aliquid non sit sibi possibile, quod possibile existimabat.'*

dinate hope is presumption, which pertains to pride.[86] Aquinas gives two examples of those who are not good in their self-estimations: young people and drunk men. They consider themselves capable, but in reality, they are unsteady and do not recognize their defects. In their inability to understand and accept their own limits, they do not recognize their powers; furthermore, they can also readily misunderstand the nature of the object they hope for. As a consequence, they suffer from false hope, the irrational belief that they can gain a desired object. Hope is rational only if one calculates that it is wise to desire this good at this time.[87]

Magnanimity and humility are essential for the proper ordering of natural hope; an appropriate hope is the result of successful balancing between humility and magnanimity. In particular, hope needs humility to estimate one's potential truthfully, not exaggerate it. If we overestimate our own powers, it is likely that we will discard the help of God, which is the very foundation of the theological virtue of hope.[88]

V
Shame: Painful Recalibration of Estimations

The traditional view in most studies is that shame is a social emotion and is therefore fundamentally linked with social values, revealing our submission to external standards or our concern for 'the eyes of others'. Its very nature includes the idea that the individual is aware of differences between people, and alert to their social statuses as well as their changes. Feelings of shame may be motivated by the awareness that one has a lower social value than one had previously assumed or that one has transgressed the social norms and is afraid of the consequent disgrace, i.e. negative evaluations by others. In either case, social comparison within one's reference group is essential. The person encounters painful pressure to recalibrate her estimation of herself compared to others.

Aquinas talks about the sense of shame in his *Summa* and his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He also discusses shame in his commentary on

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[86] *De malo* q. 8, a. 3 rp 1: 'Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod superbia est appetitus inordinatus excellentiae. Sic autem se habet spes ad bonum arduum futurum, sicut se habet desiderium ad bonum absolute sumptum. Unde manifestum est quod superbia est principaliter circa spem, quae est passio irascibilis: nam et praesumptio, quae est inordinata spes, maxime videtur ad superbiam pertinere.'

[87] *ST* II, I, q. 40, a. 6 co 'Et similiter dicendum ad secundum, quod iuvenes et ebrii habent quidem infirmitatem secundum rei veritatem, sed secundum eorum existimationem, habent potestatem; quia suos defectus non cognoscunt.' See the analysis by Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*, pp. 223–5.

[88] *ST* II, II, q. 21, a. 1 co. Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*, p. 228.

Peter Lombard's *Sentences*.[89] In his commentary on the *Ethics*, Aquinas affirms Aristotle's account of shame, that is, saying that shame is not properly called a virtue, but is more like a passion. Shame is said to be a fear of disgrace or confusion which is the opposite of glory.[90] The sense of shame is presented as a species of the fear of evil, which concerns the disgrace that damages an individual's reputation (*turpitudo laedens opinionem*).[91] If disgrace is feared in an act about to be committed, it is called shamefacedness (*erubescentia*), whereas if the fear has to do with a disgraceful act that has already been committed, then it is shame (*verecundia*).[92]

While shame is a painful feeling, Aquinas recognizes its positive aspects. Since the emotional disposition of shame is oriented towards the avoidance of disgrace, it serves well as an integral part of temperance, which is a cardinal virtue in itself. Another integral part of temperance is honesty. Shame and honesty taken together are required conditions for virtue. Shame makes one resist the disgrace that is contrary to temperance, whereas through honesty one loves the beauty of temperance. This way shame serves as a conditional disposition for a virtuous life, even for elderly and morally good people.[93] This characterization of shame exceeds Aristotle's idea that a morally good person is not disposed to feel shame. Aquinas explains that virtue itself can be understood in both a strict and a broad sense. If virtue is considered as a perfection, shame cannot be counted among the virtues. However, in a broad sense virtue denotes whatever is good and praiseworthy in human acts or passions; therefore, since shame is a praiseworthy passion, it still may sometimes be called a virtue.[94] Clearly Aquinas wishes to maintain the basic Aristotelian

[89] *Sententiae* lib IV, lib. 4 d. 17 q. 2. Aquinas' theory of shame has been analysed; e.g., Simo Knuuttila, 'The Emotion of Shame in Medieval Philosophy', in *Spazio Philosophico*, 5 (2012), pp. 243–9; Jörn Müller, 'Scham und menschlische Natur bei Augustin und Thomas von Aquin', in *Zur Kulturgeschichte der Scham, Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, Beiheft 9, ed. Michaela Bauks and Martin Mayer (Hamburg, 2011), pp. 55–72; and Ritva Palmén, 'Shame, Self-Evaluation, and Recognition in the Middle Ages', in *Recognition and Religion: Contemporary and Historical Approaches*, ed. Maijastina Kahlos, Heikki J. Koskinen and Ritva Palmén (London, 2019), pp. 149–67.

[90] *Comm. NE* IV, l. 17.867–868. In his *Summa*, Aquinas, relying on John Damascene's authority, enumerates six different species of fear, which are sluggishness (*segnities*), shamefacedness or embarrassment (*erubescentia*), shame (*verecundia*), wonder (*admiratio*), amazement (*stupor*) and agony (*agonia*). This list is frequently repeated in medieval texts. *ST* II, I, q. 41, a. 4 co. The difference between *erubescentia* and *verecundia* is often mentioned, but the overall discussion may neglect it and use the terms synonymously.

[91] *ST* II, I, q. 41, a. 4 co. Here Aquinas uses the Latin word *turpitudo* in referring to disgrace. In *ST* II, II, q. 144–5, he also uses *opprobrium* and *exprobrabilis* (disgraceful), which imply forceful reproach.

[92] *ST* II, I, q. 41, a. 4 co.

[93] *ST* II, II, q. 143, co.

[94] *ST* II, II, q. 144, a. 1, co 1.

position; however, he has a clear tendency to integrate the sense of shame into his general theory of virtues and morally good behaviour.[95]

Aquinas addresses the social aspect of shame directly by asking whether a man feels more shame before those who are more closely connected with him.[96] Basically, we fear reproach (or disgrace). Again, the reference group is essential. We are more likely to be ashamed by those who are connected with us, since they know our deeds better. Strangers and people entirely unknown to us do not inspire shame in us. We are not ashamed before animals and children either, because we do not compare ourselves to them. We feel shame before people who are able to harm us, since people of our own society are able to harm our lives continually.[97] This highlights how the person with more social relations has all the more occasion to practice shame. Social pressure affects our feeling of shame. For instance, shame is not activated if our peers commit sins similar to ours. In those cases, we estimate our jointly committed defects to be more minor than we would normally do.[98]

The feeling of shame also indirectly reveals who we think our superiors are in the sense that the attestation of people of the better sort has more weight and makes us feel more shame. Aquinas seems to think that better people means morally or intellectually superior people, because he adds that these people have more universal knowledge and their judgments hold fast to the truth. They have not attained their position on the basis of their secular status, like a place in the economic or political hierarchy.[99]

These examples show how shame is a kind of deliberate fear that makes one assess one's behaviour in social exchanges and evaluate one's standing in relation to other people. It also forces the individual into self-evaluation and imposes restraint on transgressing social norms. Furthermore, shame makes one test and calibrate one's current machinery of estimation. Seen this way, shame is one of the most efficient practical devices to control our social comparisons.

Although Aquinas summarizes Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and its ideas on shame, interestingly he omits some of its important observations. For instance, he does not elaborate on Aristotle's deliberation on the kind of shame inspired by having no share in the honourable things common to people like us. Aristotle mentions how disgraceful it is to be without similar education or other advantages than people at the same social level. Aquinas does not exploit the full

[95] This tendency is presumably influenced by Stoic ethical thought, which sees shame as an incentive to deliberate thoughtfully, and as something important in learning to live a virtuous life. For Stoic ideas of shame, see David Wray, 'Seneca's Shame', in *Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Alessandro Schiesaro (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 199–211.

[96] *ST* II, II, q. 144, a. 3 arg 1.

[97] *ST* II, II, q. 144, a. 3 co.

[98] *ST* II, II, q. 144, a. 3 ad 2.

[99] *ST* II, II, q. 144, a. 3 ad 1.

potential of Aristotle's views of shame in his own moral psychological theory and examine, for instance, the comparisons of social status, honours or material possessions and how the knowledge of these differences affect us. He only briefly mentions that sometimes an individual may be ashamed of poverty, disrepute or servitude, which, without being actual sin, at least according to everyone's opinion, are defects.[100] These remarks imply how Aquinas thinks of status and worldly possessions differently than Aristotle. While Aristotle does not have in his audience those who might be of a truly lower status — he doesn't write for or about such people — Aquinas at least thinks of people of lower status, suffering poverty and subjection.

Conclusion

Medieval Christian morality and social psychology make for an interesting point of departure for an analysis of the idea of social comparison since, while this question is only rarely addressed in the intellectual discussions of the time, the society in which these discussions took place had a strong hierarchical structure. The metaphysical assumptions of Christian theology emphasize universalism, deeming all people equal in the eyes of God. Rising above others and the feeling of pride are the most sinful acts a person can perform. Not surprisingly, the sinful aspect of comparisons of abilities have prevailed in recent research on medieval Christian intellectuals. The Christian idea that the sin of comparison leads to negating one's own bad deeds has led researchers to think either that Christian theologians delegitimized social comparison altogether or did not address the issue at all.[101] However, my analysis reveals that while Aquinas' point of departure is most often an investigation of some pathology in our process of evaluation of either ourselves or our abilities in comparison to others, the underlying presumption is still that the accurate measurement of our abilities within our social group is possible and sometimes even commendable. Our tendency to judge ourselves and others by comparison can lead us astray, but it is essential to our cognitive and affective life.

Aquinas' moral philosophy assumes several psycho-social tendencies that describe people's inclination to compare themselves with each other, mostly by explaining either sinful or pathological forms of such comparisons. These tendencies are best seen in his examinations of the sins of pride, vainglory, envy and arrogance, as well as in his theory of hope and analysis of shame. On the basis of Aquinas' works, it is possible to find a coherent idea of how people compare themselves to others. People usually compare their social status, honours, material possessions, conduct, future prospects or abilities

[100] *ST* II, II, q. 144, a. 2 ad 2.

[101] See, e.g., Kiril Petkov, 'The Cultural Career of a Minor Vice', in *Sin in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: The Tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins*, ed. Richard Newhauser and Susan Janet Ridyard (York, 2012), pp. 58–60.

like intellectual performance to those of others. Moreover, people are also prone to estimate their inner qualities, like their moral righteousness or their level of virtuosity and spiritual advancement. The often repeated structural aspect of social comparison is the relativity of comparison to one's social group, which is why Aquinas highlights that a person should learn to find their own reference group and compare themselves to others only within that context. A second structural aspect in Aquinas' account is the principle of proximity, i.e. people compare themselves to people in their near vicinity. The third aspect is competitiveness, which manifests in a strong drive to be seen as unique or superior compared to others and in competitive behaviour.

Social comparison theories have shown that a unidirectional drive upward and the pressure towards uniformity taken together produce the urge to be slightly better than the others with whom one compares oneself. The 'level of aspiration' is placed only slightly higher than the current performance. As a result, people seem to have an inborn desire to change their position relative to others. They associate competitive processes with those whose abilities are not too diverse from their own and avoid comparison with those who score considerably higher than they do.[102] In medieval thought, the phenomenon of social comparing and competing is recognized and usually examined in the context of moral psychology. This predisposition to competition is made manifest in Aquinas' thought too. The sins of pride, vainglory and arrogance all represent the drive to ascend the social hierarchy. This drive is sinful, since it is unordered, includes mis-estimations of oneself and wrongful comparisons to others, or does not credit good to God. Aquinas warns that people are ready to believe what they greatly desire and proud people consider themselves greater than they actually are. Emulation or zeal, positive imitation of one's superiors, represents the positive version of competition and striving upwards.

Several examples show that social comparison has direct consequences on a person's self-conception and estimations of their own abilities. Interestingly, Aquinas' texts show that people do not merely compare themselves to others and leave it there; rather, the outcomes of these comparisons are reflected in their actions. A person's estimation of the current situation, evaluation of their abilities and the subsequent appraisals of what they are capable of doing have a distinct bearing on their behaviour.[103] Putting oneself above others is seen as arrogant behaviour, the vainglorious person publicly declares her desire to surpass others while the hopeful person calculates the increase of her resources and sets high goals for herself. When the person

[102] Festinger, 'A Theory of Social Comparison Processes', p. 127.
[103] Cf. *ibid*., p. 117.

receives admiration from others and thence becomes aware of their own goodness or greatness, her self-assessment will be positive.[104]

Remarkably, more recent social comparison theories have shown that most comparative processes occur implicitly, and are spontaneous in nature. It appears that self-evaluation automatically evokes thoughts of comparison with others, and conversely, that interpersonal judgments automatically evoke thoughts about oneself without any explicit intention to evaluate oneself.[105] Aquinas' notion of self-comparison to others does not include this dimension and thus clearly deviates from contemporary theories. For Aquinas, the human mind is transparent to itself: constant self-scrutiny should strive to ensure that all emotions and moral volitions and reasoning are apparent to the individual. Such sinful feelings as envy or pride are volitional and thus morally blameworthy states of mind.

Aquinas acknowledges that people differ from each other and advises that by practising humility and right reason each person may gain a true estimation of themselves. This requires balanced evaluations of the capabilities and merits of oneself and others. Ordered social comparison is even beneficial. In the absence of accurate comparison, our estimations of ourselves and the social situation in general are unstable and our level of aspiration fluctuates. This is most clearly shown in the psychology of hope, where the previous experiences and estimates of our abilities are important for calibrating future prospects. In theological anthropology, in turn, proper assessment of our capacities reveals our utter weaknesses, insofar as we are sinful human beings.

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[104] *ST* I, II, q. 32, a. 5 co: 'Et quia amor est alicuius boni, et admiratio est alicuius magni, idcirco amari ab aliis, et in admiratione haberi, est delectabile; inquantum per hoc fit homini aestimatio propriae bonitatis vel magnitudinis, in quibus aliquis delectatur.'

[105] Alicke and Zell, 'Social Comparison and Envy', p. 77.