

MORAL VIRTUE AND CONTEMPLATION: A NOTE ON THE UNITY OF THE MORAL LIFE

INTRODUCTION

The notion of contemplation as the goal of life is, it seems, as old as philosophy itself. Already Anaxagoras, when asked why he was in the world, replied, «To contemplate» (*eis theorian*)¹. So too, both Plato and Aristotle placed man's highest fulfillment in contemplative activity, that activity which, more than any other, shared in the divine. No less did Thomas Aquinas —within the Christian tradition— accept that view, adding to the philosophical the evangelical dictum that Mary had chosen the better part. And yet, both philosophers as well as Christians also pointed to moral action as essential to a fulfilled human life, as being in some way the goal of our lives. Socrate's urging to the philosophical life in no way lessened his demand for justice; Aristotle postulated a secondary happiness, one based on the moral virtues; and Aquinas, while placing man's end in contemplation, also points to the rectitude of the will as its necessary prerequisite.

It is this relationship of the moral life —understood as the activities of the moral virtues— to contemplation that forms the theme of this article. In the context of St. Thomas, I wish briefly to examine 1) how the moral life points to a human fulfillment beyond itself; 2) in what way the moral virtues remove certain obstacles to contemplation; and finally, 3) in what way the moral virtues provide the rectitude of the will required for the contemplative life.

1. THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE MORAL VIRTUES

The practical insufficiency of a life led according to the moral virtues becomes apparent if we look at them individually and ask whether human fulfillment could lie in their acts².

Let us begin with temperance. The act of temperance consists of reason commanding ordinate passions and resisting inordinate ones, particularly those passions

¹ DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Cambridge: Loeb, 1925; 1980 reprint), II, 10, vol. I, p. 140.

² Here I am following the analyses of Josef Pieper in *Happiness and Contemplation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958; original title: *Glück und Kontemplation*), especially Chapter Eleven, pp. 89-99. Cfr. *Summ. c. Gent.* III, ch. 34; *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 3 a. 5.

connected with bodily pleasures. Does human life have its goal in moderately experiencing such passions? It hardly seems so. Could we perhaps say that fulfillment lies not in the moderation of the passions which are ordered to bodily pleasure, but rather in a temperate indulgence in the pleasures themselves? This may seem more likely. Still, it would mean that bodily pleasure itself was the end of life, and, what is more, it would mean that temperance was not truly a virtue. If bodily pleasure is the end of life, to moderate its enjoyment can hardly be a virtue; rather, the more the better. Even if someone moderates his present enjoyment in order to ensure greater future enjoyment, overall there would be no measure, but more would simply be better. Accordingly, if temperance truly consists in *moderating* pleasure, it requires a *measure* according to which it does so, and that measure must be beyond the pleasure itself. Thus temperance is a virtue precisely by being ordered to something beyond itself³.

So too with fortitude. Our fulfillment clearly lies elsewhere than in experiencing, in a moderate degree, the passions of fear and daring. Nor does it lie in enduring pain, nor even in overcoming external dangers. Were that so, as Aristotle points out, we would instigate wars in order to have more occasions to exercise our courage⁴. In reality, we face danger in a virtuous way only when we do so for the sake of some good beyond the danger, usually a common good to which we are obliged by justice or by love⁵. To face dangers simply for the sake of overcoming them is not courage, but rather foolhardiness and vainglory.

What, then, about justice? Once again it does not seem accurate to say that our lives could be fulfilled simply by giving the others with whom we deal what is owed them. Having done that, what should a person then do? We might think of the problems of social justice: the legal protection of basic human rights, the establishment of a just economic system, a fair distribution of society's resources and services. Here we do indeed seem to find matter for one's whole life; we need only think of those whose lives have been dedicated to abolishing social evils such as slavery or freeing their countries from unjust oppressors. And yet, here again the question arises: What if such persons were wholly successful in their efforts? What if the just society were fully realized? What then? Would we not still seek something more? Clearly even just human relationships are not ends in themselves, but rather a condition for some end that lies beyond them.

A final possible end of human life at the level of moral virtues is that of loving others. Here again the example of countless people who spend their lives in dedicated love of others, finding the meaning of their lives in furthering the welfare of their families or of some wider community, seems to present us with an ultimately fulfilling goal for human life. But even here analysis shows clearly a need for some activity other than loving at which love itself aims. Simply stated, in loving other persons I seek their good. But what, precisely, is that good? If the highest good

³ See *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 141 a. 6. Cf. q. 152 a. 2.

⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) X 7: 1177 b 8-13.

⁵ *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 123 a. 12 ad 3um.

were to love others, then I would want that they should want that yet others want this same good for still yet other people. Obviously, in this fashion, the benevolence which is essential to love has no content. Hence, the goal of seeking another's good must be some good, and not simply a seeking of the good. And so, even in an activity as exalted as loving other persons, we find ourselves pointed in the direction of some activity beyond the love itself, some activity in which the love itself is fulfilled⁶.

This further activity at which all the acts of the moral virtues ultimately aim is, according to classical thought, and particularly according to Thomas Aquinas, that of *theorein* or *contemplare*. The ultimate goal of life lies in an activity of having present to oneself, through cognitive activity, the goodness of the world and its creator. Man's greatest joy lies in seeing, for by seeing he has present to himself—he possesses—goods greater than any of the goods that he can produce by his own actions. Ultimately the insufficiency of the moral virtues lies here, viz. that the goods brought about by such actions are all limited goods (e. g. a measured indulgence in bodily pleasures), and no such good can satisfy the infinite longing of the human spirit⁷. As Aristotle had said and Aquinas repeated, were man the highest being in the universe, prudence would be the highest virtue; but since there are more perfect things than man, the activity of knowing these higher things is more perfective of man than knowing his own goodness. Thus wisdom, a speculative virtue, is more noble than prudence⁸. So too, the *vita contemplativa*—the life dedicated to speculative knowing—is more noble and superior to a life led according to the moral virtues, the *vita activa*⁹.

2. MORAL VIRTUE AS A DISPOSITION TO THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

When St. Thomas takes up the relationship between moral virtue and the contemplative life, he points out that in one sense the acts of the moral virtues hinder contemplative activity. His reason is a simple one: a person engaged in exterior activity must turn his mind in that direction and so cannot be concentrating his thoughts on the speculative objects proper to the contemplative life. To be active means not to be contemplative. Nevertheless, St. Thomas points out that in another sense the moral virtues serve as dispositions to contemplative activity. These dispositions, however, are negative, i. e., they consist in the removal of certain obstacles to contemplation¹⁰.

⁶ For Thomas's version of this argument see *Summ. c. Gent.* III, ch. 26: «Obiectum igitur voluntatis est prius naturaliter quam actus eius. Primum igitur eius obiectum praecedit omnem actum ipsius. Non potest ergo actus voluntatis primum volitum esse». Cf. *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 1 a. 1 ad 2um, q. 3 a. 4 ad 2um.

⁷ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 2 aa. 7-8.

⁸ NE VI 7: 1141 a 9 - b 23. In *VI Ethic.*, lect. 6, nn. 1186-1194; cf. *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 66 a. 5.

⁹ *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 182 a. 1; cf. a. 4.

¹⁰ *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 182 a. 3.

These obstacles are primarily two. In the first place, there are the passions. Excessive and disordered passions rob a person of the interior tranquillity that is necessary for contemplative activity. For a person who frequently experiences violent anger, strong lusts, or excessive fears, it is almost impossible to concentrate on anything other than the objects of his passions¹¹. The virtues of temperance and fortitude, whose primary objects are precisely the moderation of the passions, serve to remove inordinate passion and so produce the inner peace needed for contemplation¹². In the second place there is lack of exterior peace and tranquillity. A person who, due to war, or civil strife, or even widespread crime must worry about his own personal security as well as that of others, lacks the leisure necessary for contemplative activity. Since these external disturbances arise from injustice, it is the exercise of justice, Thomas says, that produces conditions of peace. *Opus iustitiae pax*¹³.

3. CONTEMPLATION AND RECTITUDE OF THE WILL

But is there a more direct, a more positive relationship between the moral virtues and the contemplative life? Can we say that the acts of the moral virtues not only remove obstacles to contemplation, but also in some way positively dispose a person to it? Let us, in what follows, take up this question.

Moral virtue, Thomas teaches, is virtue *simpliciter*. That is to say that moral virtue makes a man and his actions to be good with respect to the end of life as a whole. The moral virtues not only give a capacity for good action, but also a tendency to use or exercise the virtue. Since it is the will, however, that moves all powers to their acts —“uses” the powers we can say— moral virtues are always found either in the will itself or in other powers insofar as they are moved by the will¹⁴. Hence we can examine the relationship of the moral virtue to the contemplative life in terms of the will’s role in that life. This we can do in seven steps.

1. Thomas describes three fundamental relationships of the will to contemplation. The first is *antecedent* to the contemplation and consists in the will’s ordination to the contemplation¹⁵. The second, *concomitant* to the contemplation, occurs only in the beatific vision in the contemplation of God’s essence. Here, Thomas teaches, the will spontaneously loves all that it loves as ordered to God¹⁶. Third, *consequent* to all contemplation, the will experiences joy (*delectatio* or *gaudium*)¹⁷. Of these three, we will focus our attention on the first, on the will’s antecedent ordination to contemplation.

¹¹ See *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 77 a. 1c.

¹² *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 180 a. 2c. & ad 3um; q. 182 a. 3.

¹³ *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 180 a. 2 ad 2um.

¹⁴ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 56 a. 3c. We should note that for the same reason, viz. that the will uses all the powers, a man is said to be good or bad *simpliciter* according to the goodness or badness of his will; see *Summ. theol.* I q. 48 a. 6c.

¹⁵ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 4 a. 4c; II-II q. 180 a. 1; cf. I-II q. 3 a. 4c.

¹⁶ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 4 a. 4c.

¹⁷ *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 180 a. 7; I-II q. 3 a. 4c, q. 4 aa. 1-2.

2. The will's ordination to contemplation is necessary if there is to be contemplation at all. The basis for this statement is Thomas's view that the will moves all the other powers of the soul to their acts, since we use all our powers and habits according as the will exercises them. In technical terms, the will commands the exercise of the intellect's act¹⁸. In plainer terms, if I am to think about any particular object, I must choose to do so. Thus the will must be ordered to contemplation as a good for the person if the person is to engage in it.

3. The primary affection of the will is love. According to Aquinas, all acts of the will and all acts commanded by the will arise from some love¹⁹. Hence, when the will moves the intellect to the act of contemplation, there must be some love causing it to do so. Thomas points to two loves at work here. First there is a love of the *knowing activity itself* which is an element of the knower's perfection. Second there is a love of the *object which is known*, which is the basis for one's desires to see it. In this mode of love, the person wishes to know the object in order to possess it or be united to it. It is this latter which is the dominant love in the contemplative life²⁰.

4. St. Thomas, following Aristotle, maintains that the objects of that speculative knowing which constitutes the contemplative life are superior to man. It is for this reason, as we have seen, that wisdom is a higher virtue than prudence, which is concerned only with the human sphere. This means, however, that these objects must be *persons*, i. e., rational beings, for no non-rational being is superior to man²¹. But if these objects are persons, then the love we have for them must be a love of friendship (*amor amicitiae*); they are not loved simply as useful for us, but as good in themselves and as pertaining somehow to our own good²².

5. The love of friendship is complex. Here let us fix our attention on three of its essential elements. In the first place, the beloved is taken as another self or as an extension of self. Thus the good of the other is seen as one's own good. Second, the lover seeks the good of the beloved for the sake of the beloved. The lover wills what is good for the beloved. This implies that the lover takes to be good what the beloved takes as good and because the beloved takes it as good, such that there is a unity of wills²³. As Aristotle pointed out, the lover experiences joy and sorrow in the same things as the beloved²⁴. Third, the lover seeks to be united to the beloved. The lover desires the presence of the beloved when he is absent, and rejoices in the presence of the beloved when that is achieved²⁵.

¹⁸ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 9 a. 1; q. 17 a. 6.

¹⁹ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 25 aa. 1-2; q. 28 a. 6c.

²⁰ *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 180 aa. 1,7.

²¹ See e. g., *Summ. c. Gent.* III, chs. 22 & 112, which state that all material beings other than man are lower than man and exist for man; for the special status of persons in the universe see *Summ. theol.* I q. 29 a. 3c; *De potent.* q. 9 a. 3c.

²² For the distinction between *amor amicitiae* and *amor concupiscentiae*, see *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 26 a. 3c; for the structure of *amor amicitiae*, see q. 28, especially aa. 1-4.

²³ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 28 a. 2.

²⁴ NE IX 4: 1166 a 7-10.

²⁵ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 28 a. 1.

6. According to St. Thomas, the primary object of contemplation is God. All other objects of speculative inquiry are studied in order to arrive at the knowledge of God²⁶. The speculative intellect has, we might say, an internal teleology, and its *telos*, or goal, is knowledge of the divine. But, as we have seen, in contemplation it is not simply the knowledge of the contemplated object that is loved, but also that object itself. And, as we have said, that object is loved with a love of friendship. If we now add that an element of this love of friendship is to seek union with the beloved, we can say that, for Aquinas, contemplation has its deepest meaning when it is seen as the union of the lover and the beloved. Contemplation is, in fact, the fulfillment and culmination of charity²⁷. Lovers wish more than anything else to see each other, and those who love God wish to see Him, to have him present. This occurs in contemplation, imperfectly in this life, perfectly in the next²⁸.

7. Love is not simply a desire for union with the beloved; it also includes, as we have seen (point 5), a willing of the good of the beloved. And this willing, if it is authentic, is expressed in action; it includes both *benevolence*, the simple willing of the other's good, and *beneficence*, the active pursuit which procures that good. In human friendships we rejoice in those goods which the friend possesses and seek those that he lacks. In the case of friendship with God, who, being absolutely perfect, lacks no good, we rejoice in his perfection and seek the one thing that might possibly be considered to be lacking to God: that what he wills in creation be fulfilled, i. e., that creation give glory to his wisdom, power and goodness. To will this is rectitude of will. And it would seem that it is precisely this rectitude that Thomas has in mind in his discussion of beatitude when he posits rectitude of will as a necessary condition of beatitude²⁹.

4. RECTITUDE OF THE WILL AND MORAL VIRTUE

The concept of the will's rectitude provides us the context in which to see the relationship of the active life, the life of the moral virtues, to contemplation. Moral virtue, Thomas teaches, rectifies the willing of the end (as opposed to the means) and this is to rectify the will's love. In fact, he says, every moral virtue can be said to be an *ordo amoris* in that every virtue requires an ordered affection³⁰. But how is this related to the love of God? We find the answer to this question spelled out in the "Treatise on Sin" (*Summ. theol.* I-II qq. 71-89). Every sin or vicious act, Thomas says, is a disordered act. Now there are three basic orders which vicious actions disrupt: 1) the order of reason, 2) the order to one's neighbors, and 3) the order to God. The order of reason includes the order to one's neighbors and goes beyond it

²⁶ *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 180 a. 4.

²⁷ *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 180 a. 1c & 2.

²⁸ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 5 a. 3; II-II q. 180 a. 5.

²⁹ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 4 a. 4c

³⁰ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 74 a. 4c.

inasmuch as it also includes order with regard to oneself, particularly with respect to one's passions. Thus the order of reason is essentially identical with the order of the moral virtues, the rectification of our relations with others falling to justice and the right ordination of our own passions pertaining to temperance and fortitude. The order of reason, however, is not ultimate, but rather is itself a part of the more all encompassing order to God, such that whatever is done in accord with right reason is also done in accord with the divine or eternal law. Thus we can say that to act according to the moral virtues is to act according to the divine law³¹.

Now to act according to the divine law is to choose what God wills and this, in turn, is to conform one's will to God's. But as we have seen, precisely this conformity is proper to the love of friendship, i. e., to will what the friend wills³². Moreover, this conformity is to be found not merely at the level of supernatural charity which commands the acts of all the other virtues and all love of neighbor³³. Even at the level of nature, it is possible to know the moral law and to see it as a part of the providential wisdom of the creator, that is, as a part of the eternal law³⁴. Once one explicitly recognizes God as source of the law one should obey the law as a form of loving God above all things, a point Thomas makes in his discussions of the natural love for God³⁵. Nor is it necessary that a person's recognition of the natural law as participating in God's eternal law be explicit. As Jacques Maritain pointed out in his important little article dealing with this topic, «The Immanent Dialectic of the First Act of Freedom», there can be a «non-conscious knowledge of God» in which a person chooses to act according to the moral good for the sake of that good. The recognition of an exterior rule to which he should conform is implicitly a recognition of the God from whom that rule proceeds. Thus in obeying the moral law—this is tantamount to acting according to the moral virtues—a person can be said to will the good God wills and so to love God. To seek the moral good is to have a recti-

³¹ *Summ. Theol.* I-II q. 72 a. 4c.

³² It is precisely for this reason, Thomas teaches, that to act against a precept of the divine law—what God wills—breaks off one's friendship with God. See *Summ. theol.* II-II q. 24 a. 12.

³³ *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 65 a. 2; II-II q. 23 a. 1 ad 2um; q. 26 a. 7c.

³⁴ See J. MARITAIN, «La Dialectique immanente du premier acte de liberté», in *Raison et raisons* (Paris: Eglhoff, 1947), pp. 131-165. This article appears in English translation in *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), pp. 66-85. See especially pp. 69-70: «He [man] thinks of what is good and of what is evil. But by the same token he knows God, without being aware of it. He knows God because, by virtue of the internal dynamism of his choice of the good for the sake of the good, he wills and loves the Separate Good as ultimate end of his existence. Thus, his intellect has of God a vital and non-conceptual knowledge which is involved both in the practical notion (confusedly and intuitively grasped, but with its full intentional energy), of the moral good as formal motive of his first act of freedom, and in the movement of his will toward this good and, at once, toward the Good. The intellect may already have the idea of God and it may not yet have it. The non-conceptual knowledge which I am describing takes place independently of any use possibly made or not made of the idea of God, and independently of the actualization of any explicit and conscious knowledge of man's true last End». In this article Maritain is interpreting *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 89 a. 6. See also Cajetan's commentary on this article.

³⁵ See e. g., *Summ. theol.* I-II q. 109 a. 3c; *De perfectione spiritualis vitae*, ch. 14.

fied will. And this means that it is the same love, at bottom, which motivates the active life and the contemplative life. If one did not love God or his creation in the form of observing the moral law, it does not seem possible that one would delight in contemplating either God or his creation. The love that animates contemplation is expressed in morally good action.

CONCLUSION

The argument sketched out above is based on the structure of the love of friendship. If contemplation, as Thomas maintains, is concerned primarily with God, and if contemplation requires a love for the contemplated object, it follows that contemplation implies, on the part of the will, a love of friendship for God. Contemplation is the fulfillment of that love insofar as such a love seeks to have the beloved present. But the love of friendship also implies, as an essential element, a desire for the good of the beloved and especially a union of wills in desiring and seeking the good. This aspect of the love of friendship is manifested in the active life, in the acts of the moral virtues. Both the active and the contemplative lives are rooted in a single love, and so to will what is morally good in the active life is to love in deeds what one desires to see in contemplation. Indeed, we might even say, that the repeated acts of willing required by the moral life serve to increase that love and intensify that desire. Thus, while acts of the moral virtues, concerned as they are with exterior actions, seem to pull us away from contemplation, they seem also, through the inner dynamism of the will, to impel us ever more in that direction.

Here, finally, we should note that in a crucial aspect the thomistic understanding of contemplation transcends that of Aristotle with the result that for Aquinas there is a closer link between the two lives. It seems, in Aristotle's discussions, that the life of contemplation, which indeed ultimately has God as its object, is sought primarily for the perfection such knowing bestows on the knower. Having a desire to know, man wishes to satisfy that desire through knowledge of the first principle of all things³⁶. While this is true for Aquinas as well, contemplation is still more than simply the highest activity of the highest power of the soul and so the highest perfection of man. Contemplation is seen as part of the life of love. It is, ultimately, the fulfillment of love, for it is the form that union with God takes. It is, in the end, the union of lover and beloved.

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³⁶ See NE X 7; *Metaphysics* I 1-2.