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DIVINE CONTEMPLATION AS “INCHOATE BEATITUDE” IN AQUINAS

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*Così la mente mia, tutta sospesa,
mirava fissa, immobile e attenta,
e sempre di mirar faceasi accesa.*

*Thus all my mind, absorbed,
was gazing, fixed, unmoving and intent,
becoming more enraptured in its gazing.
(Dante, *Paradiso* XXIII 97-99, trans. Hollander)*

AT THE OUTSET of his theological career, in the very first lines of his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, St. Thomas Aquinas maintains categorically, “All who think rightly perceive that the end of human life is the contemplation of God.”¹ Likewise, near the close of the *Secunda secundae* of his great *Summa theologiae*—which also marks the last chapters of his life—Aquinas insists that the contemplation of divine truth “is the end of the whole human life [*contemplatio est finis totius humanae vitae*].”² No one (to my knowledge)

¹ I *Sent.*, q. 1, a. 1: “Omnes qui recte senserunt, posuerunt finem humanae vitae, Dei contemplationem.” The Latin texts of Aquinas used in this article are taken from the Aquinas Institute, available online (<https://aquinas.cc>), except where otherwise noted. Most of the commentary on the *Sentences* is not yet translated, and so most of the translations of that text are my own. I have consulted the translation on the Aquinas Institute site where available, and have so noted.

² *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 4. The Latin text of the *Summa* is from *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia: Iussu impensaue, Leonis XIII P.M. edita* (Rome: Ex typographia polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1882); the translation is that of the Fathers of the English

disagrees that, for Aquinas, the contemplation of God is the paramount and unifying aspiration of human existence.³ He is quite explicit about this. And yet, surprisingly, the topic of contemplation in his thought has received only modest scholarly attention.⁴

Aquinas attributes a surprising degree of finality to the contemplation of God *in via* inasmuch as such contemplation participates, already in this life, in man's final end. His treatment of contemplation advances—almost to the point of paradox—the

Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947). All other texts from Aquinas are drawn from the *Opera omnia* published by the Aquinas Institute unless otherwise noted.

³ Cf. *ScG* II, c. 83; *ScG* III, c. 37; see also *I Sent.*, prol., and aa. 1 and 3; *In Boet. De Trin.*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.

⁴ Thomas Hibbs notes, "Given Thomas's emphasis upon the crucial role of contemplation in the good life, it is surprising how little attention has been devoted to the topic or to the role of intellectual virtues. I might list the topic of contemplation and intellectual virtue among those features of Aquinas's moral thought that remain neglected in the literature" ("Interpretation of Aquinas's Ethics since Vatican II," in Stephen Pope, ed., *The Ethics of Aquinas* [Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002], 412). The following literature is most pertinent to the topic of contemplation in Aquinas: Joseph Maréchal, *Le sommet de la contemplation d'après Saint Thomas*, in *Études sur la psychologie des mystiques*, 2 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1924-37), 2:193-234; Dermott O'Keefe, *Theology and Contemplation according to St. Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Officium libri catholici, 1952); Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 1998); Jean Leclercq, "La vie contemplative dans s. Thomas et dans la tradition," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 28 (1961): 251-68; Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Aquinas and His Role in Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2002); Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2005), 27-38; Inos Biffi, *Teologia, storia e contemplazione in Tommaso d'Aquino* (Milan: Jaca Books, 2009), 53-137; Adriano Oliva, "La contemplation des philosophes selon Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 96 (2012): 585-662; Imai Edyta, *Thomas Aquinas on Contemplation and the Human Animal* (Saarbrücken: Scholars' Press, 2013); Mary Catherine Sommers, "Contemplation and Action in Aristotle and Aquinas," in Gilles Emery and Mathew Levering, eds., *Aristotle in Aquinas's Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167-85. Most recently, see Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); cf. his earlier recent articles on Aquinas's theology of contemplation: "Recipientes per contemplationem, tradentes per actionem": The Relation between the Active and Contemplative Lives according to Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 81 (2017): 1-30; "Contemplation, *intellectus*, and *simplex intuitus* in Aquinas: Recovering a Neoplatonic Theme," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91 (2017): 199-225; "Aquinas on Contemplation: A Neglected Topic," *European Journal for the Study of Thomas Aquinas* 35 (2016): 9-33.

notion of a "penultimate finality." He offers the analogy of sight, which is pleasurable in itself, but also because one sees the person one loves, to illustrate both the subjective and the objective delight of contemplation.⁵ The saint's contemplation of divine truth is an "inchoate beatitude" and thus has the character of a satisfying *delectatio* and "ultimate and perfect happiness" (inasmuch as that is possible for the wayfarer) both because of the subject contemplating and because of the divine object contemplated.⁶

Aquinas's treatment of contemplation stresses a fundamental continuity between the contemplation of divine truth that the saint already now enjoys *in via* and the eschatological, "face to face," contemplation that belongs to the saint in eternity. They are related as the imperfect (*imperfecta*) to the perfect (*perfecta*).⁷ Indeed, the contemplation of divine truth, maintains Aquinas, "bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude [*quaedam inchoatio beatitudinis*], which begins now and will be continued in the life to come."⁸ In the *Summa contra gentiles* he writes, "In this life there is nothing so like this ultimate and perfect happiness

⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 7. The distinction between the subjective and objective happiness of contemplation outlined in this passage corresponds to the reasons advanced for the claim that ultimate human happiness consists in the vision of the divine essence (*STh* I-II, q. 3, a. 8): "Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence. To make this clear, two points must be observed. First, that man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek: secondly, that the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object."

⁶ Precisely because creaturely happiness is subject to mutation, the "ultimate and perfect happiness" of the contemplative life (*ScG* III, c. 63) is said *secundum quid*; human beings are happy not absolutely but *as men*. Cf. *ScG* III, c. 48.

⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 7, ad 3.

⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 4. Apart from this instance in the article on contemplation, the phrase *inchoatio beatitudinis* is also found in *STh* I-II, q. 69, a. 2. Here Aquinas addresses the question whether the rewards that belong to the beatitudes obtain only in the next life or also in this life. He affirms that even in this life holy men experience a "kind of imperfect inchoation of future happiness [*quandam inchoationem imperfectam futurae beatitudinis*]." Similarly, in his commentary on Galatians, he remarks that while the fruits of the Spirit are perfected in glory, sometimes such fruit is already manifest in this life. This might be referred to as a "flower," because it signifies future fruit: "And as in the flower there is a beginning of the fruit, so in the works of the virtues is a beginning of happiness [*inchoatio beatitudinis*], which will exist when knowledge and charity are made perfect" (*In Gal.*, c. 5, lect. 6).

[*ultimae et perfectae felicitates*] as the life of those who contemplate the truth, as far as possible here below. . . . For contemplation of truth begins [*incipit*] in this life, but will be consummated [*consummator*] in the life to come.”⁹ For this reason, in the question on contemplation, Aquinas devotes an article to the claim that the *delectatio* belonging to contemplation has no equal (*STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 7).

Rik Van Nieuwenhove has recently published the important *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, the final chapter of which (before the conclusion) considers “Happiness and the Vision of God.” Van Nieuwenhove concludes:

The *intuitus simplex* that is the climax of our intellectual contemplation on earth resembles, and points towards, the intuitive, non-discursive beatific vision of God. This means that the acme of our mode of knowing on earth, i.e. the moment of intellective insight, has an eschatological dimension. It is one more instance of grace perfecting nature. Of course, the moment of speculative insight is the result of a discursive process that ultimately relies on phantasms, and it is merely fleeting, whereas the beatific vision is purely intellective and lasting. Still, it is sufficiently similar to be called an *inchoatio beatitudinis*, an incipient participation in eternal bliss.¹⁰

Given Van Nieuwenhove’s insightful work on a topic that invites further consideration, I will argue that what Aquinas terms “divine contemplation”—the contemplation of divine truth—is a participation in beatific knowing. Already in this life, divine contemplation achieves something of the simple, direct, intellectual vision of the divine essence. In short, contemplation is a proleptic experience of final beatitude. I will argue that for Aquinas this is the case when we consider the nature of divine contemplation from two perspectives: the subjective (human) experience of contemplation and the objective (divine) reality contemplated.¹¹

⁹ *ScG* III, c. 63.

¹⁰ Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 195.

¹¹ To engage the Thomistic corpus without differentiating the periods in Aquinas’s life from which various texts come to us can be perilous. On a number of critical topics his thought undergoes development (some significant, some less so). In this essay I draw from the breadth of his corpus as a systematic whole. While I am alert to the danger this poses,

To demonstrate how, for Aquinas, the *subjective* (human) experience of contemplation anticipates the beatific vision we will proceed in four steps. First, we will define more precisely what he means by "divine contemplation," particularly in contrast to the "natural contemplation" identified by Aristotle as the highest good. Second, since divine contemplation is the unique prerogative of creatures endowed with the *imago dei*, an analysis of how Aquinas understands the distinct modality according to which the human person realizes the *imago dei* is essential to his theology of divine contemplation. Third, divine contemplation is said not of our rational nature in general, but specifically of *intellectus*, our contemplative faculty. Therefore, Aquinas's distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio* as well as their circular nature underwrites his doctrine of divine contemplation. *Intellectus* at once completes human ratiocinative knowing and transcends human knowing inasmuch as it participates in the simplicity and immediacy of angelic knowing. (Here I draw heavily on the great insight of Van Nieuwenhove's study.) This leads to the final step of this section: How does divine contemplation remain a human activity when it expresses the mode of knowing proper to separate substances? Here Aquinas's doctrine of obediential potency is a critical (if underappreciated) feature of his account of divine contemplation. The contemplation of God both *in via* and *in patria* is predicated on this capacity *to be* elevated that belongs exclusively to *intellectus*. Indeed, *intellectus*—that which is most proper to the *imago dei*—suggests an obediential potency for divine contemplation. This is a capacity—the actuation of which is wholly dependent on divine initiative—for the supernatural elevation of *intellectus* beyond what is strictly human. Thus, the subjective (human) experience of divine contemplation is, for Aquinas, an "inchoate beatitude" at once fulfilling and transcending what is highest in the human person.

From the perspective of the *divine object*, contemplation is a vision of God himself, enjoyed both below by the wayfarer and

above by the blessed (albeit according to differing modes). I will argue that three features of Aquinas's treatment of divine contemplation underwrite this fundamental continuity. First, Aquinas distinguishes natural and theological contemplation from divine contemplation. Only the latter enjoys an immediacy and direct experience of God himself on account of its participation in God's own love. Aquinas describes divine contemplation as a *delectatio* because the wayfarer already possesses and enjoys the first fruits of that which he loves. This reading of Aquinas draws on an important strain of the commentatorial tradition, associated with John of St. Thomas, Ambroise Gardeil, and Jacques Maritain. Second, the supernatural gift of wisdom is the source for the immediacy of divine contemplation. The infused gift of wisdom generates the affective knowledge that belongs to divine contemplation. Third, I will argue that, for Aquinas, the vision of the holy angels and the contemplation of God enjoyed by Adam in a state of innocence serve as a proximate analogue for understanding the nature of divine contemplation here below. In sum, divine contemplation is, for Aquinas, an "inchoate beatitude" because its divine object is affectively known by the gift of wisdom in an intimate and experiential manner that is analogous to humanity's pre-fallen knowledge of God or the knowledge of God enjoyed by the holy angels.

My argument that, for Aquinas, divine contemplation *in via* already participates in the vision of God *in patria* relies in important ways on the central claim Van Nieuwenhove advances in his recent monograph (as quoted above). While I share with him the conclusion that, for Aquinas, divine contemplation constitutes an inchoate beatitude, each of the two parts of my analysis in this essay—the subjective (human) experience of contemplation and the objective (divine) reality contemplated—advance a significant new contribution to our shared conclusion. My construal of the nature-grace discussion in the first part—particularly the obediential potency for divine contemplation proper to *imago dei*—contributes an important addition to understanding why, for Aquinas, divine contemplation both fulfills and transcends that which is highest in the human person. In the second part I argue that underwriting the continuity of

divine contemplation in this life and in glory is its affective and sapiential character. This is not a pronounced feature in Van Nieuwenhove’s treatment. In sum, the twofold analysis of my essay—the subjective/objective character of divine contemplation—serves to contribute in significant ways to the conclusion I share with Van Nieuwenhove regarding the nature of divine contemplation as an *inchoatio beatitudinis*.

I. THE SUBJECTIVE BEATITUDE OF CONTEMPLATION

Aquinas considers the “contemplative life” in a number of places, but his most developed and mature exposition is in questions 179 to 182 of the *Secunda secundae*, where he distinguishes the active from the contemplative life in general. In question 180, he offers his *ex professo* treatment of the “contemplative life” in particular. He articulates the subjective delight proper to contemplation:

Each individual delights in the operation which befits him according to his own nature or habit. Now contemplation of the truth befits a man according to his nature as a rational animal: the result being that *all men naturally desire to know*, so that consequently they delight in the knowledge of the truth [*in cognitione veritatis delectantur*].¹²

Here, Aquinas defines contemplation as *intuitus simplex*, that is, the “simple act of gazing on the truth.”¹³ This definition holds contemplation to be an intellectual act that is immediate, simple, and nondiscursive.¹⁴ Further, Aquinas establishes that the fulfilment of the human person is dependent on this unique intellectual activity.

¹² *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 7.

¹³ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 3, ad 1: “contemplatio pertinet ad ipsum simplicem intuitum veritatis.”

¹⁴ Van Nieuwenhove (“Contemplation, *intellectus*, and *simplex intuitus*”) explores the implications of this definition for Aquinas’s account of contemplation.

A) *Natural and Divine Contemplation*

It is important to distinguish at the outset natural contemplation—the object of which is truth in general—from the contemplation which Aquinas holds to be a divinizing (an “inchoate beatitude”) or “divine contemplation.” He notes succinctly,

But there is an act of virtue which when it is complete is essentially happiness, namely, the act of reason or intellect [*rationis vel intellectus*]. For contemplative happiness is nothing else than the perfect contemplation of the highest truth [*perfecta contemplatio summae veritatis*]. . . . However, if we are speaking of celestial happiness which is promised to the saints, the will is ordered to it by charity [*caritas*], but if we are speaking of contemplative happiness of which is treated by philosophy, the will is ordered to it by a natural desire [*naturali desiderio ordinatur*].¹⁵

Aquinas here distinguishes between the contemplative happiness of the saints—the source of which is divine charity—and the happiness of the philosopher, the source of which is natural desire. He gives a more developed account of the same distinction in the discussion of contemplation in the commentary on the *Sentences*. In the prologue of that work, the young Aquinas also notes that the contemplation of God is twofold. The first is the philosopher’s “imperfect” contemplation of God, and its happiness is reserved to this life. The second is the “perfect” contemplation of the saints, which consists in the immediate vision of the divine essence. Further, distinct directional vectors underlie this division. The contemplation of the philosopher proceeds “up” from creatures to a knowledge of God (*ex rationibus creaturarum procedit*). By contrast, the contemplation

¹⁵ *De Virtut.*, q. 1, a. 5, ad 8 (trans. Ralph McInerny, *Disputed Questions on Virtue* [South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2009]). Likewise, in II *Sent.*, d. 4, q. 1, a. 1 Aquinas asserts that the most perfect operation of *intellectus* is the contemplation of the highest intelligible (*altissimi intelligibilis*), which is God. For this reason, man’s ultimate happiness consists in the contemplation of God. However, this is said not only of the saint, but of the philosopher [*non solum secundum sanctos, sed etiam secundum philosophos*].”

of the saint proceeds “down” by way of God’s own self-disclosure.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the contemplation of the saints which is perfected in glory is already experienced here below in the seed of faith (*secundum fidei suppositionem*). Aquinas explains:

Hence it is necessary that those things that are directed to the end are proportioned to that end, insofar as man is led by the hand [*manuducatur*] to that contemplation while still in *statu viae* [the earthly life of the wayfarer] by a knowledge not derived from creatures but inspired directly by the divine light [*immediate ex divino lumine inspiratam*]. This is the doctrine of theology [*doctrina theologiae*].¹⁷

In this passage Aquinas makes clear that the divine light of faith shares in the limitations of natural contemplation; it is “imperfect” inasmuch as it is limited to life here below and will pass away. However, it also shares already in the “perfect” contemplation of the saints inasmuch as it is “proportioned” to that end. The revealed truth possessed in faith leads believers “by the hand” to divine contemplation. A fundamental continuity obtains between the divine light possessed by the believer who in faith clings to *doctrina theologiae* and the divine light enjoyed by saints in contemplation.¹⁸ This is the central claim of this essay which we explore in more detail below.

Although contemplation is an intellectual act, affectivity constitutes an integral part of its definition. However, the affect can be directed in two ways. Here a further distinction between

¹⁶ Torrell comments on this distinction: “They represent two intellectual ways in opposite directions. The first starts from creatures to culminate in God at the end of an inductive inquiry. The second, conversely, begins with God and . . . remains under the influence of this divine origin that gives meaning and consistency to all its search” (Jean-Pierre Torrell, “Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic,” in *Christ and Spirituality in St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Bernhard Blankenhorn, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 9.

¹⁷ *I Sent.*, q. 1, a. 1.

¹⁸ An interesting comparison is found in Albert the Great, whose discussion of faith tends to emphasize less its “imperfect” character and more the fact that faith truly unites the believer with divine realities. For Albert, the light of faith is akin to mystical light. See Bernhard Blankenhorn, *The Mystery of Union with God* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 157-65.

natural and divine contemplation obtains. In the first case, affect is directed towards the perfection of the knower, in which case contemplation proceeds from love of self (*amore sui*): "This is how the affection was in the contemplative life of the philosophers [*in vita contemplativa philosophorum*]." Second, the affection of contemplation can terminate in the object, such that the object incites the desire for contemplation: "For where the love is, there the eye is, and *where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Matthew 6:21). And this is how the contemplative life of the saints [*vita contemplativa sanctorum*] has its desire."¹⁹ Jean-Pierre Torrell remarks that despite the "apparent serenity" of this passage, it is "decidedly combative." Aquinas is, in fact, contending against the claim that human felicity can be had by natural contemplation—a position identified with Aristotle and held by many in the faculty of arts at the University of Paris during Aquinas's residency there:

For Aristotle, the happiness of the philosopher consists in contemplation, not by virtue of the object contemplated, but rather because contemplation is the highest activity of the human being, who finds his perfection therein. This strictly intellectual activity achieves its perfection in immanence, not in a transcendent object. Aquinas could only disdain this enclosure of self in pure humanism, and it is this that he rejects under the name of contemplation of the philosophers.²⁰

For Aquinas, the paradigmatic example of (and source for) natural contemplation is Aristotle. In the well-known question on happiness as man's last end (*STh* I-II, q. 3) Aristotle serves as his main interlocutor. Here Aquinas gives three reasons why contemplation is most delightful from the perspective of the subject contemplating. First, contemplation constitutes man's chief happiness because it engages his "highest power in respect of its highest object."²¹ In contemplation, our intellect (*intellectus*) has the divine good as its principal object. Contemplation of divine things is, therefore, "most proper" (*maxime propria*) to man and, consequently, "most delightful" (*maxime delectabilis*)

¹⁹ III *Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qcla. 1.

²⁰ Torrell, "Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic," 11.

²¹ *STh* I-II, q. 3, a. 5.

to him.²² Second, in no other action apart from contemplation does the end inhere in the act in such a perfect manner: "contemplation is sought principally for its own sake [*maxime quaeritur propter seipsam*]."²³ Finally, in the experience of contemplation, human beings share in the happiness of God and the angels. Admittedly, the more exalted nature of pure intellects entails a more perfect mode of contemplation and, therefore, a more perfect happiness in the contemplation of God.²⁴ Nevertheless, the contemplation of embodied creatures shares in a limited way in the happiness that is proper to separate substances (i.e., angels without bodies). Aquinas concludes this question by once again contrasting perfect and imperfect contemplation: "Therefore the last and perfect happiness, which we await in the life to come, consists entirely in contemplation. But such imperfect happiness, such as can be had here, consists first and principally in contemplation."²⁵ Both in this life and the in the life to come, our natural desire for happiness finds its consummation in the contemplation of God. For Aquinas, this fact is predicated on our intellectual nature, which is intrinsically ordered to seek divine truth itself. Moreover, this desire cannot rest in simply knowing *that* God exists (*an est*), but seeks to contemplate the divine essence itself (*quid est*).²⁶

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. In *ScG* III, c. 25 Aquinas compares contemplation to play inasmuch as both are lovable in themselves rather than directed to some extrinsic end. See also *I Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 5; *Exp. De Hebd.*, pro.

²⁴ Pierre Rousselot beautifully expresses how the intellectual character of contemplation engenders a singular happiness: "The speculative idea always gladdens us by itself: always pure, it is always loved, and in this, too, it resembles the ultimate end. Thomas explains this generally by saying that it 'has no contrary.' The idea is spirit's perfection. . . . It is of another order. Whatever becomes substantially and successively *other* (matter), can be transformed, but these changes do not affect spirit's object, essential truth, and they could no more take a bite out of spirit than a dog baying at the moon could chew up moonbeams" (Pierre Rousselot, *Intelligence: Sense of Being, Faculty of God*, trans. Andrew Tallon [Madison, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 1998]; translation of *L'intellectualisme de saint Thomas* [Paris, 1908; 2nd ed. 1921], 144-45).

²⁵ *STh* I-II, q. 3, a. 5.

²⁶ Cf. *STh* I-II, q. 3, a. 8. Cf. *Comp. Theol.* 104. The entire argument, as Rousselot points out, rests on an analysis of human knowing. There is no reference to revelation or

How does Aquinas speak of divine contemplation? Forms of the term “divine contemplation” (*divina contemplatio*) appear approximately twenty-two times in his corpus.²⁷ These break down into two main categories. The first describes divine contemplation as a heavenly reality. The angels of the supreme hierarchy are “established in the hiddenness of most high divine contemplation [*in abscondito altissimae divinae contemplationis constituti*].”²⁸ Divine contemplation marks the life of the blessed—the saints and angels—who refer all other contemplation to God as its singular object.²⁹ Divine contemplation is the eternal sabbath rest experienced by intellectual creatures *in patriam*, which is signified by the seventh day of the creation narrative: “But the course of the six days is attributed to the action by which God produced things, while the seventh is attributed to the rest of divine contemplation [*divinae contemplationis*], by which God enjoys himself. Therefore sanctification and blessing are especially due to the seventh day.”³⁰ Commenting on Hebrews 12:22, “you are come to Mount Zion,” Aquinas writes that Zion signifies “the loftiness of divine contemplation [*altitudinem divinae contemplationis*] . . . the intellectual vision of beatitude.”³¹ However, the heavenly reality of divine contemplation is also experienced here below by the pilgrim. Aquinas refers to an uplifted spiritual state, one withdrawn from distractions, errors, phantasms, and spiritual forms.³² This state is achieved through certain contemplative activity—twice Aquinas quotes Richard of St. Victor who speaks approvingly of those who persevere in divine contemplation by reading daily from sacred Scripture and transcribing its clear insights of truth into their hearts³³—and by those committed to a

grace, but to “concrete human nature”: “intelligence as such is the root of the demand for its compliment” (Rousselot, *Intelligence*, 148).

²⁷ Aquinas also refers to “deifying contemplation” (III *Sent.*, d. 35, q. 2, a. 1, resp. qcla. 1, ad 1).

²⁸ *De div. nom.*, c. 5, lect. 2.

²⁹ IV *Sent.*, d. 44, q. 2, a. 1, qcla. 3, ad 4.

³⁰ II *Sent.*, d. 15, q. 3, a. 3.

³¹ *De Hebd.*, c. 12, lect. 4.

³² III *Sent.*, d. 34, q. 1, a. 4.

³³ IV *Sent.*, d. 47, q. 1, a. 2, qcla. 4.

certain state of life: "Now holy virginity refrains from all venereal pleasure in order more freely to have leisure for divine contemplation [*divinae contemplationi*]." ³⁴ Admittedly, here below divine contemplation is experienced only episodically. ³⁵

The second matrix within which the term "divine contemplation" occurs is in comparing and contrasting the active and contemplative life. Divine contemplation renders religious life a higher form of life *simpliciter*. ³⁶ Indeed, the active life is often a hindrance to divine contemplation. ³⁷ This can be the case even in religious life when those entrusted to care for the community's common possessions find their responsibilities "an obstacle to some higher act of charity, such as divine contemplation [*contemplationis divinae*]." ³⁸ Nevertheless, the demands of charity require persevering in either the active life (as is the case of a bishop who should not abandon those entrusted to his spiritual welfare even "for the sake of the quiet of divine contemplation [*divinae contemplationis quietem*]" ³⁹) or in certain charitable activities (as is the case for those religious who are made busy by their responsibilities). In fact, such activity can be more meritorious than contemplating divine truth because "a man may now and then suffer separation from the sweetness of divine contemplation [*dulcedine divinae contemplationis*] for the time being, that God's will may be done and for His glory's sake." ⁴⁰

Despite the continuity between natural and divine contemplation, Aquinas insists on a number of critical distinctions. First, the two forms of contemplation stem from distinct sources—natural desire and divine charity respectively. Second, the happiness of the first is reserved to this life, whereas the happiness of the second is fully realized only in glory. Third, the knowledge of God had by natural contemplation proceeds "up" from a knowledge of creatures, whereas divine contemplation

³⁴ *STh* II-II, q. 152, a. 2.

³⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 8, ad 2.

³⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 182, a. 2, ad 1; *Contra Impugn.*, p. 1, c. 6, 3.14; p. 1, c. 7, 6.5.

³⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 182, a. 3, ad 2.

³⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 188, a. 7.

³⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 185, a. 4.

⁴⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 182, a. 2.

proceeds “down” by way of divine revelation. Finally, natural contemplation seeks the perfection of the knower and is, therefore, animated by self-love. Divine contemplation, by contrast, seeks to know God and is animated by love of him. Most fundamentally, then, Aquinas considers divine contemplation to be a heavenly reality—an activity belonging to the angels and saints—that obtains occasionally here below by participation.

B) The “*imago dei*”

Aquinas’s contention that contemplation is perfective of human nature needs to be situated within his anthropology of the *imago dei*.⁴¹ Near the outset of his treatment of the *imago* in the *Summa*, Aquinas explains that all creatures participate in God by sharing in his likeness according to three ways: because they exist, because they live, and because they know or understand.⁴² To participate in God according to the exalted mode of the *imago dei* belongs exclusively to the last—to creatures possessed of *mens* or *intellectus* and thereby capable of *knowing* God.⁴³ But to possess this capacity is not yet to realize the exalted character of beatifying contemplation.

⁴¹ On Aquinas’s doctrine of the *imago dei* see Marie-Joseph Serge de Laugier de Beaurecueil, “L’homme image de Dieu selon saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Etudes et recherches* 8 (1952): 45-82; and 9 (1955): 37-97; F. J. A. de Grijns, *Godelijk mensontwerp, Een thematische studie over het beeld Gods in de mens volgens het Scriptum van Thomas van Aquino* (Hilversum and Antwerp: Paul Brand, 1967); Juvenal Merriell, *To the Image of the Trinity: A Study in the Development of Aquinas’ Teaching* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990); Michael Dauphinais, “Loving the Lord Your God: The *imago dei* in Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 63 (1999): 241-67; Klaus Krämer, *Imago Trinitatis: Die Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen in der Theologie des Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg: Herder, 2000); Henk J. M. Schoot, “Thomas Aquinas on human beings as image of God,” *European Journal for the Study of Thomas Aquinas* 38 (2020): 33-46.

⁴² *STh* I, q. 93, a. 2.

⁴³ Dauphinais points out how in Aquinas’s mature treatment of the *imago dei* (*STh* I, q. 93) he uses the terms *mens* and *intellectus* synonymously. Earlier, in *De Verit.*, q. 10, a. 1, ad 5 Aquinas follows Augustine in distinguishing mind from its memory, understanding and will. See Dauphinais, “*Imago Dei* in Aquinas,” 254-55.

For Aquinas, the *imago* is defined less by a fixed nature than by an activity, namely divine contemplation, which can begin in this life and awaits its perfection in glory. Aquinas writes, "We refer the Divine image in man to the word born of the knowledge of God, and to the love derived therefrom. Thus the image of God is found in the soul according as the soul turns to God, or possesses a nature that enables it to turn to God."⁴⁴ In distinguishing here between the soul turned to God and the capacity for such orientation, Aquinas subtly evokes his earlier distinction of the three ways human persons can be said to possess the image of God. First, by dint of being human, man possesses a "natural aptitude" on account of *mens* to know and love God. This is to possess the image in potency (*imago naturalis*). Here we enter the terrain of natural contemplation. By virtue of possessing an *intellectual* nature, man is ordered to the contemplation of truth. Second, by grace man actually or habitually knows and loves God. This is to possess the image imperfectly (*imago gratiae*). Third, man can fully or actually possess the image in glory inasmuch as he knows and loves God perfectly (*imago gloriae*).⁴⁵ Act gives definition to potency and so the fullness of the image in glory renders intelligible the potency or capacity that is the image of God found in human nature.

It has been frequently pointed out that Aquinas (drawing on Augustine) has a dynamic account of the *imago*—that is to say, the image of God is not a static datum of nature but manifests a *motio* or potency tending towards union with God by way of knowledge and love.⁴⁶ For Aquinas, this dynamism expresses

⁴⁴ *STh* I, q. 93, a. 8 (translation slightly emended).

⁴⁵ *STh* I, q. 93, a. 4. These three Latin terms—*imago naturalis*, *imago gratiae*, and *imago gloriae* are not found verbatim in the text, but this threefold distinction (nature, grace, and glory) frames Aquinas's description of the ways in which the human person can possess the image of God. He concludes the body of the article stating, "The first is found in all men, the second only in the just, the third only in the blessed."

⁴⁶ Dauphinais articulates this well: "Situated within the *Summa*, Aquinas's teaching on the image of God in humans must not be viewed as a static or abstract anthropological datum; rather, it manifests the dynamic character of the relation of the human creature to God, for the image is moving through various levels of potency and act, on the one hand, and obscurity and beauty, on the other" (*Imago Dei* in Aquinas," 242). Blankenhorn traces the development of Aquinas's theology of the *imago dei*. In his early

itself most fully in the beatifying contemplation of God. The knowledge and love that constitute the mind (or intellect) does not sufficiently account for its nature as *imago*. Even the reflective and reflexive character of the mind that knows and loves itself fails adequately to disclose the full nature of the *imago*. Only when mind or intellect is turned to its creator—contemplating him by knowledge and love—can we speak precisely of the image of God in man. The soul “must be engaged in at least the beginning of contemplation of God for it to be the image of the divine Trinity.”⁴⁷ This is because the full realization of the image—the *imago gloriae*—belongs to the blessed whose delight consists solely in the contemplation of God, an activity that for the just has its beginning already in this life according to the *imago gratiae*.

Two features that are critical to this account of the *imago dei* serve to hinge Aquinas’s theology of contemplation. First, the *imago dei* does not properly speaking refer to man’s rational faculty or knowing capacity in general, but of what is highest in man, namely, *intellectus* or *mens* by which he can participate in God. We will explore this distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* further. Second, not each and every act of *intellectus* is beatifying. Rather, the possession of *intellectus* bestows a capacity (proper to the *imago naturalis*) for the natural contemplation of truth in general. Only when this potency is actualized—living the *imago gratiae* in the contemplation of God—does the soul begin truly to live out its nature as image of God and proleptically to participate in the eternal contemplation that will belong to the *imago gloriae*.

Sentences commentary, Aquinas tracked closely to Albert the Great and the received Scholastic account of the *imago* as a fixed nature. In Aquinas’s early treatment, the account of human knowing and loving presented in books 9 and 10 of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* stands as the source for his theology of the *imago*. With *De veritate*, Aquinas begins to emphasize the *active* character of human remembering, knowing, and loving whereby the image of God is conformed to its archetype. This theology culminates in the *Summa contra gentiles* and the *Summa theologiae* where books 14 and 15 of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* serve as the primary point of engagement. See Blankenhorn, *Mystery of Union with God*, 239-47.

⁴⁷ Dauphinais, “*Imago Dei* in Aquinas,” 257.

C) “*Ratio*” and “*intellectus*”

It is fruitful to consider in some detail Aquinas’s frequently invoked epistemological distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* to clarify how contemplation, for Aquinas, both fulfills and transcends human nature.⁴⁸ *Ratio* refers to a distinctly human mode of knowing in which a body of knowledge is accumulated over time and through the senses.⁴⁹ It refers especially to the discursive character of human knowing.⁵⁰ By contrast, *intellectus* refers to the manner in which separate intelligences (such as angels) know—immediately, directly, and intuitively.⁵¹ It is *intellectus* that is the proper domain of contemplation. After quoting Bernard that “contemplation is the mind’s true and certain gaze [*verus certusque animi intuitus*],” Aquinas explains, “To gaze belongs to intellect [*intueri est intellectus*], whereas to make inquiry belongs to reason [*rationis*]. Therefore the

⁴⁸ *STh* I, q. 59, a. 1, ad 1: “But intellect and reason differ as to their manner of knowing; because the intellect knows by simple intuition, while reason knows by a process of discursion from one thing to another.” The distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* occurs frequently in Aquinas: I *Sent.*, d. 3, q. 4, a. 1, ad 4; II *Sent.*, d. 9, q. 1, a. 8, ad 1; *De Verit.*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 5; q. 8, a. 15; q. 15, a. 1; q. 24, a. 3; *Expos. De Trin.* q. 2, a. 2; q. 6, a. 1; *STh* I, q. 58, aa. 3 and 4; q. 59, a. 1, ad 1; q. 79, a. 8, ad 2; q. 83, a. 4; *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 1, obj. 2; q. 9, a. 1, ad 1; and q. 180, a. 3. Rik Van Nieuwenhove has noted the primacy of the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* in Aquinas’s account of contemplation and that in nearly every instance Aquinas appeals to either Pseudo-Dionysius or Boethius to support this distinction (“Contemplation, *intellectus*, and *simplex intuitus*,” 202 n. 13).

⁴⁹ John Henry Newman vividly describes the discursive, sense-based process of *ratio*: “We know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going round an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation, of many partial notions, by the employment, concentration, and joint action of many faculties and exercises of mind” (*The Idea of a University* [London: Longmans, 1907], 151).

⁵⁰ Cf. *STh* II-II, q. 49, a. 5, ad 3.

⁵¹ Joseph Pieper summarizes the distinction succinctly: “*Ratio* is the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and of examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions. *Intellectus*, on the other hand, is the name for the understanding in so far as it is the capacity of *simplex intuitus*, of that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye” (*Leisure as the Basis of Culture* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009], 28).

contemplative life consists in the act not of reason, but of intellect.”⁵²

Two properties define *intellectus*. First, *intellectus* penetrates to the essence of what it apprehends. It does not know its object at a remove, by holding it up to the light and examining it from various angles, nor does it compile knowledge through taste, touch, smell and hearing. Rather, *intellectus* enters into its object, penetrating its substantial nature and knowing it simultaneously and completely from within. *Intellegere* comes from “*intus legere*” (“to read inwardly”), explains Aquinas, and as such it “penetrates into the very essence of a thing.”⁵³ The “intimate penetration of the truth”⁵⁴ proper to *intellectus* takes diverse forms depending on what reality is known:

Now there are many kinds of things that are hidden within [*interius latent*], to find which human knowledge has to penetrate within so to speak [*quasi intrinsecus penetrare*]. Thus, under the accidents lies hidden the nature of the substantial reality, under words lies hidden their meaning; under likenesses and figures the truth they denote lies hidden (because the intelligible world is enclosed within as compared with the sensible world, which is perceived externally), and effects lie hidden in their causes, and vice versa. Hence we may speak of understanding [*intellectus*] with regard to all these things.⁵⁵

Intellectus grasps the essence of the reality known from within or “underneath” (so to speak) its accidental manifestation.

The second defining property of *intellectus* is its apprehension of reality as one or simple. *Intellectus* is uniquely calibrated to apprehend the unity and simplicity of divine truth. The method of reason (*modus rationis*) is discursive and accumulating; it is well suited to apprehend the diverse and multitudinous character of the natural order. By contrast, the divine science “adheres most closely to the method of intellect [*modus intellectus*].”⁵⁶ This is because the divine science is one and simple:

⁵² III *Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qcla. 2 (trans. Aquinas Institute).

⁵³ *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 1.

⁵⁴ *STh* II-II, q. 49, a. 5, ad 3.

⁵⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 1.

⁵⁶ *In Boet. de Trin.*, q. 6, a. 1, ad 3.

Now reason differs from intellect as multitude does from unity. Thus Boethius says that reasoning is related to understanding [*ratio ad intelligentiam*] as time to eternity and as a circle to its center. For it is distinctive of reason to disperse itself in the consideration of many things, and then to gather one simple truth from them. Thus Dionysius says, "Souls have the power of reasoning in that they approach the truth of things from various angles, and in this respect they are inferior to the angels; but inasmuch as they gather a multiplicity into unity they are in a way equal to the angels." Conversely, intellect first contemplates a truth one and undivided and in that truth comprehends a whole multitude, as God, by knowing his essence, knows all things. Thus Dionysius says: "Angelic minds have the power of intellect in that they understand divine truths in a unified way."⁵⁷

In accumulating a body of knowledge we proceed discursively, in *modus rationis*; this is a distinctly human mode of proceeding. However, once such knowledge is actually possessed, it is possessed as a whole: indivisible, simple, and one. In this case, we participate in what is properly an angelic mode of knowing. Indeed, to know a multiplicity as one is to approximate the manner in which God knows contingent being, that is, in his own simple unity. As such, Aquinas compares the indivisible, simple, and unified apprehension of being proper to *intellectus* to the indivisible unity and simplicity of eternity or to the point of a circle.

It is here that we begin to touch on contemplation. While *intellectus* is proper to the knowing of separate substances (i.e., angels), it can also speak to some aspects of the human experience of knowing. In this respect, *intellectus* characterizes both the beginning and the end of our knowing process.⁵⁸ At the outset of the knowing process, *intellectus* offers an immediate apprehension of first principles (such as the principle of non-contradiction). Likewise, the conclusion of the knowing process terminates in a flash of insight or *intellectus*. In short, *intellectus* entails that human knowing shares something with angelic knowing. However, separate intelligences know reality exclusively by adverting to intelligible, infused species, whereas, for us, *intellectus* operates in concert with *ratio* as the foundation

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See Van Nieuwenhove's discussion from which this analysis draws: "Contemplation, *intellectus*, and *simplex intuitus*," 204-11.

and consummation of the knowing experience. Consider the following passage, devoted to the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio*:

Reason and intellect in man cannot be distinct powers. We shall understand this clearly if we consider their respective actions. For to understand is simply to apprehend intelligible truth [*intelligere enim est simpliciter veritatem intelligibilem apprehendere*]; and to reason [*ratiocinari*] is to advance from one thing understood to another, so as to know an intelligible truth. And therefore angels, who according to their nature, possess perfect knowledge of intelligible truth, have no need to advance from one thing to another; but they apprehend the truth simply and without mental discursion, as Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* VII). But man arrives at the knowledge of intelligible truth by advancing from one thing to another; and therefore he is called rational. Reasoning [*ratiocinari*] therefore, is compared to understanding [*intelligere*], as movement is to rest, or acquisition to possession; of which one belongs to the perfect, the other to the imperfect.⁵⁹

Intellectus and *ratio* are diverse operations of one human knowing power. Further, the analogy of movement to rest suggests that *ratio* is ordered towards *intellectus*, which draws *ratio* to its completion.⁶⁰ Human beings share with separate intelligences a simple apprehension of truth, but only as the consummation of a ratiocinative process.⁶¹

Following his Neoplatonic sources, especially Boethius and Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas situates human knowing hierarchically. Beasts live exclusively according to sense perception. By contrast, human beings are called “rational animals” because of the process by which we come to know—the process of inquiry or the movement of reason. Rationality is not an attribute that belongs to either God or the angels; it is proper (and exclusive)

⁵⁹ *STh* I, q. 79, a. 8.

⁶⁰ Van Nieuwenhove writes, “In our case [*intellectus*] refers to the moment of insightful understanding, which remains distinct from, but grounds and fulfils, the ratiocinative process; and it is in this crowning act that contemplation comes to fruition” (“Contemplation, *intellectus*, and *simplex intuitus*,” 202).

⁶¹ Cf. *De Verit.*, q. 16, a. 1: “Human nature, insofar as it comes in contact with the angelic nature, must both in speculative and practical matters know truth without investigation.” All translations from *De veritate* come from James McGlynn, trans., *De veritate* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), unless otherwise noted.

to the genus of animal (*rationale est differentia animalis*).⁶² We apprehend the quiddity of things by adverting from sense data to the sensible species in an act of abstraction. Finally, angels know by advertence to the infused species with which they were created. Human knowing shares something with angelic knowing in the immediacy of this advertence:

The human soul, according to what is highest in it, attains to [*attingit*] that which is proper to angelic nature, so that it knows some things at once and without investigation [*subito et sine inquisitione*] although it is lower than angels in this, that it can know the truth in these things only by receiving something from sense.⁶³

Situated midway up the hierarchy of being, we have something in common with both beasts and angels. We rely on sense data in the ratiocinative process of coming to know, but the moment of insight—once something *is known*—abstracts from sense data, so that what is known is known according to its immaterial and eternal species. In that moment of insight or recognition, which consummates the knowing process, human knowing “attains to” angelic knowing⁶⁴ (in an admittedly different mode, since angels

⁶² Cf. I *Sent.*, d. 25, q. 1, a. 1, arg. 4. To the extent that our thinking approximates the simplicity of *intellectus* (as opposed to *ratio*), this is not an inherent quality but “participates to some extent in that simple knowledge which exists in higher substances” (*De Verit.*, q. 15, a. 1). Likewise, in his commentary on the *Ethics*, Aquinas writes, “Aristotle considered the intellect a part of the soul, and in this view, the intellect is not something divine by itself [*simpliciter*], but the most divine of all the things in us. This is so because of its greater agreement with the separated substances, inasmuch as its activity exists without a bodily organ” (X *Nic. Ethic.*, lect. 10). And further on, “[Contemplation] is not on the human level, but above man [*non est secundum hominem, sed supra hominem*]. Indeed, it is not on the human level considering man’s composite nature, but it is most properly human [*propriissime secundum hominem*] considering what is principal in man [*principalissimum in homine*]—a thing found most perfectly in superior substances but imperfectly and by participation [*imperfecte et quasi participative*], as it were, in man” (X *Nic. Ethic.*, lect. 11)

⁶³ *De Verit.*, q. 16, a. 1. I am relying on Van Nieuwenhove’s exegesis of this text (“Aquinas on Contemplation,” 13-14).

⁶⁴ *De Verit.*, q. 15, a. 1: “Although the knowledge proper to the human soul takes place through the process of reasoning [*per viam rationis*], nevertheless, it participates to some extent in that simple knowledge [*simplicis cognitionis*] which exists in higher

do not abstract in a rational process, but know truth intuitively and immediately, outside of temporal succession, by adverting to the eternal forms). The manner in which our physical senses instantaneously and completely apprehend their proper matter (light for the eyes or sound for the ears) is a fruitful analogy for the human power of *intellectus*, the moment of insight that breaks beyond the ratiocinative limits of the human to share in the direct intuitive gaze of truth proper to separate substances.⁶⁵ At the acme of the knowing process, we share with angels a nondiscursive, immediate, simple apprehension of truth, and it is to this experience of *intellectus* that contemplation corresponds.

Aquinas insists that contemplation belongs exclusively to the crowning act of *intellectus*. At first glance it might seem that many “spiritual” activities enter into the contemplative life—meditation, spiritual reading, and prayer.⁶⁶ For Aquinas, however, such activities might lead to contemplation or result from it, but they are not properly designated “contemplation” because such an aggregate of spiritual activities would vitiate the unity of the one contemplative act understood as *intuitus simplex*—the “simple act of gazing on the truth.” He writes,

Accordingly, then, the contemplative life has one act wherein it is finally completed [*finaliter perficitur*], namely the contemplation of truth, and from this act it derives its unity. Yet it has many acts whereby it arrives at this final act. Some of these pertain to the reception of principles [*acceptatio principiorum*], from which it proceeds to the contemplation of truth; others are concerned with deducing from the principles [*deductio principiorum*], the truth, the knowledge of which is sought; and the last and crowning act [*ultimus autem completivus actus*] is the contemplation of the truth.⁶⁷

Aquinas here distinguishes three intellectual movements relevant to contemplation. There are distinct ratiocinative steps on the way “up” to the moment of contemplative insight, which build

substances, and because of which they are said to have intellective power [*intellectivam vim*].”

⁶⁵ Cf. Pieper, *Leisure*, 29.

⁶⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 3, obj. 4. See the discussion on the “spiritual” activities relevant to contemplation in Biffi, *Teologia, storia e contemplazione*, 94-96

⁶⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 3.

on what he refers to as the “reception of principles” (*acceptionem principiorum*). There are also ratiocinative steps on the way “down” from the contemplative act—“deduction from principles” (*deductionem principiorum*). But only the crowning act of the simple gaze on truth itself is properly termed contemplation. These three intellectual movements relevant to contemplation are “circular.” Aquinas explains, “The circularity is observed in this, that reason reaches conclusions from principles by way of discovery [*viam inveniendi*], and by way of judgement [*viam iudicandi*] examines the conclusions which have been found, analyzing them back to the principles.”⁶⁸ Van Nieuwenhove’s study of contemplation in Aquinas highlights the “circular” character of his presentation, illustrating how “discovery” and “judgment” are the two movements “up to” and “down from” the moment of contemplative insight.⁶⁹

It is fruitful to turn again to the question devoted to the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* (*STh* I, q. 79, a. 8). After considering the relation between *ratio* and *intellectus* according to the analogy of movement and rest, Aquinas continues,

Movement always proceeds from something immovable, and ends in something at rest; hence it is that human reasoning, by way of inquiry and discovery [*secundum viam inquisitionis vel inventionis*], advances from certain things simply understood—namely, the first principles; and, again, by way of judgment [*in via iudicii*] returns by analysis [*resolvendo*] to first principles, in the light of which it examines what it has found. Now it is clear that rest and movement are not to be referred to different powers, but to one and the same, even in natural things: since by the same nature a thing is moved towards a certain place.

Note that in all three texts just cited the knowing process is described as circular: it begins with *intellectus*—the immediate recognition of first principles—and by such *acceptionem principiorum* proceeds “up” in a reasoning process of “inquiry and discovery” until it arrives at a new insight, a fresh moment of *intellectus*. This new insight (*intuitus simplex*) is the base from

⁶⁸ *De Verit.*, q. 10, a. 8, ad 10.

⁶⁹ Aquinas’s circular account of contemplation predicated on the *viam inveniendi* and the *viam iudicandi* is discussed at length in Van Nieuwenhove, “Contemplation, *intellectus*, and *simplex intuitus*,” 204–11.

which the reasoning process also descends by way of judgment (*deductionem principiorum*) to arrive, once again, at an experience of *intellectus*. In contemporary epistemic parlance we would call the *viam inveniendi*, which depends on the reception of principles, “inductive reasoning” and the *viam iudicandi*, which proceeds by deduction from principles, “deductive reasoning.”

The contemplative experience, thus, at once *crowns* what it means to be human and *transcends* what it means to be human, inasmuch as the operation of *intellectus* entails a participation in the knowing that properly belongs to separate substances. Aquinas writes, “Insofar as he is contemplative, a man is in a way above man [*supra hominem*], for in the simple vision of the intellect [*intellectus simplici visione*] a man is united with the higher substances, which are called ‘intelligences’ or ‘angels.’”⁷⁰ Thomas Hibbs remarks that, for Aquinas, “the contemplative life cannot be fully achieved by the embodied intellect; yet, to the extent that it is available to us, contemplation most fully actualizes our humanity, or at least what is highest in it.”⁷¹ In the very last sentence of the article on contemplation, Aquinas writes, “The Philosopher declares the contemplative life to be above man [*supra hominem*], because it befits us ‘so far as there is in us something divine’ (*Ethic.* x, 7), namely the intellect [*intellectus*] which is incorruptible and impassible in itself.”⁷² Josef Pieper comments on this paradoxical feature of Aquinas’s account of *intellectus*, which is “already beyond the sphere allotted to man. And yet it belonged to man, though in one sense ‘superhuman’; the ‘purely human’ by itself could not satiate man’s powers of comprehension, for man, of his very nature, reaches out beyond the sphere of the ‘human’, touching on the order of pure spirits.”⁷³ Contemplation reaches out beyond the merely human knowing proper to our ratiocinative nature (it is *supra hominem*); but, at

⁷⁰ III *Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qcla. 2, ad 1 (trans. Aquinas Institute).

⁷¹ Thomas Hibbs, “Transcending Humanity in Aquinas,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 66 (1992): 195.

⁷² *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 8, ad 3. Elsewhere, Aquinas describes the *vita contemplativa* as “*non proprie humana, sed superhumanum*” (*De Virtut.*, q. 5, a. 1).

⁷³ Pieper, *Leisure*, 28-29.

the same time, our natural desire to know truth in general manifests an obediential potency ordered to fulfillment in such contemplation.⁷⁴ This capacity or disposition to be raised is the defining character of *intellectus*.

D) Obediential Potency

Both in this life and in the life to come, the natural desire to contemplate the divine essence exceeds our nature.⁷⁵ The

⁷⁴ Cf. *STh* I, q. 62, a. 1.

⁷⁵ Henri de Lubac's *Surnaturel* (1946) sparked the major conflagration of twentieth-century theology, namely, a debate over how to render the nature-grace relationship, and, more particularly, over the question whether man has a natural desire for the vision of God. De Lubac forcefully rejected the Scholastic thesis of "pure nature," that is, the contention that God could have created human beings apart from grace, thereby rendering human nature intelligible according to a purely natural end. De Lubac summarizes his position as such: "This desire [for God] is not some 'accident' in me. . . . For God's call is constitutive. My finality, which is expressed by this desire, is inscribed upon my very being as it has been put into this universe by God. And by God's will, I now have no other genuine end, no end really assigned to my nature or presented for my free acceptance under any guise, except that of 'seeing God'" (*The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed and John Pepino [New York: Crossroad, 1998], 70). By insisting that man only has one end, the graced end of the beatific vision, De Lubac claimed to be retrieving the authentic teaching of St. Thomas. In the words of Christopher Cullen, "through his history-making thesis, de Lubac believed himself to have, in one stroke, saved Aquinas from the neo-Scholastics and vindicated Augustine's great insight that 'our heart is restless until it rests in you'" (Christopher Cullen, "The Natural Desire for God and Pure Nature: A Debate Renewed," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86 (2012): 706). This complex debate is inextricably tied up with the claim of the first half of this essay, namely, the subjective beatitude of contemplation. For my purposes, however, it need not be resolved here. Central literature on the topic includes Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946); idem, *Augustinisme et théologie moderne* (Paris: Aubier, 1965); John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2005); *Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., trans. Robert Williams (Ave Maria, Fla.: Sapientia Press, 2009); Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle théologie and Sacramental Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86-98; Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Ave Maria, Fla.: Sapientia Press, 2010). For an overview of this debate, see Cullen, "Natural Desire for God."

unsurpassable gulf between the finite and the infinite entails an incommensurability between the subject (the human *intellectus*) and the divine object. Is our natural desire for happiness, then, rendered void (*inane*)? Are we created to achieve an end that is unachievable? No, nature cannot be in vain, writes Aquinas when treating of the vision of God. The beatific vision is the final cause of the rational animal: "If the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void [*inane desiderium naturae*]." ⁷⁶ The metaphysical structures of Aquinas's anthropology help to resolve this logical impasse of a creature attaining a natural desire that exceeds its nature. Aquinas admits that there is a deeply rooted "capacity" or "disposition" on the part of the human intellect *to be* elevated to contemplate God, the realization of which is wholly dependent on divine initiative. As Aquinas puts it, "Rational creatures surpass every other kind of creature in being capable of the highest good in beholding and enjoying God, although the sources from their own nature do not suffice to attain it, and they need the help of God's grace to attain it." ⁷⁷ The orismology of "obediential potency" has not been applied in discussions of Aquinas's theology of contemplation, yet the concept underlies his account of the capacity and aptness of the intellectual creature *to be raised* to the vision of God. ⁷⁸

The obediential potency *to be raised* to a simple, direct vision (*intuitus simplex*) of the divine essence is exclusive to *intellectus*; such a disposition or capacity does not obtain for rocks or goats, or even ratiocinative knowing. Rousselot expresses well this aptness which is unique to *intellectus*:

The "obedience of potency" of intellectual natures, according to Aquinas, is not something independent from their natural potency; it is that very nature. So we can recognize, at least *post factum*, the traces of this capacity in the consciousness that being has of itself in certain muted summons [*appels sourds*]

⁷⁶ *STh* I, q. 12, a. 1. Cf. *STh* I-II, q. 3, a. 8.

⁷⁷ Cf. *De Malo*, q. 5, a. 1 (trans. Richard Regan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003]).

⁷⁸ The best entry into the topic of "obediential potency" is Steven A. Long, "Obediential Potency, Human Knowledge, and the Natural Desire for God," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1997): 45-63.

of its nature. And what in the absence of the divine offer could only be translated into the undecipherable darkness of affective longing [*appétitif*] might with the light of faith be formulated in a series of clear syllogisms. In that way we construct a probable system to link reason and revelation, taking as middle terms the insufficiency of human speculations and our desire to embrace the first intelligible. Aquinas believed that as a matter of fact we have been offered this increase in its very highest form, the promise of intuitive vision. If we take the whole human dynamism thus transformed, it is clear that this gracious gift from heaven crowns his conception of intellectualism in the most triumphant way.⁷⁹

The supernatural finality of *intellectus*—that natural contemplation finds its fulfillment in divine contemplation—is manifest only in the light of revelation and the gift of faith.

The profound paradox entailed in the contemplation of divine truth—that human nature is fulfilled by an experience that transcends human nature—is, in fact, the outworking of Aquinas's doctrine of the *imago dei*. The image of God is not a simple datum of human nature; it transcends human nature *per se* (it is *supra hominem*). Aquinas does not predicate the *imago dei* in man according to *ratio*, but according to *intellectus*, whereby we are capable of being elevated to contemplate God. Aquinas writes,

As Dionysius says (see *De Div. Nom.* VII), an inferior nature reaches its peak at the lowest point of a superior nature [*secundum supremum sui attingit infimum naturae superioris*], and thus, at its peak, it participates somehow in intellectuality [*intellectualitatem*]. And because the image is designated according to what is highest in the soul, it is better designated according to intellect than according to reason, for reason is nothing other than an obscured intellective nature [*natura intellectualis obumbrate*]. This is why reason knows through inquiring and under the aspect of temporal succession what intellect conveys immediately and in full light [*statim et plena luce*].⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Rousselot, *Intelligence*, 151-52.

⁸⁰ I *Sent.*, d. 3, q. 4, a.1, ad 4. Rousselot explains what Aquinas means when he states that rational creatures are said to "attain" participation in natures that are purely intellectual: "According to the Neoplatonic laws of continuity lower beings participate by their highest operation in the simpler and nobler nature of the higher beings, so human intelligence functions as *intellect* in certain acts, but its specific mark is *discursive reason* which shatters the intelligible perfection" (*Intelligence*, 52).

Because the *imago dei* is most precisely predicated of *intellectus*, which exceeds the proper definition of “rational animal,” Aquinas maintains (perhaps surprisingly) that “the image of God is more perfect in the angels than in man, because their intellectual nature is more perfect.”⁸¹

The *imago dei* in man is predicated of *intellectus* whereby it has an obediential potency for divine contemplation; this is a capacity and orientation not fitted to the human person’s ratiocinative nature. The natural desire for divine contemplation demands supernatural elevation beyond (but not opposed) to our human nature. The immediacy and simplicity (*intuitus simplex*) of apprehension proper to *intellectus* belonging to the *imago naturalis* suggests a capacity or fittingness (obediential potency) to be raised to divine contemplation and, hence, the possibility of attaining the natural desire for the vision of the divine essence.⁸² From the perspective of the human subject, the contemplation of God is singularly beatifying and delightful—an “inchoate beatitude”—because it both fulfills and transcends that which is highest in the human person.

II. THE OBJECTIVE BEATITUDE OF CONTEMPLATION

The second reason contemplation in this life participates already in the contemplation of God that belongs to eternity is “on the part of its object, in so far as one contemplates that which one loves.”⁸³ The *object* of divine contemplation—God in himself—likewise renders the contemplation of divine truth an “inchoate beatitude.” In an article devoted to the delight of contemplation, Aquinas writes, “Since, then, the contemplative

⁸¹ *STh* I, q. 93, a. 3.

⁸² Of course, Aquinas is categorical throughout his corpus that a created intellect can in no way see the divine essence by its own natural powers (“It is impossible for any created intellect to see the essence of God by its own natural power” [*STh* I, q. 12, a. 4]). Cf. *De Verit.*, q. 8, a. 3: “Nature does not transcend its limits. Now, the divine essence surpasses any created nature. Consequently, the divine essence cannot be seen by any natural cognition.” In this life, Aquinas reminds us, we are united to God “as to one unknown” (*STh* I, q. 12, a. 13, ad 1).

⁸³ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 7.

life consists chiefly in the contemplation of God, of which charity is the motive . . . it follows that there is delight in the contemplative life, not only by reason of the contemplation itself, but also by reason of the Divine love."⁸⁴ The reason contemplation *in via* is an "inchoate beatitude" is that contemplation here below and *in patria* is animated by the same motive cause, namely, the divine love. Aquinas writes,

The contemplation of God in this life is imperfect in comparison with the contemplation in heaven; and in like manner the delight of the wayfarer's contemplation is imperfect as compared with the delight of contemplation in heaven, of which it is written (Psalm 35:9): "Thou shalt make them drink of the torrent of thy pleasure." Yet, though the contemplation of divine things which is to be had by wayfarers is imperfect, it is more delightful than all other contemplation however perfect, on account of the excellence of that which is contemplated.⁸⁵

A fundamental continuity obtains between contemplation *in via* and *in patria* because the saint drinks the same water of life in a rivulet below that he experiences as a torrent above. This section will treat of the fundamental continuity (but distinct mode of apprehension) that obtains with respect to the contemplation of the wayfarer and that of the blessed.

A) Natural, Theological, and Divine Contemplation

Aquinas distinguishes between three types of knowledge of God: natural knowledge, graced speculative knowledge, and graced affective knowledge.⁸⁶ An important strain in the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., ad 3.

⁸⁶ *STh* I, q. 64, a. 1. The context for this division is fascinating. Aquinas presents his argument about the knowledge of demons, maintaining that they are not deprived of all knowledge of the truth. Knowledge of truth comes from both nature and grace. Further, the knowledge had by grace is also twofold: "speculative" knowledge, by which one knows divine secrets, and "affective" knowledge, which produces a love for God. Aquinas identifies the latter with the gift of wisdom. The *natural knowledge* of God that belongs to demons is not compromised by their unhappy state; yet their *speculative knowledge* is less than that of those angels who are established in grace, and they have no *affective knowledge* of God.

commentatorial tradition holds that this division corresponds to three types of contemplation—natural, theological, and divine—of which only the last is an “inchoate beatitude” inasmuch as it has divinity itself as its object.⁸⁷ The three dominant figures associated with this interpretation of Aquinas are John of St. Thomas (1589-1644), Ambroise Gardeil (1859-1931), and Jacques Maritain (1882-1973).⁸⁸

The first, *natural contemplation*, is a knowledge of God by way of causality. This is the domain of metaphysics. The metaphysician knows God as a necessary first principle, who is one, simple, and distinct from his creatures.⁸⁹ For Aquinas, Aristotle is, once again, the paradigmatic example of natural contemplation.⁹⁰ Metaphysical knowledge of God operates on

⁸⁷ For discussion of Aquinas’s three-fold division of wisdom see Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 263-70; Charles Journet, *Introduction à la théologie* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1945), 9; Lawrence Boadt, “Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Biblical Wisdom Tradition,” *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 595-96; Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 28-34. Some recent commentators resist this division inasmuch as it seems to threaten Aquinas’s insistence on the unity of the contemplative act. See Van Nieuwenhove, “Aquinas on Contemplation,” 22-27; Rudi te Velde, “Understanding the *scientia* of Faith,” in Fergus Kerr, ed., *Contemplating Aquinas* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 55-74; Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “Aquinas, Contemplation, and Theology,” *New Blackfriars* 102 (2021): 160-73.

⁸⁸ John of St. Thomas, *Curs. Theol.*, I, q. 8, disp. 8, a. 6; I, q. 43, disp. 17, a. 3; I-II, q. 110, disp. 22, a. 1; I-II, q. 72, disp. 17, a. 3. Ambroise Gardeil, *La structure de l’âme et l’expérience mystique*, 2 vols. (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1927); idem, “L’expérience mystique pure dans le cadre des ‘missions divines,’” *Vie spirituelle, supplément* 32 (1932): 138-42; Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*. Cf. H. F. Dondaine, *Somme théologique* (Paris: Desclée, 1950), 449-53, who follows Gardeil’s interpretation.

⁸⁹ Cf. ScG III, cc. 25, 37.

⁹⁰ In book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that contemplation is the highest form of human happiness. In his commentary, Aquinas considers the five reasons Aristotle enumerates for this claim. First, contemplation is the most noble of human activities considered both on the part of the *subject* contemplating (i.e. the intellect) and on the part of the *objects* of contemplation (realities that are “supra-sensible—especially divine”). Second, because contemplation is free from bodily labor it can be more “continuous and lasting” than other human activity. Third, Aristotle describes contemplation as “the most delightful [*delectabilissima*] of all activities” offering “pleasures marvelous both in purity and permanence.” Aquinas explains that the “purity” of contemplation lies in the fact that it deals with immaterial realities while the immutable

the plane of analogy. As such, it never attains to the knowledge of the divine essence; and yet, in the words of Jacques Maritain,

It truly knows God in the divided mirror of the transcendental perfections analogically common to the uncreated and to the created. In this mirror it grasps in the imperfect mode proper to finite things, realities which, brought to their pure state and overflowing all of our concepts, pre-exist in the incomprehensible simplicity of the infinite.⁹¹

Perfections (such as goodness and life) refer properly and principally to God (*perfectiones ipsas significatas*), but their manner of signifying (*modum significandi*) is through creatures and are therefore imperfect.⁹² To take an example, if I seek to explain the notion "wise" to my child, that reality is more readily intelligible to him (*modum significandi*) when I point to his grandfather while the notion *itself* is most properly predicated (*significatas*) of God. In sum, natural contemplation involves a knowledge of God from his effects using the discourse of analogy.

The second, *theological contemplation*, corresponds to graced speculative knowledge of God. Here we enter a realm wholly distinct from natural contemplation. This is because the object of theology is distinct from metaphysics. It does not know God analogically, through his creation, but as he reveals *himself*.⁹³ Again, Maritain is trenchant: "[Theological contemplation] does not have as its object God as expressed by His creatures, nor God as the first cause or author of the natural order, but, rather, God in the guise of mystery, as inaccessible to reason alone, in His own essence and inner life."⁹⁴ Unlike natural contemplation, the study of *sacra doctrina* presupposes revelation and requires that

objects of contemplation account for its "permanence." Fourth, contemplation is particularly self-sufficient. While other virtues such as justice require another person on whom to exercise virtue, the "contemplation of the truth is an entirely internal activity not proceeding externally." Finally, contemplation is desirable in itself (*per se*): "it is never sought for the sake of anything else" (*Nic. Ethic.* 10.10.2087-97 [trans C. I. Litzinger (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964)]). See also *Metaphys.* 12.8.2538-43).

⁹¹ Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 264-65.

⁹² *STh* I, q. 13, a. 3.

⁹³ Although it is distinct from creation, Aquinas does consider the revelation proper to *sacra doctrina* as a divine "effect." Cf. *STh* I, q. 1, a. 7, ad 1.

⁹⁴ Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 265.

the light of faith illumine reason to inform the contemplation of divine truth.⁹⁵ It must be stressed, however, that Aquinas never abandons the foundational premise that *all* knowledge of God—even that of revelation—rests on a causal knowledge of God that apprehends divinity through his effects.

Finally, *divine contemplation* corresponds to graced affective knowledge of God. It is to this highest form of contemplation that Aquinas refers when he describes contemplation as an “inchoate beatitude.” The gifts of the Holy Spirit—particularly the gift of wisdom—allow for an immediate, intuitive, and connatural knowledge of God. Here the object of contemplation is God *in himself*. Whereas theological contemplation operates according to a mode of knowing strictly proportionate to our rational nature (even as its object is supernatural), divine contemplation knows its supernatural object in a *mode* that is also supernatural, namely, by an infused gift of wisdom.

The emphasis in this account, which stems from John of St. Thomas, falls on the immediacy of divine contemplation. The affective experience of love given in the presence of God is direct; indeed, it is exclusive of any intermediary. Further, such immediate perception of divinity is “supraintentional” because it is possessed without concepts. This strain of commentary is attentive to Aquinas’s frequent use of the language of sensation, (particularly, the language of tasting, savoring, and relishing) to articulate the connatural or experiential knowledge of God given to the saint in divine contemplation. The immediacy of taste is a fitting metaphor for the direct experience of God that belongs to this highest form of contemplation.⁹⁶ Divine contemplation is an

⁹⁵ As Torrell points out, the principles of theological wisdom are found in revelation, but “its manner of judging derives from science in a human way; one is more or less wise to the degree that one is more or less learned about divine things” (Torrell, “Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic,” 15).

⁹⁶ “For the knowing that comes from union with God, ‘tasting’ is the metaphor used to capture its immediacy and persuasiveness. It is a savoring of a divine reality attained in faith’s penumbra and fully realized in the face-to-face radiance of the blessed” (Thomas Ryan, “Revisiting Affective Knowledge and Connaturality in Aquinas,” *Theological Studies* 66 [2005]: 67).

immediate participation in God's own love and, therefore, "supraconceptual." Maritain writes,

This love grows into to an *objective means* of knowing, *transit in conditionem objecti*, and replaces the concept as intentional instrument obscurely uniting the intellect with the thing known, in such a way that man not only experiences his love, but, through his love, that precisely which is still hidden in faith, the *still more* to be loved, and to be tasted in love, which is the hidden substance of faith.⁹⁷

The striking assertion advanced by this reading of Aquinas is that divine contemplation transcends the ratiocinative limits of finite knowing, and mystically and proleptically already partakes (in some manner) in beatific knowing.

However, this account of divine contemplation has been criticized for seeming to abscond from Aquinas's bedrock principle that *in via* there is no immediate knowledge of God: any and all knowledge of God possessed by the wayfarer necessarily derives from the divine *effects*.⁹⁸ On this score, Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange (1877-1964) breaks with his mentor, Gardeil.⁹⁹ The only knowledge of God that is immediate, maintains Garrigou-Lagrange, is reserved to beatitude. The experiential knowledge of God proper to divine contemplation is therefore an effect of God, namely, the filial love that he produces in the just soul. It is by this divine effect that God is

⁹⁷ Jacques Maritain, "On Knowledge through Connaturality," *The Review of Metaphysics* 4 (1951): 475-76.

⁹⁸ Here one might point to *De Virtut.*, q. 1, a. 12, ad 11 (McInerney, trans.): "The wisdom whereby we contemplate God now does not look immediately to God [*non immediate respicit ipsum Deum*], but to His effects which are the present means of contemplating him." Only the beatific vision constitutes an immediate knowledge of God—all other knowledge of God is necessarily from his effects. As such, the vision of beatitude is qualitatively distinct from divine contemplation. Nevertheless, as we will outline below, the knowledge of God proper to divine contemplation is an "effect" that is internal, infused, and experiential.

⁹⁹ Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, "L'habitation de la sainte Trinité et l'expérience mystique," *Revue thomiste* 33 (1928): 449-74; idem, *L'amour de Dieu et la croix de Jésus* (Paris: Cerf, 1953), vol. 1, chap. 3. Francis Cunningham follows Garrigou-Lagrange; see, Francis Cunningham, *The Indwelling of the Trinity* (Dubuque, Iowa: Priory Press, 1955), 196-211.

known. While such knowledge is not immediate, it is also not discursive, nor does it derive from a reasoning process. Rather, divine contemplation is an experience of divine love that generates “supradiscursive” knowledge. Garrigou-Lagrange writes, “Mother and child have no need of reasoning to reveal their hearts to each other, but know each other deeply through their mutual love. The same is true of God and those who are born of God.”¹⁰⁰

It is important to take this concern seriously, for Aquinas does hold that all knowledge of God in this life necessarily derives from God’s effects. *Prima facie*, there is a challenge here to the emphasis on the direct and immediate experience of God proper to the account of divine contemplation advanced by John of St. Thomas, Gardeil, and Maritain. How does the latter position sufficiently preserve the qualitatively distinct experience of beatitude, which alone is direct and immediate? We will consider this question in the final section. Here I will only remark that the distinctive feature of Aquinas’s account of divine contemplation is that it knows God as *present*. It seems that Aquinas intends more than simply a supradiscursive awareness of the divine effects of our filiation (à la Garrigou-Lagrange) or a discursive conjecture of what *might be* divine effects, namely, love and moral virtue (à la Galtier). Divine contemplation is predicated on a genuine experience of the presence of the divine persons themselves in the soul. Such contemplation is engendered by union—it is a connatural, “loving knowledge.” Further, Aquinas

¹⁰⁰ Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Love of God and the Cross of Jesus* (St. Louis: Herder, 1947), 156. Paul Galtier maintains in turn that Garrigou is not consistent. It is not coherent, maintains Galtier, to claim that knowledge of God proper to divine contemplation is “supradiscursive.” If such knowledge is an effect, claims Galtier, we know it only discursively. He insists that divine contemplation remain human, not angelic; it is the experience of a *rational* animal. See Paul Galtier, *L’habitation en nous des trois personnes* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1949). Thomas Fitzgerald follows Galtier; see Thomas Fitzgerald, *De inhabitatione Spiritus sancti doctrina s. Thomae Aquinatis* (Chicago: Mundelein, 1949), 65-72. The division of Aquinas’s commentators on this question into three distinct camps (the schools of Gardeil, Garrigou-Lagrange, and Galtier) follows the classification laid out by John Dedek, “*Quasi experimentalis cognitio*: A Historical Approach to the Meaning of St. Thomas,” *Theological Studies* 22 (1961): 357-90.

is clear that this contemplation obtains both *in via* and *in patria*. Commenting on Christ’s response to the disciples’ question as to where he dwells—“come and see” (John 1:39)—Aquinas comments,

In the mystical sense, he says, *come and see*, because the dwelling of God, whether it is of glory, or grace, cannot be known except by experience: for it cannot be explained in words. . . . And so he says, *come and see*. *Come*, by believing and working; *and see*, by experiencing and understanding. It should be noted that we can attain to this knowledge in four ways: first, by doing good works . . . second by the rest or stillness of the mind . . . third, by tasting the divine sweetness . . . fourth, by acts of devotion.¹⁰¹

He will frequently appeal to Dionysius in his treatment of divine contemplation because the Areopagite speaks not of *learning* divine things, but *suffering* divine things. In his commentary *On the Divine Names*, Aquinas writes,

There is another most perfect knowledge of God [*perfectissima Dei cognitio*], namely by remotion [*remotionem*], by which we know God through ignorance, through a kind of union with divinity above the mind’s nature [*supra naturam mentis*], inasmuch as our mind . . . is united to the supra-resplendent rays of divinity.¹⁰²

The knowledge of God obtained in union with him, continues Aquinas, is possessed by way of gift, inasmuch as the mind is “illuminated from the inscrutable depths of divine wisdom itself.”¹⁰³

The experience of divine contemplation proper to the gift of wisdom entails that charity (which is the Holy Spirit’s “own likeness”)¹⁰⁴ becomes both the means of knowledge and the

¹⁰¹ *In Ioan.*, c. 1, lect. 15.

¹⁰² *In De Divin. Nom.*, c. 7, lect. 4 (ed. C. Pera [Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1950], no. 732).

¹⁰³ Ibid. Bernard McGinn explains, “The *donum sapientiae* does not give us new conceptual information about God and divine mysteries, but provides us a new way of knowing them, a knowing by an *intuitus* that is *connaturalis*, *experimentalis*, and *affectivus*” (Bernard McGinn, “‘Contemplatio sapientialis’: Thomas Aquinas’s Contribution to Mystical Theology,” *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 95 (2019): 328.

¹⁰⁴ *STh* I-II, q. 70, a. 3.

object of knowledge. For this reason, maintains Aquinas, contemplation is characterized by *delectatio*: “everyone delights when he obtains what he loves.”¹⁰⁵ Here we see again the almost paradoxical character of a “penultimate finality” that marks Aquinas’s account of contemplation. The indwelling of the Holy Trinity in the soul of the saint and the concomitant gift of wisdom entail the striking conclusion that the saint, while *in via*, already possesses a type of beatitude. In the *Scriptum* Aquinas terms this a “foretaste”: “For the contemplative life is not ordered to something else within the one who has it, since eternal life is nothing except a consummation of the contemplative life available in the present [life] in a certain way as a foretaste [*praelibatur*] through the contemplative life.”¹⁰⁶ Unlike theological contemplation possessed in faith, “divine contemplation” already achieves, in an inchoate mode, the delight that belongs to the “loving knowledge” of beatific vision.

In the final analysis, one must admit that the clear delineation between natural, theological, and divine contemplation—as well as the emphasis on the immediate and experiential character of the last—is a development of Aquinas’s teaching by one significant line of commentators. Although one readily finds resources in the texts of Aquinas to advance this reading, one also finds texts that are difficult to square with this interpretation and that seem, rather, forcefully to eschew the possibility of a direct experience of God in this life.

B) Contemplation and the Gift of Wisdom

The gift of wisdom is, for Aquinas, the source of divine contemplation. Such wisdom generates an affective knowledge of God derived from a loving union with him. In the *Scriptum*, Aquinas elaborates on the distinction between theological contemplation, which proceeds by the light of faith and which knows divine truth in a human mode (mediated in concepts and divinely given analogies), and divine contemplation, which in

¹⁰⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 1.

¹⁰⁶ *III Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4, qcla. 1.

love experiences divinity itself. He writes, "The gift of wisdom proceeds to a type of godlike contemplation [*ad quamdam dei-formem contemplationem*] and a certain unfolding of the articles of belief that faith holds in a somewhat enfolded manner according to a human manner of knowing."¹⁰⁷ The distinction between theological contemplation and divine contemplation hinges on how Aquinas differentiates the virtues from the gifts.¹⁰⁸

Both the virtues and the gifts are infused by the Holy Spirit and both are habits perfective of human nature, but they have distinct modes of operation. The virtues order human action naturally, under the guidance of reason, whereas the gifts order human action supernaturally, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁹ The theological virtues logically precede the gifts as their necessary condition, while the gifts supervene as perfective of the virtues. And, while the virtues express human loving and knowing, it is more accurate to say the gifts are a divine expression of loving and knowing.¹¹⁰ The virtues proceed from natural reason (aided by grace) such that it is appropriate to describe virtuous action as "my action." The gifts, by contrast, proceed directly from the Holy Spirit; they are wholly

¹⁰⁷ III *Sent.*, d. 35, q. 2, a. 1, qcla. 1, ad 1.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Jordan Aumann, "Mystical Experience, the Infused Virtues and the Gifts," *Angelicum* 58 (1981): 33-54; Andrew Pinsent, "The Gifts and Fruits of the Holy Spirit," in Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 475-88.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *STh* I-II, q. 68, a. 1: "Now it is manifest that human virtues perfect man according as it is natural for him to be moved by his reason in his interior and exterior actions. Consequently man needs yet higher perfections, whereby to be disposed to be moved by God. These perfections are called gifts, not only because they are infused by God, but also because by them man is disposed to become amenable to the Divine inspiration." See also *STh* I-II, q. 68, a. 4; *STh* II-II, q. 52, aa. 1 and 3.

¹¹⁰ Cf. *STh* III, q. 7, a. 5. In *STh* II-II, q. 52, a. 2, ad 1, Aquinas writes, "In the gifts of the Holy Ghost, the position of the human mind is of one moved rather than of a mover." In the *Scriptum* he explains, "The mode of an action is taken from what is the measure and rule of action. Since the gifts are for a superhuman mode of action, the activity of the gifts must be measured by another standard than that which regulates human virtue. This standard is divinity itself, in which man participates according to his own mode, no longer in the manner of men, but as one who has become God by participation" (III *Sent.*, d. 34, q. 1, a. 3).

gratuitous.¹¹¹ It is more appropriate to describe the activity of the gifts as “God’s action” (with which I cooperate). Ultimately, the distinction between the virtues and the gifts is the distinction between a human and a divine act. In the first case, the soul is active in virtue and in the latter the soul is passive to the motion of the Holy Spirit.¹¹²

The highest of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the *donum sapientiae*, allows the saint to know God according to a divine mode that is divine contemplation. Such contemplation is a wholly gratuitous gift of God (*sapientia infusa*) that obtains by the indwelling of love (appropriated principally to the Holy Spirit). Aquinas writes, “Uncreated Wisdom . . . unites itself to us by the gift of charity, and consequently reveals to us the mysteries the knowledge of which is infused wisdom. Hence, the infused wisdom [*sapientia infusa*] which is a gift, is not the cause but the effect of charity.”¹¹³ By contrast, theological contemplation proper to *sacra doctrina* proceeds to divine truth in a human mode. Here the virtue of faith illumines what reason discovers

¹¹¹ Cf. Bernhard Blankenhorn, “Aquinas on the Spirit’s Gift of Understanding and Dionysius Mystical Theology,” *Nova et vetera* (English ed.) 14 (2016): 1118.

¹¹² For a more detailed analysis, see Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, “Le mode suprahumain des dons du Saint-Esprit dans la *Somme Théologique* de S. Thomas,” Supplement, *La Vie Spirituelle* 7 (1923): 126-31; and Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1980), 80-97. More recent scholarship has challenged the notion that for Aquinas the operation of the gifts entails the passivity of the soul to the primary movement of Holy Spirit. Rather, because the gifts operate as a *habitus*, they do not exclude the exercise of human faculties cooperating with God. Instead the gifts allow human beings to respond to God with new alacrity and docility. Cf. Cruz Gonzalez-Ayesta, *El don de sabiduría según santo Tomás* (Pamplona: Euns, 1998), 43-52; Servais Pinckaers, “Morality and the Movement of the Holy Spirit: Aquinas’s Doctrine of ‘Instinctus,’” in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, ed. John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 388-89; Ulrich Horst, *Die Gaben des Heiligen Geistes nach Thomas von Aquin* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011), 57, 71-79. Bernhard Blankenhorn summarizes this recent emphasis of human agency in Aquinas’s theology of the gifts: “God’s impulse does not bypass but rather elevates the act of deliberation. . . . The Spirit perfects rather than replaces the acts of the theological virtues. . . . The gifts as *habitus* grant deeper receptivity, enabling higher subsequent, active spontaneity. Aquinas does not speak of being passive before the Spirit but of ‘being movable (*mobilis*)’” (Blankenhorn, *Mystery of Union*, 275-76).

¹¹³ *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 6, ad 2.

through theological investigation and study (*sapientia acquisita*).¹¹⁴ An overarching principle in Aquinas's treatment of the virtues and the gifts is that the gifts are dependent on and perfective of the virtues. Likewise, divine contemplation is dependent on and perfective of theological contemplation; Aquinas describes it as an experiential "unfolding of the articles of belief that faith holds in a somewhat enfolded manner according to a human manner of knowing."¹¹⁵

Although divine contemplation is an act of the intellect (*essentialiter consistat in intellectu*), it has its origins (*principium*) in the affect, since the love of God (as both a subjective and an objective genitive) propels the soul to contemplate (*ex caritate ad Dei contemplationem incitatur*).¹¹⁶ The animating fire of divine love is not only the efficient cause of contemplation, but informs this unique intellectual act, such that its formal character is a "loving knowledge":

Since the end corresponds to the beginning, it follows that the term [*terminus*] also and the end [*finis*] of the contemplative life has its being in the affect, since one delights in seeing the object loved, and the very delight in the object seen arouses a yet greater love. Wherefore Gregory says (*Hom. xiv in Ezech.*) that "when we see one whom we love, we are so aflame as to love him more." And this is the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life [*ultima perfectio contemplativae vitae*], namely that the Divine truth be not only seen but also loved.¹¹⁷

Here we touch on a rather thorny question: does divine contemplation belong more properly to the intellect or to the will? In the question on wisdom (*STh* II-II, q. 45), Aquinas gives a succinct answer: "The wisdom that is a gift has a cause in the will, viz., charity, but it has its essence in the intellect."¹¹⁸ The

¹¹⁴ Aquinas does not use the term *sapientia acquisita*. However, it expresses well the contrast between divine wisdom that is a gift (*sapientia infusa*) and theological wisdom obtained through study. Here I follow McGinn, "Contemplatio sapientialis," 325.

¹¹⁵ *III Sent.*, d. 35, q. 2, a. 1, qcla. 1, ad 1.

¹¹⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 7, ad 1. Cf. Biffi, *Teologia, storia e contemplazione*, 75-82.

¹¹⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 7, ad 1 (translation slightly emended).

¹¹⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 2. In the *Scriptum* Aquinas explains that divine contemplation does not consist solely in cognition because the contemplative life is fixed on the love of God and so is animated by the affect. He continues, "To taste pertains to one's affect, just

distinct contemplative knowledge of God generated by the gift of wisdom certainly is a type of *knowledge*, but a knowledge of divine love and *by means* of divine love.¹¹⁹ It is true that only the intellect illumines, but the will draws the intellect to the object of its affection, focusing its attention on the object of its delight.¹²⁰ Or, as Aquinas puts it in the *Scriptum*: “The contemplative life consists in the act of the cognitive power that has been directed by the affect [*praeacceptatae per affectivam*].”¹²¹

C) *Contemplative Vision and Beatific Vision*

If the saint already experiences an “inchoate beatitude” inasmuch as by the indwelling of the Holy Trinity and the concomitant gift of wisdom he experiences divinity itself as his object of contemplation, how does Aquinas preserve the unique character of the eschatological vision of God? The claim that the contemplation of divine truth already participates in the beatific knowledge of God raises a question about the distinction between divine contemplation and beatific vision. Surely, it is not the case that divine contemplation is simply a transient or occluded experience of beatific vision.

In question 18 of the disputed questions *De Veritate*, Aquinas considers three distinct states according to which the human person can see God: innocence, corruption, and glory. What distinguishes the experience of the vision of God in these three states is the mode in which sight operates. Here we need briefly

as to see pertains to one’s intellect. But Gregory says that the contemplative life, by its intimate flavor [*saporem intimo*], tastes already the rest that is to come. Therefore the contemplative life does not consist only in cognition” (III *Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qcla. 1).

¹¹⁹ Rousselot’s articulation of a “loving knowledge” (“la connaissance amoureuse”) expresses well Aquinas’s account of the distinct quality of divine contemplation that involves both the will and the intellect (Rousselot, *Intelligence*, 13-49).

¹²⁰ This is only a cursory response. See Christopher J. Malloy, *Aquinas on Beatific Charity and the Problem of Love* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Academic, 2019); Guy Mansini, “*Duplex amor* and the Structure of Love in Aquinas,” in *Thomistica*, ed. E. Manning (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 127-96; Michael Sherwin, *By Knowledge and by Love: Charity and Knowledge in the Moral Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

¹²¹ III *Sent.*, d. 35, q. 2, a. 1, resp. qcla. 1.

to consider Aquinas's account of vision, which operates according to a threefold medium, namely, the medium *under which* something is seen (*medium sub quo*), the medium *by which* something is seen (*medium quo*), and the medium *from which* knowledge is obtained of that which is seen (*medium a quo*). Thus, to see a yellow rutabaga requires light as the medium *under which* the rutabaga is seen, rendering the rutabaga to be "actually visible." Second, the sensible species of the rutabaga existing in the eye is the medium *by which* the yellow rutabaga is seen. Aquinas calls the sensible species the "principle of the activity of sight." Finally, the medium *from which* knowledge of the yellow rutabaga is obtained is the likeness of the rutabaga mirrored in the eye. Thus, it is not the physical rutabaga that enters into the eye, but its likeness from which I come to know the rutabaga.¹²² Such a threefold medium of sight also obtains with respect to our intellectual vision. The light of the agent intellect corresponds to physical light: it is the medium *under which* our understanding sees. Corresponding to the sensible species in physical sight is the intelligible species, the medium *by which* we understand. Finally, the effects that allow us to know the cause serve as the medium *from which* we know a thing. Aquinas maintains, "Consequently, this type of knowledge is called 'mirrored' knowledge because of the likeness which it has to sight which takes place through a mirror."¹²³

This last medium—the medium *from which*—is required in our current state of corruption to see God. Ever since the Fall, our knowledge of God derives from his effects; we are led to know the cause as if through a mirror. However, in the state of innocence this medium *from which* was not necessary; rather, all that was needed to know God was something like the medium *by which*, namely, the intelligible species. Adam did not enjoy the direct vision of the divine essence, but "saw God through a spiritual light which was given to the human mind by God and

¹²² *De Verit.*, q. 18, a. 1, ad 1.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

which was a kind of expressed likeness of the uncreated light.”¹²⁴ Aquinas explains further:

In the state of innocence, man, by reason of the perfection of grace, received a knowledge of God by means of an internal inspiration due to the irradiation of divine wisdom [*inspirationem internam ex irradiatione divinae sapientiae*]. In this way he did not know God from visible creation but from a spiritual likeness imprinted on his mind.¹²⁵

The light of divine wisdom whereby Adam in a state of innocence possessed an infused and internal knowledge of God is, for Aquinas, a helpful analogue for understanding the *intuitus simplex* of divine contemplation, whereby the saint knows God in an infused and internal manner by the gift of wisdom.¹²⁶

However, this elevated way of knowing God—not from his visible effects, but from an internal experience of divine wisdom—is *not* equivalent to the vision of the blessed in glory. Some contend that in the state of innocence Adam enjoyed a “midway vision” (*mediam visionem*) of the divine essence, in a manner less perfect than that of the blessed, but still superior to that of fallen man apart from the healing of grace.¹²⁷ Aquinas excludes this possibility. The vision of the divine essence is not communicated in degrees (say, more transient and occluded). In short, either one sees or one does not: “The sight of the blessed is not distinguished from the sight of those in this life because the former see more perfectly and the latter less perfectly, but because the former see and the latter do not see.”¹²⁸ To see the divine essence is the end of man—an end that is either attained or not. In the state of innocence, Adam was a wayfarer, that is to

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ *De Verit.*, q. 18, a. 2.

¹²⁶ Commenting on the text from the Gospel of John, “No one has ever seen God,” Aquinas notes that there are different ways of “seeing” God. The highest degree according to which God is seen in this life is when “God is seen through a certain spiritual light infused by God into spiritual minds during contemplation [*infusum spiritualibus mentibus in contemplatione*]; and this is the way Jacob saw God face to face (Gen 32:30). According to Gregory, this vision came about through his lofty contemplation” (*In Ioan.*, c. 1, lect. 11).

¹²⁷ *De Verit.*, q. 18, a. 1.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

say, one not yet having attained his end: “Every rational creature finds its beatitude in this, that it sees the essence of God, and not in this, that it sees it with such a degree of clarity, or more or less.”¹²⁹ Given the intransigent exclusivity of beatific vision for Aquinas, how does he maintain that the vision enjoyed by the wayfarer—both Adam in a state of innocence and those who taste of divine contemplation—is an “inchoate beatitude”?

The answer lies again in the distinct medium *under which* God can be seen. Divine, angelic, and human vision of God are distinguished according to the medium required to see God. God’s own vision of himself entails no medium at all; it is an immediate vision of the divine essence. Such a vision is not natural to any creature, but belongs to God alone.¹³⁰ For the creature to be elevated to such a divine vision of God requires the gift of illumination by a divine light. In beatitude, the light of glory will take the place of the medium *under which*, maintains Aquinas, appealing to Psalm 35:10: “In thy light we shall see light.” The second mode of seeing God is proper to angels, who do not see God from his created effects (medium *from which*), but require only an intelligible species to see God. This “intentional likeness” is the medium *by which* God is seen. To see God in this manner is proper only to separate substances—angels without bodies.¹³¹ For embodied rational animals to see God in this angelic manner requires the light of grace to serve as the medium *by which*. Finally, the vision of God proper to postlapsarian human nature is one of “mirrored knowledge”; a knowledge of God by likeness that discerns the cause from the effects (medium *from which*).¹³²

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ This is a foundational premise for Aquinas. One quotation will suffice: “It is impossible for the soul of man in this life to see the essence of God” (*STh* I, q. 12, a. 11).

¹³¹ In referring to the mode of vision proper to the angels, Aquinas is not referring to the knowledge that belongs to the confirmed angels, that is to say, the knowledge of the beatific vision.

¹³² *De Verit.*, q. 18, a. 1, ad 1. Elsewhere, when discussing “mirrored knowledge,” Aquinas uses the phrase “*in quo*” rather than “*a quo*.” Cf. *IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 1, ad 15; *STh* I, q. 12, a. 5, ad 2.

The vision of God proper to God, angel, and man corresponds to the three states in which the human person can possess the vision of God: glory, innocence, and corruption. Aquinas writes,

Accordingly, it is clear that after the fall man needs a triple medium to see God: creatures themselves, from which he rises to knowledge of God; a likeness of God, which he gets from creatures; and a light from which he receives the perfection of being directed toward God. This light may be the light of nature, such as the light of the agent intellect or the light of grace, such as that of faith and wisdom. In the state before the fall, however, he needed a double medium: one which is a likeness of God, and one which is a light elevating and directing his mind. The blessed, however, need only one medium, the light of glory which elevates the mind. And God sees Himself without any medium, for He Himself is the light by which He sees Himself.¹³³

In a state of innocence, Adam did not see God from his created effects (medium *from which*) but from “an internal inspiration due to the irradiation of divine wisdom.” In this respect, the vision of God enjoyed by Adam before the Fall is proximate to that of the angels who see God by the medium *by which* of the intelligible species. While neither the holy angels nor man in the state of innocence enjoys the unmediated vision of God, Aquinas describes such vision as “midway between the sight which we now have and the sight of the blessed.”¹³⁴ Angels and prefallen Adam enjoy a knowledge of God imprinted directly on the mind. Prior to the Fall, Adam did not need to rise to a knowledge of God through the likeness mirrored in his effects (medium *from which*), but “had through grace the kind of sight which the angels had naturally.”¹³⁵ The medium *by which* Adam saw God in a state of innocence “is somewhat like the species of the thing seen, because he saw God, through a spiritual light which was given to the human mind by God.”¹³⁶ Unlike the knowledge of God proper to our current state—in a mirror, through an intermediary or a likeness—knowledge of God in a state of innocence is like

¹³³ *De Verit.*, q. 18, a. 1, ad 1.

¹³⁴ *De Verit.*, q. 18, a. 1.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, ad 12.

¹³⁶ *De Verit.*, q. 18, a. 1, ad 1.

that belonging to the holy angels: experiential, interior, and given by a divine light.

It is precisely this internal, elevated, and luminous "angelic knowledge" enjoyed in the state of innocence by the "irradiation of divine wisdom" that Aquinas maintains is proximate to divine contemplation had by the "light of grace," given in "faith and wisdom." We have seen how human *intellectus*, for Aquinas, is characterized by an obediential potency to know God in a way proper to angelic knowing inasmuch as contemplation entails an "a simple act of gazing on the truth" (*intuitus simplex*).¹³⁷ The elevating "spiritual light" by which Adam before the Fall attained to a type of angelic knowledge of God is proximate to the manner in which infused divine contemplation allows the saint to behold God:

In contemplation, God is seen through a medium [*per medium*] which is the light of wisdom [*lumen sapientiae*]. This elevates the mind to the sight of things divine, not, however, to immediate vision of the divine essence itself. And it is in this way that God is seen through grace by the contemplatives after the fall, although He is seen more perfectly in the state of innocence.¹³⁸

While Aquinas preserves the exclusive character of the beatific vision proper to the saints in glory, he holds that in divine contemplation the gift of wisdom becomes the medium *by which*, such that the object of contemplation is divinity itself apart from any medium *from which*. As such, the saint *in via* enjoys an "inchoate beatitude," sharing something of prelapsarian "angelic knowing."

CONCLUSION

Aquinas's treatment of contemplation stresses a fundamental continuity between the contemplation of divine truth that the saint already now enjoys *in via* and the eschatological, "face-to-face" contemplation that belongs to the saint in eternity. They

¹³⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 3, ad 1: "contemplatio pertinet ad ipsum simplicem intuitum veritatis."

¹³⁸ *De Verit.*, q. 18, a. 1, ad 4.

are related as the imperfect (*imperfecta*) to the perfect (*perfecta*).¹³⁹ Indeed, the contemplation of divine truth, maintains Aquinas, “bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude [*quaedam inchoatio beatitudinis*], which begins now and will be continued in the life to come.”¹⁴⁰ In the *Summa contra gentiles* he writes, “In this life there is nothing so like this ultimate and perfect happiness [*ultimae et perfectae felicitates*] as the life of those who contemplate the truth, as far as possible here below. . . . For contemplation of truth begins [*incipit*] in this life, but will be consummated [*consummatur*] in the life to come.”¹⁴¹ For this reason, in the question on contemplation, Aquinas devotes an article to the claim that the *delectatio* belonging to contemplation has no equal (*STh* II-II, q. 180, a 7).

Divine contemplation, according to Aquinas, is an “inchoate beatitude,” participating, already in this life, in the eschatological contemplation of God enjoyed by the blessed in heaven. Aquinas’s claim for the fundamental continuity between the contemplation of the wayfarer and that of the blessed rests on two overarching arguments. First, when considered in relation to the human subject, the contemplation of God fulfills our natural desire for happiness. Aquinas’s theological anthropology is defined by the paradoxical truth that human nature is fulfilled by that which exceeds its rational nature, namely, the contemplation of divine truth. In this respect, Aquinas contrasts two modes by which intellectual creatures apprehend: *ratio* and *intellectus*. *Ratio* is a discursive and sense-based knowing process that belongs to animals in time and space, who accumulate a body of knowledge through sensible and accidental phenomena. Human beings are on this account defined as “rational animals.” *Intellectus*, by contrast, apprehends truth by penetrating to the hidden essence of a reality in a nondiscursive, immediate, and simple mode. *Intellectus* belongs to separate substances that know reality whole and simple, “at a glance” as it were. And, although *intellectus* transcends what is strictly human and

¹³⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 7, ad 3.

¹⁴⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 4.

¹⁴¹ *ScG* III, c. 63.

functions only as an aspect of what for us is a process, its place in our knowing suggests a capacity in human nature for contemplation. Aquinas defines contemplation as *intuitus simplex*, the "simple act of gazing on the truth" that belongs to *intellectus*. Indeed, it is this capacity for contemplation proper to *intellectus* that gives definition to the *imago dei*. The natural desire of man for happiness in the contemplation of truth is not a vague wish, the attainment of which is bereft of any real possibility. Rather, *intellectus* manifests in the human person an obediential potency—an intrinsic ordering, disposition, or capacity, the realization of which wholly depends on divine initiative—for the contemplation of God. The wayfarer's contemplation of God is, thus, an "inchoate beatitude" because it fulfills and transcends what is noblest in the human person.

The second reason for Aquinas's contention that contemplation is an "inchoate beatitude" is that it apprehends divinity itself. Unlike natural contemplation of metaphysics or theological contemplation of *sacra doctrina*, divine contemplation apprehends a divine object in a mode that is also divine, namely, by the infused gift of wisdom. This interior and connatural manner of apprehension proper to the gift of wisdom unfolds divine mysteries that faith holds in an enfolded manner. Aquinas articulates the saint's "loving knowledge" (or taste) of divine realities with a surprising degree of finality: in divine contemplation the wayfarer "obtains what he loves," enjoying a supreme *delectatio*. Admittedly, the contemplation of the wayfarer is not the beatific vision; however, like Adam in a state of innocence, the saint sees divine realities not through the medium *from which* of God's created effects, but by the medium of an infused gift of wisdom that elevates the mind to apprehend divinity itself. Divine contemplation is an "inchoate beatitude" in that by the gift of the *lumen sapientiae* it attains to an interior and direct knowledge of God proximate to that of prelapsarian man and the holy angels.