

QUESTION 119

Prodigality

Next we have to consider prodigality (*prodigalitas*). And on this topic there are three questions: (1) Is prodigality opposed to avarice? (2) Is prodigality a sin? (3) Is prodigality a more serious sin than avarice?

Article 1

Is prodigality opposed to avarice?

It seems that prodigality (*prodigalitas*) is not opposed to avarice (*avaritia*):

Objection 1: Opposites cannot exist in the same thing at the same time. But some individuals are simultaneously prodigal and ungenerous (*illiberales*). Therefore, prodigality is not opposed to avarice.

Objection 2: Opposites have to do with the same thing. But insofar as avarice is opposed to generosity, it has to do with certain passions by which a man has affection for money. By contrast, prodigality does not, it seems, have to do with any passions of the soul, since it has no affection for money or anything else of that sort. Therefore, it is not the case that prodigality is opposed to avarice.

Objection 3: As has been established (*ST* 1-2, q. 72, a. 3), a sin receives its species mainly from its end. But prodigality seems always to be ordered toward an illicit end for the sake of which one spends his own resources, and mainly for the sake of pleasures; hence, Luke 15:3 says of the prodigal son that he “had dissipated his own resources by living luxuriously.” Therefore, it seems that prodigality is opposed to temperance and insensibility rather than to avarice and generosity.

But contrary to this: In *Ethics* 2 and 4 the Philosopher posits prodigality in opposition to generosity and illiberality, which we are here calling ‘avarice’.

I respond: In moral matters the opposition of vices and virtues is attendant upon *excess* and *deficiency*. Now avarice and prodigality differ in diverse ways with respect to excess and deficiency.

For the avaricious individual is excessive *in his affection for riches*, loving them more than is appropriate, whereas the prodigal individual falls short in this, exercising less care about riches than is appropriate.

By contrast, *with respect to the exterior things*, prodigality involves an excess in giving one’s riches away but falls short in holding on to them and in acquiring them, whereas avarice, on the contrary, falls short in giving them away but is excessive in obtaining them and holding on to them.

Hence, it is clear that prodigality is opposed to avarice.

Reply to objection 1: Nothing prevents opposites from existing in the same thing in different respects, and yet a thing is denominated more from what is more principal. Now just as, in the case of *generosity*, which holds to the mean, the principal element is *giving* and it is toward *giving* that *obtaining* and *holding on to* are ordered, so, too, avarice and prodigality are mainly looked at with respect to *giving*. Hence, someone who is excessive in giving is called *prodigal*, whereas someone who is deficient in giving is called *avaricious*.

Now as the Philosopher points out in *Ethics* 4, it sometimes happens that there is someone who is deficient in *giving* but who is not excessive in *obtaining*. Similarly, it also happens that there is someone who is excessive in *giving* (and is for this reason *prodigal*) and who is at the same time excessive in *obtaining*—perhaps (a) out of a certain sort of necessity, because, while such individuals are excessive in giving, they lack their own resources and so are forced to obtain them in an inappropriate manner, which pertains to *avarice*, or (b) because their minds are disordered, for as long as they do not give for the sake of any good end, then with virtue having been disdained, as it were, they do not care how they come into their money or from where. And so it is not in the same respect that such individuals are both prodigal and avaricious.

Reply to objection 2: Prodigality has to do with passions regarding money, not in the sense that it is excessive in those passions, but in the sense that it is deficient in them.

Reply to objection 3: It is not always the case that a prodigal individual is excessive in giving because of pleasures with respect to which there is intemperance; rather, he is excessive in giving sometimes because he is disposed in such a way as not to care about riches, and sometimes for the sake of something else.

Still, prodigal individuals do very frequently fall into intemperate acts, both because (a) since they spend excessively on other things, they likewise are not afraid of spending on pleasurable things, and also because (b) since they do not find pleasure in the good of virtue, they seek corporeal pleasures for themselves. This is why, in *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says, “Many prodigal individuals become intemperate.”

Article 2

Is prodigality a sin?

It seems that prodigality is not a sin:

Objection 1: In 1 Timothy 6:10 the Apostle says, “Excessive desire (*cupiditas*) is the root of everything evil.” But it is not the root of prodigality, which is opposed to it. Therefore, prodigality is not a sin.

Objection 2: In 1 Timothy 6:17-18 the Apostle says, “Charge the rich of this world ... to give easily, to share with others.” But this is what prodigal individuals especially do. Therefore, prodigality is not a sin.

Objection 3: Prodigality involves being excessive in giving and being deficient in caring about riches. But this is especially appropriate for men of perfection who fulfill what our Lord says in Matthew 6:34 (“Do not be solicitous about tomorrow”) and in Matthew 19:2 (“Sell all that you have and give it to the poor”). Therefore, prodigality is not a sin.

But contrary to this: In Luke 15:11ff. the prodigal son is reproached for his prodigality.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), prodigality is opposed to avarice by an opposition of excess and deficiency. But the mean of the virtue is corrupted by each of them, and something is vicious and a sin by the fact that it corrupts the good of virtue. Therefore, it follows that prodigality is a sin.

Reply to objection 1: Some writers expound this passage from the Apostle as having to do not with *actual* excessive desire (*non de actuali cupiditate*), but rather with a certain sort of *habitual* excessive desire (*de quadam habituali cupiditate*), i.e., the concupiscence belonging to the ‘stimulant’ (*quae est concupiscentia fomitis*), from which all sin arises.

By contrast, others claim that he is talking about a general excessive desire (*de cupiditate generali*) with respect to every sort of good. And on this score it is obvious that even prodigality arises from excessive desire, since the prodigal individual desires to pursue a temporal good in a disordered manner, either to please others or, at the very least, to satisfy his own will in giving.

However, if one considers the matter correctly, the Apostle is here talking literally about an excessive desire *for riches*. For prior to this he had said, “Let those who want to become rich, etc.” And so avarice is being claimed to be the root of everything evil, not because everything evil always arises from avarice, but instead because there is no evil that does not at some time arise from avarice. Hence, even prodigality sometimes arises from avarice, as when an individual uses up many resources in a prodigal manner with the intention of gaining favor with certain people from whom he might obtain riches.

Reply to objection 2: The Apostle is warning the rich to give easily and to share what is theirs as

the need arises. This is something that prodigal individuals do not do, since, as the Philosopher points out in *Ethics* 4, “Their instances of giving are not good or for the sake of the good or as the need arises; instead, they sometimes give a lot to those who ought to be poor, viz., stage-actors and flatterers, while giving nothing to good people.”

Reply to objection 3: The excess that belongs to prodigality is mainly concerned not with the amount that is given, but rather with the fact that the amount exceeds what should be given. Hence, sometimes a generous individual gives more than a prodigal individual does if this is necessary. Therefore, one should reply that those who give away all that they have with the intention of following Christ and who remove from their minds all care about temporal things are not prodigal but perfectly generous.

Article 3

Is prodigality a more serious sin than avarice?

It seems that prodigality is a more serious sin than avarice:

Objection 1: Through avarice an individual harms the neighbor whom he does not share his goods with, whereas through prodigality an individual harms his very self; for in *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says, “The disintegration of the riches by which a man lives is a sort of loss of being itself.” But one who harms himself sins in a more serious way—this according to Ecclesiasticus 14:5 (“He that is evil to himself, to whom will he be good?). Therefore, prodigality will be a more serious sin than avarice.

Objection 2: A disorder is less vicious if it is accompanied by some praiseworthy condition. But the disorder of avarice is sometimes accompanied by a praiseworthy condition, as is clear in the case of those who want neither (a) to spend what is their own nor (b) to take what does not belong to them. By contrast, prodigality comes with a blameworthy condition; hence, in *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says, “We attribute prodigality to intemperate men.” Therefore, prodigality is a more serious vice than avarice.

Objection 3: As was established above (q. 56, a. 1 and *ST* 1-2, a. 2), prudence is preeminent among the moral virtues. But prodigality is more opposed to prudence than avarice is; for Proverbs 21:20 says, “There is a desirable treasure, along with oil, in the dwelling of the just, and the imprudent man will spend it,” and in *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says, “The foolish man gives in excess and does not obtain.” Therefore, prodigality is a more serious sin than avarice.

But contrary to this: In *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says that the prodigal individual “seems much better than the illiberal individual.”

I respond: Prodigality, considered by itself (*secundum se considerata*), is a lesser sin than avarice, and this for three reasons:

First, because *avarice differs more from the opposed virtue*. For *giving*, in which the prodigal individual is excessive, belongs to the generous person more than does *obtaining* and *holding on to*, in which the avaricious individual is excessive.

Second, because, as *Ethics* 4 points out, *the prodigal individual is useful to the many to whom he gives but not to himself*.

Third, because *the prodigal individual is easily curable*—(a) by falling into old age, which militates against prodigality; and (b) by easily arriving at extreme poverty when he has frivolously gone through many resources, and so when, having become a pauper, he is unable to be excessive in giving; and likewise (c) because he is easily led to virtue by reason of the similarity that his prodigality bears to virtue. By contrast, the avaricious individual, for the reason explained above (q. 118, a. 5), is not easily cured.

Reply to objection 1: The difference between the prodigal individual and the avaricious individual

does not have to do with sinning against oneself and sinning against another. For a prodigal individual sins against himself when he uses up the resources that he himself ought to be living off of, and he likewise sins against another by using up the resources that he should be providing for others from. And this is especially apparent in the case of clerics, who are the dispensers of the Church's resources that belong to the poor, whom they defraud by spending those resources in a prodigal manner.

Similarly, the avaricious individual sins against others by falling short in giving to them, and he likewise sins against himself insofar as he falls short in things consumed; hence, Ecclesiastes 6:2 says, "A man to whom God has given riches ... and yet He has not given him the power to eat thereof." And yet it is in this that the prodigal individual is excessive, since he harms himself and certain others in such a way as to profit some. By contrast, the avaricious man profits neither himself nor others, since he does not dare to make use of his own resources even for his own advantage.

Reply to objection 2: When we are talking about the vices in general, we judge them according to their proper character; for instance, in the case of prodigality we focus on its consuming riches in an excessive manner, whereas in the case of avarice we focus on its holding on to them in an excessive manner.

Now the fact that someone consumes in an excessive manner because of intemperance already names a multitude of sins, and this is why, as *Ethics 4* says, prodigal individuals of this sort are worse. However, the fact that an illiberal, i.e., avaricious, individual abstains from taking from others, even if this seems praiseworthy considered by itself, is blameworthy because of the reason for which he does it, when the reason that he does not take from others is in order not to be forced to give to others.

Reply to objection 3: All vices are opposed to prudence, just as all virtues are directed by prudence. And so a vice is thought of as a lesser vice by the very fact that it is opposed only to prudence.