

Department of Philosophy

Dr. David Ross Boyd Colloquium Series



Dr. Nancy Snow
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“The Perils of Magnificence”

October 28, 2016, 3:30-5:30pm, Dale Hall Tower, Room 607

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that magnificence is the virtue of making large expenditures for the public good. As such, it stands between the vices of niggardliness and vulgarity. It is also related to generosity, for the magnificent person, Aristotle says, is generous, though not necessarily vice versa, presumably because not all generous people have the means to spend on a grand scale (Aristotle 1122a18-1122b17). In *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, Daniel C. Russell discusses Aristotle's view, arguing that magnificence is a specialized virtue that is subordinate to the more basic or primary virtue of generosity. Russell mentions but dismisses Aquinas' view (following Cicero) that magnificence is subordinate to courage or fortitude (Russell 2009, 219, n. 17). In this essay, I argue for the following claims: (1) Magnificence can be a virtue, and can include, in addition to motives of generosity, motives of courage, as well as of confidence, patience, and perseverance. In expanding the range of motives in this way, I, like Aquinas, follow Cicero. (2) Magnificence can be a vice, and can include any number of morally unworthy motives, such as the desire to ingratiate oneself, self-aggrandizement, or envy. (3) Magnificence can be what I call an 'impure' virtue. A virtue is impure if the motives it includes are not all morally worthy, but are mixed. A set of mixed motives consists of morally worthy and morally neutral motives. The presence of morally vicious motives in a set renders the set not mixed, but vicious, and can render the trait that includes the set a vice.

In part I of the essay, I discuss Aristotle and Russell on generosity and magnificence. In part II, I add Aquinas and Cicero to the mix. Taking my cue from their accounts, I begin the case that magnificence as a virtue can include motives in addition to generosity. In part III, I extend the account by discussing how magnificence can be an impure virtue as well as a vice, and consider how taking context into account can influence evaluations of the moral value of magnificence. To make my case in part III, I draw on a 'form of life' in which magnificence was important and supposed instances of magnificence were encouraged: the northern Italian Renaissance Courts of the fifteenth century. Context and motive affect how traits are shaped, as well as our moral evaluations of them. Magnificence in this era was influenced by Aristotle's theory of magnificence (see Cole 1995, 19; 23), but it was also affected by the social and political circumstances of the time. The circumstances of northern Renaissance Italy, being different from Aristotle's time as well as our own, bring to light the extent to which magnificence can indeed be plausibly linked with courage and the other motives mentioned above, as well as with corrupting motivations. Drawing on a form of life hints at a larger methodological issue in the study of virtue: perhaps we should not confine our thinking about virtues to theory alone, but should, instead, consider how actual forms of life shape them. One might dub this an 'anthropological turn' in studying virtue, in the sense that studying virtue *in situ* can yield insights for normative theorizing.

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