

# THE IMPOSTER SYNDROME

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“Aquinas’s Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence:  
A New Measure of Greatness”

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**W**hen afflicted, you are certain that you were accepted (for graduate studies or a new job or whatever) by some terrible mistake. It is therefore only a matter of time before everyone realizes that you are in fact completely unqualified to be there. So you slink around trying to stay unnoticed lest you be unmasked as the imposter that you are and summarily dismissed in disgrace.

When Imposter Syndrome becomes a chronic condition, rather than a passing episode, it can cripple our ability to use our gifts and fulfill our potential for worthwhile achievements. We become habitual self-underestimators, we believe our self-disparaging comments about our worth and abilities, and as a result, we fail to live up to all we are called to be.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas calls this condition the vice of pusillanimity. Pusillanimity means ‘smallness of soul;’ its ‘faintheartedness’ shrinks back in the face of challenge and difficulty. Its main effect is inaction: we neglect to develop our talents and fail to stretch ourselves toward the fulfillment of our potential. If you are sure you can never achieve anything worthwhile, much less something great, then why bother even to try?

The key transformative feature of Aquinas’ account of pusillanimity and magnanimity is its acknowledgment of our fundamental relationship of dependence on God. Only an acknowledgment of our dependence enables us to grasp the true worth of the self and to live up to our full potential.