

Going Further Together

The Theological Virtue of Hope and Flourishing in Christian Communities

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Abstract: Christian communities are often discussed as communities of faith. In this article I consider how they are also communities of hope. Hope is highly relevant to communal flourishing as the theological virtue of hope aims at one's ultimate postmortem well-being. Yet, authors such as Augustine and Aquinas have described the theological virtue of hope as being for one's *own* eternal flourishing. Thus, theological hope can appear to be too solipsistic and otherworldly to contribute to communal flourishing in this world; however, I argue that theological hope can overcome these two difficulties. First, I show how theological hope is inherently interpersonal and social given its reliance on God. I then explain how hope contributes to the flourishing of Christians and Christian communities in this life. While much could be said about the benefits of hope, I only argue for two such benefits: 1). Hope helps us strike the balance of appropriate human agency in relation to God and others, avoiding prideful and slothful presumption and, 2) hope encourages us to strive for greater flourishing through the virtue of magnanimity. In short, I argue that Christians and Christian communities go further in flourishing when they hope together.

Keywords: Hope, Flourishing, Aquinas, Presumption, Magnanimity

1. Introduction

Christian communities are communities of faith.¹ While it is difficult to say exactly what faith amounts to, it is assumed that a Christian community somehow shares the same faith. I will start with this assumption in order to explore how the church is also a community of *hope* and how this hope contributes to individual and communal flourishing.

Aquinas calls hope the virtue of the wayfarer, a description which calls to mind the image of a pilgrim on a long and arduous path toward some important destination.² We continue on the difficult journey through this world in hope, pursuing the ultimate prize of our final and perfect happiness as union with God in the next. Hope provides encouragement, comfort, and insulation from despair on this earthly road, acting as “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Hebrews 6:19).³ Commenting on this passage in Hebrews, Aquinas says that just as an anchor “secures a ship in the sea, so too hope secures the soul in God in this world” (*In Heb* C6.L4.). Aquinas then cites Isaiah 40:31 to remind us that hope in God is not merely passive or consoling; it also brings energy and joy for “they who have hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, and they shall take wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (*In Heb* C6.L4.).

In hope, the wayfarer finds steadfastness and joy while still on the road to their final destination. And yet, the wayfaring image of theological hope can seem a rather solitary journey, one that rushes through this world to get to the next, making it appear too solipsistic and too otherworldly to contribute to the flourishing of Christian communities in the here and now.

For example, Aquinas follows Augustine in saying that “hope regards directly one’s own good, and not that which pertains to another” (*ST* II-II Q17A3). A Christian hopes for her *own* eternal happiness, so it seems that hope is only for herself. Likewise, hope’s supernatural destination seems all too otherworldly. The Christian wayfarer might ignore this world, placing all their hope in the next. Historically, critics such as Rousseau and Freud condemned Christian hope for this reason.⁴ Even contemporary theologian Timothy Jackson argues that hope for the

¹ For an overview of different views of faith see Bishop & McKaughan (2023). For defense of doxastic propositional faith see Malcolm & Scott (2022). For defense of non-doxastic faith see Howard-Synder (2018). For a recent discussion of faith and relational knowledge see Benton (2024).

² See e.g., *ST* II-II Q18A4.

³ Unless otherwise stated, all Bible translations are from the Revised Standard Version.

⁴ See e.g., Rousseau (1968) and Freud (2001).

afterlife undermines the work of charity in this world, such that postmortem hope “tempts us to hate life or love death” (Jackson 2010, 162).

Even if hope provides future individual benefit, the question remains: how does hope contribute to the flourishing of Christian *communities* in *this* life? I will try to answer this question by showing how theological hope can overcome the two difficulties of solipsism and otherworldliness. First, I will show that theological hope is not solipsistic, rather it is inherently interpersonal and social. I then turn to explain how hope contributes to the flourishing of Christians and Christian communities in this life.

While much could be said about the benefits of hope, I will argue for just two such benefits: 1). Hope helps us strike the balance of appropriate human agency in relation to God and others, avoiding prideful and slothful presumption and, 2) hope encourages us to strive for greater flourishing through the virtue of magnanimity. Before I turn to hope, I use Section 2 to briefly explain what I mean by flourishing. In Section 3, I explore the inherent social nature of the theological virtue of hope. In Section 4, I explain how theological hope can be expanded to include hoping *for* and hoping *in* other humans. Finally, in Section 5, I argue for the two benefits of theological hope described above.

2. Theistic Flourishing and Hope

Before we can discuss how hope contributes to the flourishing of Christian communities, we need a brief account of flourishing or well-being.⁵ When we ask about well-being, we are asking about basic prudential value, that is, that which is “non-instrumentally or ultimately good *for* a person” (Crisp 2025). But what provides prudential value?

The general split in theories of well-being has been between objective and subjective views. A subjective view claims that basic prudential value must involve some pro-attitude the subject holds toward a prudential good. E.g., a subjectivist might say that friendship is good for me only if I desire it. On the other hand, objectivism is the view that basic prudential goods do *not* require such a pro-attitude.⁶ E.g., an objectivist might say that friendship is good for me regardless of how I feel about it.⁷

A third option is the hybrid theory which attempts to capture the intuitions from both camps. For my purposes, I will assume (and not argue for) a hybrid theory of

⁵ I use the terms ‘well-being’ and ‘flourishing’ interchangeably.

⁶ Some subjectivist views include Heathwood (2006) and Tiberius (2018).

⁷ For objective list theory see Fletcher (2013); for a perfectionist view see Hurka (1993).

flourishing presented by Eleonore Stump. While her inherently theist view might be controversial outside of this context, within the discussion of how Christians and Christian communities flourish, the claim that God is involved in our well-being is less contentious.

According to Stump, there are two irreducible scales of prudential value.⁸ On the objective scale, a human person flourishes through union with the God of classical theism. This means that on the objective scale, the very highest flourishing for any human person is inherently theistic and relational. Union with God is fully consummated in the beatific vision, but it is still operative in earthly life as a function of charity and growing in the image of God. On this view, union with God comes in degrees on earth and in the beatific vision, the more in union, the more you flourish.

On the subjective scale, humans flourish when they receive the desires of their hearts. Desires of the heart are a function of what individuals care about and subjective in the sense given above since they are endowed with prudential value by our pro-attitudes. This means that what brings prudential value for *you* may not bring prudential value for *me*. It depends on what we care about. On this scale we flourish when our desires are fulfilled, and we get what we want. The more we desire something, the more prudential value is gained when we attain it. While an individual has innumerable desires of the heart at any given time, the deeper they are, the more important they are to our flourishing.

Stump combines these two scales in a novel manner through the Thomistic claim that the deepest desire of *every* human heart is union with God. Thus, whether they know it or not, all humans share at least one pro-attitude: "I desire union with God."⁹ On the Thomistic position every human's will is bent toward the good, and combined with the claim that God himself is Goodness, she endorses Augustine's famous phrase that all human hearts are restless until they rest in God.¹⁰

With this summary in mind, we can say that an individual gains prudential value through receiving any number of subjective desires of the heart *and* by growing in union with God. With some understanding of well-being in place, consider just one way hope is important on this account of flourishing. Even on a pre-theoretical understanding, hope is often recognized for its motivating effect.

⁸ I take Stump's view to be closest to what Wall & Sobel (2020) call a "robust hybrid theory." This is in contrast with hybrid theories such as Adams's (1999) "enjoyment of the excellent."

⁹ Stump argues that desiring God does not require something like affirming the proposition: "I desire the Christian God." She discusses different ways we can know and desire God in many places: Stump (2007); Stump (2010) Chapter 3; Stump (2018) Chapter 8; Stump (2022b) Chapter 6.

¹⁰ Stump argues that this deepest desire can be opaque. So, her position does not entail that every person knows that this is their deepest desire.

Many philosophers have commented on the agency-enabling function of hope. Luc Bovens suggests that hope “arouses a certain zeal” (Bovens 1999, 671). Victoria McGeer calls this powerful motivation the “energy of hope” (McGeer 2004, 105). Ariel Meirav writes about hope’s characteristic “good cheer, enthusiasm, and motivation” (Meirav 2009, 216). Catherine Rioux argues that hope plays a key role in motivating and rationalizing long-term difficult actions (Rioux 2022). If the general philosophical consensus is right, then hope is at least instrumentally valuable in attaining the desires of our hearts when our agency can help bring them about. If we hope to attain eternal happiness or further union with God, then hope should help us reach these goals.

However, I will focus more specifically on how theological hope can help bring about the objective value of union with God. In the next section, I start by explaining why theological hope is not solipsistic but actually inherently social and interpersonal.

3. The Theological Virtue of Hope as Interpersonal

In the contemporary hope literature, hope is usually discussed as propositional, i.e., hope that *p* obtains.¹¹ The rough consensus view is that one hopes for *p* iff they desire that *p*, believe *p* to be possible yet uncertain, and they take some “positively-toned ‘what-if’ attitude toward a future containing that outcome” (Martin 2020, 232).¹² E.g., if I hope to run a marathon then I desire to run the marathon, believe that it is possible yet uncertain, and find this belief-desire pair to be *encouraging* and positive somehow. Such propositional hope may be very individual. For example, my hope to run the marathon might not involve anyone besides myself.

In this article, I will rely on Aquinas’s understanding of the theological virtue of hope, and in this section, I will argue that unlike propositional hope, Aquinas’s understanding of theological hope is *necessarily* interpersonal and reliant on another. To avoid confusion, it is important to note that Aquinas understood hope as a passion *and* as a theological virtue. The two are importantly different, but they are similar insofar as they share a common definition. Aquinas defines the theological virtue of hope by referring back to the passion of hope: “as we have already stated,

¹¹ Cathy Mason says that the standard philosophical analysis of hope “takes hope to be a primarily propositional state: the paradigmatic case of hope is hope that some state of affairs obtains” (Mason 2021, 519).

¹² The best way to describe this third element is still up for debate. See e.g., Martin (2013), Calhoun (2018), Milona & Stockdale (2018), Rioux (2022), and Chignell (2023).

when we were treating of the passion of hope, the object of hope is a future good, arduous but possible to obtain" (*ST* II-II Q17A2).¹³

For something to be an object of hope on this fourfold definition it must first be a good which is desired. The object must also be something "future," or better yet, something unpossessed or unobtained. Like most philosophers, Aquinas does not think we can hope for things which we believe we have already obtained. On the opposite extreme is the limitation that an object of hope must still be *possible* to attain. Just as one does not hope for something they already have, so one does not hope for something they think they cannot attain at all.

Finally, Aquinas provides a condition less commonly found in the contemporary hope literature, that hope is limited to "arduous" [*arduum*] objects. While scholars debate the exact meaning of this term, I take it that something arduous is difficult to attain, such that it requires elevated effort, but it is also viewed by the agent as important.¹⁴ So, an arduous object is something worth the elevated effort required to achieve it, making it at least something *worthwhile*.

While the passion and virtue of hope share a common definition, explaining exactly how they interact for Aquinas is a surprisingly complex topic; however, since I am focused on resolving difficulties about the apparent solipsistic nature and otherworldliness of *theological* hope, I won't discuss this complicated issue here.¹⁵ Instead, I'll take just the most relevant difference between the two as a starting point. Unlike the passion of hope, the theological virtue is inherently social and not so clearly propositional. To see why this is the case, we need some understanding of what a theological virtue is in general.

The three theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity, and Aquinas says that they are "theological" because they are habits which perfect our intellect and will by orienting us toward God as our ultimate final end.¹⁶ Unlike Aristotelian acquired virtues, the theological virtues are not gained through human effort and habituation. Instead, all three are supernaturally infused instantaneously into a human by means of charity and the indwelling of a divine person—the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Thus, the

¹³ Since it is an important technical detail, I have altered the cited translation of *arduum* to 'arduous' rather than 'difficult.'

¹⁴ My interpretation is close to Bobier's (2020). See also Miner (2009) 217, Schumacher (2003), and Gauthier (1951).

¹⁵ On the passion of hope and its interaction with the theological virtue: *ST* I-II Q40, Pieper (1986), King (2002), Schumacher (2003), Miner (2009), King (2012), Lamb (2016), Bobier (2017), and Bobier (2020).

¹⁶ *ST* I-II Q62A2.

¹⁷ See Stump (2011) and Pinsent (2012) for more. See *ST* I-II QQ62-65 for more on infused virtues.

theological virtues, which oriented us toward God, are gained by supernatural and *social* means, i.e., through a relationship with God.

Even though they are infused together instantaneously and are never possessed apart, each theological virtue is distinct and has a unique function. David Elliot summarizes their individual functions like this: “faith knows God as first truth and charity loves God as the universal good...” but “hope loves God as our personal good – namely, as our perfection and beatitude” (Elliot 2017, 7). Aquinas describes theological hope as the “stretching forth of the appetite towards an arduous good,” and in this case, the arduous good is union with God as eternal happiness (ST II-II Q17A3).

But doesn’t hope’s supernatural object pose a problem? As we saw, the object of hope must be cognized as *possible* to attain, yet finite humans cannot reach an infinite and supernatural good through their own power. Thus, eternal life seems impossible to hope for!¹⁸ The only way for theological hope to be possible is by relying on the help of another whose power *can* bring about this desired end.¹⁹ In this case, the help comes from God. We cannot hope to attain supernatural beatitude by natural means, but it is made possible “by means of the Divine assistance” (ST II-II Q17A1).

This makes the object of hope God twice over, once as our final end and once as our means to this end. For example, Joseph Wawrykow says that by the theological virtue of hope “one aspires to the God who beatifies, trusting in God’s aid” (Wawrykow 2012, 288). In other words, unlike propositional hope, theological hope is necessarily interpersonal. We can only hope to attain union with God by hoping *in* God for his help.

This means that theological hope is social in at least three ways. First because it is gained through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Second because the object itself is relationship with a person, for our eternal happiness is attaining and enjoying God. And finally, theological hope “attains God by leaning on His help in order to obtain the hoped for good” (ST II-II Q17A2). In short, we hope to attain God in the postmortem life by hoping *in* God during this life. It is only by divine assistance that we can attain something impossible to attain on our own. Unlike the passion of hope, supernatural hope is *essentially* social and interpersonal.

While the social aspect of hope is underdeveloped in the hope literature, it has not gone totally unnoticed. For example, McGeer emphasizes the social nature of hope in child development. She argues that it is only through adult caretakers socially scaffolding their child’s hope and agency that infants develop into human

¹⁸ Aquinas even says that it is rational and non-sinful for humans to despair of attaining heaven so long as they are despairing over obtaining this object *by their own power* (ST II-II Q20A1ad3).

¹⁹ See e.g., ST I-II Q40A2ad1.

agents (McGeer 2004). This social scaffolding is also known as joint or second-personal attention. McGeer argues that hope develops a child's agency through social interaction, highlighting the limitation of human agency. Just as humans require God's help to attain supernatural beatitude, infants can only attain their hoped-for natural ends through the help of their caretakers.

Adrienne Martin further formalizes the idea of interpersonal hope, describing it as "hope invested by one person in another" (Martin 2020, 229). Martin understands interpersonal hope as a kind of socially extended agency wherein we invest our hope in another person and rely on them for our hoped-for outcome. She describes interpersonal hope as a Strawsonian reactive attitude, one which takes a second-personal or participant stance.²⁰ E.g., Martin suggests that a father hopes *in* his daughter when he hopes that she will take advantage of the opportunities he provides for her. If the daughter wastes these opportunities, he feels the second-personal reaction of being let-down.

While not all hope is necessarily interpersonal, we have seen that the theological virtue of hope must be, and this has not been missed by Aquinas scholars. Andrew Pinsent argues that Aquinas's infused virtues, such as hope, are best understood from a second-personal perspective (Pinsent 2012 and 2020). Stump has argued for much the same position, seeing the infused virtues as "the flowering of second-personal connection with a personal God" (Stump 2011, 43).

Pinsent understands second-personal relatedness in this context as joint attention. Joint attention is "a triadic arrangement that involves two personal agents that share awareness of shared focus on some object, like a parent pointing out something to a child or playing a game with a child" (Pinsent 2020, 52). Joint attention is a kind of shared awareness *of* a shared focus. Importantly, it involves imitation and openness to being guided or directed by another.

Consider how this more general principle of the infused virtues applies to hope. Hope's unique object of joint attention is eternal happiness attained by God's help, and in hope we adhere to God "as the source whence we derive perfect goodness, i.e., insofar as, by hope, we trust to the Divine assistance for obtaining happiness" (*ST* II-II Q17A6). In hope we tend to God "as to a helper strong to assist" (*ST* II-II Q17A6). As Pinsent points out, "hope involves God not only as the difficult-to-obtain future object of one's attentive desire but also as one's present co-attending subject" (Pinsent 2020, 53).

Because God is both the end goal of our desire *and* the means by which we reach it, he is not remote and distant simply waiting for us to arrive at heaven's gate.

²⁰ See e.g., Strawson (2008).

Rather, he is with us in this life; the wayfarer travels alongside God and leans upon him. Pinsent emphasizes that hoping “involves the side-by-side metaphor of ‘leaning on’ God, consistent with the description of the Holy Spirit as the *paraclete* (John 14:16, 26) meaning the one called to one’s side” (Pinsent 2020, 53). We are not alone on the road of hope but only manage it by God’s coming alongside us.

I’ve argued so far that hope is not solipsistic as regards the human-divine relationship, for theological hope requires a relational openness and a willingness to be helped by God. However, hope still seems devoid of any human-to-human relationships; likewise, it appears focused entirely on the afterlife. In the next section, I will discuss the first concern and explain how hope makes room for other humans.

4. Theological Hope for and in Other Humans

4a. Hoping for Another in Charity

According to the logic so far, I only hope for *my* eternal happiness, not for anyone else’s. However, this seems overly exclusive, for surely we hope that others attain salvation! Aquinas considers just this question: “Whether one man may hope for another’s eternal happiness?” (ST II-II Q17A3).

Aquinas initially affirms Augustine by saying that hope is absolutely and directly about one’s own good “and not that which pertains to another” (ST II-II Q17A3). However, Aquinas explains that one *can* hope for another so long as charity/love for the other is presupposed. This is because in charity another’s good becomes our own good, for in love the other becomes “as his other self” (ST II-II Q17A3). In charity, I view *your* good as my *own*. Thus, Aquinas concludes:

if we presuppose the union of love with another, a man can hope for and desire something for another man, as for himself; and, accordingly, he can hope for another’s eternal life, inasmuch as he is united to him by love... (ST II-II Q17A3)

Aquinas thinks charity makes the other appear as another self because he understands charity as a function of friendship. In John 15:15 Jesus states that “No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends,” and Aquinas uses Aristotle to interpret what friendship means here. Friendship with God must be the best kind of friendship, a friendship of benevolence and fellowship.²¹ Charity as

²¹ Aquinas uses the terms ‘fellowship’ and ‘communication’ [*communicatio*] to describe this social aspect.

friendship with God extends to our neighbors, opening a way to hope for them as we hope for ourselves.

By presupposing charity hope can be for any and all of our loved ones, for their goods are adopted as our own goods.²² To use more Kantian language, through friendship and charity we build a kingdom of ends by building other's practical ends into our own. This makes the object of hope less individualistic, as Christians can at least hope *for* each other, and it goes some way in explaining how hope can help a Christian community flourish. If I am encouraged by hope and pursue my hopes in a practical manner, then I will be encouraged to pursue not only my own eternal flourishing but also my loved one's flourishing as well.

However, even if we can hope *for* others, it seems the interpersonal aspect of hoping *in* another is limited to hoping in God. Is there a way in which the theological virtue of hope also allows for interpersonal hope in other humans?²³

4b. Hoping in the Church: Individually and Collectively

Martin understands interpersonal hope (or hoping *in*) as a means of extending your individual agency. When you hope in another more becomes available to you; we saw this pattern in the theological virtue of hope. One can hope for things which are impossible by our own power by hoping in God. This same pattern can play out in a human register regarding earthly goods as members of a Christian community can hope in one another as a means of helping each other attain their earthly individual ends. E.g., I may hope to pay off excessive medical bills by hoping in my church community's generosity.

But the supernatural object of hope can only be brought about by God, so how can humans hope in other humans for such an object? It seems like hoping in other humans (or in the natural world more generally) for a supernatural end is disordered. For example, Augustine cites Jeremiah 17:5 as "cursed is he who puts his hope in a man" (Augustine 1999, 17). If I hope to attain supernatural beatitude through hoping in the natural power of my friend, priest, or church then I have

²² Note that this includes our enemies, see e.g., *ST II-II Q25A8*.

²³ Whether perfect happiness requires shared joy with other humans is an interesting question but one I will not address here. See Brown (2009) for a discussion of Aquinas's view of friendship in heaven.

misjudged how my supernatural object is attained, for there is no human power which can grant me my supernatural object on its own.²⁴

However, Aquinas concedes that even though we hope in God as the *principal* and efficient cause of our hope, it is “lawful to hope in a man or a creature as being the secondary and instrumental agent through whom one is helped to obtain any goods that are ordained to happiness” (ST II-II Q17A4). This concession is important as it opens the door to a proper ordering of hope in other humans as a means to attaining the supernatural end of eternal flourishing. While God is the principal cause of our hope, there is room for other humans within this hope.

Although hope’s final end is supernatural, Elliot argues that the proximate or instrumental end of earthly hopes can be referred to the final end of eternal happiness (Elliot 2017, 194).²⁵ Insofar as earthly ends are important for our final end of attaining supernatural beatitude, they can be built into our theological hope. Likewise, our hope in others can support our final goal of attaining the beatific vision. Even if we recognize that other Christians are only a *secondary* cause, we can still hope in them as an ordered part of the chain of causation that brings about our hoped-for object.

For example, Aaron Cobb and Adam Green suggest that the church “provides an enhanced context for enacting hope in God that allows one’s hoping to express itself most naturally and fully” (Cobb & Green 2017, 243). It is among fellow believers that we find encouragement, shared beliefs, and mutual love. If our flourishing is partly measured by union with God, and our church communities help grow us in this union, then we have reasons why we would hope in our fellow Christians and why hope would contribute to the welfare of the church community in general.

Cobb and Green also suggest that a hopeful church is more than a bundle of individuals hoping in each other as instrumental means for their own personal salvation. When the church hopes, it also hopes as part of a shared project (Cobb & Green 2017, 243). Hope is not just a point of commonality for those within the community, rather the community is built around the theological virtues, such that the community “serves the function of practicing faith, hope, and love” (Cobb & Green 2017, 244). A Christian might hope in their non-religious communities because they provide friendship and support. However, the church is unique since within an ecclesiastical community a Christian takes part in a shared project of growing in the theological virtues and ultimately entering the beatific vision.

²⁴ I am not suggesting that the church does not play a role in bringing humans to salvation, just that it cannot bring salvation by natural human ability alone. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for noting the need for clarification.

²⁵ See also MacDonald (1991).

Ideally, traveling the road of hope is a project that is shared with fellow wayfarers. While it is possible to walk the road of hope without human community, Cobb and Green emphasize the “extra pressure” such isolation puts on one’s faith and hope since there is no shared experience. They compare this situation to a “solider deep behind enemy lines who can maintain a confidence in the campaign of which he is a part but who would have a much easier time doing so if he could see his compatriots taking ground” (Cobb & Green 2017, 246). Traveling without human community is not impossible and God may of course provide special grace; however, in general, there is more confidence and joy in a shared project when it is done with the community.

If this is right, then the supernatural hope of the church can be both individual and collective. A Christian can find hope in the church as a community uniquely built to help her achieve her individual goal of attaining the beatific vision. However, the church itself, as a group, shares the project of attaining glory and eternal happiness. This shared project includes any instrumental ends which further the shared final end.

In this section, I have argued that through charity theological hope can make room for interpersonal hope in other humans, and that hope, as a shared goal for the afterlife, is important for communal flourishing. We can both hope *for* other humans and hope *in* other humans, already providing a reason why supernatural hope points us back to this world. In the next section, I detail two other ways in which hope supports the flourishing of Christian communities on the road to beatitude.

5. Interpersonal Hope on the Road: Hope and Flourishing

Even if humans can hope in each other, the theological virtue of hope may still appear too otherworldly given that its object of supernatural beatitude is only attainable in the next world. Yet, I hold that there are a number of ways in which the theological virtue of hope supports both individual and collective human flourishing in this world. In this section, I will argue for just two. Hope helps Christians and Christian communities flourish by balancing our agency in avoiding presumption and by goading us away from sloth and toward magnanimity.

5a. Presumption, Hope, and Agency

Perhaps the most famous vice of hope is despair. According to Aquinas, one despairs by denying the possibility of attaining one’s own salvation and supernatural

beatitude (*ST II-II Q20A1*).²⁶ However, Aquinas also posits a less discussed vice of hope called presumption, which comes in two varieties, what I will call prideful and slothful presumption. Each kind of presumption is an inordinate hope with an opposite failure regarding the balance of our agency and God's assistance in interpersonal hope.

In prideful presumption, a person hopes that they can attain a supernatural end *without* God's assistance by their own natural ability (*ST II-II Q21A1*). It is something like the Pelagian idea that we can earn our own way to supernatural beatitude without any need for divine assistance. Prideful presumption is an *overestimation* of one's own powers and agency, for no human can attain a supernatural end on their own. Prideful presumption leads one to reject the help they need; they fail to hope in God appropriately and lean on his assistance. Rejecting God's help, they try to travel alone.

In contrast, a slothfully presumptuous person hopes to reach their supernatural end without doing anything, such as repenting of sins (*ST II-II Q21A1*).²⁷ Thus, slothful presumption is an *underestimation* of our necessary contribution. In slothful presumption, one falsely assumes that God will take care of everything without us, that he will save without repentance and that he will give glory without merit.²⁸ This person stops walking the difficult road and assumes that God will get them to the destination without them having to make the journey.

This provides an important point. Given what has been said so far, one might imagine that theological hope leaves no room for human contribution, for the object of hope is supernatural and outside our own ability to reach it. While theological hope does rely on God, it is explained as assistance or leaning-on, leaving open the need for human contribution. While the hopeful wayfarer *leans* on God, she must still walk the road to glory. How should we understand this?

Without going into the controversial details of grace and free will, for Aquinas, human agency cooperates with the habitual grace of the indwelling Holy Spirit.²⁹ Through cooperative grace, humans contribute and merit along the way through the

²⁶ Hope is unique among the theological virtues as being flanked by vices on either side. See e.g., *ST II-II QQ20-21* and Pinches (2014).

²⁷ I cannot address issues of grace and free will here. However, Aquinas believes humans must contribute to their own salvation. E.g., Aquinas says it is impossible to "obtain pardon without repenting, or glory without merits." *ST II-II Q21A1*. For Aquinas on grace and free will see Stump (2003) Chapter 13; Long, et. al. (2016); Hoffmann (2022). For discussion of Aquinas and protestants on grace and merit see Colon-Emeric (2009) and Raith II (2014).

²⁸ See e.g., *ST II-II Q21A1* and A4.

²⁹ See e.g., Stump (2003): "Grace that is the source of meritorious acts a person performs is cooperating grace." 376

grace of the Holy Spirit.³⁰ Even in grace, human agency does not disappear in the interpersonal relationship of hope. God's assistance is exactly that, assistance in our own action. Virtuous hope avoids being overly dependent and overly independent in our agency.

This idea has been echoed in contemporary hope literature. Whether intentional or not, McGeer provides two versions of bad hope which mirror Aquinas's twofold presumption. What McGeer calls "wishful hope" is much like slothful presumption, for wishful hope is "a failure to take on the full responsibilities of agency in both formulating and working toward the realization of one's hopes" (McGeer 2004, 113). Likewise, McGeer's "willful hope" mirrors prideful presumption, for "willful hope, involves the reverse, an overdependence on our own powers of agency and a consequent underdependence on others" (McGeer 2004, 117).

McGeer concludes that good hope is "responsive hope" which recognizes one's dependence on others without being overly passive (McGeer 2004, 122). If Pinsent and Stump are correct, then this is a label which Aquinas could gladly accept as avoiding both kinds of presumption. Aquinas's virtuous hope falls between the vices of taking no responsibility and thinking we can do everything on our own.³¹ With this much said about presumption, we can reflect on how hope helps the flourishing of the Christian community in the present age, both on the level of the individual and the collective.

For individuals, theological hope invites us to acknowledge our dependence on others. Most properly, it requires us to be vulnerable to and reliant on God. However, as we saw, there is room to hope in other humans as well, and we often require their help. Insofar as we hope in other humans, we need to strike the same balance of agency, neither pridefully isolated nor slothfully ignoring the need to contribute. A church community full of virtuous hopeful members will rely on each other while contributing to the shared goal. This avoids both prideful isolation and slothful freeriding.

This same balance can be applied at the collective level regarding the church's need for reliance on God. In seeking God and eternal happiness as a shared project with a common aim, the church needs to avoid two pitfalls. The first is a prideful presumption in this world, losing sight of the final end by rejecting the humble need for assistance from God. Prideful presumption may play out in innumerable ways,

³⁰ For congruous and condign merit see *ST I-II Q114A3*. See also Stump (2003) Chapters 12 and 13; Raith II (2014).

³¹ Although Aquinas denies theological hope follows a mean in regard to its principal object (i.e., God and his assistance), theological hope can follow a mean "insofar as he either presumes above his capability, or despairs of things of which he is capable" (*ST II-II Q17A5.ad2*).

but to provide just one example, it might look like the unfortunately familiar pattern of churches growing in membership and worldly influence yet losing sight of the proper work which merits glory, such as love of neighbor through caring for the marginalized and the needy.

The second pitfall is inordinate reliance, as if the church community need not do much of anything besides wait. This is problematic on the Thomistic view briefly glossed above, for the slothfully presumptuous church assumes that it need not perform good works which merit glory or even repentance. The slothfully presumptuous church may look more the morally lax community which bothers to neither repent nor work to sanctify itself, hoping that God will save them without them.

Virtuous hope avoids two extremes of presumption, setting the appropriate level of cooperation for personal and outside agency. Such hope can contribute to the appropriate functioning of individual and communal action. In the next section, I explore more about how this is so by discussing the virtue of magnanimity.

5b. Hope, Sloth, and Magnanimity

I've assumed that human flourishing is in part a function of union with God and in part a function of gaining the desires of your heart. On Stump's and Aquinas's view, all humans desire eternal happiness as union with God as their ultimate end. But how does good hope for flourishing in the next life impact us now?

First, consider how Aquinas describes the object of supernatural hope. As discussed above, Aquinas claims the object of hope is necessarily arduous, such that it must be difficult to attain yet worth the elevated effort. The object of the supernatural hope fits this description because eternal happiness is the most desirable and worthwhile goal. So, if it is the most desirable goal, why do people not attain it? The short answer is because the arduous is not just desirable-- it is also difficult.

One loses hope by despairing, and Aquinas lists two ways one might come to despair. Since hope is about attaining the arduous good of supernatural beatitude, one might despair by desiring this end deeply, yet judging it as impossible or unattainable for themselves, causing a deep disappointment.³² A despairing individual still desires the object and feels distraught over not being able to attain it. Yet, despair can arise in a second manner by no longer deeming the object of hope

³² For Aquinas on despair, see *ST II-II Q20*. For contemporary discussions of hope and despair, see: Govier (2011), Ratcliffe (2013), and Huber (2023).

as an arduous good. By this path, one no longer *cares* about the arduous object. The latter option is the route of sloth [*acedia*], a kind of weariness which “denotes sorrow for spiritual good” (ST II-II Q35A1). On the first path of despair, one deems supernatural beatitude desirable yet impossible to obtain, but on the second path, one stops deeming it a good worth the effort.³³

Aquinas’s metaphor of taste captures this idea well. In sloth we pursue lesser goods, such as earthly goods of concupiscence and pleasure, *in place of* higher and more arduous spiritual goods. Thus, “love of those pleasures leads man to have a distaste for spiritual things, and not to hope for them as arduous goods” (ST II-II Q35A1). It is difficult to attain our supernatural happiness by means of loving spiritual goods due to the temptations of this world. The logical end of sloth is that “spiritual goods taste good to us no more, or seem to be goods of no great account” (ST II-II Q35A1). Thus, Aquinas follows Gregory the Great in holding that despair is born of sloth.

Consider how this applies to the larger wayfarer analogy. One might quit the journey even though they desperately wish to reach the end. However, sloth leads to giving up through distraction, by turning down the easier and more comfortable path of earthly pleasures. The early Renaissance poet Petrarch reflects on this after climbing Mount Ventoux. He compares the arduous physical climbing to his spiritual journey, saying “What, then, is holding you back? Nothing, surely, except that you take a path which seems at first sight easier leading through low and worldly pleasures” (Petrarca 1999, 14).

Sloth and despair can derail our final supernatural hope by taking us off the road to eternal happiness altogether. Sloth which destroys charity is a mortal sin, precluding our salvation and supernatural flourishing (ST II-II Q35A3). Such slothful temptation to worldly goods can take place at the individual or the collective level. It is easier to be formed to this world, to enjoy material pleasures in an inordinate manner rather than to strive for spiritual goods, which is often uncomfortable and difficult.

For obvious reasons, when we discuss spiritual flourishing, there is an emphasis on mortal sin and damnation. For Aquinas, one’s postmortem destination is binary: either heaven or hell. However, I also want to consider the fact that flourishing and the sloth that undermines it can come in degrees.

On Stump’s account flourishing is measured in terms of union with God, and such union can come in degrees both in this life and in the next. At this point, the road metaphor breaks down, for arriving at a destination is binary, either you make

³³ See ST II-II Q20A4. For more on sloth see DeYoung (2014) and Hudson (2021).

it or you don't. So how can we make sense of degrees of flourishing? Doesn't everyone who reaches eternal happiness share the same perfect and complete reward in the beatific vision? To see how this is not the case, consider the spheres of heaven in Dante's *Paradiso*.

In Dante's paradise different groups exist within concentric spheres, closer or further away from God. In this image, those who receive the most glory, and therefore flourish the most, are literally closer to God. Aquinas supports this poetic idea in his commentary on John where he makes sense of the metaphorical idea of "degrees of closeness" by appeal to our capacities to know and love God. Commenting on the many mansions of heaven (John 14:2), Aquinas says that "the reward of eternal life is both one and many. It is many based on the various capacities of those who share in it..." (*Super Ioann.* C14.L1).

While God is absolutely perfect as the one supreme good, in the beatific vision of God:

one person can be happier than another depending on the possession of this good and the capacity of each. The greater the capacity a person has for this good, the more he shares in it, I mean he participates in it more the better disposed and prepared he is to enjoy it (*Super Ioann.* C14.L1).

The capacities required to enjoy greater happiness in the beatific vision are purity of heart and charity, for "the more one has a heart which is *raised above earthly matters*, the more he will see God", and the "one who has a more burning love for God will find more delight in the enjoyment of God" (*Super Ioann.* C14.L1). But this raises the same question Dante asks the residents of the lowest sphere of paradise: does this mean that some are not perfectly fulfilled in heaven?³⁴

Aquinas answers this concern by appealing to degrees of perfection. The beatific vision is like a spring of water, "available to all to take as much as they wish. Then, one who has a larger cup will receive more, and one who has a smaller cup will receive less" (*Super Ioann.* C14.L1). Although all cups in the beatific vision are perfectly filled, those with the larger cups receive more than those with smaller cups. Everyone is perfectly fulfilled in the beatific vision, but some are still capable of greater unity with God than others. Even though everyone's thirst for God is quenched, some have a greater thirst than others.

All of this seems very otherworldly; however, this discussion comes back down to earth due to *how* we enlarge our own metaphorical "cups." Given the standard

³⁴ "But tell me, please: do you who are happy here/ have any wish to rise to higher station,/ to see more, or to make yourselves more dear?" (Alighieri 2003, 617).

view about the unchangingness of our postmortem state, the capacity for charity and knowledge of God must be expanded *in this world* by raising our heart “above earthly matters” and focusing on spiritual things. Yet it is exactly sloth which leads us to focus inordinately on earthly pleasures, losing our taste for arduous spiritual goods. Thus hope, as it avoids sloth, helps us attain greater well-being in the next world by putting spiritual goods first *now*, enlarging our capacities to know and love God in the next life.

Returning to hope, I suggest we can see the importance of striving for spiritual goods in this life more specifically within a virtue Aquinas associates with hope--magnanimity. At first, it is puzzling to see how the Aristotelian virtue dealing with high honors and giving gifts of large sums of money can be a Christian virtue open to all. It seems to be an acquired virtue which is only available to the very wealthy, one bordering on sinful pride. However, scholars have pointed out that Aquinas sees magnanimity as a virtue associated with hope and courage.³⁵

I cannot offer a complete exploration of magnanimity or provide adjudication on differing scholarly opinions. Instead, I will focus on how just one aspect of magnanimity which Stump highlights is directly related to the current discussion of hope and gradations of flourishing. Stump argues that magnanimity finds continuity with Aristotle because Aquinas still imagines magnanimity as connected with great honors. The difference between the two is *where* this honor comes from. She says that “solution is to see that for Aquinas the honor in question for the Christian virtue of magnanimity is not honor from human beings but honor from God...” (Stump 2022a, 27).

Rather than seeking honor from fellow citizens, the magnanimous Christian “will strive for honor from God as recompense and recognition for the gifts God has given him” (Stump 2022a, 27). Stump further explains magnanimity by reference to the parable of the talents found in Matthew 25 where three servants are given different amounts of money to invest while the master is away. Upon return, the master awards more talents to the servants who provided returns on their initial sum. Yet the master rebukes the servant who buried his small talent, saying ““You wicked and slothful servant!” (Matthew 25:26).

Stump reads this story as relevant to courage and hope. The rebuke of the servant who buried his talent shows us that we are obligated to avoid the vices of pusillanimity and sloth. On Stump’s reading, the point is that God asks that we be courageous and hopeful in this life, not merely to reach the beatific vision, but to strive for a glorious earthly life, one which merits honor and glory from God. Or as

³⁵ See e.g., Schumacher (2003), Lamb (2016), Stump (2022a).

Stump puts it, “it is morally obligatory to *go for glory*, because glory is a matter of being honored by God as faithful” (Stump 2022a, 28).³⁶ The slothful servant may hope in God, but they do not go for glory; rather they cling to the bare minimum.

Stump’s takeaway from hope’s supporting virtue of magnanimity is that we ought to go for glory, i.e., we are to aim for higher gradations of flourishing, by seeking honor from God. In the beatific vision, this honor arises from being closer in union with him. Yet the way in which we grow closer to God is by increasing our capacities of heart. The more courageous and hopeful we are in this life in acting out our love for him, the more honor and well-being we will receive in eternal paradise.

What role can the community play in this process of going for greater glory? Since hope is undermined by sloth, the encouragement we receive from others seeking the same goal will be a blessing. The familiar proverb says, “iron sharpens iron and one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). All alone we might be tempted to hope just to get by, but in community, we are not only encouraged to hope for the lowest rung of heaven but to seek God’s honor first and foremost. The church is not a place to bury one’s talent out of fear or sloth; it is a place in which we find encouragement to pursue our ultimate well-being through love of God and neighbor.

The long road of hope is usually imagined as weary with an emphasis on just making it to the end. In this image we imagine steadfast pilgrims leaning on each other as we lean on God. However, in magnanimity, the image that comes to my mind is more like the headlong rush of Narnians at the end of C.S. Lewis’s *The Last Battle*. The image of the magnanimously hopeful is a community of creatures speeding into paradise with a sense of joyful abandon. While Lewis’s sprint is heavenly in its completeness and consummation, I suggest that this communal sense of joy and encouragement can be played out on earth as well.

A magnanimous and hopeful Christian community should share the project of attaining great heavenly glory by deepening our capacity for union with God. However, unlike critics of hope imagine, aiming for heavenly crowns is not problematic when we remember how we achieve them. We achieve heavenly glory and deeper union with God through expanding our capacities for charity while still in *this* world. Hopeful actions in this world can be aimed toward our ultimate final end of beatitude. As Lewis suggests elsewhere, “those who want Heaven most have served Earth best” (Lewis 1986, 101).

Communal hope does more than just safeguard a minimal amount of hope to attain the beatific vision. Magnanimous hope can provide the courage to go for glory, taking a greater portion of eternal happiness. I suggest that we do not need to

³⁶ Italics added.

wait for the next life to follow Lewis's advice for advancing further up and further in (Lewis 2015).

7. Conclusion

The theological virtue of hope orients Christians to the final end of eternal happiness which is our ultimate flourishing. While this can appear to be a rather solipsistic and otherworldly virtue, I've argued for why this is not the case.

Unlike propositional hope, the theological virtue of hope is inherently social and interpersonal. There is no theological hope without hope *in* God. Likewise, through charity, theological hope can be expanded to include a human community connected in friendship. But Christian communities are not just a heap of individual hopes; rather they are unique in that they share the same collective hope, that of attaining supernatural beatitude.

I also argued that this supernatural goal is not objectionably otherworldly. By looking at the vices of hope I have highlighted how virtuous theological hope supports our flourishing in this life *and* the next. A responsive and non-presumptuous hope helps us find the appropriate level of dependence on others in this world, and hope helps avoid the mortal sins of despair and sloth which destroy charity and preclude enjoying eternal happiness. Likewise, I explored one aspect of magnanimity to illustrate how hope is related to gradations of flourishing, such that our focus on spiritual goods in this life determines our capacity for union with God in the next.

Whether we are discussing the binary of arriving or the gradations of going for glory, Christians go further when they travel together.³⁷

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³⁷ Special thanks to my anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and help in improving this article.

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