

**‘Aquinas and Contemplation: A Neglected Topic’
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AQUINAS ON CONTEMPLATION: A NEGLECTED TOPIC¹

Rik van Nieuwenhove

Introduction

While important scholarship has considered in detail Aquinas's views on the beatific vision and his indebtedness to Islamic and early-Latin sources,² the topic of contemplation remains rather neglected.³ It is hard to account for this neglect. After all, Aquinas

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented in Utrecht during the Conference *On the Virtuous Life* organised by the Thomas Instituut in December 2015, and at the invitation of the Irish Dominican Province, on the occasion of the Aquinas Lecture (28 January, 2016) which celebrated the 800th anniversary of the Dominican Order. I am grateful to all present for their constructive comments, and especially to Professor Harm Goris, Utrecht, for his detailed feedback.

² For an outstanding recent contribution on Aquinas's Latin sources, with helpful references to literature, see Katja Krause, "Remodelling Ultimate Human Happiness: Thomas Aquinas' Commentary on the Sentences and his Sources" *Divus Thomas* 118 (2015), 15-56.

³ Thomas Hibbs, "Interpretation of Aquinas's Ethics Since Vatican II" from Stephen Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 412: "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." Only Josef Pieper [*Happiness and Contemplation* (IN: St Augustine Press, 1996)], writing in the 1940s and '50s, considered it of sufficient importance to dedicate a number of short books to it. There is a helpful contribution by Mary Catherine Sommers "Contemplation and Action in Aristotle and Aquinas" in G. Emery and M. Levering (eds.), *Aristotle in Aquinas's Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 167-85. Apart from a rather brief (and somewhat abrasive) discussion of Aquinas's notion of contemplation

sees contemplation as the purpose and goal of our entire life (*STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 4: *contemplatio est finis totius humanae vitae*) and as an inchoative sharing in the beatific vision (*STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 4: *inchoatio beatitudinis*), which, therefore, shapes almost every aspect of his theological outlook, and his view on the human person and her ultimate fulfilment in particular.

The following questions remain largely unexplored in recent scholarship: What exactly is contemplation according to Aquinas? To what extent does Aquinas transform the Aristotelian notion of contemplation by importing elements from Christian and Neoplatonic authors (e.g. Augustine, Gregory the Great, Boethius, Ps-Dionysius, Richard of St Victor)? How do philosophical and theological contemplation relate to each other? Does Aquinas treat of “infused contemplation” (as some scholars such as Garrigou-Lagrange and Torrell claim, see note 26), or is this a later category, originating with the Carmelite mystics of the sixteenth century? What is the role of the cognitive gifts of the Holy Spirit in relation to contemplation, and how did Aquinas’s views on this matter change from his *Scriptum* to (and throughout) the *Summa Theologiae*? What is the role of charity in contemplation? How does Aquinas conceive of the relation between the active and the contemplative lives? Is he quietly abandoning the traditional notion

by Simon Tugwell in his book *Albert and Thomas. Selected Writings. Classics of Western Spirituality* (NY: Paulist Press, 1988), 279-86, a helpful discussion in Bernard McGinn’s *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*. Vol. IV of *The Presence of God. A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (NY: Herder & Herder, 2005), 27-38 and a recent study by Edyta Imai (dealing with contemplation and emotions), entitled *Thomas Aquinas on Contemplation and the Human Animal* (Scholars’ Press, 2013) relatively little has been published in the English-speaking world on the subject in the last forty years. In the francophone world Jean-Pierre Torrell has engaged with the subject, and there is a probing article by Adriano Oliva in *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 96 (2012): 585-662, entitled “La Contemplation des Philosophes selon Thomas d’Aquin.”

that the contemplative life is superior to the active life, and is he, in light of the Dominican charism, espousing a kind of mixed life?

In this contribution I will not be in a position to tackle all of these questions, but I would like to consider the nature of contemplation. I will argue that Aquinas operates with a broad and integrative notion of contemplation, which includes philosophical contemplation, theological contemplation, and the contemplation of the ordinary Christian. This implies that I will take issue with those scholars who put forward the view that Aquinas considers philosophical contemplation to be radically different in kind from “supernatural” theological contemplation (informed by charity).⁴

In part one of this contribution I will examine in some detail the nature of contemplation, and uncover its intellective dimension. In doing so, I will make a subsidiary claim, namely that a central aspect of Aquinas’s notion of contemplation, namely the characterisation of contemplation as *intuitus simplex*, is actually Neoplatonic rather than Aristotelian in inspiration. This claim is bound to strike some as provocative; after all, Aquinas’s indebtedness to Aristotle’s views on contemplation are well-documented.⁵ In a second part I will examine the relation between philosophical and theological contemplation, while in part three I will consider how the intuitive or simple nature of contemplation can accommodate the contemplation of the ordinary faithful.

⁴ Some scholars (e.g. Jordan Aumann in the Blackfriars Edition, Vol. 46, *Action and Contemplation*, 105-106) include the theological activity of the theologian with dead faith (as well as philosophical contemplation) in ‘acquired contemplation’, which they contrast with ‘acquired supernatural contemplation’ (such as that of theologian who enjoys charity) and ‘mystical contemplation.’

⁵ An illustration: a cursory glance at *STh* II-II, q. 182, a. 1 (where Aquinas argues for the superiority of the contemplative over the active life), for instance, reveals that all eight arguments are drawn from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, on which Aquinas had written an extensive commentary.

1. The intellectual nature of contemplation, and its Neoplatonic roots

In order to explain the intellectual nature of contemplation I need to discuss first the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio*. Aquinas contrasts *ratio* and *intellectus* throughout his works. In *STh* I, q. 59, a. 1 *ad* 1, for instance, we read: “the intellect knows by simple intuition, while reason knows by a process of discursion from one thing to another.” Of course, as he points out in *STh* I, q. 79, a. 8 *intellectus* and *ratio* are not different faculties. However, the one faculty of human cognition has two distinct operations, a rational-discursive and an intellectual one:

Reason and intellect in humans cannot be distinct powers. We shall understand this clearly if we consider their respective actions. For to understand is simply to apprehend intelligible truth: and to reason 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 (*simpliciter et absque discursu veritatem rerum apprehendunt*), as Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* VII). But we arrive at the knowledge of intelligible truth by advancing from one thing to another; and therefore we are called rational. Reasoning, therefore, is compared to understanding, as movement is to rest, or acquisition to possession; of which one belongs to the perfect, the other to the imperfect.⁶

⁶ The quotation continues: “And since 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.” From first

A number of points are worthy of note in this context: first, while human cognition is mainly rational-discursive, it is also intellective: discursive reasoning culminates in a moment of intellective understanding or insight. As Aquinas suggests elsewhere, human cognition is therefore dialectical (in the Hegelian, not in the Aristotelian sense) or, to use Aquinas's phrase: 'circular'⁷, i.e., our discursive reasoning processes cannot *begin* without assenting in an intellective manner to a number of principles or truths which we simply grasp without discursive reasoning (such as the principle of non-contradiction), and our reasoning process *culminates* and comes to rest in intellective understanding.⁸

Secondly, our rationality is a kind of shadow⁹ of the pure intellectivity of angels, which it mirrors, and in which it

principles we arrive at new truths which we had not known earlier, and this is called *via inquisitionis* or *inventionis*. It is also possible that an 'analytic' move occurs, when by way of resolution (*via iudicii*) we return to first principles. (See: *In De Div Nom* no. 711). For our purposes it is important to note that in both cases, whether by *via inquisitionis* or *via iudicii*, we begin and end with an intellective moment of understanding, or with something that is self-evident (which can also be an experimental datum).

⁷ *De Ver* q. 10, a. 8 ad 10: "the circularity is observed in this, that reason reaches conclusions from principles by way of discovery, and by way of judgement examines the conclusions which have been found, analysing them back to the principles."

⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 3 ad 2: "The discourse of reason always begins from an understanding and ends at an understanding; because we reason by proceeding from certain understood principles, and the discourse of reason is perfected when we come to understand what previously did not know."

⁹ The metaphor of shadow, which Aquinas repeatedly uses, is derived from Isaac Israeli: "Ratio oritur in umbra intelligentiae" (II *Sent* d. 3 q. 1, a. 6; see also: I *Sent* d. 3 q. 4, a. 1 ad 4; d. 25, q. 1, a. 1 ad 4; III *Sent* d. 14 q. 1, a. 3 sol. 2 ad 3; *Expos De Trin* q. 1, a. 1 ad 4; *De Ver* q. 5, a. 8; q. 8, a. 3 ad 3; and q. 24, a. 3.

participates,¹⁰ no matter how imperfectly. There are, of course, important differences between human and angelic cognition: Whereas angels have an immediate grasp of truth beyond temporal succession (*sine continuo et tempore*)¹¹ through the intermediary of innate intelligible species, we know in a ratiocinative manner through the intermediary of sensible species acquired through abstraction. The natural manner of knowing for an angelic nature is to know truth “without investigation or movement of reason” whereas we know mostly through inquiry and by moving from one thing to another.¹² Nonetheless, we too share in intellectivity:

The human soul, according to what is highest in it, attains to that which is proper to angelic nature, so that it knows some things at once and without investigation (*anima humana, quantum ad id quod in ipsa supremum est, aliquid attingit de eo quod proprium est angelicae naturae; scilicet ut aliquorum cognitionem habeat 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.¹³

Thirdly, the distinction between the rational and intellective nature of cognition, as well as the notion of contemplation in terms of *simplex intuitus*, appear more indebted to Neoplatonic sources

¹⁰ We are intellective *per participationem* (*STh* I, q. 108, a. 5). For the notion of participation, see Rudi te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

¹¹ *III Sent* d. 14 q. 1, a. 3 sol. 2.

¹² *De Ver* q. 16, a. 1.

¹³ *De Ver* q. 16, a. 1; cf. also *De Malo* q. 16, a. 5; *De Ver* q. 8, a. 15. Again, in *De Ver* q. 16, a. 1 Aquinas affirms that “human nature, insofar as it comes in contact with the angelic nature, must both in speculative and practical matters know truth without investigation. And this knowledge must be the principle of all the knowledge which follows, whether speculative or practical, since principles must be more stable and certain.” Two aspects deserve attention: first, Aquinas alludes to the Neoplatonic notion of participation in a hierarchy (“in contact with...”); secondly, *synderesis* also involves a kind of intuition or insight. This I will not develop in this contribution.

than to Aristotle.¹⁴ While Aquinas's philosophy of mind is undoubtedly deeply Aristotelian, his views on contemplation incorporate an important Neoplatonic element, and it is this Neoplatonic element which, perhaps surprisingly, allows for an inclusive and integrative notion of contemplation, which covers both Christian and philosophical contemplation, as I hope to show.

It is revealing to survey the most important texts which emphasise the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*, and the references Aquinas quotes: I *Sent* d. 3 q. 4, a. 1 *ad* 4 (with a reference to Ps-Dionysius); II *Sent* d. 9 q. 1, a. 8 *ad* 1 (Ps-Dionysius); *De Ver* q. 5, a. 1 *ad* 5 (with a reference to Boethius); q. 8, a. 15 (Ps-Dionysius); q. 15, a. 1 (Boethius and Ps-Dionysius); q. 24, a. 3 (no reference); *Expos De Trin* q. 2, a. 2 (no reference) and q. 6, art. 1 (Boethius); *STh* I, q. 58, a. 3 (no reference) and a. 4 (Ps.-Dionysius); I, q. 59, a.1 *ad* 1 (no reference); I, q. 79, a. 8 (Ps-Dionysius); *STh* I, q. 79, a. 8 *ad* 2 (Boethius); II-II, q. 8, a. 1 obj. 2 (Ps-Dionysius); I, q. 83, a. 4 (no reference); II-II, q. 9, a.1 *ad* 1 (no reference); II-II, q. 180, a. 3 (Ps-Dionysius). In *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 1 obj. 2 (a text I will discuss below) the objection reveals the source from *The Divine Names*: "the mode of human nature is to know the truth, not simply (which is a sign of understanding) but discursively (which is a sign of

¹⁴ Aquinas, when distinguishing between *discernere*, *cogitare* and *intelligere*, associates the notion of *intelligere* as *simplex intuitus* with the writings of Augustine (cf. I *Sent* d. 3 q. 4, a.5) but scholars have been unable to find its source in Augustine. Augustine discusses *cogitatio* in *De Trin* XIV.7, quoted in *STh* II-II, q. 180, a.3 *ad* 1. Perhaps a remote inspiration here was the Pseudo-Augustinian *De Spiritu et Anima*, chs 1 and 23, which Aquinas quotes in *De Ver* q. 15, a. 1: "the sight of the soul by which it looks at the true." A more immediate source is Boethius's *De Consol Phil* Bk V (especially in relation to the contrast between the 'rest' of intellect, and the 'movement' of reason), and, of course, Pseudo-Dionysius, who is quoted (from *In De Div Nom* IV, 8) for instance, in *De Ver* q. 8, a. 15. In *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 1 obj. 2 he also refers to *In De Div Nom* VII for the distinction between discursive and multiple reasoning and a knowledge in a simple manner (*simpliciter*) through *intellectus*.

reason), as Dionysius explains (*Div. Nom.* VII).” As this sample suggests: whenever Aquinas is contrasting *intellectus* and *ratio* he invariably appeals to Ps-Dionysius or Boethius, if he refers to his sources at all, and never to Aristotle.

This distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio* is of immediate significance in relation to contemplation. While in general terms Aquinas describes contemplation as “the consideration of truth” he characterises it in more specific terms as “a simple gaze upon the truth” (*STh* II-II, q. 180, a.3 ad 1: *contemplatio pertinet ad ipsum simplicem intuitum veritatis*) and, as I mentioned, Aquinas always draws on Christian-Neoplatonic sources to describe this simple, intellectual or non-discursive grasp of things, not Aristotle.

This observation raises the question: why would Aquinas have drawn on Ps-Dionysius and Boethius to develop the intellectual notion of contemplation rather than on Aristotle? Aristotle was, after all, also familiar with the distinction between *noein* and *dianoesthai* (e.g., *De An.* 429a 23-24; 408b 18-31) and he repeatedly acknowledges the non-discursive nature of *nous*, which simply accepts certain principles without argument or deduction. An in-depth answer to this question would require an exhaustive comparison of Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s views on contemplation, *scientia*, *intellectus* and *sapientia* – an enterprise I cannot undertake within the confines of this paper. Still, we can hint at a possible answer.

Aristotle uses *nous* both in a general sense to include all operations of reason (e.g. 429a23), or to refer to a non-discursive apprehension of first principles, in which instance it is clearly distinct from *dianoia* (discursive reasoning). When he uses it in this more restricted sense, such as in *Posterior Analytics*, *nous* (*intellectus*) refers to grasping first principles, which are necessary to generate the reasoning process in the first place, and avoid an infinite regress. Specifically in the context of contemplation a characteristic (and well-known) passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk VI.6 (1140b31-1141a8) may prove instructive in relation to the question we raised. Here Aristotle discusses the intellectual virtues of *nous*

(*intellectus*), *episteme* (*scientia*), and *sophia* (*sapientia*); the latter is the most excellent and characteristic virtue of the contemplative person. He explains that because *episteme* involves reason (*meta logou*) the insight into first principles is not a matter of *episteme* but of *nous*: “what is scientifically known is demonstrable” while first principles are not. Thus, the end-result of demonstrative reasoning is called *episteme* (*scientia*), and it always presupposes reasoning (*meta logou*): *scientia* is from conclusions, *intellectus* relates to principles. After having reiterated that “understanding and not reasoning deals with first principles,” he adds: “nor is wisdom [exclusively] about origins; for it is proper to the wise person to have a demonstration of some things” (*apodeixis*).¹⁵ He then goes on to describe wisdom as the combination of understanding and *episteme*: “the wise person must not only know what is derived from the origins of a science, but also grasp the truth about the origins. Therefore wisdom is understanding plus scientific knowledge.”

These passages indicate that not just *episteme*, but *sophia* as well (as the combination of intellectual apprehension of principles and demonstrative reasoning) remains intrinsically linked with *apodeixis*, and is therefore non-simple or composite. Aristotle generally associates the outcome of the demonstrative reasoning process with *episteme*, rather than with *nous*: *nous* is primarily concerned with principles¹⁶ while *episteme/science* is the outcome of demonstrative reasoning.¹⁷ In short, it seems doubtful that, for Aristotle, *episteme* (which is essentially a grasp of demonstration, cf. *Post. An.* I.2) can be simple. The same applies, I suspect, to Aristotle’s *sophia* (as the combination of *nous* and *episteme*), which remains apodeictic. Aquinas, at least in his own theological

¹⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a 1-3. I have made use of the translation by Terence Irwin, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics* (IN: Indianapolis, 1985), 156-7.

¹⁶ *Post An.*, 100b5.

¹⁷ In Aquinas’s words –when commenting on Aristotle’s *De Anima* 428a 16-18, III, lect. 5 (no. 648): “simple understanding bears upon first principles, and science upon demonstrated conclusions.”

syntheses (as distinct from the Commentaries on Aristotle) explicitly allows for the possibility that the outcome of our reasoning process can be simple or non-composite, and he draws on Neoplatonic sources –especially the Pseudo-Dionysius– to make this point. For Aquinas, there are instances in which both science and wisdom can be simple or non-composite, as I will show. I will suggest later that Aquinas had good reasons (albeit theological ones) to identify contemplation with a simple understanding of truth rather than with Aristotelian *scientia* or *sapientia*, which remain composite: as I will try to show in part three, if contemplation is effectively characterised as a simple, non-discursive understanding of truth, Aquinas can incorporate the contemplation of the ordinary faithful within his overall notion of contemplation. With an apodeictic notion of contemplation, such as Aristotle’s, this is not possible.

For now, let’s examine in some more detail contemplation as simple intuition of truth and how it relates to other acts of human cognition. As indicated earlier, in contemplation we have to abandon discursive reasoning, and direct all the operations of the soul toward the simple contemplation of the intelligible truth (*omnes operationes animae reductuntur ad simplicem contemplationem veritatis intelligibilis*).¹⁸ The gaze of the soul must then be fixed in an intellective manner on the contemplation of the one simple truth (*cessante discursu, figatur eius intuitus in contemplatione unius simplicis veritatis*).¹⁹ *STh* II-II, q.180, a.3, then, considers the relation of this act of contemplation with other acts. More specifically, Aquinas asks “Whether there are various actions pertaining to the contemplative life?” He basically argues that there is only one basic act in contemplation, namely the grasping of truth, in which contemplation comes to fruition, although this one final act presupposes a number of other cognitive acts, such as inductive inquiry and ‘analytic’ judgement (i.e., *via inventionis* and *via iudicii*).²⁰ In his *Response* he first refers, again,

¹⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 6 ad 2; *In De Div Nom* no. 906.

¹⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 6 ad 2.

²⁰ See footnote 6 of this contribution.

to angelic intelligence, pointing out that despite the differences between angelic and human cognition, we too arrive at the one act of beholding the truth:

According to Dionysius (*Div. Nom.* VII) between humans and angel there is this difference, that an angel perceives the truth by simple apprehension, whereas we arrive at the perception of a simple truth by a process from multiplicity (*ex multis pertingit ad intuitum simplicis veritatis*). Accordingly, then, the contemplative life has one act wherein it is finally completed, namely the contemplation of truth, and from this act it derives its unity.

We share in a hierarchy, midpoint between angels and the rest of the animal kingdom. In the apex of our cognition, we share to some degree in an intellective understanding which is connatural to angels. Aquinas now argues for the unity of the contemplative life on the basis of the one act of contemplating truth, which he characterises in terms of *intuitus simplicis veritatis*, as he puts it in the first Reply.²¹ In summary, for Aquinas, contemplation is the terminus of human reasoning; it is the high-point of human understanding; it is this which mirrors the intellective operation of angels; and it is this climax of understanding that pertains especially to contemplation, and bestows unity on the contemplative life.

The significance of what Aquinas is saying here in relation to the unity of the contemplation should not be overlooked. For instance, prayer, reading, study, meditation are traditionally considered to be contemplative activities. Does this mean, then, that the contemplative life loses its unity, as it covers rather divergent activities? This does not appear to be Aquinas's view. The *Sed contra* puts it in a summary fashion: "Life signifies here the operation on which a man is chiefly intent. Wherefore if there are several operations of the contemplative life, there will be, not one but several contemplative lives." For Aquinas contemplation is that which gives ultimate meaning to human existence; on earth it is a foretaste of the vision of God. This ideal at the heart of his moral theology cannot be splintered into many ideals. Thus, while there are many acts that precede the crowning act of contemplation, "the

²¹ *Sth* II-II, q. 180, a. 3 ad 1, with reference to a text from Richard of Saint Victor.

contemplative life has one act wherein it is finally completed, namely the contemplation of truth, and from this act it derives its unity." This final act is an intellective apprehension or vision of truth.

This observation has implications for the topic I now hope to discuss. For Aquinas, truth is one. There is not one truth for philosophers, and another one for theologians. Hence, it makes no sense to treat philosophical and theological contemplation as specifically different. To do so, would undermine the very integrity of theology as a science which integrates the findings of other sciences, including philosophy. It is now time to substantiate this claim.

2. Theological and philosophical contemplation

In *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 4 Aquinas raises the question "Whether the contemplative life consists in the mere contemplation of God, or also in the consideration of any truth whatsoever?" The full response runs as follows:

I answer that, as stated above (II-II, q. 180, a.2), a thing may belong to the contemplative life in two ways: principally, and secondarily, or dispositively. That which belongs principally to the contemplative life is the contemplation of the divine truth, because this contemplation is the end of the whole human life. Hence Augustine says (*De Trin.* I, 8) that "the contemplation of God is promised us as being the goal of all our actions and the everlasting perfection of our joys." This contemplation will be perfect in the life to come, when we shall see God face to face, wherefore it will make us perfectly happy: whereas now the contemplation of the divine truth is competent to us imperfectly, namely "through a glass" and "in a dark manner" (1 Cor. 13:12). Hence it bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude, which begins now and will be continued in the life to come; wherefore the Philosopher (*Ethic.* x, 7) places our ultimate happiness in the contemplation of the supreme intelligible good.

Since, however, God's effects show us the way to the contemplation of God himself, according to Rm. 1:20, "The invisible things of God . . . are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made," it follows that the contemplation of the divine effects also belongs to the contemplative life, inasmuch we are guided thereby to the knowledge of God. Hence Augustine says (*De Vera Relig* xxix) that "in the study of creatures we must not exercise an empty and futile curiosity, but should make them the stepping-stone to things unperishable and everlasting."

Accordingly it is clear from what has been said (II-II, q. 180, aa. 2-3) that four things pertain, in a certain order, to the contemplative life; first, the moral virtues; secondly, other acts exclusive of contemplation; thirdly, contemplation of the divine effects; the fourth contemplative factor is the contemplation of the divine truth itself.²²

This response rewards close reading.²³ Aquinas had already explained how the moral life can assist us in obtaining serenity, which is a prerequisite for contemplation (art. 2). He had also already mentioned different cognitive acts which contemplation crowns (art.3). In the first paragraph of article 4, then, Aquinas refers to Christian contemplation, including the contemplation at the heart of the endeavours of the Christian theologian. Christian theology takes God as its immediate object of study (cf. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 7), and it does so from the perspective of assent to key Christian beliefs. The quotation from 1 Cor. 13:12 further confirms this. In the second paragraph Aquinas has in mind philosophical contemplation, as the reference to Romans 1:19-20 suggests. Indeed, the passage from Romans 1:19-20 is a stock phrase which Aquinas generally uses to argue for the legitimacy of philosophical pursuits. In *STh* I, q. 7, a. 6, for instance, he had already written, quoting the same passage from Romans: "sacred doctrine essentially treats of God viewed as the highest cause – not only so

²² Following the Leonine edition, which has: *quantum vero contemplativum*, instead of *quantum vero et completivum*.

²³ Compare Oliva, "La Contemplation...", 590-92.

far as he can be known through creatures just as philosophers knew him – *That which is known of God is manifest in them* (Rom 1:19) – but also so far as he is known to himself and revealed in others.” In both instances the reference to Rom 1:19-20 backs up the validity of a philosophical consideration of creation as a manifestation of God. The reference to Augustine’s *De Vera Rel* further reinforces the point that such a philosophical consideration of creation, although legitimate, should not lose this theocentric focus lest it become mere curiosity.

In the final paragraph Aquinas summarises his broad notion of the contemplative life, which he had been developing in previous articles: while contemplation involves several acts which precede the contemplation of divine truth, it is the intellective contemplation of truth which bestows on the contemplative life its unity. Thus, it comprises the moral virtues, as well as other acts, which include inquiry and judgement. It further involves the (philosophical) contemplation of the creation, but ultimately it comes to fruition in *contemplatio divinae veritatis*. Thus, while Aquinas admits there is a certain hierarchy or order (*ordine quodam*) to contemplation there is no hint that he sharply differentiates philosophical from theological contemplation, or considers them to be “specifically different.” As Simon Tugwell rightly pointed out, in the *STh* Aquinas is not interested in making a distinction between the intellectual life of the philosopher and that of Christians: “on the contrary, he is eager to show the continuity between the saint and the philosopher (...). The contemplative life is much more simply and straightforwardly the intellectual life, whoever is leading it. A Christian intellectual life must, of course, be motivated by charity, like any other Christian activity; but that does not mean that it becomes something quite different from anyone else’s intellectual life.”²⁴

The way we conceive of contemplation will have repercussions for how we interpret how Aquinas conceives of the relation between theology and philosophy, and vice versa.

²⁴ S. Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*, 285.

Anyone who subscribes to the view that Christian and philosophical contemplation are different in kind, will find it difficult to account for the harmonious way in which Aquinas conceives of the relation between theology and philosophy. Or again, those scholars (such as Eugene Rogers, John Milbank, and others) who are of the view that Aquinas has no place for philosophical considerations in his theological outlook, will probably be wedded to the position that Christian and philosophical contemplation are inherently different acts – a position that Aquinas, in my reading, does not support. Aquinas’s general notion of contemplation – “the consideration of truth” – covers both Christian and philosophical contemplation, and nowhere in the *Summa* does Aquinas state that these are ‘specifically’ different, as some commentators have asserted.²⁵ Nor does Aquinas use the phrase “infused contemplation” anywhere in his writings, as some twentieth century scholars (e.g., from Garrigou-Lagrange to Jean-Pierre Torrell) appear to claim.²⁶ At the heart of contemplation is an intellective understanding that Aquinas considers to be the culmination of our reasoning processes, and this intellective

²⁵ For the claim of a “specific difference”, see for instance the comments by the Editors of the Blackfriars Edition, *Summa Theologiae* Volume 46 *Action and contemplation (2a2ae 179 - 182)* Latin Text, English Translation, Introduction, notes appendices & glossary by Jordan Aumann (NY: Blackfriars and McGraw-Hill, 1966), Appendix 3 “Contemplation”: “Acquired supernatural contemplation [which includes theological contemplation under the impetus of charity] issues from the infused virtues of faith and charity. (...) It is (...) specifically different from purely natural acquired recollection [which includes philosophical contemplation].” (106).

²⁶ For attributing “infused contemplation” to Aquinas, see for instance R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation* (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books, 2003), 221-35 and Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Christ and Spirituality...* 15, with a reference (unconvincing, in my view) to *In Ioannem* I, lect. 11, no. 211.

understanding extends to both philosophical and theological contemplation.²⁷

In a helpful contribution Rudi te Velde has reminded us that the widespread view of the relationship between reason and revelation as constituting two separate sources of knowledge about God is really “a distortion belonging to later times. Revelation, as distinguished from reason, pertains to the formality under which God is known as object of faith.”²⁸ Thus, *Sacra Doctrina* is not a science about a different reality; it is about the same reality as metaphysics but seen under a different formality, namely “the aspect of the intelligibility which things have when seen in the light of God’s revelation.”²⁹

Te Velde’s views will resound with all those who have read the first question of the *STh*. The very first article addresses the question “Whether, besides philosophy, any further doctrine is required?” The answer is a resounding “Yes”: given our limitations (in terms of intelligence and time) it was necessary, for our

²⁷ A stronger case –yet still unconvincing, in my opinion– could be made that the speculative sciences, namely natural science, mathematics, and divine science involve different kinds of cognition (through their respective approaches: *rationabiliter*, *disciplinabiliter*, and *intellectualiter*) rather than that philosophy (“theology pursued by philosophers”) and theology (“theology taught in Sacred Doctrine”) involve a different *intellectus*. Cf. *Expos De Trin* q. 5 art. 4 and q. 6. All our philosophical pursuits can be described as an intellectual glimpse (*quasi intuitu*) which prepares us for Christian theology (cf. *ScG* IV 1.4). Metaphysics is especially intellective, while natural philosophy relies primarily on *ratio* or discursive reasoning. (*Expos De Trin* q. 6 a.1). This suggests that metaphysics, being especially intellective, is particularly apt at preparing us for the Christian contemplation of God.

²⁸ See Rudi A. te Velde, “Understanding the *Scientia* of Faith” in Fergus Kerr (ed.), *Contemplating Aquinas. On the Varieties of Interpretation* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 55-74. For this quotation, see 61

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 68

salvation, that we should be taught divine truths by revelation. But this does not imply that theology considers an entirely different area of study: “there is no reason why those things which may be learned from philosophical science, so far as they can be known by natural reason, may not also be taught us by another science so far as they fall within revelation.” (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 1 ad 2) Theology considers things “under the formality of being divinely revealed” (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 3) and is based on principles revealed by God (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 2). Metaphysics also treats of God as the highest cause but it does so from another angle (to use a spatial metaphor). To refer to a text quoted earlier: “Sacred doctrine essentially treats of God viewed as the highest cause –not only so far as he can be known through creatures just as philosophers know him –*That which is known of God is manifest in them* (Rom 1:19)– but also so far as he is known to himself alone and revealed to others.” (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 6) Note that Aquinas writes “*not only* so far as he can be known through creatures” –which implies that theological science also includes knowledge of God through creatures. In *STh* I, q. 1, a. 3 ad 2 he drives home the point:

Objects which are the subject-matter of different philosophical sciences can yet be treated of by this one single sacred science under one aspect precisely so far as they can be included in revelation. So that in this way, sacred doctrine bears, as it were, the stamp of divine science, which is one and simple, yet extends to everything.

In short, theology is an all-encompassing or architectonic discipline for Aquinas: it also includes knowledge which we usually associate with philosophy. It is this inclusivity of theology as the overarching science which sanctions the use of philosophical rationality within the domain of theology.³⁰ Of course, such a broad and inclusive approach does not weaken the claim that God remains the primary object of the science of theology (as is argued in *STh* I, q. 1, a. 7). Peter Lombard, for instance, had stated that other things (such as “things and signs”) are also included a topics of theology. Aquinas does not disagree but he makes the point that God remains the primary subject of theology, and things are only treated as

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 68.

subject of theology if “they have a reference to God” as their origin or end (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 7). This focus on God is essential for theology to remain a unified science.

While the philosophical and the theological paths are both legitimate ways of pursuing truth, Aquinas is, of course, in no doubt about the superiority of the latter, as the first article in the *Summa Theologiae* makes clear. Still, for Aquinas, philosophy and theology are not in competition with one another; nor is it necessary somehow to insulate theology from the intrusions of philosophy. His perspective is more serene than our modern one: for him, our philosophical pursuits point the way and open up a theological vista, just as nature craves grace. This is perhaps one of the reasons why by the end of the *Secunda Secundae* Aquinas operates with an integrative view of contemplation. In defining contemplation in broad terms as “nothing else than the consideration of truth”³¹ he can cover both theological and philosophical truth. If we fail to acknowledge Aquinas’s inclusive and integrative understanding of contemplation, the status of theology as the science which integrates the findings of other disciplines, while respecting their integrity, will become eroded.

There is little doubt that Aquinas considered philosophy and theology specifically different disciplines, as *STh* I, q. 1, a. 1 ad 2 states (*differt secundum genus*). But from this it does not follow that they imply specifically different acts of understanding. One may raise the legitimate question: is our act of understanding while reading the five ways (a preamble to faith) or when pondering philosophical arguments for the immortality of the soul (in *Disputed Questions On the Soul*) specifically different from the act of understanding a theological argument, such as that there must be two wills in Christ, and not one (cf. *STh* III, q. 18, a. 1)? Or is there any merit in the suggestion that a theologian on whom the virtue of charity and the gift of wisdom have been bestowed, understands the data of faith in a *specifically different* manner from one who does not enjoy these gifts? (This is not to deny that the theologian who has a living faith may understand them *better* or have a more intimate understanding than a theologian who has a dead faith; but

³¹ *STh* I-II, q. 35, a. 5 ad 3: “nihil aliud sit quam consideratio veri.”

that is a different claim). I am not aware that Aquinas suggests this to be the case, and I suspect he would resist such a claim, for it would splinter the contemplative life into a multiple acts: “if there are several operations of the contemplative life, there will be, not one but several contemplative lives.” Given the unity of contemplation as the goal of human life, this seems an unacceptable suggestion. I will now argue that this integrative notion of contemplation does not merely include theological and philosophical contemplation, but also the contemplation of the ordinary Christian.

3. Contemplation of the ordinary Christian

Earlier, I have attempted to show that Aquinas invariably refers to Neoplatonic sources to argue for the intellective nature of human cognition, which, as we have seen, is central to his notion of contemplation. I also suggested why he could not appeal to Aristotle, given the apodeictic character attached to Aristotelian contemplation. This raises a further question: why exactly does *intuitus simplex* occupy such a pivotal role in Aquinas’s understanding of contemplation? I will conclude this contribution by hinting at a number of possible (theological) reasons.

Emphasising the intellective, non-discursive nature of human cognition has a number of advantages. First, as indicated earlier, it makes clear that to the degree that we, too, are intellective, we share in a hierarchy which puts us within touching distance of angels, who are entirely intellective. This matters to Aquinas for whom hierarchy adds to the beauty of the created world.³²

More importantly, it further supports his view that there is continuity between our ways of knowing on earth, and the beatific vision. The intellective dimension of contemplation on earth prefigures our non-discursive ways of knowing God in the after-life. This kind of continuity mattered to Aquinas the theologian, for whom grace perfects nature but does not abolish it. Thus, the intellective nature of contemplation enables Aquinas to argue more

³² *ScG* III, 97.3.

cogently that contemplation on earth is an inchoative sharing in heavenly beatitude.³³

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, there is the issue of inclusivity of contemplation. For Aristotle, as mentioned earlier, the final acme of our reasoning processes appears to remain linked with demonstration and knowledge of causes. For Aquinas the culmination of contemplation is clearly intuitive or non-discursive.³⁴ In my view it is here that the notions of simplicity and *intuitus simplex* are of particular significance. Aquinas is willing to defend notions of *scientia*, *intellectus* and *sapientia* that are utterly non-composite and non-discursive, especially when he discusses the theoretical gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Given the fact that an exhaustive discussion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is beyond the confines of this paper, I will focus for present purposes exclusively on Aquinas's treatment of the intellectual gifts of the Holy Spirit in the latter parts of the *Summa Theologiae*. As is well-known, Aquinas altered his views on the gifts of the Holy Spirit throughout his career. It was only towards the end of his career that he appended the gifts to their relevant theological and cardinal virtues. The cognitive gifts of *intellectus* (II-II, q. 8) and *scientia* (II-II, q. 9) are appended to the theological

³³ See *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 4: "inchoatio beatitudinis, quae hic incipit ut in futuro terminetur."

³⁴ See also this early text: III *Sent* d. 35 q. 1, a. 2 qc. 2: "The contemplative life consists in the activity that one assumes (*acceptat*) above all others. (...) Now, the inquiry of reason (*inquisitio rationis*) proceeds from a simple regard of the intellect (*a simplici intuitu intellectus progreditur*) – for one proceeds by starting out from principles which the intellect holds; so too the intellect attains certainty when the conclusions it draws can revert back to the principles through which the intellect attained certainty. This is why the contemplative life consists primarily in the operation of the intellect (*Et ideo vita contemplativa principaliter in operatione intellectus consistit*): the very word 'contemplation' suggests this as it denotes 'vision.' The contemplative person, however, uses rational inquiry (*inquisitione rationis*) so as to attain the vision of contemplation, which is his main goal."

virtue of faith, while *sapientia* (II-II, q. 45) is discussed in the context of charity, and *concilium* (II-II, q. 52) is associated with prudence.

Aquinas usually distinguishes between two key operations of the intellect, namely grasping the indivisible and judgement.³⁵ In order to clarify the distinction between the gifts of understanding and knowledge he refers to these two basic operations. The gift of knowledge involves judgement; the gift of understanding is an instance of the first operation (the apprehension of quiddity): it involves a certain perception of the truth,³⁶ “an excellence of cognition that penetrates into the heart of things” (*excellentia cognitionis penetrantis ad intima*).³⁷

The first objection of *STh* II-II, q. 8, a.1 is particularly relevant for our purposes: given the fact that humans know truth mainly discursively (*discursive*), which we associate with *ratio* rather than knowing simply (*simpliciter*), which we usually connect with *intellectus*, we should speak of ‘the gift of reason’ (*donum rationis*) rather than ‘the gift of understanding’ (*intellectus*). In his reply, Aquinas reiterates that our reasoning proceeds from, and ends in, understanding. We speak therefore of ‘the gift of understanding’ (rather than of ‘the gift of reason’) because the gift of understanding is in comparison with what we know supernaturally, what the natural light is in regards to the things we know intuitively and primordially. Thus, the gift of understanding assists us in immediately perceiving the truth (*perceptio veritatis*), and piercing with the mind (*mente penetrare*) into the principles of faith.³⁸

³⁵ *In Meta* Bk VI lect. 4 (no. 1232): “The intellect has two operations. One of these is called the understanding of indivisibles, and this is the operation by which the intellect forms simple concepts of things by understanding the whatness of each one of them. The other operation is that by which the intellect combines and separates.” See also *In Meta* IV (no. 605); *In De An* III, nos 760-62; *De Ver* q. 14, a. 1. I *Sent* d. 19, q. 5, a. 1 ad 7; *Expos De Trin* q. 5, a. 3.

³⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 5 ad 3.

³⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 1 ad 3.

³⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 8, a. 6 ad 2.

It should not strike us as particularly surprising that the gift of understanding is non-discursive. After all, the same can be said about the intellectual virtue of understanding. More significant is how Aquinas characterises the gifts of knowledge and wisdom. The first objection in article 1 of question 9 of the *Secunda Secundae* – the article raises the question whether *scientia* is a gift – cites *An. Post.* I, 2 (71 b18), where Aristotle writes that demonstration is a syllogism producing *scientia*. Whereas science is the result (*effectum*) of our natural reasoning efforts, the gift of knowledge surpasses our natural ability. In his reply, Aquinas, while acknowledging that human science is acquired by means of demonstration, argues that the gift of the Holy Spirit is a participated likeness in the divine way of knowing, which is non-discursive and simple:

In God there is a sure judgement of truth without any discursive process, by simple intuition (*absque omni discursu per simplicem intuitum*). Therefore, God's knowledge is not discursive, or ratiocinative, but absolute and simple (*non est discursiva vel ratiocinativa, sed absoluta et simplex*), to which that knowledge is likened which is a gift of the Holy Spirit, since it is a participated likeness thereof (*participata similitudo ipsius*).³⁹ In short, the non-discursive or intuitive nature of the gift of knowledge is one of the key features that distinguishes it from the intellectual virtue of *scientia*.

Following Augustine, Aquinas distinguishes between the gifts of knowledge and wisdom by linking the former with the cognition of things created, and the latter of things divine.⁴⁰ Whereas the gift of knowledge pertains to judgements of created things, the gifts of understanding and wisdom, then, are particularly

³⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 9, a. 1 ad 1.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *De Trinitate* XIII, 24. In *De Trin* XII, 21-25 Augustine had also associated wisdom with contemplation and knowledge with action, making an interesting distinction between intellective cognition of eternal things (wisdom), and rational cognition of temporal things (knowledge). For Aquinas's comments, see for instance his *In Col.* 2:3, no. 81.

relevant for our contemplation of divine truth.⁴¹ I have already outlined the non-discursive nature of the gift of *intellectus*. It is now time to examine the gift of *sapientia*.

The virtue of wisdom and the gift of wisdom both involve judgement according to divine norms. The gift of wisdom, however, is characterised by an intuitive judgement, which distinguishes it from the intellectual virtue of wisdom: "It belongs to the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue to pronounce right judgement about divine things after reason has made its inquiry, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit to judge aright about them on account of connaturality with them."⁴² Aquinas quotes Ps-Dionysius's remark from *The Divine Names* ch.2 about Hierotheus who "suffered divine things" through a connaturality or sympathy, which results from the unity with God that charity effects.⁴³ By way of illustration, Aquinas draws a well-known contrast with right judgement in matters of chastity after a reasoning process, and an instinctive or intuitive awareness how to judge when one has the habit of chastity. This theme of connaturality has been frequently commented upon in scholarship.⁴⁴ For our purposes it suffices to state that the gift of wisdom, as connatural, is intuitive and non-discursive.

Now, this non-discursive gift of wisdom is of central importance in the contemplation of God. Through charity we are intimately united with God. Through it and the gift of wisdom that flows from charity, we are directed towards contemplation of God (as well as proper action).⁴⁵

Aquinas's notion of contemplation incorporates central insights from Aristotle. It is, however, overall far more inclusive and less elitist. It can accommodate the contemplation of both the

⁴¹ *STh* II-II, q. 9, a. 4 ad 3.

⁴² *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

⁴³ *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

⁴⁴ See for instance Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas. Vol. 2. Spiritual Master* (Washington DC, The Catholic University of America, 2003), 206-24.

⁴⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 45, a. 3 ad 1 and ad 3 (*ad sapientiam pertinet contemplatio divinatorum, quae est visio principii*); II-II, q. 45, a. 5.

philosopher who pursues knowledge and wisdom through discursive reasoning, the theologian, and the illiterate *vetula* who grasps and subscribes to central articles of the Christian faith—even though she may not be able to reason about them, or refute arguments against them; if she enjoys the gifts of the Holy Spirit she just *sees* their truthfulness. In III *Sent* d. 36 q. 1, a. 3 ad 5 (no. 12831) Aquinas explicitly states that all Christians—most of whom do not have the philosophical or theological skills to engage in reasoning and demonstrative argumentation about what they believe—are called to participate in contemplation: “Although all those who are in the active life do not attain to a perfect state of contemplation, every Christian who is in a state of salvation must participate somehow in contemplation, for the commandment is given to all: ‘Be still, and see that I am God.’” (Ps. 45:11). As the quotation suggests, Aquinas interprets the third commandment (keeping the Sabbath) in terms of a universal call to contemplation.⁴⁶ Similarly, in *Summa contra Gentiles* I.6 he rejoices in the fact that “inspiration [is] given to human minds, so that simple and untutored persons, filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom...” (*ut idiotae et simplices, dono spiritus sancti repleti, summam sapientiam et facundiam in instanti consequerentur*). It further explains why Aquinas considered the Virgin Mary as excelling in contemplation—a view that Aristotle undoubtedly would have found rather puzzling.⁴⁷

Contemplation is the goal of our entire life (*finis totius vitae*). It is a foretaste of heavenly beatitude.⁴⁸ All Christians are called to contemplation but not all Christians have the intellectual skills to

⁴⁶ III *Sent*, d. 36 q. 1, a. 3 ad 5 *Ad quintum dicendum, quod quamvis ad perfectum statum contemplationis non perveniat omnis qui in vita activa est; tamen omnis Christianus qui in statu salutis est, oportet quod aliquid de contemplatione participet, cum praeceptum sit omnibus: vacate, et videte quoniam ego sum Deus, Psal. 45, 2; ad quod etiam est tertium praeceptum legis.*

⁴⁷ *Sermon Puer Iesus*. See also *STh* III, q. 27, a. 5 ad 3.

⁴⁸ See *STh* I-II, q. 3, a. 5 c. and *STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 4: “inchoatio beatitudinis.”

argue in a reasoned manner about their faith. Hence, Aquinas must make allowances for a kind of contemplative act which is non-discursive and which is available to all Christians through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This explains why the non-discursive notion of intuitive understanding he encountered in the writings of his Neoplatonic sources would have appealed to him. The broad understanding of contemplation as *intuitus simplex* can incorporate the acts of contemplation of the Greek sage or the academic theologian, as well as those of the *vetula* who enjoys the benefit of her Christian faith, enabling her to know truths which the philosopher comes to know, if at all, with great difficulty and after laborious reasoning processes.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ See *Sermo Attendite a falsis*, pars 2: “Plus scit modo una vetula de his quae ad fidem pertinent, quam quondam omnes philosophi.” See also *Sermo Beati qui habitant*, where Aquinas contrasts the labours of the philosopher with the short-cut offered by our Lord: “Veritatem cognoscere nisi sunt per exercitium studii. Sed Deus breviorē viam docet, scilicet per cordis mundiciā dicens: beati mundo corde et cetera.”