



# Aquinas's Principle of Misericordia in Corporations: Implications for Workers and other Stakeholders

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Received: 9 September 2021 / Accepted: 26 September 2022 / Published online: 19 October 2022  
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## Abstract

Despite its central position in the history of European and Christian thought on the protection of human dignity, the virtue of mercy is currently a problematic and under-developed concept in business ethics, compared to related ideas of care, compassion or philanthropy. The aim of this article is to argue for its revival as a core principle of ethical business practice. The article is conceptual in method. An overview is provided of the scope of contemporary business ethics research on related topics and clarifies some of the similarities and differences between mercy and popular terms, such as compassion and prosocial behaviour. The question is then explored as to why mercy has so little traction in business ethics. Some of the history of the idea of mercy in European and Anglophone philosophy is discussed, from Anselm and Aquinas to the present day, showing how discourse on mercy came to be split into a wider concept of the prevention and alleviation of suffering (*misericordia*) and a narrower one of clemency or leniency. Aquinas's wide concept of the virtue of *misericordia* is developed as the basis for a principle of mercy, which is applicable directly to corporations. The practical implications of this for standards of corporate behaviour towards employees and other stakeholders are then considered through the introduction of a 'vulnerability grid'. The grid offers a critical contrast to other analysis tools, such as stakeholder power-interest matrices. Cases drawn from empirical studies are used to illustrate application of the grid and to challenge some common assumptions of stakeholder theory.

**Keywords** Mercy · Compassion · Aquinas · Virtue ethics · Stakeholder theory · Precarious work

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## Introduction

What might the idea of mercy mean, as applied at the corporate level, and why is it important?

Despite its central position in the history of European and Christian thought on the protection of human dignity, mercy is currently a problematic and under-developed concept in business ethics, compared to related ideas of care, compassion or philanthropy. The term *mercy* is little used in business and management literature, perhaps surprisingly so in view of the level of interest in closely related concepts. A search<sup>1</sup> conducted through Web of Science on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2022, yielded 467 articles on the topic of ‘compassion’, 827 on ‘philanthropy’ and 902 on ‘altruism’. ‘Pity’ yielded 10 articles and ‘mercy’ just 5.

In the small literature explicitly regarding mercy in business and management, most of those who discuss mercy use it in the narrow sense of tempering justice or punishment, and generally at the individual level, often regarding the treatment of workers by managers or behaviour among co-workers. This is true of Faldetta (2019), Fleckenstein and Bowes (2000), and Wang and Murnighan (2017). In understanding mercy as leniency, these authors are following a 20<sup>th</sup> Century discourse oriented to judicial and legal contexts (see Section II). Eastman and Santoro (2003) use what seems a more broad-based idea of mercy as one value on a rigour-mercy value dichotomy in managerial decision making, along with a range of other value dichotomies, though without defining clearly what they mean by the term mercy.

Zuzworsky (2001) discusses mercy as *misericordia*, compassion towards suffering others, challenging Aquinas’s exclusion of animals from this consideration, and using the discussion to critique market practices in farming and food supply. Zuzworsky thus directly places Thomas Aquinas’s *misericordia* in the context of business ethics, but does not yet theorize mercy at the corporate level. One of the very few authors to do that is Bernacchio (2018), who follows Alasdair MacIntyre’s (1999) exploration of Aquinas on mercy as *misericordia* and applies this to business organizations. Bernacchio allows for *misericordia* to operate between organizations as well as within them, and he uses MacIntyre’s notion of networks of giving and receiving to draw attention to the question of how managers respond to stakeholders in urgent need. This is in itself a crucial step and invites further development.

The question remains: How can we best apply the concept of mercy at the corporate level, and what are the practical implications for business ethics when we do so? This provides the starting point for the argument of the current article, which aims to develop an idea of the virtue of mercy as *misericordia* which can be applied as a principle of corporate responsibility, and to show how it can contribute to ethical business practices towards vulnerable workers and other stakeholders.

Section I provides a review of contemporary business ethics research on mercy and related topics and then moves to disambiguate mercy as *misericordia* and more popular terms, such as compassion and prosocial behaviour. Section II explores the history of the idea of mercy in European and Anglophone philosophy, showing how modern discourse on mercy has split between the wide concept of the prevention and alleviation of suffering

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<sup>1</sup> The terms of the search were by the field ‘topic’ (search term *compassion*, etc.), then refined for ‘categories’ business and management. The total figure of five returned for the topic of mercy given here is for a comparative search to illustrate volumes of publishing. The articles on mercy which follow in discussion were in some cases recovered through further database searches and reading.

(*miser cordia*) and a narrower one of leniency or clemency. Discussion in Section III develops an idea of the principle of mercy at the corporate level, derived from Aquinas. In Section IV, some practical implications of this principle are considered with regard to workers and other stakeholders.

## I. Mercy and Related Concepts in Business Ethics

If mercy as such appears an unfashionable and underused term in business ethics, this is not to say that similar concepts are not discussed under other heads. Tables 1 and 2 show positive and negative examples respectively of key associated terms in the literature, together with what persons or structures each term primarily relates to and how it is used.

The scope of the terms have been generated by iterative readings, starting with ‘mercy’ and ‘compassion’ as near cognate terms (Barad 2007; and see discussion in Section II), noting closely related terms (e.g. ‘care’ and ‘empathy’) and their opposites (e.g. ‘cruelty’ and ‘mistreatment’) and following these terms through business ethics literature. Where these searches yielded articles with a substantive focus on the given term at the corporate level, this has been included in the lists below. Each stage of reading yielded further potential terms, either positive or negative, which were then pursued in the same way, stopping the searches when either insufficient article examples were found or when the meanings of the terms became too distant from the starter terms. The lists are intended to be indicative of the scope of common terminology, rather than exhaustive (particularly with respect to negative terms for bad practices, which are very wide ranging).

The range of terms in the tables, and their variable application and use, seem to indicate a lack of unifying concepts and agreed terminologies. These terms in business ethics are borrowed from a range of disciplines, such as psychology, religion or moral and political philosophy, as well as from ordinary language. It is therefore important to try to distinguish some of those terms which are closest to the virtue of mercy, such as compassion, empathy, prosocial behaviour and altruism, which are discussed in turn below. In what follows, comparisons are made between these and Aquinas’s virtue of *miser cordia* (mercy).

### Disambiguations

Mercy, understood as Aquinas’s virtue of *miser cordia*, is broad in scope and has two central elements. The first is the emotion of compassion for the suffering of another. The second is the direction of compassion to alleviate that suffering, in accordance with practical reason; without this regulation according to right reason, compassion is not a virtue and may be misdirected. (A fuller explanation of the concept is given in Section II.)

The term which appears closest to mercy in this sense in business and management literature is ‘compassion’, for which the two main sources are psychology and Buddhism. Psychological accounts of compassion are concerned with compassion as an interior affect. Strauss et al. (2016) define compassion in five key components:

‘recognition of suffering; understanding its universality; feeling sympathy, empathy, or concern for those who are suffering (which we describe as emotional resonance); tolerating the distress associated with the witnessing of suffering; and motivation to act or acting to alleviate the suffering’ (Strauss et al. 2016: 25).

**Table 1** Common terms in business and management literature for treating others well

Descriptor	Application	Examples of usage
Altruism	Leadership, owners, corporation	A broad (often undefined) other-orientation, contrasted with egoism (Husted and de Jesus Salazar 2006; Restick et al. 2006)
Benevolence	Corporation, employees	Benevolence as a measure of trustworthiness in perceptions of people or firms (Colquitt et al. 2007; Mayer et al. 1995). As a Confucian corporate value (Tsai and Tsai 2022). Benevolent ethical climates in organizations (Cullen et al. 2003)
Care	Holistic (ethics of care), leadership, corporation	Ethics of care as a principle for business ethics (Lawrence and Matulis 2012). Care as an attribute of virtuous leadership (Waterman 2011). The 'caring corporation' as an identity portrayal (Fuoli 2012)
Compassion	Employees, community members	'Compassion organizing' among staff or within a local community (Dutton et al. 2006; Shepherd and Williams 2014). As prevention of harm and alleviation of suffering (George 2014). Compassionate treatment of co-workers (Lilius et al. 2008), and as organizational culture (Madden et al. 2012)
Empathy	Personal interactions, group	Empathy as a human capability (Goleman 1998). Collective empathy as a driver for corporate philanthropy (Muller et al. 2014)
Forgiveness / leniency	Between people and groups	Forgiveness as a personal disposition to forgo anger or revenge when harmed by another, which may be enabled or not within organizations or by them (Goodstein and Aquino 2010; Bies et al. 2016)
Humanity	Leadership	Humanity as a Confucian virtue ( <i>ren</i> ) in leadership (Hackett and Wang 2012). 'Humane orientation' as treating others with respect, as ends rather than means (Eisenbeiss 2012)
Prosociality	Individuals, groups, social enterprises	Prosocial behaviours of individuals or groups (Penner et al. 2005). Prosocial emotions and motivations as other-oriented (Miller et al. 2012)

**Table 2** Common terms in business and management literature for treating others badly

Descriptor	Application	Examples of usage
Abuse	Workers, children, tenants, elderly	Abusive supervision (Tepper 2007). Abuse of older people in institutional care settings (Yon et al. 2019); of elderly investors (Catalano and Lazaro 2010); of low-income tenants by landlords (Seymour and Akers 2020)
Bullying	Workers	Bullying in the workplace as a form of persistent hostile or aggressive behaviour (Einarsen 1999; Salin 2003)
Cruelty	Animals, people	Cruelty to animals as a normal practice in factory farming (Crittenden 2000)
Exploitation	Customers, suppliers, workers	Market exploitation of the poor by corporations (Arnold and Valentin 2013; Santos and Laczniak 2009). Exploitation of suppliers by powerful buyers (Schleper et al. 2017); of precarious labour (Anderson 2010); in ‘sweatshops’ (Berkey 2021; Radin and Calkins 2006)
Harassment	Workers / women	Harassment as unwelcome behaviour, related to discrimination and sexism (McDonald 2012; Bowling and Beehr 2006)
Hostile design	Public space	Design intended to exclude undesired groups, particularly homeless (Rosenberger 2019)
Inhumane practices	Prisoners, animals, workers	Inhumane labour conditions in supply chain (Yu 2008). Detainees forced substance withdrawal (Fiscella et al. 2004). Inhumane employment practices in SMEs in Pakistan (Asad et al. 2018)
Mistreatment	Workers, elderly, women	Mistreatment of workers by customers and incivility between workers (Lim and Cortina 2005; Wang et al. 2011)
Slavery	Workers, supply chain	Extreme exploitation and coercion of workers (Cooke 2003; Crane 2013)
Violence	Workers	Aggression by customers and co-workers (LeBlanc and Kelloway 2002; Neuman and Baron 1998)

This definition, derived from a meta study, does mention action, but only in one out of five components and, even then, it is an option, rather than a necessity. The emphasis is on affect and motivation. This idea of compassion is thus directly equivalent to one half of Aquinas account of *miseriordia*. It deals with Aquinas's notion of *compassio* as a moving passion, but not the virtue which may then follow and which also requires practical wisdom in order to act well.

The psychological model above draws on Buddhist ideas of compassion, but with key differences, which place Buddhist compassion closer to Aquinas's *miseriordia*. Barad (2007) argues that the accounts of compassion given by the Dalai Lama and by Aquinas are close enough to accept that they are speaking of the same concept, albeit with some differences of scope. Others emphasise important cultural and theological differences underlying Christian and Buddhist notions of mercy and compassion (Augustine and Wayne 2019). Nevertheless, Buddhist compassion remains the closest of any of the terms surveyed in Table 1 to Aquinas's *miseriordia*. Both are explicitly virtues, and both must be exercised with wisdom. Buddhism insists that compassion without the virtue of wisdom is not true compassion and is dangerous (Condon et al. 2019; Gyatso 2001), and Aquinas insists likewise. Buddhist ethics and Thomistic Aristotelian ethics are both complete systems which see virtues as acting together as part of a coherent vision of the good life. In this, both differ from modern positive psychology, which sees compassion as an emotion which can be understood independently of any particular belief system or ethics.

Empathy is well researched in psychology and is generally regarded as a capacity for emotional and cognitive recognition of the emotional state of another, which may or may not issue in certain kinds of action (Cuff et al. 2016). It is a capability, rather than a virtue. Empathy does not imply a negative affect – it may involve understanding another's joy or pleasure, as much as their sadness or pain. It therefore differs from Aquinas's *compassio*, which implies feeling sorrow.

Prosocial behaviour describes 'a broad category of acts that are defined by some significant segment of society and/or one's social group as generally beneficial to other people' (Penner et al. 2005: 366). Prosocial motivation refers to that which is other-oriented, rather than self-oriented, compassion being one example (Miller et al. 2012). The concept of prosociality is rooted in behavioural psychology, rather than ethics, and admits the possibility or likelihood that prosocial behaviours may be generated by motives which are themselves self-oriented (Batson 1987).

This brings discussion of prosocial behaviour into contact with philosophical discourse on altruism. Altruistic behaviour can be understood as behaviour intended to help another or avoid harming them, for that other person's sake (Kraut 2020). Often the term is used simply to indicate other-oriented (benevolent) actions or intentions; it is thus a very broad category, including motive or action or both (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003; Warneken and Tomasello 2009). Altruism is not normally considered a virtue in Aristotelian traditions, but if we take the broad idea of altruistic intentions and actions as benevolently other-oriented, we can draw some relations between altruism and the virtues. We can say, for instance, that some virtues such as generosity and beneficence appear to be relatively other-oriented, whereas a virtue such as temperance appears more self-oriented. We could also venture that in the specific case of *miseriordia*, it might be better to say that this virtue is neither egoistic nor altruistic in its orientation, because it springs from a recognition of joint suffering; if person A is suffering and person B perceives this with compassion, then the intention of mercy is to alleviate the suffering of both. It is a distinctive feature of mercy in comparison, for instance, to general benevolence or beneficence – that it is specifically a response to another's suffering.

Virtue ethics commonly deals with both virtues and vices as contrasting sets: access to language about vices helps to define the virtues with which they are contrasted (Aristotle 2000; Hursthouse 1999). When we turn to the list of negative attributes in Table 2, the range of relevant terms is, if anything, somewhat broader than in Table 1. From a virtue ethics perspective, this is understandable, since a single virtue may be associated with more than one corresponding vice. Courage, as Aristotle has it, is a mean with respect to fear and confidence, contrasted with cowardice at one extreme and recklessness at the other.

It is also notable that discussions of negative treatment of others in corporate life have a somewhat different emphasis compared to discussions of positive treatment. Whereas articles listed in Table 1 are full of theorisation of virtue-like qualities (prosociality, compassion, altruism etc.), articles in Table 2 often discuss specific bad behaviours (abuse, mistreatment, harassment, exploitation, etc.) without necessarily configuring these as vice-like qualities. One term which stands out as vice-like in Table 2 is the adjective ‘inhumane’, which has wide application. It also directly corresponds to the positive term ‘humane’ in Table 1. Considering the lists as a whole, the terms ‘humane’ and ‘inhumane’ are perhaps the nearest proxies in contemporary business English for discussion of the presence or absence of *misericordia*, since neither ‘mercy’ nor ‘mercilessness’ are in common use in business ethics.

Taken together, the two lists present challenges to the goal of developing a cogent account of mercy which can be applied specifically at the corporate level. The section which follows lays the groundwork for this, by exploring the way that mercy has been understood in European philosophy and the way that it has fragmented in the wake of the enlightenment.

## II. Mercy in Medieval and Modern Philosophy

Mercy has become problematic in modern discourse. With the exception of some religious traditions, mercy has declined as a reliable good of public life, both in theory and in practice (Barkow 2007; Tuckness and Parrish 2014). Whilst the words ‘mercy’ and ‘pity’ remain widely used in everyday English, they are disputed in academic discourse and pity, in particular, has nowadays a generally negative connotation. This section explores this predicament: it traces a falling arc from mercy’s highpoint in philosophical discourse among the Scholastics, through its decline in the European Enlightenment to its current state today.

### Anselm and Aquinas

Anselm of Canterbury, writing in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, gives clear expression to specific philosophical difficulties with mercy in the context of retributive justice and, in doing so, has bequeathed two related problems which have come to dominate much academic debate on mercy. Both occur in his *Proslogion* (Anselm 2000).

The first concerns the compatibility of mercy with justice (*Proslogion*, ch.9): How can it be just to spare those who deserve punishment? The second concerns consistency in application (*Proslogion*, ch.11): How can it be just to have mercy on some wrongdoers but not all? In this approach, justice and mercy are seen to be in tension – a paradox in need of resolution (Mann 2019; Moloney 2017). The two problems have proved fruitful, but they

have also focused attention on mercy as clemency or leniency in punishment, in a way which has often been restrictive, at least for modern authors.

Thomas Aquinas, two centuries later, gives a rather different account of mercy in the *Summa Theologiae* (Aquinas 2000). Although he deals with the connection between clemency and justice (ST, 2–2 q.157),<sup>2</sup> his account of mercy as *miseriordia* is much broader and, in this context, retributive justice is not his primary focus (ST, 1 q.21). His systematic exploration of mercy as *miseriordia* treats it as both an emotion and a virtue (ST, 2–2 q.30), and he is careful to show the separation and the relatedness of these two things. He describes the emotion thus:

‘As Augustine says in *De Civitate Dei* 9, “Mercy or pity (*miseriordia*) is compassion in our heart for another’s unhappiness (*alienae miseriae in nostro corde compassio*), by which we are compelled to help if we are able to.” For it is called ‘*miseriordia*’ from the fact that one has a saddened heart (*miserum cor*) over the unhappiness of another (*super miseria alterius*).’ (ST, 2-2 q.30 a.1)

*Miseriordia*, here, is characterised as a feeling of sorrow for another’s suffering, a suffering-with; it therefore rules out both detachment and self-pity. It also compels to action. Although the word ‘emotion’ is generally used in this context, we should note that Aquinas does not simply refer to an affective state, but rather a moving passion which issues in action.

Aquinas argues that *miseriordia* in the sense of a moving passion is not in itself a virtue, because it may be misdirected. It may cause us to intervene where we should not, or in ways that damage rather than help. To become a virtue, *miseriordia* must be rightly directed in accordance with reason:

‘Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 9 Augustine says, “This movement of the soul”— viz., mercy —“serves reason when mercy is offered in such a way that justice is preserved, whether one is giving to the needy or forgiving the penitent.” And because, as was shown above (ST 1-2, q. 56, a. 4 and q. 59, a. 4 and q. 60, a. 5 and q. 66, a. 4), the nature of a human virtue consists in the movements being regulated by reason, it follows that mercy is a virtue.’ (ST 2-2, q. 30, a. 3)

So, as a virtue, mercy guides compassion towards right action in responding to the suffering of another, in accordance with reason. Mercy and beneficence are both effects of the greater virtue of charity; they may often coincide in some particular exterior acts, since beneficence simply means doing good to someone (for a range of possible reasons), but mercy picks out the interior effect of compassion in response to suffering (Clark 2011).

Aquinas’s idea of *miseriordia* is perhaps best characterised as an integrative view of mercy, in the sense that it holds mercy together with other central virtues as compatible and consistent elements of a good life. *Miseriordia* thus becomes a virtue which is central and foundational to the human good. We should note some implications of this integrative view.

First, the position of mercy (*miseriordia*) relative to other virtues in the *Summa Theologiae* is significant. Aquinas structures his account so that mercy holds a central position in his overall account of the theological virtue of charity (Miner 2015). For

<sup>2</sup> References to Aquinas and Aristotle texts are given in the following forms. ST, 2–2 q.30 a.1 refers to Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, Second Part of the Second Part, Question 30, Article 1. NE 2.7 refers to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, Chapter 7.



Aquinas, mercy is the greatest of all the virtues which pertain to how human beings deal with one another (ST, 2–2 q.30 art.4), and it has the greatest possible scope, as a virtue which underpins not only retributive but also distributive justice.

Aquinas's idea of mercy as a human virtue depends also on his understanding of the mercy of God, and it is this understanding which allows him to integrate mercy and justice. The mercy of God is the first work from which other works spring, including creation and justice (ST, 1 q.21). If mercy is definitive of the nature of God, and the justice of God arises from it, then divine justice is an expression of mercy, and there can be no conflict between them. Human justice, at its best, will follow the same pattern. Aquinas explicitly rules out conflict between justice and mercy; to exercise the virtue of *misericordia* implies right judgement in accordance with both justice and wisdom. Mercy cannot operate as a virtue without right reason (*ratio*), which is required in order to direct compassion well.

The question of whether Aquinas sees the virtue of *misericordia* as infused (a gift of grace) or natural (acquired through human endeavour) is moot (O'Callaghan 2013; Miner 2015). Deane-Drummond's (2017) solution is to say that mercy, along with other virtues, can be thought of as a virtue which is natural at one level, but which may be transformed in the way that it operates through grace. What is at least clear and more immediately relevant to the current enquiry, is that in a eudaimonistic ethics, virtues are qualities possessed by true persons, and the moral psychology of the agent is as relevant as the nature of their behaviour. To have any given virtue, a person must have the right kind of motive and the right kind of aim; this is integral to Aquinas's thinking as it was to Augustine before him, in respect of *misericordia* and the virtues generally (Irwin 1999; Dodaro 2004).

In his treatment of *misericordia* as a virtue, as is his custom elsewhere, Aquinas follows both Augustine and Aristotle as far as he is able. In the principal Question concerning mercy in the *Summa* (ST, 2–2 q.30), both authorities are cited freely. Although Aquinas treats both sources with the greatest respect, he nevertheless transforms each of them to some degree as he attempts to synthesise them into a coherent whole (Irwin 1999; Keaty 2005). His use of Aristotle, who he cites fourteen times in Question 30, is particularly striking here, since Aristotle himself does not treat pity (*ἔλεος*) as a virtue. In the *Rhetoric* most prominently, and also in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle treats pity as an emotion or passion, rather than a virtue. As with anger, fear, joy and other feelings, pity is a passion, which a relevant virtue might govern. At one point, Aristotle appears to propose that appropriate indignation (*νέμεσις*) is the relevant virtue in this case, operating as a mean between envy and spite, with respect to pain or pleasure felt at the fortunes of others (NE 2.7). However, the suggestion is not followed up elsewhere, and some have suggested that Aristotle's praise of appropriate indignation is either flawed or implicitly critical of the idea (Wyllie 2021).

Nevertheless, it is clear that Aristotle's treatment of pity is different from Aquinas's of *misericordia* in significant ways. Most important is Aristotle's requirement that the appropriate object of pity is a person who does not deserve their suffering (Basil 2021). Aquinas does not directly confront Aristotle on this, but is still clear about the difference in their positions. Following Augustine and the New Testament rather than Aristotle, he affirms the appropriateness of mercy towards sinners (ST, 2–2 q.30, reply to objection 1). As Keaty (2005) puts it, that suffering should be undeserved, becomes a sufficient condition for mercy in Aquinas's account, but not a necessary one as it is for Aristotle.

Finally, Aquinas's *misericordia* carries with it a precondition relating to capability. In order to be able to exercise compassion in practice, one must not only feel it as a moving passion, one must also be able to help. The virtue of mercy depends on capability

(*potestas*); inasmuch as a person is able to supply something that another needs, that person possesses a capability or resource that the other lacks. In his argument at this point Aquinas relies on an assumption of his time and social order that ‘to supply what is needed by another belongs, as such, to someone who is higher and better’ (ST 2–2, q. 30 a. 4). This is not an assumption which we need to share, but we can nevertheless retain the idea that an imbalance in power or capability (*potestas*) is integral to Aquinas’s *misericordia*. This will be significant in the context of corporations in positions of power, relative to employees and other stakeholders.

We are now in a position to describe the virtue of mercy as *misericordia*, following Aquinas, thus:

Mercy (*misericordia*) is that virtue through which compassion for the suffering of others moves us to prevent or alleviate that suffering. Compassion itself remains, as the word suggests, a passion or affect, and it is only when it is combined with wisdom that it becomes the virtue of *misericordia*. Without wisdom, compassion may as easily issue in wrong as in right action.

### Modernity, Secular Philosophy and Contemporary Catholic Perspectives

As Tuckness and Parrish (2014) have observed, mercy has nowadays a much reduced status as an acknowledged virtue in public life. With the exception of some, such as Hume and Rousseau (Pettigrove 2007; Boyd 2004), many leading philosophers of the European Enlightenment rejected mercy or pity for a range of reasons. Kant leads the charge:

‘And, in truth, when another suffers, and I allow myself to be infected by his sorrow, which, however, I cannot mitigate nor avert, then two persons suffer, although naturally the evil affects one singly; and it is quite inconceivable that it can be any one’s duty to augment the physical evils in the world; and consequently there can be no obligation to act kindly out of pity. There is likewise an offensive variety of this pity called mercy, by which is meant that kind of benevolence shown to the unworthy; but such an expression of benevolence ought never to take place betwixt man and man, no one being entitled to boast of his worthiness to be happy.’ (Kant 1886, Section 34)

Nussbaum (1993) argues that Kant’s assault on pity derives directly from the Stoics. For Kant, the pity which drives mercy is an object of shame, and this sense of shame has found its way into current popular discourse on pity (Gerdes 2011).

Nietzsche for once agrees with Kant on this: pity is a pathological infection which we would be better off without (Cartwright 1984). Adam Smith also favours Kant’s view of mercy. He rejects pity towards the convicted criminal, which must be quashed in favour of a general and impartial consideration towards the rest of humanity. He approves those who ‘reflect that mercy to the guilty is cruelty to the innocent, and [...] counter the emotions of compassion that they feel for a particular person by a broader compassion that they feel for mankind’ (Smith 1869, p.81).

The passage is not a good summary of Smith’s views on compassion or mercy; in fact Smith’s principle of sympathy, which underpins his broader position on moral sentiments is itself arguably a form of compassion or empathy (Long 1990). However, it is significant here, because it represents a separation of language between, on the one hand, mercy in the sphere of justice and, on the other, compassion more generally. In Smith’s lexicon, mercy

is thus restricted to clemency, while broader notions of mercy in Aquinas's sense of *miseri-cordia* are expressed by terms such as 'sympathy' and 'compassion'.

In the European Enlightenment, moral philosophy thus came to abandon the very broad idea of mercy as *miseri-cordia* offered by Aquinas. For Kant, Smith and Nietzsche, pity became an emotional contagion and mercy its irrational and demeaning result.

In more recent anglophone philosophy, there has been a modest revival of interest in mercy, in the narrower sense of clemency, led by Smart (1968) and taken up by philosophers in ethics and jurisprudence (Bull 2019; Card 1972; Murphy 1986; Nussbaum 1993; Rainbolt 1990; Twambley 1976).

The forensic context is overwhelmingly favoured by modern authors as the locus of debate on mercy. There is recognition that mercy is also applicable in other contexts such as war (Bull 2019; Murphy 1986) but generally discussions remain anchored in legal justice. When modern writers on mercy emphasise this context, they recall Anselm's *Proslogion*, rather than Aquinas. They are interested in tensions between justice and mercy, and whether it is ever right for mercy to overturn the normal operation of justice, particularly from the perspective of a judge (Markel 2003; Nussbaum 1993). Others, such as Murphy (1986) reject a narrow judge's eye view of mercy, focusing instead on a paradigm of private or civil law and emphasising a rights / litigant view of mercy. One advantage of this view is that it is relevant to the commercial sphere, where business may exercise mercy by refraining from action which is legally permissible, but injurious to others. Mercy has also been recast from the sphere of punishment to a more general context of harsh treatment or harm. Rainbolt (1990: 170) defines a merciful act as one which occurs when 'someone treats another less harshly than one would normally expect them to be treated given the circumstances'.

In all of the above authors, there is an assumption that mercy is to be construed as clemency, rather than the wider idea of *miseri-cordia*. Perspectives are very different in the Roman Catholic Church, where mercy has not suffered the decline seen in Enlightenment and secular philosophy. Whilst secular philosophy has focused on mercy as legal clemency, contemporary Catholic thought has reinvigorated its own tradition of *miseri-cordia* as a basic principle of human life, which precedes and informs justice in its widest senses, social and distributive as well as retributive.

This reinvigoration is evident in the papal works of John Paul II and Francis (Massaro 2018; Francis 2015; John Paul II 1980). In these teachings, mercy is affirmed as broad in its scope and central in its position. John Paul II's (1980) encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, explores both the mercy of God and the response of human beings in acts of 'merciful love' (*miseri-cors amor*), which include not only forgiveness, but also healing, giving, parenting and teaching. Francis's (2015) papal bull *Miseri-cordiae Vultus* reaffirms the central importance of mercy in characterising the nature of God and his approach to human beings, and recalls the church to works of mercy, which include corporal works, 'to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead', and spiritual works, 'to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead' (Francis 2015, Sec 15).

The lists are traditional and practical, but also poetic. The point is that, as a human virtue, mercy seeks to alleviate suffering in whatever form or person it is found. This idea of mercy as a central and wide ranging virtue of humane treatment of others is directly in line with Aquinas's view of mercy as compassionate response. Mercy has therefore maintained a place in traditional Catholic practice of everyday works of mercy as well as in its central teachings (Keenan 2017).

Contemporary Catholic perspectives which regard mercy as both wide ranging and foundational to the human good include the Thomistic Aristotelian philosophy of MacIntyre (1999), who turns to Aquinas for an account of a virtue which can support his exploration of the human condition of mutual dependency and vulnerability. MacIntyre focuses on *miseriordia* as a central virtue of human life, which responds to anyone in need, rather than depending on prior ties of family or friendship; this is crucial in extending the care that we might otherwise have only for those close to us, to others who have no such claim. MacIntyre makes it clear that *miseriordia*, although commonly translated as mercy, is a much broader concept than the term ‘mercy’ in the usage of most modern anglophone philosophers.

The importance of mercy is also evident in the response of the Catholic Church to poverty and oppression in Latin America in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The liberation theologian, Sobrino (2015) sees mercy as the central and fundamental principle of what it means to be human. Sobrino’s understanding of mercy is radical: mercy is at the root of what it means to be human, and it is at the root of social justice. It is therefore not only spiritually and psychologically radical, but also politically and socially so. The practice of mercy requires the adoption of an uncalculated vulnerability, a ‘willingness to enter into the chaos of another’ (Keenan 2020: 63). For Sobrino and his associates in San Salvador at the time, this was literally a matter of life and death; many were murdered because they gave voice to the oppression of others and so took on their vulnerability.

It thus seems that a key part of the decline of mercy as a widely agreed good of public life may be due to a pattern of bifurcation, particularly during the enlightenment. Contemporary secular (largely anglophone) philosophy now favours a narrow version of mercy as clemency versus retributive justice, while Roman Catholic and other Christian traditions have maintained Aquinas’s wider view of mercy as *miseriordia*, a core human virtue which seeks to alleviate the suffering of others and acts as a well-spring of justice in its broadest sense.

### III. Corporations and the Principle of Mercy as *Miseriordia*

#### Description at the Corporate Level: from Virtue to Principle

Mercy as the virtue of *miseriordia* is described by Aquinas as a core element of a human life well-lived. However, it is not necessarily applicable in the same way to corporations as such, and there are good reasons for not assuming that the virtue can be simply applied at the corporate level as it stands.

It has long been clear that a corporation is a legal entity which is not the same as the sum of its members (Brown 1905; French 1984). Unlike people, corporations have neither psychology nor emotions; they cannot feel sorrow, pity or sympathy. Yet, they do act and publicly give reasons for action, for instance in the form of intentions and desires (Ludwig 2017).

Moore (2005) makes the case for corporate moral character and goes so far as to propose that corporations can possess canonical Aristotelian virtues such as fortitude and temperance. However, his usage is admittedly metaphorical, and metaphorical usage comes with its own difficulties. If we want to speak literally of mercy at the corporate level, we will need to be explicit about the way that meanings shift as they move levels, from human beings to corporations.

In the case of mercy, the shift is considerable, because the direct connection with compassion which was there at the level of the individual moral agent, no longer pertains. The corporation itself cannot feel sorrow for the suffering of another. It therefore seems best to avoid the adjective *compassionate*, as literally applied to the corporation, since that would imply an emotional state, rather than simply intentions or reasons for action. Of course, people *within* a corporation can feel compassion and act in response to it. So, there is no problem with using virtue terms to describe the culture or moral climate of an organization, so long as this remains anchored in the relevant collective membership. However, this remains distinct from description of the corporation itself.

In this respect, compassion is very different from, say, justice. When Rawls (1972) famously describes justice as ‘the first virtue of social institutions’, whatever one’s position on his political philosophy, the use of virtue language here is not immediately problematic. The same cannot be said in the case of virtues or vices which directly pertain to emotional and psychological states in Aristotelian or Thomistic canons. Referring to corporations as courageous or cowardly, witty or humourless may be legitimate as figurative descriptions, but cannot denote virtues in an Aristotelian sense, since corporations lack the relevant emotional and psychological capacities on which such virtues or vices might operate. In Aquinas’s account, the relationship between the emotion of compassion and the virtue of *miseriordia* is crucial: the virtue is understood in classic Aristotelian terms, where the regulation of compassion is part and parcel of the virtue, and the virtue is an habitual disposition of moral character, directed to good ends by the exercise of wisdom. None of this is a good fit at the corporate level.

One way around the problem is to reconfigure mercy as a principle, which is directly related to the Thomistic virtue, but conceptually distinct. Principles here may be understood as supporting standards which allow us to judge ‘what it takes for a given action on a given occasion to have some moral property or other’ (Berker 2019: 907). If a principle can be described in such a way as to preserve the moral value of the virtue of *miseriordia*, whilst avoiding the attribution of an unrealistic psychology to the corporation, then the idea of mercy can still act as a means of evaluating standards of corporate behaviour.

If this is to be successful, it is important that the connection is maintained between the virtue of mercy at the human level and the principle of mercy at the corporate level, a connection which will be not only conceptual but also practical. Let us say that the principle of mercy relies directly on the virtue of *miseriordia*, thus:

The principle of mercy is that standard of action which arises from the virtue of *miseriordia*.

The standard refers back to the virtue and so ultimately to virtuous persons. The idea that virtuous persons supply the standard by which virtues can be judged is traditional in virtue ethics (Hursthouse 1999). Underpinning the principle of mercy is the idea of good persons, capable of feeling and acting in certain ways. So, to judge whether a corporation, in deciding to do X, acted in accordance with the principle of mercy, is partly to ask if a person possessed of the virtue of mercy would have decided to do X in that situation.

Given so close a connection between the principle and the virtue, is it any more realistic to apply the principle to the corporation, compared to the virtue? The answer is yes, because some key things have changed in the move from virtue to principle. Where possession of the virtue of mercy implies moral character, there is no such implication for the corporation with regard to the principle. Other things are similarly no longer required of the corporation, once we have moved from virtue to principle, including a capacity for the

emotion of compassion, a psychological history, ongoing habits of thought and action, and so on.

Instead of supposing moral character at the corporate level, we can rely on less contentious ideas of organizational culture or moral climate. For instance, the principle of *misericordia* is conceptually compatible with the kind of organizational culture described by Melé (2003) as humanizing. Instead of supposing ongoing habits of thought and action at the corporate level, we can rely on the kind of notions of policy, strategy and performance which are implied by frameworks for corporate responsibility or corporate citizenship (Matten and Moon 2008; Matten and Crane 2005).

On the other hand, some key things have not changed: mercy remains a human principle for human institutions and, because it remains human, it remains messy. The principle relies on its reference to people, their emotions and their reasoning, and this connection is also practical. Without actual people within the corporation capable of actually feeling compassion and responding, the corporation cannot act in accordance with the principle of mercy. The move from virtue to principle is therefore significant in the sense that we are not claiming moral character for corporations, but the connection to the emotion of compassion remains and, with it, the question of motives. None of the complexity has been removed.

#### IV. Practical Implications: Vulnerable Stakeholders

Thus far we have reviewed mercy in its narrower sense of clemency or leniency and its wider sense of *misericordia*. Based on Aquinas's virtue of *misericordia*, a principle of mercy has been formulated which can be directly applied at the corporate level as a means of evaluating an organisation against its social responsibilities.

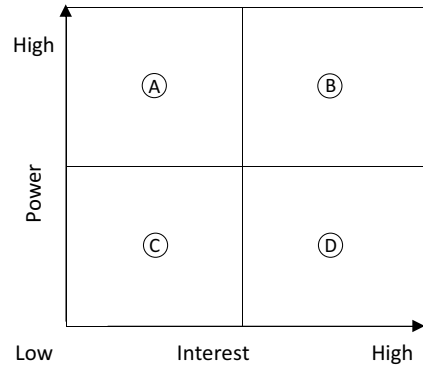
What practical impact might this have for business ethics? It appears to throw up some radical challenges for the way that firms treat workers and other stakeholders. Aquinas's idea of *misericordia* is explicitly applicable to those in a position of power to help or to harm. It is therefore relevant wherever a corporation has power relative to others, most of all where the gap in power is greatest, and this has potential to reverse the assumptions of some prevalent stakeholder models in organization theory.

The stakeholder power-interest matrix is one of the most widely used analysis tools in research and teaching on stakeholder management (Buchanan and Huczynski 2019). Popularized by Johnson and Scholes (Johnson et al. 2017), who acknowledge a debt to Newcombe (2003), the model analyses stakeholders according to two axes, one describing the level of power which stakeholders hold relative to an organization or project, and the other the level of interest they have in its activities. The model is not only descriptive but also normative. Having introduced the power-interest matrix, Buchanan & Huczinski recommend methods for managing the possible resistance of stakeholders:

‘Different stakeholders must be managed differently. Allies need to be “kept on side”, while opponents need to be converted, or perhaps discredited and marginalized. [...] While education, participation and support are likely to be the norm, there will be situations where negotiation, manipulation and coercion may be seen as appropriate.’ (Buchanan and Huczinski 2019: 658)

The power-interest matrix emphasises the need to pay attention to those who have power over the corporation or its projects, understood as power to help or hinder; if

**Fig. 1** Power-interest matrix, adapted from Newcombe (2003)



Quadrants:

- A: Keep satisfied
- B: Key players
- C: Minimal effort
- D: Keep informed

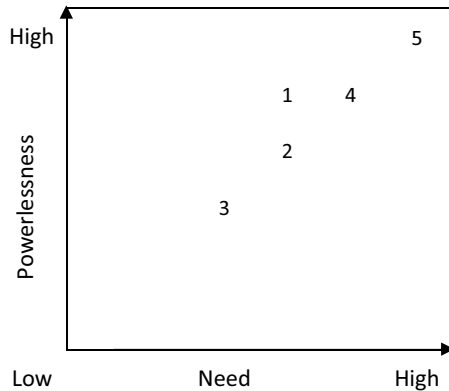
stakeholders are low in power, then corporations should devote minimal effort or just keep them informed of what is happening.

The principle of mercy has a contrasting orientation: those stakeholders who have the most need and the least power relative to the corporation and its activities are the ones who are most vulnerable and therefore most stand in need of consideration and protection. The Johnson and Scholes model is, in fact, a broadly inhumane model of stakeholder management.

To understand some of the practical implications of this difference, two models are presented visually below. Figure 1 shows the conventional stakeholder power-interest matrix. Figure 2 shows a proposed alternative vulnerability grid, based on the idea of *miser cordia*, with two axes. The powerlessness axis is an inversion of the standard power-over axis of Fig. 1, so that in Fig. 2 powerlessness tracks the degree to which the organization has power over the stakeholder. Here, powerlessness (inversely) implies power as a relational concept of power-over as expressed by Tew (2006), though it does not imply specifically either the creative or oppressive exercise of power.

The need axis in Fig. 2 tracks the degree of dependency of the stakeholder on the organization such that, if their needs are not met, they will suffer or continue to suffer. Here, needs are distinct from wants or desires, and the term ‘need’ is meant first of all in the sense of necessary conditions for human well-being, including the avoidance of harm and the pursuit of the good, as expressed by Gough (1994).<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the idea of need here is intended relationally in a similar way to the axis of powerlessness. It tracks the dependency of people *on* an organization *for* their needs. This dependency relation is sometimes moot, of course, and this is a legitimate source of complexity. A worker might need to be paid by their employer and this might seem indisputable. On the other hand, a cancer patient might

<sup>3</sup> This is only to make use of Gough’s core idea of what is meant by human need, rather than the full detail of his substantive account of what particular needs count.



Stakeholders:

1. Precarious workers – asylum seekers in Australia (Van Kooy and Bowman 2019)
2. Ferry crews dismissed in UK (O'Connor 2022)
3. Employees who have harmed others or breached trust (Goodstein et al. 2016)
4. Vulnerable energy customers in South Wales (Groves et al. 2020)
5. Animals in Nordic businesses (Tallberg et al. 2021)

**Fig. 2** Vulnerability grid, mapping stakeholder groups on axes of powerlessness and need

need a pharmaceutical company to lower the price of a life-saving drug to an affordable level, and that need may be disputed at a relational level: the company may respond that, yes, the patient needs the drug, but that this implies that they need the right medical insurance, not that the price needs to be lower.

These two relational axes of powerlessness and need are conceptually distinct: a person may need something from an organisation, whilst also being in a position of sufficient power relative to that organization to secure it or, alternatively, someone may be powerless relative to an organisation, whilst also needing nothing from it. The two axes are also intended to work together to provide a way of mapping vulnerability which denotes actual or potential suffering, depending on the actions of some relevant organization. Someone is vulnerable relative to an organisation if they are in a position of both need and powerlessness.

This is best illustrated further by exploring real cases drawn from business ethics literature.

The following illustrations of workers and other stakeholder groups are drawn from recent empirical studies of various forms of vulnerability. Workers are a particularly appropriate focus for critical analysis of practice, in part because they are the most frequently occurring group represented in association with negative treatment of others surveyed in Table 2 (section II of this article). Although workers are clearly stakeholders in their organizations, they are often not the focus of normative stakeholder discussion (Van Buren and Greenwood 2011). The particular contexts have been chosen because they each shed light on different aspects of the way that the vulnerability grid works in relation to the core concept of mercy as *miseriordia*. The context of precarious work shows a typical context in which the concept operates with regard to workers. Employee misbehaviour touches on the position of clemency or leniency relative the overall idea of mercy as *miseriordia*.



Vulnerable energy customers illustrate the application of the framework to external stakeholders. Finally, the case of animals in organizations offers some critique of the scope of Aquinas's idea of *miser cordia*, i.e. its confinement to mercy for human suffering only.

Numbers in square brackets below correspond to the positions of each group shown on the vulnerability grid.

### ***Precarious Work [1] & [2]***

There is a close conceptual link in academic discourse between precarious work and vulnerability (Chin 2019). Studies of precarious labour have helped to articulate how the vulnerability of workers varies amongst groups and individuals, between regulatory regimes, and across industries and sectors. Precarious work may be defined as work that is 'uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker' (Kalleberg 2009: 2) or as 'the absence of those aspects of the standard employment relationship' that protect against the commodification of labour (Rubery et al. 2018: 510).

A qualitative study of asylum seekers in Australia by Van Kooy and Bowman (2019) illustrates how state immigration systems create conditions of precarious work, even when asylum seekers are granted bridging visas permitting them to work legally. The study finds that workers in this system are vulnerable in a number of ways: stable jobs with good working conditions and secure contracts are unavailable to them, and they are obliged to accept short-term, low-skilled jobs with low pay, poor conditions and unpredictable hours. Often they work in the informal labour market and so are apt to exploitation.

To describe this group [1] as precarious is also to describe them as vulnerable, particularly in respect of powerlessness, which is a direct result of their doubtful citizenship status. This kind of precariousness, associated with migration or asylum, is identified as problematic in comparison to standard labour conditions in some given state regulatory system. The problem is well-attested around the globe (Rubery et al. 2018; Polanco 2016; Lewis et al. 2015).

Migration is of course only one cause of precarious work, and other causes include deregulation and non-compliance with existing regulations (Prosser 2016). The case of 800 workers [2] summarily dismissed by P&O Ferries in the UK offers a contrasting case. The company sacked the workers (ship's crews) without consultation in March 2022, apparently in contravention of UK labour regulations, causing national uproar (O'Connor 2022). Up until their sacking was announced, these workers might not have been considered precarious, since they worked in a reasonably well regulated industry, as part of a unionised workforce. This group [2] is therefore positioned differently in terms of vulnerability to group 1 above.

In comparing these two groups, what is particularly of relevance here is that, whilst group 1 are discussed in academic discourse as victims of an inhumane immigration system at the state level, group 2 have been characterised for the most part by news media and by the UK Government as victims of sharp employment practice, in contravention of state level protections. In the P&O case, it appears that the company sacked unionised UK workers, in order to hire international seafarers on less expensive contracts (Topham 2022). Such a change might have the effect of reducing the company's legal obligations towards workers but not its moral ones. Arguably, *miser cordia* implies an inversion: the less that a worker is protected in law, the greater their

vulnerability and, correspondingly, the greater the moral obligation of the corporation towards them.

### ***Employee Misbehaviour [3]***

Although leniency and forgiveness have traditionally been more studied in theology, law and psychology, in recent years research into topics concerning forgiveness and reconciliation in the workplace has also been evident in business ethics (Faldetta 2022; Palanski 2012). Research which provides first-hand qualitative data from the point of view of employees who have breached trust or harmed others is understandably rare, but Goodstein et al. (2016) provide a relevant in-depth study of MBA students in the USA, reporting on their own experiences of harming others or breaching standards and then making amends. This is the group [3] located for illustrative purposes in Fig. 2.

To speak of employees guilty of misconduct covers a wide range of potential severity and impact on others. Fleckenstein and Bowes (2000), citing Aquinas, discuss the difficulties of practical decision making in the context of employee misconduct so as to recognise the organization's obligations to all concerned. The guilty parties are not the only vulnerable persons in need of consideration. The placement of group 3 on the vulnerability grid is therefore very dependent on particular circumstances, and the balancing of the needs of different stakeholders. This group is positioned on the grid as the least vulnerable of the groups considered, because the fact of their presence on a prestigious MBA course indicates a positive career trajectory; it is of course possible that other individuals, with similar histories but not enrolled on the course, were more adversely affected by their own misbehaviour.

### ***Vulnerable Energy Customers [4]***

A study by Groves et al. (2020) provides first-hand accounts from South Wales of 'energy vulnerability', i.e. 'the propensity for a household to suffer a lack of adequate energy services' (Groves et al. 2020: 1). The study highlights a number of ways that vulnerability can become deprivation, and the way that it connects with other vulnerabilities, for instance with regard to old age or ill health, insecure housing and hard choices 'to eat or heat'. The households [4] in the study are classed as vulnerable to fuel poverty, and are already suffering in a number of ways, including anxiety. They are vulnerable not only in respects of events, such as price increases or deterioration of housing fabric, but also in respect of relationships, particularly their relationships with landlords and utility companies. Tenants in conditions of precarious housing can be vulnerable to unequal power relations with landlords, both in developing and developed economies (Arku et al. 2012; Pendall et al. 2012), and many of the same issues arise in relations with utility suppliers, with regard to overcharging or disconnection (Citizens Advice 2021; O'Sullivan et al. 2011).

### ***Animals in Organizations [5]***

Animals do not appear within Aquinas's purview of the scope of *misericordia*. Neither do they traditionally appear on stakeholder mapping, although this is increasingly being

challenged (Merskin 2021). Animals are integral to the running of many businesses, and they are conspicuously vulnerable to abuse and suffering, particularly in factory farms (Crittenden 2000). Animals are included here partly in recognition of Zuzworsky's (2001) and Barad's (2007) critique of Aquinas, that animals are appropriate objects of compassion and should be included as such, and partly as a critique of stakeholder theory, which may be seen as unduly anthropocentric (Smart 2021).

Recent empirical research by Tallberg et al. (2022) provides a detailed ethnographic study of an animal shelter and Nordic husky kennels [5], taking a feminist perspective on stakeholder theory, and this has been used to position animal stakeholders in Fig. 2. Although Tallberg et al. propose affective salience as an addition to traditional stakeholder theory, intending to capture the emotional power of animals to call out a caring response from human beings, here they are positioned as powerless in an institutional sense.

### Potential Application of the Stakeholder Vulnerability Grid

In the vulnerability grid at Fig. 2, the stakeholder groups discussed above are given positions for illustration, based on the studies cited. Any such positioning is, of course, open to debate and revision. Here, the purpose is only to illustrate the different perspective offered by the two grids. Most of these stakeholder groups would be positioned very differently on the standard power-interest matrix (Fig. 1): groups 1, 2 and 4, being low in power and high in interest, would likely fall within quadrant D 'keep informed'; group 5, animals would not normally appear at all. Positioning of group 3 is more arguable on either model, depending on the offence or harm done and the resources available to each individual to make amends or repair relationships.

There are key differences in intent between the grids. First, unlike the power-interest matrix, the vulnerability grid is not divided into quadrants with broad recommended strategies attached. Rather it indicates an increasing obligation of mercy (*misericordia*), rising from the lowest point bottom left to the highest top right: organizations have the greatest obligation to act with mercy towards those who are most vulnerable. This obligation depends on two normative forces operating in the vulnerability grid. One is Aquinas's condition of *potestas*. *Potestas* refers to power as capability to do something or as legitimate authority, rather than simply power-over: a corporation's responsibility towards the vulnerable is proportional to its capability to help or protect. The other is the standard notion that corporations have responsibilities towards their stakeholders, which is implicit in theories of corporate social responsibility and explicit in stakeholder theories which refer to the legitimacy or legitimate claim of stakeholder groups (Freeman and Dmytriiev 2017; McGahan 2020).

Second, the overall intentions of the models differ. The power-interest matrix is explicitly intended as a model of stakeholder management. The vulnerability grid is intended mainly as an evaluative and critical commentary on stakeholder management, rather than as a stakeholder management model in itself.

Lastly, the axis of 'interest' in Fig. 1 may appear superficially similar to the axis of 'need' in Fig. 2. However, interest denotes a much wider class of motives than need. A stakeholder can have a range of possible interests, desires, goals etc., which may have little to do with needs. The gambling industry provides an example (Gray et al. 2021), where customers with a gambling addiction may have a desire to continue gambling, whilst also having a need to stop.

The vulnerability grid thus has potential practical application in providing a counter-balance to conventional stakeholder theories. In the discussion above, the power-interest matrix has been chosen as a focus, because it exhibits a sharp contrast to the principle of *miseriordia*. Other stakeholder theories may fare better. For instance, the stakeholder salience model developed by Mitchell et al. (1997), is arguably more nuanced and more normatively defensible. The principle of *miseriordia* and the vulnerability grid proposed here do not provide an alternative to such models, but they do offer a means of evaluating them.

The grid also has potential as a social accounting tool to guide strategy and mission, for instance in the case of social enterprises (Ramus and Vaccaro 2017). For many commercial organizations, it could usefully act as a means of critiquing business practices as humane or inhumane, supplementing mainstream stakeholder management tools, which may marginalise claimants without power (Tashman and Raelin, 2013).

## Conclusion

This article has used Aquinas's account of *miseriordia* to argue for a principle of mercy, which is directly applicable to corporations and their activities. It has been shown how ideas of mercy diverged in the European enlightenment, with the result that much recent academic discourse has concerned only the narrower idea of mercy as leniency, rather than the broader idea of mercy as *miseriordia*. This broader idea of mercy as *miseriordia* is central to human flourishing, and deserves a similarly central place in contemporary business ethics. For want of a satisfactory existing English terminology, the terms 'humane' and 'inhumane' have been used to describe corporations which meet or fall short of mercy as a standard.

This notion of a principle of mercy applicable to corporations then produces a number of challenges to our ways of thinking about business ethics. In order to describe any corporation as humane, we need to be able recognise the principle of mercy as one of its basic features. Such an organization needs to be especially aware of those whose positions are most vulnerable, and at times to prioritize those who are least rather than most powerful. Some of the implications of this for mainstream theories of stakeholder management have been explored, particularly regarding the protection of vulnerable workers and other groups, and a model for analysis has been proposed in the form of a stakeholder vulnerability grid.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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