

Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. ix, 220. (*The Philosophical Review*, April 2023: preprint)

Everybody knows (for the relevant value of ‘everybody’) that for Thomas Aquinas perfect happiness consists in intellectual contemplation of the divine essence, with the will’s delight or enjoyment being a necessary concomitant of that beatific vision but not, strictly speaking, part of the essence of happiness. Beyond this boilerplate statement, however, most of us would be hard-pressed to say much more about contemplation in Aquinas. What sort of act is it, and how does it relate to other acts of intellect? What acts of contemplation are available in this present life, and how do those acts fit into a life of faith or a life devoted to philosophical or theological study? What contribution, if any, does contemplation make to this-worldly happiness? In *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation* Rik Van Nieuwenhove takes up these and related questions and develops Aquinas’s account of contemplation in a systematic way, elaborating even what “everybody knows” in unexpected directions and unearthing important but neglected material. There are even some surprises along the way.

Van Nieuwenhove notes that although Aquinas identifies contemplation as the goal or end of human life, he nowhere offers a precise definition of contemplation. In fact, he speaks of contemplation in a variety of ways and contexts, ranging from the perfect vision of God in the next life, through theoretical contemplation in this life, whether theological or

philosophical, all the way to the insight that ordinary Christians can have—and indeed are called to have—into divine truth. What unites all these varieties of contemplation, Van Nieuwenhove argues, is that they culminate in “a non-discursive moment of understanding (*intuitus simplex*), a simple intellectual insight into truth, (what is sometimes called an *Aha-Erlebnis* in German)” (16). In theological and philosophical contemplation such non-discursive insight is the hard-won result of a discursive process; in the contemplation that characterizes the ordinary Christian life, by contrast, it arises directly out of a divinely granted kinship (“connaturality”) between the believer and “the deep things of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10). It is an advantage of this broad understanding of contemplation as *intuitus simplex* that it “can incorporate the acts of contemplation of the Greek sage, as well as those of the *vetula* who enjoys the benefit of her Christian faith” (47–48).

This *vetula* (Van Nieuwenhove leaves the word untranslated; it means “little old woman”) has a minor recurring part in the book, as she has in Aquinas’s own writing. In his sermon on the Apostles’ Creed Aquinas writes that “not one of the philosophers before the coming of Christ, however hard they tried, could know as much about God and about what is necessary for eternal life as one *vetula* after the coming of Christ can know through faith” (*In symbolum apostolorum*, pr.; all translations of Aquinas are my own). In his sermon *Attendite a falsis* Aquinas writes:

One *vetula* knows more nowadays about matters pertaining to faith than all the

philosophers did in days gone by. The story goes that Pythagoras was once a boxer. He heard a teacher discussing the immortality of the soul and arguing that the soul is immortal; he was so captivated that he left everything else behind and devoted himself to the study of philosophy. But what *vetula* is there today who does not know that the soul is immortal? Faith can do far more than philosophy. (*Sermo Attendite a falsis*, 2)

The *vetula* may not be the ideal example for Van Nieuwenhove, since the cognition she is said to have in these two passages is clearly propositional knowledge rather than simple intuition. Van Nieuwenhove identifies a better example from *ST* III, q. 27, a. 5, ad 3, “where Aquinas writes that the Virgin Mary enjoyed ‘the use of wisdom in contemplation’ . . . but not ‘wisdom as to teaching’” (4, n.).

Whatever the best example of “ordinary” Christian contemplation may be—and by that I mean the “openness or receptivity to the divine truth that should characterize the life of” (198) Christians who either do not have, or lack the opportunity to exercise, the intellectual capacities required for doing academic theology or philosophy—the possibility of such contemplation requires a rethinking of some of what “everybody knows” about Aquinas’s view of happiness. As Van Nieuwenhove says, there is a near-consensus reading among recent interpreters that Aquinas’s “imperfect happiness” is just Aristotelian happiness—happiness achievable in this present life by the exercise of our natural powers,

expressed either in philosophical contemplation or in virtuous civic activity—whereas “perfect happiness” is the happiness of the beatific vision, a happiness attainable only in the next life and only through a supernatural gift. Aristotle knew nothing of theological contemplation (at least not in the sense of theology as *sacra doctrina*); he certainly knew nothing of “a life shaped by charity and infused virtues” (13). Yet both of these can contribute to this-worldly or “imperfect” happiness on Aquinas’s view, and both—to the extent that they involve “the contemplation of divine truth”—are “an early stage (*inchoatio*) of the happiness that begins here and is brought to completion in the world to come” (*ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 4; we find similar statements concerning faith at *De veritate* q. 14, a. 2, and *Super Eph.* cap 3, l. 5, and concerning virtuous acts at *Super Gal.* cap. 5, l. 6). Van Nieuwenhove is right to emphasize that “This kind of continuity is not without significance to Aquinas the theologian, for whom grace perfects nature but does not abolish it” (47).

After an introductory chapter, Van Nieuwenhove lays out in Part I the epistemological and metaphysical foundations for his reading of Aquinas on contemplation. Chapter Two is devoted to epistemological issues, especially the various acts of the intellect and the place of contemplation among them. The discussion of Aquinas’s reliance on Neoplatonist sources in preference to Aristotle is particularly useful. Chapter Three is a bit more tentative and speculative, applying the theory of transcendentals to understand contemplation—something Aquinas himself never explicitly does, as Van Nieuwenhove

acknowledges (49). An important conclusion here, drawing on the epistemology ably laid out in Chapter Two, is that there is no basis for reading a doctrine of divine illumination into Aquinas. As Van Nieuwenhove puts it, “the fact that truth has a *metaphysical* foundation in the divine ideas does not commit Aquinas to a theological or illuminist *epistemological* perspective” (59).

This observation brings us to an important recurrent theme in *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*: Van Nieuwenhove’s opposition to some recent scholarship that interprets Aquinas “as a thinker whose theology should perhaps best be labelled as sapiential (e.g. J. P. Torrell, B. McGinn), Augustinian-illuminist (John Milbank), or even charismatic . . . [that is,] deeply shaped by the gifts of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Servais Pinckers, Andrew Pinsent)” (18). What these have in common is a certain tendency to try to turn Aquinas into Bonaventure, and Van Nieuwenhove’s critique is sharp, assured, compelling, and yet always somehow charitable.

Since I have looked briefly at his rejection of the “illuminist” reading, I turn next to the sapiential reading. I found the idea of “sapiential wisdom” quite puzzling at first mention—*sapientia* is just the Latin for wisdom after all, and what would a wisdom-y wisdom be?—but Van Nieuwenhove explains that it means “a tasting or savouring kind of wisdom” (174). *Sapientia* does come from the verb *sapio*, to taste or savor, and Aquinas is not averse to using etymologies to bolster a point when they serve his purposes. It is therefore all

the more noteworthy that Aquinas dismisses as irrelevant the etymological connection between wisdom and savor: “it may be that way in Latin, but it’s not in other languages” (178, quoting III *Sent.* d. 35, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 3, ad 1; Aquinas makes the same point in *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 2, ad 2). In general, as Van Nieuwenhove shows, Aquinas resists the idea that theological wisdom is essentially affective. Even the wisdom that is a gift of the Holy Spirit is not essentially affective: it is cognitive, a divine elevation of the intellect that enables its possessor to judge rightly about divine things. Granted, the gift is rooted in charity, which belongs to the will and grants the believer a kind of kinship or “connaturality” with divine things so that she may judge correctly, but the gift itself belongs to the intellect (178–179). That gift is not—and now we turn to the “charismatic” reading of Aquinas—necessary for theological insight: “Of course, the theologian will ideally enjoy the gifts of the Holy Spirit or at least be morally upright. Theologians who are the slave of their carnal desires will be hampered in the pursuit of truth. Still, Aquinas resisted attributing an *essential* role to the gifts in relation to the academic pursuit of theology” (180, emphasis in original).

These critiques, and much more so the positive accounts that ground them, are worked out in Part III: Theology, the Christian Life, and Contemplation. It is not possible to do justice in a short review to the richness of this discussion. (Of particular note are Van Nieuwenhove’s explanation in Chapter Five of the importance of the claim that theology—more strictly speaking, *sacra doctrina*—is a *scientia* (science) sub-alternated to God’s own

*scientia* and his account in Chapter Seven of the gradual development in Aquinas's understanding of the role of gifts of the Holy Spirit.) Instead I want to look more closely at Part II: The Dominican Context, a single chapter that considers Aquinas's account of the relationship between the active and contemplative lives in light of his ongoing defense of the Dominican Order against anti-mendicant writings.

Contrary to some recent scholarship, Van Nieuwenhove argues compellingly that "Aquinas's views on the relation and the merits of the active and contemplative lives remain fairly consistent . . . : from the very beginning Aquinas defended an ideal which is neither purely contemplative nor purely active, although throughout his career he was willing to acknowledge the inherent superiority (*melior*) of the contemplative life" (74). In the *Sentences* commentary Aquinas acknowledges that the active life is *more useful* (to the extent that it is concerned with the well-being of our neighbors and not just with one's own excellence) but the contemplative life is *dignior*, worthier. Van Nieuwenhove suggests that we rephrase *dignior* as "more meaningful in its own right" (79), a gloss that made me bristle at first but came to seem more and more right as the discussion went on. As for which life is more *meritorious*, the *Sentences* commentary leaves the question somewhat open. In the *Secunda secundae* and *Tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae* it is definitively resolved: whichever life manifests greater charity is more meritorious. Generally the contemplative life is more meritorious: "nonetheless, it can happen that one person gains greater merit in works of the

active life than another person gains in works of the contemplative life” (*ST II-II* q. 182, a. 2).

Great charity indeed is manifest in those who “allow themselves from time to time to be separated from the sweetness of divine contemplation for a period” (*Ibid.*) to transmit by teaching or preaching the fruits of their contemplation, as the Dominicans do. Such a life, Aquinas says, “is more perfect than a life that involves only contemplation” (*ST III* q. 40, a. 1, ad 2).

*Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation* is much more than a book on one underappreciated aspect of Aquinas’s thought. It is a creative synthesis of aspects of Aquinas’s epistemology, philosophy of mind, and moral theology. It is circumspect without being timid, opinionated without being polemical, attentive to historical context without overwhelming the reader with needless detail. It is a splendid achievement.

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