

Vengeance: Sin or Virtue by Justin Killam

Vengeance, the act of taking revenge, is any action taken in return for an injury or offense. In today's world vengeance has come to be seen in a darker and less favorable light, as unlawful and a sin. The act is seen to include feelings of enjoyment in repaying another's offenses against you with more and usually escalating violence. Avengers take the law in their own hands and become vigilantes, putting their desires above any concern over consequences. True vengeance is a form of justice and may lead to this kind of unethical and unlawful behavior only if the avenger's intentions are not pure or in violation of the law. Virtuous vengeance is the action, through self defense or punishment, you take to protect yourself and God against further injury or offense. With the modern moral and ethical movement to a focus on obligation and duty, virtuous vengeance, being a part of justice, has become assimilated into the laws governing and protecting us. This is the cause of vengeance's now misunderstood meaning.

It is understandable, considering the modern popular opinion of what vengeance is, why people have a hard time accepting vengeance as a virtue. Virtues themselves are now misunderstood as they are seen as important only in regards to your personal religious spirituality and not in everyday life. Matters of philosophical ethics have become separated from spiritual morality. The teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas are specifically concerned with the importance of virtues in a combined spiritual and ethical morality or a moral theology. In his *Summa Theologiae*,

"Virtues were the mainstay of St. Thomas's moral teaching. He therefore studied them with care, drawing upon all the resources of philosophical and Christian tradition. For him, as for the ancients, virtue was the noblest of human, moral qualities; for moderns, on the contrary, the word connotes weakness, deformity, a kind of caricature." (Pinckaers 225)

The virtue of vengeance is explored and discussed in St. Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*, clarifying its true meaning and its place as a virtue.

St. Thomas discusses vengeance and explores it by answering the four questions, "1. whether vengeance is lawful; 2. a special virtue; 3. the way in which it is carried out; 4. those against whom it is to be directed." (Aquinas 115) Each question is discussed fully. First he puts forth reasons for and against a certain answer, then makes his conclusion, then concludes the argument by addressing each of his original points according to his conclusion. This shows his brilliance in rhetoric as he turns his original points, even the ones opposing his conclusion, into strong arguments to support his conclusion. By addressing issues that may be raised against his conclusions he dispels any doubt in his teachings.

The first question that St. Thomas discusses about vengeance is whether it is lawful or not. He comes up with a number of points against the lawfulness of vengeance. Vengeance belongs to God, not men, so any man taking vengeance is taking what belongs to God. God commands us to be content even among the wicked and to take vengeance is to not be content. Vengeance is achieved through punishment and the fear of future punishment, but the new law (of the New Testament) is a law of love, not of fear. The sins of a group are greater than that of one person and it is wrong to take vengeance on a group of people, so it is a greater wrong to take vengeance on an individual.

St. Thomas concludes that "vengeance is not in itself evil and unlawful." (Aquinas 117) What determines whether or not vengeance is lawful or not is the intentions of the avenger and his attitudes towards the act of avenging. Proper vengeance is lawful "if the intention of the avenger is aimed chiefly at a good to be achieved by punishing a wrongdoer." (Aquinas 117) If "his attention be

centered chiefly upon the evil done to the recipient and is satisfied with that, then the act is entirely unlawful." (Aquinas 117) The act of avenging a wrong must be done with the intent on safeguarding others from being wronged by the same person, not with the soul purpose of causing the wrong doer harm for the sake of seeing him inflicted with the same harm as he caused.

For the original points he made against vengeance being lawful St. Thomas makes the following replies. Men that take vengeance are not taking what is God's, but are enacting a God given power as long as they are acting within their station, thus a judge that sentences a guilty man to imprisonment is enacting vengeance within his station and is doing it lawfully. This keeps vengeance lawful, but limits who can do it to those that have the intentions of doing it right. We must be content even among the wicked, but only to the extent of ourselves, wrongs must not be permitted against God and neighbors. The new law is a law of love and fear is not needed to be instilled in those that live a good life according to the law, but it is needed for those that do not. This keeps the law of love, love for everyone including your enemy, in place, but allows good people to protect themselves. If a whole group sins then vengeance should be taken on the whole group unless there is a chance that they can be corrected, then only a select few should be punished so that the rest can learn. If only a few of a group has sinned then only they should be punished, but only if their punishment will do less spiritual harm than their wicked acts. I find the last point of this reply to be questionable. It leaves open the possibility for a community leader to abuse his powers and seems to be tainted with vengeance's default vice of inaction, which is discussed more fully later. It does, however, take into account the protection of the good community's spirituality, which is viewed by St. Thomas as being far more important than the sinner's punishment.

St. Thomas's second question about vengeance looks at whether vengeance is even a virtue at all. He points out that when an act is sufficiently covered by other virtues then there is no need for a special virtue for it and it seems that courage and zeal cover vengeance well enough. Also all virtues have specific vices that are opposed to them and vengeance doesn't seem to have any. This raises an interesting point of whether every action needs a virtue to govern over how to properly enact the action.

St. Thomas concludes that "virtues bring about a proper development of tendencies that are innate and that are included in natural law." (Aquinas 121) Innate tendencies, such as the tendency to protect yourself from what is harmful, therefore have corresponding virtues. The innate tendency that humans have against coming to harm is to defend themselves against it or somehow make sure that it doesn't harm them again. This is vengeance, so it is a special virtue. This also answers that not all actions need to be governed by a virtue, because not all actions are innate tendencies, so there is a limit of how many virtues are needed.

The most interesting aspect of this question comes when St. Thomas replies to the original points he made at the beginning of the question, in which he explores the relationship of vengeance with other virtues and vengeance's own vices. Courage doesn't govern the action of vengeance, but it will help it by removing the fear of the action that must be done or some other fear that may be interfering with the successful completion of vengeance. Zeal helps vengeance by giving you a great love for God, which, with the virtue of charity, imparts a charitable sense of personal wronging when someone wrongs God. This demonstrates the influence of each virtue on each other. St. Thomas then explains that vengeance does have vices opposed to it. The default vice that opposes vengeance is inaction, or letting a wrong go unpunished. This vice allows the wicked to go unpunished for their deeds and allows them to continue to do harm against good people and God. It is the vice directly opposed to vengeance as it deters it's completion. The second vice is even more interesting, the vice

of cruelty or ferocity. It is this vice that has caused vengeance to take on the meaning that it now holds for most people. Vengeance can too easily become a personal vendetta in which the aim is not to protect yourself or someone else from the wrong, but to inflict that wrong, and more, back upon the sinner.

St. Thomas's next two questions deal with concerns over vengeance and its clarification, now that it has been concluded that it is a special virtue. Question three is concerned with the extent of punishment that should be given to a wicked person and if punishment can be handled similar to conventional punishment. It deals with concerns about the death penalty and whether or not punishment should be publicized. St. Thomas concludes that punishment should be carried out by taking away what the sinner holds most important and that the severity of the punishment should be based on the severity of the sinner's crime. People that commit heinous crimes, such as murder, can lawfully be punished by the taking of their life. Concerned with the effect publicized punishment might have on good people, St. Thomas replies that the fear it generates in those that are wicked will scare them into not sinning and that good people shouldn't be effected. "The punishment terrifies more than sin attracts." (Aquinas 125). In this question St. Thomas seems to be concerned with clarifying vengeance and reaffirming it as a virtue directly related to justice, even when the appearance of punishments seem dreadful, such as the death sentence. Publicized punishment may appear to onlookers to be harsh and St. Thomas affirms that although the action of vengeance may be harsh, it lawfully does so only when it has to and is not tainted by the vice of cruelty.

If someone is punished for something he has done involuntarily, does he deserve to have vengeance enacted upon him, or is he innocent? This fourth and final question seeks to defend the seemingly unjust use of vengeance, by God, to punish those who were indirectly involved with some wrong. God has punished the children of wrong doers and nations for the sin of one man. Other arguments include the punishment of someone because of events that are out of one's control, such as disease or another's sins or when someone is forced into committing a sin. Ignorance is also looked at, whether it is a suitable reason to be excused of punishment, for committing a sin unknowingly is not willfully committing it. It would seem that to be punished for something that you are not directly responsible for, because you didn't will it to be so, but it happened because of forces outside your control, would be unjust. Unfortunately that view would put God in a position of being unjust, and that cannot be so.

St. Thomas answers the question by concluding that the purpose of punishment is not just a repaying of past sins, but that it must also prevent future sins from happening. Thus all punishments, even seemingly unjust ones, happen for a greater good. God punishes the children or nation of a sinner so that the sinner may be punished through them, so that they will not imitate his sin and so that families will keep each other from sinning. Ignorance is not a reasonable excuse to not be punished simply because in the punishment the person learns not to do it again and being forced into a sin by fear is not truly involuntary, only partially so and must be punished. St. Thomas assures us that the punishment of someone who has involuntarily sinned or was in some way a part of a sin, but not the direct cause of it, always involves only a worldly privation, never a spiritual privation and that it is sometimes necessary for spiritual growth. Thus punishments of this kind never harm the person's soul, but are actually inflicted to insure its spiritual growth. St. Thomas's point is that God's actions are always for the greater good, "Seeing that spiritual goods are of supreme importance, while the temporal are of slight moment." (Aquinas 129)

It has been argued convincingly by St. Thomas Aquinas that vengeance is one of the virtues, "dynamic potentialities for carrying out noble action," (Pinckaers 224) and is lawful if the intentions

of the avenger are pure. The applications of it being a virtue have been explored and clarified, including its relations with other virtues, such as courage and charity, and its opposed vices, inaction and cruelty. St. Thomas's arguments, along with the rest of his moral teachings, is concerned with the intentions involved with actions, not just the actions themselves. Modern society judges what it sees simply by what it sees. With the proper act of vengeance being assimilated into the laws of society and therefore hard to see, only the improper acts of vengeance, ones tainted by the vice of cruelty, are witnessed. This is the cause of the modern view of vengeance being an unlawful and sinful act, in which one who has been wronged wrongs the other for the sole reason of inflicting harm back on him. Unfortunately this view of vengeance as the simple act of harming another for wrongs they have committed obscures what its true purpose is. It, as a virtue and along with the rest of St. Thomas's moral teachings, attempts to lead us spiritually to "our complete happiness and the ultimate end of all our actions." (Pinckaers 227) The contribution to that ultimate end that vengeance makes is the protection of each other from harm and the sins of others. Thus vengeance cannot be anything but virtuous.

Endnotes

Aquinas, St. Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Blackfriars in conjunction with Byre & Spottiswoode, London, and McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York. Volume 41, 115-129.

Pinckaers, Servais. *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. The Catholic University of America Press. Washington, D.C. 224-227.