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# Philanthropy as a Virtue in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

G. Scott Davis

University of Richmond, sdavis@richmond.edu

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# 1 Philanthropy as a Virtue in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

*Scott Davis*

“PHILANTHROPY,” “CHARITY,” and related concepts were well known to late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Rulers, wealthy individuals and, early on, the Christian church founded hospitals, distributed food, and established forms of relief for the needy of various sorts throughout the period. The problem comes in interpreting these activities, their motives, and their goals. Is the *philanthropia* of a pre-Christian philosopher of a piece with the *agape*, or Christian love, of a fourth-century bishop? When the Roman emperor provides bread and circuses, what does he intend and why does he do it? Does the twelfth-century nobleman intend the same? As with so many of our social, moral, and political concepts, placing “philanthropy” and its premodern cognates in their historical and intellectual context highlights our contemporary understanding of philanthropic work and its place in our moral world.

Consider two respected scholars in the field. Demetrios Constantelos, revising a major study of East Roman social welfare that he had published twenty-five years earlier, writes that in the intervening period he has come to believe “the Christian *agape* developed as a direct inheritance of ancient Greek *philanthropia*.” And he adds that he now sees “more continuity in the social ethos of ancient Hellenism with Christian Hellenism than I was willing to acknowledge” (Constantelos 1991, p. ix). On the other hand, the celebrated French historian Paul Veyne argues persuasively that the appearance of continuity between classical philanthropy and Christian charity “is an illusion,” that the grand expressions of pagan benevolence, as opposed to the “pious and charitable works” of Christians, “differ in ideology, in beneficiaries and in agents, in the motivations of agents, and in their behaviour” (Veyne 1990, p. 19).<sup>1</sup> Neither Veyne nor Constantelos denies that from late antiquity on there were hospitals and orphanages, poor relief and patronage.<sup>2</sup> But knowing what happened is only part of the story. What we would like to know is why they were established and what they meant, how they fitted into the fabric of ancient and medieval moral thought and political life.

Unfortunately, this is easier said than done, for it is not entirely clear what we want to know, or how to discover it. In imperial Rome the doing of grand public works is reserved to the emperor, at least in the capital; is this intended to stamp out popular rivals or encompass the city in the godlike embrace of the

first citizen? Are the foundations of hospitals and the like power plays, penance for evils done, acts to ingratiate the doer with the gods or expressions of compassion at the plight of the indigent? Is the patronage of Maecenas, so indispensable to Virgil and Horace, an instance of philanthropic support for the arts, the ostentatious display of a powerful aristocrat, or both? Veyne, reflecting on the family allowances instituted by Trajan, notes that “its humble beneficiaries thanked the Emperor for his liberality, while the political world praised him for ensuring the survival of the Italian race . . . whether it was beneficence or birth-rate policy, he had spent his money on a new and gracious task” (Veyne 1990, p. 367). The point, of course, is that we have no clear way of determining whether these pensions were established for “philanthropic” purposes or for reasons of state, to secure a stable agricultural base. How could we tell? But this needn’t mean that we can learn nothing about the motives and goals of giving in antiquity and the Middle Ages. My goal in what follows is to sketch what was meant by philanthropy in various social contexts, from late antiquity to the end of the thirteenth century, focusing not so much on the facts of who gave what to whom, but on the ideals and motives that inspired such giving.

## **From Aristotle to Seneca: Virtue, Prudence, and Concern for Others**

For several reasons it will prove useful to begin with Aristotle, for he not only sets out to write the first self-conscious “ethics,” he insists on its continuity with the political world and is committed to a level of detail in analysis that makes him a useful foil for understanding the implications of his rivals. Although “philanthropy” as a noun occurs very rarely in his works, the adjectival form is common and its use instructive. For example, at the beginning of his discussion of friendship, Aristotle notes that friendship seems to be a natural instinct, “for which reason we praise those who love their fellow men (tous philanthropous epainoumen)” (Aristotle 1975, 1155a).<sup>3</sup> Here “philanthropic” means “benevolent” or “humane,” without the sense of public giving or aid to the needy carried by its modern cognate. It is the attitude with which we should approach our dealings with other people, the foundation of that friendship which, if properly reciprocated, would make recourse to law rare and unnecessary. We praise philanthropy not because it promotes a certain kind of act, but because it is the way we feel toward others if we are properly brought up.

The Aristotelian virtues directly associated with giving have little to do with love of humanity. Liberality, the virtue associated with small sums, is the disposition to “give for the nobility of giving,” and the noble “will give to the right people, and the right amount, and at the right time, and fulfill all the other conditions of right giving” (Aristotle 1975, 1120a). Right giving, like all of Aristotle’s virtues, stems directly from the character of the individual and from his desire to achieve happiness through living the most choiceworthy life and

doing the most praiseworthy deeds. The right people are his family, friends, and fellow citizens, who share his penchant for virtue and will, in their turn, give rightly. To give excessively, either to the wrong people or when it is ill timed, is prodigal, while failure to give when giving is appropriate is meanness. Aristotle's student and successor, Theophrastus, paints the mean character as likely:

to borrow of a stranger that is staying in his house; to say as he carves the meat that the carver deserves a double portion, and help himself without more ado. . . . When a friend or a friend's daughter is to be married, he is like to go into foreign parts some time before the wedding to avoid the giving of a present. (Theophrastus 1953, XXX)

The mean person, like the prodigal, we condemn not so much for the consequences of his actions as the quality of his character, and this should alert us to something important about classical ethics. Whatever their differences, the classical authors on ethics begin by asking what a good and choiceworthy life looks like. After determining what our lives should look like, the task is to make ourselves the sort of people for whom that life is natural, people of character, for whom virtuous action flows unimpeded. This is why the liberal individual gives freely and with pleasure, while to give at all pains the mean man. His desires are shaped by the virtues, and thus he wants to give, while the mean man wants to keep what he has and gives only under constraint.

When large sums and public display come into play we graduate from liberality to magnificence, but the basic account of virtue does not change. Thus, writes Aristotle, "the magnificent man is an artist in expenditure: he can discern what is suitable, and spend great sums with good taste." If the situation calls for it "he will spend gladly and lavishly, since nice calculation is shabby; and he will think how he can carry out his project most nobly and splendidly, rather than how much it will cost and how it can be done most cheaply" (Aristotle 1975, 1121a–b). The forms such magnificence takes are varied, and include public banquets and dramatic choruses, as well as "the service of the gods—votive offerings, public buildings, sacrifices—and the offices of religion generally" (Aristotle 1975, 1122b). In all, however, he observes the mean with regard to his resources and his position in the community, otherwise he becomes prodigal, profligate, and a fool.

The association of magnificence with religious practice deserves comment. The magnificent man underwrites a building or offers a sacrifice in thanks for benefits received or in hope of benefits to come. It is a display of prudence, a form of reciprocity through which he maintains his status with the powers that be. Through such acts the city as a whole benefits, but should there be any benefit to the poor it is at best secondhand. Their families and kin, not strangers, are expected to take care of them. The severely underprivileged might gather round the temple in hope of food or alms, but they have no formal recourse and

must rely on the goodwill of those who have paid for the sacrifice or come to share in the magnificence of their friend.

This is not to imply that no thought was given to the indigent. Poor relief and exemption from certain civic duties are incorporated into the Athenian constitution, but the motive is neither sympathy, in the modern sense, nor identification with the poor (cf. Aristotle 1984, 69). It seems, rather, to reflect the interaction of legal justice and common decency, what older translations call equity. "Equity," Aristotle writes, "though just, is not legal justice, but a rectification of legal justice." It is the virtue that adjusts the letter of the law to particular cases, not necessarily because there is a defect in the law, but because "the material of conduct is essentially irregular. When therefore the law lays down a general rule, and thereafter a case arises which is an exception," the person of common decency attempts to "rectify the defect by deciding as the lawgiver would himself decide if he were present" (Aristotle 1975, 1137b). Equity, common decency, is what we expect from our neighbors. If they are properly reared they will exercise this decency in conjunction with the philanthropy, or benevolence, that we also praise as exemplifying what is well bred in our fellow citizens. Those among us endowed with exceptional wealth, assuming always that *they* are well bred, will be naturally disposed to express themselves, in the right way and at the right time, in acts of magnificence, and they are to be recognized as such.

This excursion into the vocabulary of Aristotelian virtue highlights several points. It alerts us to the dangers of identifying our use of a word with its earlier uses and opens up the complexity of the classical vocabulary of ethics. Even more important, it points up the dangers in assuming that our contemporary vocabulary is sufficiently supple to capture the arguments and presuppositions of our precursors. The modern contrast of "egoism" with "altruism," for instance, is an anachronism when imported into classical ethics.<sup>4</sup> Despite her judicious attempts to avoid such anachronisms, Julia Annas seems to me to reverse the source of paradox in her recent discussion of the debate between Aristotelians and Stoics on concern for others. "Aristotle," she writes, "sees morality as developing from self-love, and also argues that the end result is self-love—a highly special and refined form of self-love, of course. The latter point is universally rejected after Aristotle, as being unnecessarily paradoxical" (Annas 1993, p. 288). Later departures aside, Annas mislocates the paradox, by taking impartiality as an obvious moral desideratum, assigning thereby Aristotle and others to the ethical margins (cf. Annas 1993, p. 270ff.).

The debate Annas presents centers on whether "self-love," *philauton*, is properly a term of reproach or a presupposition of rational action. "It is those who take too large a share of things," Aristotle writes, "whom most people usually mean when they speak of lovers of self" (Aristotle 1975, 1168b). His use of

popular proverbs and the like indicate that the person guilty of *pleonexia*, taking too much, is the same character satirized by Theophrastus. This is obviously a bad sort, and if this is all there is to self-love, then it is a bad quality. But, *this* is the paradox, for if taken at face value what could be more natural than to love ourselves? We naturally want what is good, and even if we also want it for others, we assuredly don't deny it to ourselves. By book nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle thinks he has clarified where the good lies, and so the paradox of "self-love" as a term of opprobrium stands out with clarity. Thus he can write that "it is our reasoned acts that are felt to be in the fullest sense *our own* acts, *voluntary acts*" (Aristotle 1975, 1169a), assuming that his readers will understand that the most perfectly reasoned and voluntary acts are precisely those in accord with virtue, as he argued in book two, and since virtue is intrinsically lovable, and those acts which are most ours are acts of virtue, we should love ourselves. The common criticism of self-love is nothing but a sloppy way of condemning "sordid greed" and the sort of character we describe as "niggardly, close-fisted, and stingy" (Aristotle 1975, 1221b-1222a).

For Aristotle, concern for others is a consequence of being well brought up, having a sense of common decency grounded in an education that enables us to discern the demands of virtue and act accordingly. While nothing guarantees that we always manifest the virtues, or even common decency, few communities of any size can tolerate too much deviation from their norms, for that would render any attempt to pursue and secure the goods of life unstable. This, at least, seems the import of Aristotle's remark that "friendship appears to be the bond of the state," and his noting that "to promote concord, which seems akin to friendship," is what wise lawgivers desire, "while faction, which is enmity, is what they are most anxious to banish" (Aristotle 1975, 1155a). The wise lawgiver knows that benevolent acts stem from those virtues, such as liberality and magnanimity, that incline us to do good for the sake of good, particularly to our friends. Friendship, it would seem, is the ideal relation, both for individuals and for the community as a whole. After that, the law and common decency attempt to rectify less-than-ideal relations and states of affairs. Beyond that, giving is not systematically related to the moral life.

If there is anything novel in Aristotle's treatment of our relations with others, it is not his accounting for other-concern in terms of self-concern and our relations to friends, but his replacing obligations derived from divinely sanctioned relations of reciprocity with reasons based on virtues. Constantelos writes that:

In the Homeric age philanthropy was associated with assistance to beggars as well as to the poor and to strangers. . . . The ancient Greeks were also very philanthropic and affectionate toward the aged. Not only was reverence for

aged parents advocated, but also respect and consideration for all persons of advanced age. . . . The spirit of brotherhood and friendship which is the basis of philanthropy is well expressed by Sophocles in his *Antigone*. (Constantelos 1991, pp. 4–6)

But he cites as evidence for this general spirit Xenophon's remark that "if one desires the protection of the gods, one must practice piety toward them; if a man would be loved by his friends he must help them; if he would be honoured by a city he must serve it" (Constantelos 1991, p. 6). Rather than the spirit of Christian charity, much less contemporary altruism, this reflects the understanding of gift giving studied by Marcel Mauss in his classic, *The Gift*. According to Mauss, gift giving in traditional and ancient societies is a matter of reciprocal obligation. At the most basic level a gift carries with it a supernatural energy that remains unstable and potentially dangerous until it has been satisfied by a return of equal value. There is a spiritual economy that obliges the recipient to give and the giver to receive, and the sanctions that secure this circulation of goods are not merely social but spiritual in the sense that "to refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war" (Mauss 1990, p. 13). Mauss argues that almsgiving, for example, has its roots in this "morality of the gift," for to receive the blessings of wealth and power without an effort to keep them circulating offends against the order of things. Generosity becomes an obligation when the gods either demand or tolerate that a portion of what "had been hitherto destroyed in useless sacrifice should serve the poor and children" (Mauss 1990, p. 18). Where Aristotle innovates is in arguing that virtue and happiness, as opposed to the gods and the spirits, require this recognition of the underprivileged. Nonetheless, the principal motivation behind our actions remains our quest for happiness, informed by those virtues that make us praiseworthy, both in our own eyes and in the eyes of our compatriots.

Placing the matter in this context sheds a different light on the debate Annas lays out between Aristotelians and Stoics in the Hellenistic period. She argues that the Stoics "are the first ethical theorists clearly to commit themselves to the thesis that morality requires impartiality to all others from the moral point of view" (Annas 1993, p. 265), and goes on to present this as a consequence of the demand for rigorous rationality in reaching practical conclusions. The argument seems to be that difference in moral treatment must depend exclusively on difference in intrinsic worth, and since we are all humans we are all identical in our intrinsic worth. Preferences of one sort or another must, therefore, depend on acquired qualities or relationships, which may modify particular obligations at particular times, but do not affect our basic relations as moral agents. This is different from the requirement of common decency, which insists on impartiality in our legal system and related institutions. Those



institutions answer to the good of the public as a whole, and to use them for personal or family gain would be unjust. The debate Annas points to centers on our fundamental reasons for action, pitting our search for happiness against the ostensible claims of even "the furthest Mysian" (cf. Annas 1993, ch. 12). For the Stoic, not only does the stranger *in our midst* have a claim on our common decency, but so does the distant stranger as well. When pressed as to the source of this claim, the Stoic response seems to be "in virtue of our shared fellowship in the family of humankind." Aristotle, not to mention the ancient and traditional cultures discussed by Mauss, must find this simply specious. I might, as an act of compassion or magnanimity, go to the aid of that "furthest Mysian," but *claim* he has none. That, as Annas puts it, "later Aristotelians simply caved in to the Stoics on this point and accepted the impartiality requirement without even integrating it to the rest of the theory very satisfactorily" (Annas 1993, p. 290) reflects poorly on those later thinkers, while leaving the Stoics themselves with no very good reason for their claim.

That at least some Stoics didn't fully understand the point comes out in Seneca's discussion of gift giving, penned toward the middle of the first century of the common era. Early in his discussion of benefits Seneca insists on the study of "the rules for a practice that constitutes the chief bond of human conduct . . . a law of conduct in order that we may not be inclined to the thoughtless indulgence that masquerades as generosity" (Seneca 1979, I.4). Here he remarks the need for the giver to "make no record" and the recipient "to feel indebted for more than the amount," going on to cite the Stoic Chrysippus on "this most honourable rivalry in outdoing benefits by benefits." Whatever the status of impartiality, gift giving remains securely tied to the traditional system of reciprocity traced in Mauss to the ancient Indo-Europeans (Mauss 1990, pp. 47-63). Seneca cites Chrysippus yet again for the example of the ball game in distinguishing the good player from the novice. The skilled player "must of necessity use one method of hurling the ball to a partner who is a long way off, and another to one who is near at hand. The same condition applies to a benefit" (Seneca 1979, II.17). Giving is like a game in which all work together to keep the play going smoothly, the goal being to sustain the sort of life appointed us by nature. Giving creates friendship and hence sustains the social fabric, thus "I must be far more careful in selecting my creditor for a benefit than a creditor for a loan." I should seek to give and receive benefits only from those whose character is worthy, for:

even after I have paid my debt of gratitude, the bond between us still holds; for, just when I have finished paying it, I am obliged to begin again, and friendship endures; and, as I would not admit an unworthy man to my friendship, so neither would I admit one who is unworthy to the most sacred privilege of benefits, from which friendship springs. (Seneca 1979, II.18)

As with Aristotle, the motive for giving has little to do with the material circumstances of the recipient, and when it does the relevant issue is whether or not he is in a position to return the benefit. To give to an unworthy person, or in a way that does not sustain the friendships that make up our social relations, is simply wasteful. From Aristotle to Seneca, albeit with differences of emphasis, public giving, whether by individuals or the state, is intended to secure those goods most desirable to the givers, not necessarily the recipients. When the Christians come to reinterpret pagan virtue in the fourth century, it is precisely the self-conscious sense of *discontinuity* that stands out, and it is to that we now turn.

### Splendid Vices: Pagan Virtue in Ambrose and Augustine

The fourth century began with the last Roman persecution of Christians, that of Diocletian, and ended with the emperor Theodosius proclaiming edicts against the pagans and in favor of the church. Though battles of Christian against Christian loomed, the traditional gods of Rome were now on the defensive, and, at least in some quarters, their traditional virtues as well. When, in February of 362, Julian the Apostate proclaimed religious freedom it was in the vain hope of restoring the temples and protecting their worshipers from Christian depredations. In a long fragment Julian writes that a Roman priest “must above all exercise philanthropy, for from it result many other blessings, and moreover that choicest and greatest blessing of all, the good will of the gods.” But he goes on almost immediately to remark that:

philanthropy has many divisions and is of many kinds. For instance it is shown when men are punished in moderation with a view to the betterment of those punished, as schoolmasters punish children; and again in ministering to men’s needs, even as the gods minister to our own. (Julianus 1954, II, 289a–c)<sup>5</sup>

Despite the intervening six centuries, philanthropy remains much what it was for Aristotle. While it is now identified, at least in part, with helping the needy, that help is an expression of a much broader attitude that may as easily include moderating legally mandated punishments or disciplining children. When Julian speaks of giving to the poor he embraces the “paradox” of giving to the unworthy, though he notes that we must not ignore “the poor who go about in our midst, especially when they happen to be of good character—men for instance who have inherited no paternal estate, and are poor because in the greatness of their souls they have no desire for money” (Julianus 1954, II, 290a). The truly magnanimous individual cares for all, but the well born and the philosophically inclined have a *special* claim on his attention. When Julian talks of why we should condemn those who ignore the poor, or blame the gods for

their plight, he does not reprove their lack of humanity, but cites the more mundane vice of "insatiate greed." As with Aristotle and Seneca, it is individual virtue, deployed to attain happiness and the most choiceworthy life, that motivates giving. Julian's immediate concern with the neglect of the poor by the upholders of Roman tradition centers on the rise of Christianity:

for when it came about that the poor were neglected and overlooked by the priests, then I think the impious Galilaeans observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy. And they have gained ascendancy in the worst of their deeds through the credit they win for such practices. For just as those who entice children with a cake, and by throwing it to them two or three times induce them to follow them, and then, when they are far away from their friends cast them on board a ship and sell them as slaves . . . they have led very many into atheism. (Julianus 1954, 305c-d)

Philanthropy is, quintessentially, the attitude of the gods toward mortals, and thus, as Norman Baynes put it, "when subjects speak on the streets or in the public baths—wherever it may be—of that which they desire from their emperor, the one word is *philanthropia*" (Baynes 1955, p. 55). As a good emperor, Julian attempts to let this philanthropy flow from the top down, and by obliging his lesser magistrates to follow his example he hopes to secure the noble traditions of Greece and Rome against the impiety of the Christians. Even when provoked by the sophistries of the Christians, philanthropy should shine through and strive to cure them, "even against their will, as one cures the insane, except that we concede indulgence to all for this sort of disease. For we ought, I think, to teach, but not punish, the demented" (Julianus 1954, 37: III, 424a).<sup>6</sup> By his piety and philanthropy, expressed in reason and moderation, Julian hoped to retrieve even those fallen into atheism, regardless of their social and material station.

He failed. By the middle of the fourth century the momentum gathered by the Christian movement easily withstood the short-reigned apostate, and Christian intellectuals began to turn the works of the classical tradition against themselves. Such, at least, was the intent of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, who recast Cicero for Christian use. Thus, he says, while meditating on Psalm 39, "it has come to my mind to write on the duties. . . . And as Cicero wrote for the instruction of his son, so I, too, write to teach you, my children" (Ambrose 1979, I, 7). A bit of Ambrose's popular etymology is illuminating here. He asks, having introduced the subject, whether *officium* is a proper word for Christians to reflect on, concluding that such a discussion is not only supported by scripture, but "is not inconsistent with reason, since we consider that the word *officium* [duty] is derived from *efficere* [to effect], and is formed with the change of one letter for the sake of euphony; or at any rate that you should do those things which injure [*officiant*] no one, but benefit all" (Ambrose 1979, I, 8). The play on duty, effect, and injury introduces a subtle but important twist to Cicero's original. For

where Cicero's duties devolve upon us in virtue of our natural endowments and social status, Ambrose suggests that they derive from our relations to other people in general, in virtue solely of their status as human beings, created by God. The ordinary state of human beings, he goes on, is typically miserable and only rectified in the life to come, as in the example of Lazarus in Luke 16, "who endured evil things here, there found comfort." In fact, the great distinction between Christians and pagans is where they locate their true goods. Pagans value conveniences, resources, and wealth, while the Christians "state nothing useful but what will help us to the blessings of eternal life," and do *not* "recognize any advantages in opportunities and in the wealth of earthly goods, but consider them as disadvantages if not put aside, and to be looked on as a burden, when we have them, rather than as a loss when expended" (Ambrose 1979, I, 9). By themselves, these remarks are consistent with the popular Stoicism of Cicero's text, and thus with one strain of the tradition of reciprocity, but Ambrose does not stop here. He adopts Cicero's distinction between "the sort of duty that is called common and that called perfect" (Cicero 1961, I, 3; I have given a more literal translation) and identifies the common duties with those codified in the Decalogue, going on to cite that passage of Matthew where Jesus counsels the rich young man that "if thou wilt be perfect, go and sell all thy goods and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow Me" (Ambrose 1979, I, 11). Here we have Cicero's notion of a perfect duty being given both concrete content and divine ordination in terms of forsaking material gain and giving it to the poor, not as an expression of your own magnanimity, but because the poor are in need and the seeker after eternal life will wish to escape the entrapments of this world.

Ambrose carries his critique of pagan morality further in book three, where he attacks profit seeking at the expense of the public. To the merchant who says, "I have sown freely. I have tilled actively. I have gathered good increase . . . in time of famine I sell it, and come to the help of the hungry," Ambrose replies "thou collectest wealth from the misery of all, and callest this industry and diligence, when it is but cunning shrewdness and an adroit trick of the trade. Thou callest it a remedy, when it is but a wicked contrivance." Here the classical distrust of the retailer meets the Christian reversal of classical values. Citing both the Gospel of Luke and the Proverbs of solitude he concludes that "the gains of avarice have nothing to do with the rights of succession" (Ambrose 1979, III, 6). Those in need have a right to the fruits of nature. To insist on your own work as an entitlement to profit from the prevailing situation is duplicitous.

Nevertheless, Ambrose remains within the pale of classical culture. Thus, concluding his discussion of Christian duty, Ambrose naturally employs the traditional language of friendship, noting that a friend is "a partner in love, to whom thou unitest and attachest thy soul. . . . It is produced, not by money, but

by esteem; not by the offer of rewards, but by a mutual rivalry in doing kindness" (Ambrose 1979, III, 22). What makes Christian friendship different is the rejection of material goods in favor of the kingdom of God. It is still natural to desire the enjoyment of fellowship and mutual obligation, particularly now that it is freed from the taint of money. The mutual reciprocity of man and man, man and God, remains. Ambrose's identification of Christ's injunction to give to the poor with Cicero's notion of a perfect duty is a key step toward a novel concept of the virtue of giving. As in the case of Seneca, this is a view of human relations that did not see itself in conflict with the reciprocity of benefits. In order to develop our notion of charity as giving motivated by the plight of the stranger, *regardless* of our relation to that stranger, a markedly different account of the virtues will be necessary. A key figure in this transformation is Ambrose's younger contemporary, and sometime student, Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine's thought is notoriously protean, driven more often than not by the exigencies of ecclesiastical and doctrinal dispute. A detailed and secure unraveling of the strands of his moral thought would be far too ambitious for the present occasion. Nonetheless, the key text and its centrality to Augustine's thought is not in doubt. In 425, just five years before his death, Augustine composed for the nineteenth book of his *City of God* the following simple, but devastating argument:

For though the soul may seem to rule the body admirably, and the reason the vices, if the soul and reason do not themselves obey God, as God has commanded them to serve Him, they have no proper authority over the body and the vices. . . . It is for this reason that the virtues which it seems to itself to possess, and by which it restrains the body and the vices that it may obtain and keep what it desires, are rather vices than virtues so long as there is no reference to God in the matter. For although some suppose that virtues which have a reference only to themselves, and are desired only on their own account, are yet true and genuine virtues, the fact is that even then they are inflated with pride, and therefore to be reckoned vices rather than virtues. (Augustine 1948a, XIX, 225)

From seemingly unexceptional premises Augustine concludes not merely that the classical tradition of moral thought is confused or defective in various places, but that it is vicious, root and branch, and to the extent that its followers succeed in internalizing and acting upon its recommendations they make themselves, albeit splendidly, damnable in the eyes of God. For it is a matter of justice, "whose office it is to render to every man his due" (Augustine 1948a, XIX, 4), that we acknowledge the sovereignty of God. Failure to do so is unjust. God's law for us is clear in Matthew 22:37-40, where Jesus states unequivocally that the first mandate of the law is to love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, while the second is to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

But the classical virtues, inflated as they are with pride, fail to acknowledge this law. They are self-serving, willful, and godless, hence they and all their fruits are unjust.

Peter Brown rightly sees this brusque condemnation as “the last round in a long drama” (Brown 1967, p. 302), and a full account of Augustine’s moral theology and its relation to the classical tradition would qualify it in myriad ways.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the argument itself stands as the cornerstone of the theology of the subsequent 12 centuries in the west and remains central to the moral vision of many in the Christian tradition (cf. Davis 1991). Jesus, on this account, delivered the new law, superseding the old law of the Hebrew Bible and establishing thereby the true church, entry into which is through faith, which comes as a free gift from God. What will become the orthodox understanding of this grace, the doctrine being laid down by Augustine, insists that it alone makes possible the love of God and neighbor that the Lord demands.

Recent interpreters have focused on the conflict between *agape* and *eros*, charity and erotic love, but for many reasons this seems misguided. It is more fruitful to think, with Augustine, in terms of the transformation of the individual needed to recognize the propriety of God’s new law, for the problem is not that each and every pre-Christian was a creature of pride, bent on his own virtue and the enjoyment of that virtue’s rewards. It is, rather, that the noblest and most praiseworthy of pagans is doomed to fail in his quest for happiness by an inability to feel, and thus to perceive the truth about his relation to others. The preeminent example of the need for the transformation worked by grace is Augustine himself. On the brink of his conversion he is all but persuaded of the intellectual and the moral superiority of Christianity; this is no longer the problem. “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet,” he had prayed, but “the day had now come when I stood naked to myself, and my conscience complained against me: ‘Where is your tongue?’ . . . I threw myself down somehow under a certain figtree, and let my tears flow freely. . . . ‘Why not now? Why not an end to my impure life in this very hour?’ ” Why not indeed? But the choice cannot be made unaided, by Augustine himself:

As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again “Pick up and read, pick up and read.” At once my countenance changed, and I began to think intently whether there might be some sort of children’s game in which such a chant is used. But I could not remember having heard of one. I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find. For I had heard how Antony happened to be present at the gospel reading, and took it as an admonition addressed to himself when the words were read: “Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow

me." . . . with a face now at peace I told everything to Alypius. (Augustine 1992, *Conf.* VIII, 12)

He is turned around, converted in the literal sense of the word, and he is now able to see what he should do. The androgynous voice floating into the garden comes from the Holy Spirit and renders Augustine capable, at last, of hearing and acting upon what his intellect already tells him. His internal conflicts are healed, and it now becomes natural and easy to perceive what needs to be done and make the decisions necessary to that end.

Once his conversion is effected Augustine becomes capable of recognizing that true virtue does not stem from the desire for individual attainment and happiness, but from the desire to serve his neighbor that flows from the love made possible by grace. As he wrote not long after his conversion:

temperance is love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God; fortitude is love bearing everything readily for the sake of God; justice is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man; prudence is love making a right distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it. (Augustine 1948b, XV)

Grace imparts love of God, and thus the preeminent desire to do God's bidding. God commands not merely good works, but love of the neighbor, and this, on Augustine's account, constitutes a qualitative and unbridgeable gap between the motives and actions of pagan and Christian. The relevant distinction is not institutional allegiance, but the difference in heart and soul between the person who has received grace, now capable of genuine moral discernment, and the one who still labors under the constraints of sin. The Stoics were, it now appears, on the right track, but without an awareness of God's law they could not coherently articulate the ties that bind us to the most distant Mysian, mediated as they are through the creative and providential activity of God. The particularities of our place in time and space will modify what we can do for strangers, and hence qualify the blame that accrues to our failures, but in principle everyone is our neighbor, and we are bound and beholden to do what we can for them in this life, up to and including the sacrifice of ourselves and our immediate loves. This is perfect virtue. Anything less is mundane and tainted by our own self-interest.

### **The Appearances and the Realities: Occasions for Giving in the Medieval Context**

Michel Mollat, the preeminent student of medieval poverty and its relief, writes that the uniquely Christian argument for poor relief "derived straight from the Gospels: Christ is found in the poor; we possess earthly goods only to

administer them; all excess belongs to the poor; alms wipe away sin, but God cannot be corrupted by charity; it is the duty of all Christians to give alms" (Mollat 1986, p. 39). But the reality is much more complex. Medieval thought on giving is fluid and responsive to changes in the social and intellectual context. In illustration, I shall comment briefly on the monastic tradition, an influential English lord and his milieu, the movement initiated by St. Francis of Assisi, most famous of high medieval saints, and Thomas Aquinas's attempt to come to grips with all this in the *Summa Theologica*, his self-described manual for beginners.

About the time Augustine pens the nineteenth book of his *City of God*, John Cassian, in a religious house in Marseilles, writes that the earliest monks:

men of perfect life, were, if I may say so, a stem from which grew many flowers and fruit—the hermits. Everyone knows the founders of this way, Abba Paul and Antony . . . this second way of perfection sprang out of the first. Its followers are called anchorites, that is *withdrawers*. They have not remained satisfied with defeating the attacks which the devils secretly plan in human society, but have been ready to meet them in open war. (Cassian 1958, 18, 6)

The image of monk as warrior is central, for although the great figures of monastic tradition are typically well versed in Augustine's thought, true perfection expresses itself not in the doing of good works, but in encountering the temptations of the devil and proving your fealty to your lord. The most influential training manual for this battle against God's opponents, as far as western Europe goes, is the *Rule* of St. Benedict, composed sometime in the sixth century and given great impetus in the seventh by the spiritual authority of Gregory the Great.<sup>8</sup> The follower of Benedict internalizes his love of God by climbing the ladder of humility, giving up his own will in obedience to his abbot, "bearing injuries and adversity with patience. But more: Struck on one cheek they offer the other," until they reach the point "when the monk's inward humility appears outwardly in his comportment," at which point the monk "will quickly arrive at the top, the charity that is perfect and casts out all fear. And then the virtues which he first practiced with anxiety, shall begin to be easy for him, almost natural, being grown habitual" (Benedict 1958, 7). For the monastic, charity is the perfection of virtue, the service out of love for God and the neighbor that comes with the gift of faith. The monk works to internalize this in his struggles against the temptations thrown up by the forces of evil.

Among the 70-some precepts enumerated in rule four are "to relieve the poor, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick, to bury the dead, to help those that are in trouble, and to comfort the afflicted," but they are explicitly "instruments of spiritual progress," and "the best place to practice these things is the monastery with its seclusion—provided that we remain steadily in the community and do not leave it" (Benedict 1958, 4). Although the office of almoner emerged well



before the twelfth century, his special duty is not mentioned by name in the rule. Almsgiving, as a practical activity, may be a duty, but it is not the attainment of perfect charity sought by those who enter the lists of spiritual combat.

This is not to say that the monasteries had no impact on charitable giving, or that they did not teach the duty to relieve the poor. Quite the opposite, for "the brutal reality of poverty and greed contradicted the ideal of the Sermon on the Mount" (Mollat 1986, p. 42). Within the church the monastic houses in particular considered assistance to the poor "an evangelical obligation," that enjoined the almoner not merely to aid the poor and ill who came to him, but in some cases "to make a weekly tour of the township to seek out any who were sick and in need of food or medicaments" (Lawrence 1989, p. 122). The church could sustain this welfare because religious opinion "considered that offering the material things of this world to God's servants was an act of piety deserving salvation," which meant that "any act of mortal sin was an occasion for a devout man to make a gift of atonement. . . . Benedictine abbeys and cathedral churches were the chief beneficiaries" (Duby 1962, p. 174). The church was expected to devote its material resources to the care of the community, and those suitably endowed were expected to give, and they intended those gifts to secure their own spiritual, as well as physical, well-being. In an important sense the spiritual power derived from combat with demons, and stored up in the monasteries, could be circulated to protect the spiritual welfare of the rich, whose alms to the monasteries made it possible both for the monks to continue their battles and give succor to the poor. Richard Southern, discussing this system of circulation, cites a rousing passage from the twelfth-century chronicler Orderic Vitalis:

Look carefully at the things which are provided for you by trained monks living in monasteries under a Rule: strenuous is the warfare which these castellans of Christ wage against the Devil; innumerable are the benefits of their struggle. . . . I earnestly advise you to build such a castle in your country, manned by monks against Satan. Here the cowed champions will resist Behemoth in constant warfare for your soul. (Southern 1970, p. 225; ellipses mine)

The evangelical duty embedded in the *Rule* plays an important unifying factor in the larger spiritual and material economy of the time. The great fathers of the Latin church—Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory—may have set the stage for the transformation of classical into Christian virtue, but the overarching framework remains the reciprocal exchange of goods articulated by Mauss and evidenced in Veyne.

Duby captures this ethos of spiritual and material reciprocity particularly well in his account of William Marshal's last hours, in April of 1219. This regent of England, who rose from humble beginnings to wield immense power, leaves

to his second son a seignury in Normandy "so that unlike so many disinherited second sons he will not envy and torment and execrate his older brother" (Duby 1985, p. 8). The third son's place in the church has been secured, at considerable expense, the fourth given a small manor, and the fifth an income in trust. The daughters, all but one, are properly and advantageously disposed and it is now left to divest himself of his liquid assets, "whose weight risks dragging his soul down to hell. That is what the churchmen keep telling him. For they are here now, increasingly numerous, drawn by this windfall" (Duby 1985, p. 17). Distribute it he does, first to his own people, then to the lords and prelates who, he assumes, will remember his largesse in working for the continued stability of his family, and finally in death, he presides over a final meal, "as master of the house, the seigneur who is never better loved than when he distributes bread and wine. He has told his heir that he desires that one hundred poor men be present and fed . . . there are on this day many more than are needed" (Duby 1985, p. 23). To be mindful of others, and of your duties to God and to those less fortunate is part and parcel of a noble's self-interest, and failure in this regard will cause you to suffer duly. In the comparatively small world of Anglo-Norman nobility William may well have heard tell of Alais of Soissons, who "after dining exceedingly well on the first day of Lent . . . lost the use of her tongue and became infirm throughout her body, and, what was worst of all, after that she had no understanding of the things of God and lived the life of a pig" (Benton 1970, pp. 209-10). In a world where all our acts have consequences both natural and supernatural it is a mark of wisdom to do as much as we can to secure the circulation of goods in our favor. In this way there is a constant exchange going from monk to noble to the indigent poor, watched over by God.

But even as William Marshal lay dying things had begun to change. In January or February of 1206 an exasperated father brought his rebellious son before the local bishop, insisting that if he would not renounce his ways he should at least renounce all claim on his patrimony. Appearing before the bishop the well-to-do young man, not quite 25, "did not wait for any words nor did he speak any, but immediately putting off his clothes and casting them aside, he gave them back to his father. Moreover, not even retaining his trousers, he stripped himself completely naked before all" (Habig 1973, p. 241). So began the spiritual career of Francis of Assisi. A generation earlier the attempt of Peter Waldo and his followers to embrace poverty and lay preaching got them hounded out of Lyon, but from this dramatic beginning Francis went on to become the most famous saint of the high Middle Ages. The order of "little brothers" that he founded became wealthy and powerful to the point of internal fracture, and like never before the source of contention was money.<sup>9</sup> But while visionary, Francis's new understanding was not without its precursors.

In the earlier Middle Ages alms circulated from the landed few to the monasteries and cathedral churches, who added to the work of divine service

the responsibility for assisting the publicly needy. The solitary hermits who chose poverty and life in the forest were rarely in a position to help the needy. Lay giving, as in the example of William Marshal, was "ostentatious by design, and pride and condescension were integral components of the act of giving" (Mollat 1986, p. 71). But with the growth of a money economy and the revival of city life came new reflections on the status of the poor, returning self-consciously to the central texts of Augustine and the other fathers to unite Christian charity with justice for the poor. The rich now have a "duty" to give, not simply as a hedge against hell, but as a matter of proper Christian intention.<sup>10</sup> These reflections bore fruit in various public responses to the calamities of the twelfth century. Mollat notes the upsurge in founding or refurbishing hospitals, the establishment of a royal almonry in France, and the appearance of charitable associations in the cities (Mollat 1986, pp. 87-101)—all this as part of a rethinking of Christian charity and its place in the social and economic systems.

Where the Benedictines of earlier days stored up spiritual power through battle with demons, the followers of Francis made their spiritual ascent by forsaking all forms of wealth, but especially money, and dedicating themselves to preaching and to serving the poor. Whatever its relation to the official lives of Francis, the life attributed to his earliest followers is striking for its emphasis on the role of money in his conversion.<sup>11</sup> Thus it opens, "the father of the blessed and evangelical man Francis was named Peter, the son of the merchant Bernadone; and he was absorbed with making money" (Habig 1973, p. 890). The saint they describe as:

a spendthrift, and all that he earned went into eating and carousing with his friends. . . . he spent much more on his clothes than was warranted by his social position. He would use only the finest materials. . . . Although a merchant, he squandered his wealth, never counting the cost. One day when he was in the shop selling cloth, a beggar came in and asked for alms for the love of God; but Francis was so intent on the business of making money that he gave nothing to the poor man. (Habig 1973, pp. 891-92)

It is involvement with money for money's sake that characterizes Francis before his conversion, and his subsequent rejection of money is linked to a new understanding of the demands of the gospel. We do not sell all we have and give it to the poor in order to take on the demons in the desert, but in order to minister directly to the needy, whose demand on us is pressing for no other reason than that they are Christ's poor.

The work of Francis and his older contemporary, Dominic, "represent something new in the history of poverty" (Mollat 1986, p. 119). New is the identification with the poor, not merely as recipients of soul-saving alms, or Cassian's voluntary "withdrawers," but as the objects of God's highest affection and hence a reprimand to all who are not committed to their love and care. But

Francis combines love for the poor with two other notions that are key to understanding the novelty of his position. First, he feels compelled himself to live the life of the poor. In all the early biographies Francis insists on the poorest of garments, eschews shoes, and embraces extremes of hunger and discomfort. From early on his followers are forbidden to take money or own real property and must rely on the goodness of others for their daily needs. In the final version of his *Rule*, in 1223, Francis insists that even if the brothers allow spiritual friends to provide their barest necessities, "this does not dispense them from the prohibition of receiving money in any form," going on to permit them to accept what they need as wages, when they work, "except money in any form. And they should accept it humbly as is expected of those who serve God and strive after the highest poverty" (Habig 1973, p. 61, rules 4 and 5). Second, Francis insists that whatever good the friar performs comes not from him, but from God. In itself this is hardly a novel idea, but Francis takes it to a new intensity, not only in his own life, but in the *Admonitions* collected after his death and kept as a Franciscan book of guidance. Thus in the 12th admonition the test of the truly religious is that "his lower nature does not give way to pride when God accomplishes some good through him, and if he seems all the more worthless and inferior to others in his own eyes" (Habig 1973, p. 83). The sentiment is reiterated in the 17th, which extols "the religious who takes no more pride in the good that God says and does through him, than in that which he says and does through someone else" (Habig 1973, p. 84). This is still clearer in the 25th admonition, lauding "that friar who loves his brother as much when he is sick and can be of no use to him as when he is well and can be of use to him" (Habig 1973, p. 86). Neither Aristotle nor William Marshal would himself be so callous as to abandon a sick friend, for Francis's point is that Christian brotherhood extends to "all peoples, tribes, families and languages, all nations and all men everywhere, present and to come" (Habig 1973, p. 51). Here, as nowhere before, the virtues reinterpreted as forms of Christian love are conjoined with the call to work actively and in your own person on behalf of the most needy.

The novelty, not to mention the difficulty of living out this ideal is nowhere more evident than in the subsequent history of Franciscan poverty. Within a generation of Francis's death in 1226, the order had become the object of severe criticism from outside, and inside the Franciscans bickered over discipline, government, and, most especially, over the requirements of poverty. Within a century internal factions turned militant, and argument turned to outright rebellion. On May 7 of 1318 Pope John XXII had four recalcitrants burned in Marseilles for their refusal to submit (Moorman 1968, p. 311). In subsequent years various groups were persecuted as heretics and even within the order divisions proliferated to accommodate competing ideals. But this fascinating

story goes well beyond the limits of this essay. To conclude I turn to the remarkable *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

It is common to treat the work of St. Thomas as a watershed in the thought of the Middle Ages, and in a sense this is correct. The *Summa*, though unfinished, is a masterpiece of synthesis, argument, and organization. In later centuries it became the centerpiece of much mainstream Catholic thought. Nonetheless, identifying medieval thought with the work of St. Thomas risks obscuring the innovative, in many ways radical, qualities of Thomas's work. For Aquinas wishes both to continue the tradition of Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory and take advantage of the now inescapable legacy of Aristotle, recovered for the Latin West only within the century. The body of Aristotle's work was little known in the early Middle Ages, and it burst on the culture of the emerging universities like a dam breaking. Teaching Aristotle's natural philosophy was banned at Paris in 1210, and the ban was renewed in 1215 and again in 1231, but by 1255 its study was required by the statutes of the university (Kretzmann et al. 1982, pp. 70–73). The institutional impact of Aristotle, not to mention the intellectual excitement of the work, made it more than expedient that his place within the teachings of the faith be clarified and integrated, particularly in the teaching of young clerics. Thomas undertook this in his various commentaries, disputed questions, and the *Summa contra Gentiles*, but nowhere more deeply than in the *Summa Theologica*.<sup>12</sup>

The *Summa Theologica* takes for its architectonic the derivation of all things from God's creative act and the manner in which creation reflects the perfection of that act. Most of nature, of course, reflects this simply by behaving as it was designed, though humanity, as a result of disobedience, fell away from God, and its perfection is only realized in the return to God made possible through grace. This structure falls naturally into three parts: The nature of the created order in general; the nature of human action, both in its perfection and in its defect; and the steps by which a fallen humanity may be brought back to God. In the process of return all aspects of man's created nature are perfected, including the senses, leading naturally to his discerning things as they are and treating them as they should be treated, and indeed "this is effected by charity which operates consent in us men. Wherefore even the perfection of the senses consists radically in the perfection of charity" (Aquinas 1989, 2a2ae, 184, 1 ad 1). In good Aristotelian fashion, there is a continuity in the perceptions, emotions, and habits that incline us to act, so when charity reshapes the senses, it allows them to grasp what was previously obscured. At the same time the emotions are brought into line and the virtues transformed so that the truly good may be seen and done. In this fashion Aquinas melds Augustine's transformation of the virtues with Aristotle's account of how those virtues work.

Another aspect of Thomas's Aristotelianism is his tendency toward the spe-

cific. Thus if charity is the general state toward which the Christian moves, it may have specific forms, so that "we may consider a threefold perfection. One is absolute, and answers to a totality not only on the part of the lover, but also on the part of the object loved, so that God be loved as much as He is lovable." This sort of perfection is only possible for God, who is infinitely lovable and also the only being capable of infinite love. A second form of perfection in charity would be to love God as much as the lover, given his created nature, is capable, but "perfection such as this is not possible so long as we are on the way, but we shall have it in heaven." It is not possible on earth because we are constantly being distracted from the love of God by our own concerns and the concerns of those around us. But despite the fact that these two forms of perfection are not available in this life, we can achieve the love of God that disposes us to remove from our affections "all that is contrary to charity, such as mortal sin," as well as "whatever hinders the mind's affections from tending wholly to God." This is the perfection appropriate to human life in this world, though Aquinas goes on to point out that charity is possible, and when achieved it is worthy, even when it is not perfect, "for instance in those who are beginners and in those who are proficient" (2a2ae, 184, 2).

If perfection is found in charity, it is still necessary to discover what charity is, and how it relates to human interaction. For Thomas, the answer is that "charity is the friendship of man for God" (2a2ae, 23, 1). In good Aristotelian fashion, friendship seeks happiness through achieving the good for the friend. In the case of God, this is obedience to his law as communicated through Jesus. To be a genuine friendship, however, the interaction, and thus the communication must be continuous, and, in the sense that perfection is possible in this life, this friendship extends not only to our immediate friends, but to everyone in respect of God:

as when a man has a friendship for a certain person, for his sake he loves all belonging to him, be they children, servants, or connected with him in any way. Indeed, so much do we love our friends, that for their sake we love all who belong to them, even if they hurt or hate us; so that, in this way, the friendship of charity extends even to our enemies, whom we love out of charity in relation to God, to Whom the friendship of charity is chiefly directed. (2a2ae, 23, 1 ad 2)

Charity is first and foremost friendship with God, which becomes love of our friends for God's sake, and then love of those "belonging to him," which means all people, at all times. Thus we find ourselves naturally disposed to care for all humanity as a consequence of our charity.

Aquinas contrasts such charity with liberality. Liberality, as we saw earlier, deals specifically with money and its proper disposition. It is a part of justice only insofar as it is concerned with the appropriate distribution of goods

to others, and far from being the perfection of virtue, liberality rests on a friendship that is not "based on virtue, as though he were better than others, but that which is based on utility, because he is more useful in external goods, which as a rule men desire above all others. For the same reason he becomes famous" (2a2ae, 117, 6 ad 3). Liberality, by itself, may be related to charity, but only as a subordinate virtue that must itself be judged by the precepts of charity.

Almsgiving provides a more complex example of the melding of Augustinian with Aristotelian. Thus Thomas acknowledges seven forms of corporal almsgiving, "to visit, to quench, to feed, to ransom, clothe, harbor or bury," which go hand in hand with the spiritual alms, "to counsel, reprove, console, to pardon, forbear, and to pray" (2a2ae, 32, 2 ob. 1). To the extent that almsgiving is a part of charity, as opposed to an expression of pagan pride, it comprises both the spiritual and corporal duties that are due members of the community from their fellows. Here Thomas rejects reciprocity in the sense of Mauss. He insists, for example, that "to invite our friends and kinsmen . . . so that they may invite us in return" is unacceptable, "an act not of charity but of cupidity" (2a2ae 31, 3 ad 1). Nonetheless, almsgiving in practice must be subsumed under the general Aristotelian account of virtue as rational action in accord with nature and congruent with the mean. Thus, in addressing the question of whether one ought to give alms out of what one needs, Thomas concludes that "it is altogether wrong to give alms out of what is necessary to us" in the sense of being required for the maintenance of station and family. "For instance," he notes, "if a man found himself in the presence of a case of urgency, and had merely sufficient to support himself and his children, or others under his charge, he would be throwing away his life and that of others," albeit he qualifies this by granting that such sacrifice would be acceptable in

such a case as might happen, supposing that by depriving himself of necessities a man might help a great personage, and a support of the Church or State, since it would be a praiseworthy act to endanger one's life and the lives of those who are under our charge for the delivery of such a person, since the common good is to be preferred to one's own. (2a2ae, 32, 6)

We must, as a matter of the reason, exercise discretion in giving and acknowledge the ties of nature that lead us to prefer our near neighbors and family over distant neighbors. We must respond selflessly to the distress of even the stranger who suffers in our midst, but not to the extent of endangering ourselves and our charges, *except* in the case where the person to be helped is of particular importance to the community whose common good now resides in the spiritual realm.

Neither the unbridled self-sacrifice of Francis nor the studied reciprocity of the Stoic commonwealth, this alloy of Augustine and Aristotle on the virtues stands as a backdrop for charity in all of its forms. St. Thomas may serve as a

summary of the medieval consensus on giving not because he brings a single theory to its culmination, but because he succeeds in holding several strands of the tradition in a reasonably stable synthesis. Aquinas articulates the common wisdom that the sacrifice of Francis cannot be obligatory on all, while acknowledging it as an ideal to be applauded. For those incapable of such sacrifice, giving must be ordered by the doctrine of the mean found in Aristotle, interpreted in terms of the good represented by the church. When Dante, in the *Paradiso*, has Thomas extol the relation of Francis and Lady Poverty, whose “harmony and their glad looks, their love and wonder and their gentle contemplation, served others as a source of holy thoughts” (Dante XI, 76–78), he acknowledges one among many forms of life, all of which must be cultivated as long as Christians remain pilgrims in this world.

## Conclusion

I began with a dispute over the continuity of philanthropy from late antiquity into the Middle Ages. By and large I have sided with Veyne and his claim for the *discontinuity* of the classical with the late antique and medieval meanings of philanthropy. But there was still an important story to be told about philanthropy, charity, and their related vocabulary. This is the story I have tried to sketch, and it involved the spectrum of medieval thought, institutions, and common presuppositions. If there is a medieval consensus, St. Thomas represents it as well as anyone else, but it is important to recognize the continuing plurality of forms and understandings that underlie the medieval concept of philanthropy. While Thomas measured giving against the norms of nature and virtue, Benedict counseled his charges to climb the solitary ladder of humility. Francis left an example that stood in judgment against even Aquinas’s analysis. Whatever the dictates of practical reason, the plight of the poor *should* inspire the total sacrifice of Francis, and while failure to go as far as the saint may not be a moral failure, it points nonetheless to our spiritual limits. To do at least something, even for the furthest Mysian, is not just a duty, it should be a desire.

## Notes

1. Veyne uses the term “euergetism” which is derived from two Greek roots meaning “good” and “to do.” “Euergetism,” Veyne writes, “means private liberality for public benefit. The word euergetism is a neologism—nay, even a new concept—for which we are indebted to André Boulanger and Henri-I. Marrou. It was created from the wording of the honorific decrees of the Hellenistic period by which cities honored those persons who, through their money or their public activity, ‘did good to the city’ ” (Veyne 1990, p. 10). Veyne’s book was first published in 1976, in French; an abridged English translation appeared in 1990. See also Veyne (1987).

2. The evidence for ancient Greece and Rome is surveyed in Hands (1968). Jones



(1964) remains fundamental for the early centuries of the common era, while Constantelos (1991) takes the eastern empire into the Middle Ages, with considerable bibliography. For fascinating details of case studies in the medieval West, see Suzanne Roberts's chapter in this volume.

3. It is traditional to cite Aristotle by referring to the nineteenth-century edition of Immanuel Bekker. Although Bekker's text has been superseded, his consecutive numbering of pages and lines continues to be printed in almost all editions and translations, allowing users to find a text regardless of the edition.

4. "Altruism" appears to be a neologism introduced by Compté "to denote a devotion to the interests of others as an action-guiding principle" (Paul et al., eds. 1993, p. vii). It should probably be seen as part and parcel of the French critique of British liberal individualism that also motivated Durkheim and issued in Marcel Mauss's classic work on gift giving in traditional cultures. See Mary Douglas's forward to Mauss (1990).

5. References to Julian take as their standard the pagination of the 1696 edition of Spanheim, but this is problematic for some works, so in addition I have added the volume number of Wright's text, from which all my citations come. Thus (II, 289a-c) indicates Wright volume two, Spanheim 289A to 289C.

6. That this last is intended as a mark of Julian's philanthropy could hardly be lost on those who might remember the brutality of the last persecutions, particularly in the east, where market goods were sprinkled with the blood of pagan sacrifices, propaganda circulated to rouse the hatred of the mob and, as Robin Lane Fox puts it, "prostitutes were tortured to confess to Christian debaucheries, while bishops were directed to a new, invigorating life as keepers of the Imperial camels or stable boys for the Imperial horses" (Fox 1986, p. 596).

7. The secondary literature on Augustine is of oceanic proportions. Chadwick (1986) is an adequate introduction, with a sensible bibliography, though rather unhelpful on the specifics of philosophical argument. Look at Wetzel (1992) for a sensitive and philosophically sophisticated account of Augustine on grace, virtue, and freedom, with serious attention to the relevant bibliography.

8. Knowles (1969) is a popular, though authoritative, survey of the sweep of monastic history. Lawrence (1989) concentrates in more detail on the medieval west and brings the bibliography up to date. Straw (1988) is an important presentation of the spirituality of Gregory the Great.

9. Little (1978) explicitly relates these movements to an urban spiritual crisis under the advent of a profit economy. Morris (1989) provides further bibliography on all of these topics. Note particularly the works of David Knowles, R. I. Moore, M. D. Lambert, and Kajetan Esser.

10. In addition to the discussion in Mollat (1986, pp. 102-13), see the seminal essays in Chenu (1968), particularly 1, 6, and 7.

11. Habig's "omnibus" is a gold mine of sources with an exhaustive bibliography through 1969. Fleming (1977) is a systematic survey with an emphasis on the social and literary. Moorman (1968) is the standard history of the early Franciscans in English, but should be supplemented by the bibliography found in Morris (1989), particularly the works of Rosalind Brooke and David Knowles.

12. The standard way of referring to Thomas's *Summa* is by part, question, article, and section. Thus in my first citation below "2a2ae, 184, 1 ad 1" should be read "second part of the second part, question 184, article 1, response to the first objection." Although the French original appeared in 1950, Chenu (1964) remains an indispensable guide to Thomas's work as a whole. Weisheipl (1974) supplies the narrative, but there is no outstanding guide to the details of his thought, though many have tried. Of the more recent, Kenny (1980) is very readable.