

The Contemplative Life and its Practice According to Aquinas

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Abstract: Thomas Aquinas properly categorizes the diversities of man's life, emphasizing its rational capabilities, in two categories: (1) Contemplative; and (2) Active. Of the two, the former is considered to be the more noble in nature. Wherefore, he lists nine arguments to support his claim, eight citations coming from Aristotle, and the final coming from the Lord Himself. In today's context, the contemplative can be attributed to the terms: "cloistered", "esoteric", or "too-religious", while the latter as "adventurous", "vigorous", or as choosing the "pro-active" life. As such, the new generation of thinkers, who are the few, and thoroughly-accustomed to critical thinking, are naturally inclined to be called "contemplative", while at risk to be given a clear-cut separation to the exterior life. In short, it seems that today's intellectuals are at the verge of being labeled as only occupying the interior life. This paper, as if taking water from an ocean, will faithfully try to shed light on Aquinas' conception of the contemplative and active life, in an attempt also to emphasize the co-dependence of each other rather than its separation. Now, thereof understanding Saint Thomas, the happiness of man is the contemplation of divine essence; but happiness essentially consists in the act of the intellect [contemplative], while accidentally on the act of the will [active]. Therefore, happiness consists in both the object of the two forms of life. Hence, I agree that a proper practice of the intellectual life must not stop in the joy of contemplation, but must needs be participating in the active life to overflow that joy, since also it belongs to the essence of goodness to communicate itself. Finally, here lies the nobility of teaching, a form of an active life, yet more excellent than being merely contemplative – since it is a mixture of both.

Keywords: Aquinas, Practical, Contemplative Life, Active Life,
Happiness

The motivation of this paper rightly follows: (a) to show the co-dependence of contemplation and external action, (b) emphasize the nobility of the mixed life,

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specifically the profession of teaching, and (c) establish that both ends of the kinds of life are directed to a participation in the life of a charity, as becoming a receiver through

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contemplation and a giver through acts of charity. I claim that a proper practice of the intellectual life must not stop in the joy of contemplation, but must needs be participating in the active life – so as to overflow the delight that the intellect has received in possessing the knowledge of truth.

CONSIDERATION OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE AND ACTIVE LIFE

St. Thomas Aquinas widely categorizes two forms of human life according to man's intellect. He says that the intellect can be divided for two uses, the first is towards the contemplation of truth – specifically, divine truth, and the latter towards some external action.¹ Among these, the contemplative life is said to be more excellent for nine reasons; of which I will explain three.²

The contemplative life is said to be better since it is that which is most proper to the nature of man i.e. to become rational. In man, all other functions of the body are ordained that he might be able to use his intellect to contemplate.³ Also, the active life is also taken up inasmuch as it is directed to something else, and not for its own sake. Whereas the contemplative life is occupied for its own sake.⁴ Lastly, he attributes the excellence of the contemplative as regards to its object, viz. to divine things, whereas the

active life is merely related towards human things.⁵

However, this is not a clear-cut shunning away from the active life. Since it is taken up in order to dispose man into contemplation.⁶ All other external activities are directed towards the cultivation of the interior life.⁷ The contemplative and active life are actually co-dependent; both are ordained towards reaching happiness, which is man's only end.⁸ There are three reasons regarding the connection of finality and the co-dependence of the two kinds of life: (1) Initially, attention towards the object in which happiness consists is caused not by intelligence, but attention is caused by the act of willing. (2) This corresponds that the will must be fine-tuned to direct external actions that cultivates the interior life and disposes it to attain none other than the chief good of man that is found in contemplation. In short, the active life strengthens the will to attain the fruits of contemplation. But finally, (3) in so far as the act of the intellect possesses the object in which happiness essentially consists, and the delight of happiness, which pertains to the act of the will, only comes accidentally, then all external actions must only be caused inasmuch as it directly pertains towards attaining and practicing the truth. Again, to put it tersely, all desires are only acted upon inasmuch as it is one way or another related towards practicing the fruits of contemplation.⁹ And wherefore

happiness as the final end of man. Aquinas further explains that this happiness must consist in God, which is an eternal happiness. Therefore, that which more properly pertains to the final end of man regarded noble.

⁶ ST., II-II, 182, 3, co.

⁷ But that is not the only case since the soul consists the body and not otherwise. In other words, from the intentions of the heart comes all the other actions. Belief systems affect human acts.

⁸ For Aquinas, the life of man is an *exitus-reditus*. Man is born into the world in order that he might be reunited to his creator when he dies.

⁹ It is good to highlight that the final end of man is none other than “knowing the divine essence” or simply “knowing the truth”. c.f. ST., I, 16, 5, co.

¹ Aquinas, Thomas. 1920. *Summa Theologiae*. Second and Revised Edition. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Accessed July 2017. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>. II-II, 179, 2., Hereafter will be regarded as “ST” for citation.

² ST., II-II, 182, 1, co., The order consists in the eight, followed by the fifth, and finally the seventh.

³ The rational soul consists the powers of the vegetative or nutritive (nourishment and growth) and sentient (sense and locomotion).

⁴ In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that the chief good must be loved for its own sake. Such is the case for the contemplative life.

⁵ It must be understood that both Aristotle and Aquinas are teleological – thereafter taking upon

regarding these three reasons, happiness may consist in one kind of life, but more noble in a mixed life.

As to the first reason, Saint Thomas puts it as:

... two things are needed for happiness: one, which is the essence of happiness [viz. perfect knowledge of divine truth]; the other, that is as it were its proper accident. i.e., the delight connected with it.” And, “... the essence of happiness consists in the act of the intellect [he calls intelligence], but the delight that results from happiness pertains to the will. [will here is used as act of the will – or a desiring, i.e. a movement towards]¹⁰

In more familiar terms, the intellect just “grabs” knowledge, but the movement towards the good and as well as the delight that arises from attaining it comes from the will. Think the claw machine in fun zone. The will are your hands moving the arrow keys and the claw is the intellect. Once the you press the red button, the intellect just grabs the prize. Therefore, knowing and willing are inseparable because happiness consists essentially in the act of the intellect, and accidentally in the act of the will.¹¹ But remember that it was actually your hands which moved the claw, and it will be your hands who will hold the prize. Desire is the efficient cause of knowing.¹² For fundamentally, as Peter Kreeft explains, “it is the will that commands the mind”. It is what directs our attention towards contemplation.¹³ And it is the will that is delighted, for thence is found the appetite. The intellect has no

appetite. Your heart wants the prize, and so the hands are compelled to move. The claw doesn’t have an appetite for the prize – you have. And maybe that’s why the claw machine seems so impossible.

Secondly, the contemplative life is dependent on the active life. This is because the will must be cultivated in order that it may attain which is most proper to it. Hence, the active life is a taming of the “inordinateness of the internal passions” that the mind may as much be undistracted.¹⁴ A strong will corresponds to a tranquil mind. Saint Thomas attributes this to one of the functions of the moral virtues.¹⁵ Growing in justice, temperance, fortitude, and temperance essentially belongs to strengthen external actions, but it also disposes the soul to a peaceful study.

Finally, the active life is as well dependent on the latter because all external actions are caused inasmuch as it practices the truth in which the contemplative life only attains. This is the meaning of what is aforementioned: happiness cannot consist essentially in the will that acts, but only through the act of the intellect - which forms belief systems.¹⁶ Belief takes precedence over delight, that is why delight is accidental. Think comparing an optimists and pessimists. Optimists are happy with the smallest of things because their happiness is brought forth by their happy go lucky philosophy, while pessimists take less delight. Therefore, the act of the intellect is more essential because willing precedes from thought. In other words, happiness is an inside job.

¹⁰ ST., I-II, 3, 4, co., Emphasis mine.

¹¹ ST., I, 79, 7, Ad. 1.

¹² The efficient cause is the agent that moved while the final cause is goal behind its movement. The efficient is concerned with initiation while the latter with termination.

¹³ Kreeft, Peter. 2014. “#200. The Contemplative life”, In *Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from St. Thomas Aquinas*. San Francisco: Ignatius press, p. 206. Hereafter it shall be regarded as “PT” for citation.

¹⁴ ST., II-II, 182, 3, co.

¹⁵ ST., II-II, 180, 2, co. c.f. I-II, 61, 3, co.

¹⁶ ST., I-II, 3, 4, co.

ABUNDANCE OF THE MIXED LIFE

... that form of **active** life in which a man, by preaching and teaching, delivers to others the fruits of his contemplation, is more perfect than the life that stops at contemplation, because such life is built on an **abundance** of contemplation, ...¹⁷

Hereafter is established the co-dependence of both kinds of life. The active life strengthens moral virtues as to dispose the passions towards attaining the truth through contemplation; while the contemplative life produces the belief systems from which emerges the external actions that the active life practices. But so as to arrive at a central standpoint, Saint Thomas does not marginalize the attainment of happiness in one kind of life. Instead, he creates the mixed life, his synthesis of both the contemplative and active. This is caused by an “abundance of contemplation” that seeks to communicate itself, and wherefore engages in external actions. This implies, and I strongly agree, that the intellectual cannot stop at merely the act of contemplation, but he must share the fruits of the goodness in which he has been immersed because “it belongs to the essence of goodness to communicate itself in the highest manner to the creature”.¹⁸ But the object of contemplation is the divine essence – which is goodness. Therefore, it belongs to the object of contemplation to communicate itself. Peter Kreeft puts it uniquely simple as: “So love is ... the motive that moves the intellect to contemplate God, ... what it ‘consists in’, ... and the final cause.”¹⁹

Note that Saint Thomas places the mixed life in the category of the active. This is correct for two reasons: (1) the mixed life is

properly categorized as active because its final cause is to communicate – or to transmit, pertaining to an external action; and (2) its material cause, i.e., preaching and teaching, are of the active life.²⁰ Further, since the most proper activity of man is the use of the intellect, wherefore its two uses, which are the contemplative and active, both consists in the mixed life, it follows that the most noble profession for man is contained in either teaching or preaching.

Regarding the final cause of the mixed life: it is not merely a short-stop to become average, i.e., to have a third of the day each to: sleep, leisure, and study. But it is excellently put in the context of the Dominican Spirituality, which the Saint lived: to share the fruits of the harvest found in contemplation.²¹ The motto emphasizes the primacy of contemplation over external works, as the introductory section of this paper explains. But if there be any, those are acts of charity. Therefore, the Dominican spirituality emphasizes the co-dependence of the two kinds of life, but it remains that happiness consists essentially in the act of the intellect, and accidentally in the act of the will.

To ask which kind of life consists happiness more excellently is a wrong question. Because both consists happiness, but distinct by the nature that they do so. It is like asking which cup is better used: whether a teacup-full of tea or a glassful of water. This also is the case regarding the difference between one man to another. A man may prefer the active life in regard to his vibrant spirit, or as Saint Thomas terms, his “restless soul”.²² Whereas his happiness consists more in the active life. But a man may also be naturally inclined towards contemplation, whereas his happiness consists better in silence and meditation.

¹⁷ ST., III, 40, 1, ad.2.

¹⁸ ST., III, I, I, co.

¹⁹ “#200. The Contemplative Life”, In PT., p.

²⁰ ST., II-II, 181, 3, co.

²¹ Refer to <http://www.op.org/en>

²² ST., I-II, 183, 4, co.

But the case is so regarding as the happiness of man may differ in object. All men choose the particular life they have on account of the happiness that they see potentially contained wherefore. The better question would not be assessing where individual happiness better consists, but in which life more directly pertains to participation in the life of charity.²³ Hence, the question is more universal rather than particular. This is because the saint's philosophy is largely based upon his metaphysics.²⁴ The twentieth-century, *existential, neo-thomist*, Norris Clarke describes his metaphysics as a "whole basic philosophy and theology of ecology"²⁵ The charity of God is that which causes existence. Man, who in receiving charity is caused into existence, is called to participate in an overflow of charity through the created world, and as well as through the destined eternal rest with his creator. And that life which is more according to this cause, which Saint Thomas describes as more deserving in reward, is the contemplative life.²⁶ However, there may happen in some cases where by an excess of charity man is compelled to communicate this goodness through external actions.²⁷ As such, although the contemplative life is simply regarded not only to become more noble, but also more meritorious, until now there is no clear cut that it is the only life to be lived. But for Christians, and might as well to those who strongly affirm his metaphysics, life should be lived "radically in charity", whether consisting in the contemplative, active, or mixed.²⁸ If two is better than one, then accordingly, the most charitable life consists in the mixed.

PRE-CAUTIONS FOR THE MIXED LIFE

I deliberately re-emphasize at this juncture that the final happiness of man consists in knowing the divine essence, an operation consisting essentially in the act of the intellect and accidentally in the will. As the Dominican Spirituality, silence and external works go hand-in-hand, inasmuch as the external works are results of the fruits of contemplation. In this sense, I do not only denote that the active life is a pre-requisite to the other, but also that the converse I posit. Wherefore I clarify that my arguments put a distinction between the nature of the two kinds of life, in their object and their method. Again, essentially in the contemplative, and accidentally in the active. A peanut may be essentially A, but accidentally B. Nevertheless, both A and B refer to the same peanut. Hence, I prefer not to place myself standing in one extreme. The Thomist abstracts from one side to another in accordance with looking at reality as one picture – as one truth. Touching heaven may consist in one kind of life, but more excellently done if through a synthesis. As Sertillanges, in his what I would describe as "the-student-handbook", *The Intellectual Life*, puts it: "The True is a single whole; all things are connected in one supreme Truth..."²⁹

But to that which pertains not merely to the particular happiness of man, but also to his nature, since happier is a thing which more directly consists its life according to its nature, as a man is happier when treated genuinely "humane" rather than "objectified", I agree

²³ ST., II-II, 182, 2, co.

²⁴ c.f., Kreeft, Peter. 2009. *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*. LLC: Recorded Books. P.49.

²⁵ Clarke, Norris. 2001. "The Great Circle of Being and Our Place in It: The Universe as Meaningful Journey", In *The One and The Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press., p.307.

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²⁶ "Meritorious". c.f., ST., II-II, 180, 7, co.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ ST., II-II, 184, 1, co.

²⁹ Sertillanges, A.G. 1987. "The Spirit of Work", In *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*. Reprinted Edition. Cork, Ireland: The Catholic University of America Press., p.137. It shall again be regarded as "IL".

that the contemplative life is more noble – not only noble, but properly so.

There are pre-cautions for the mixed life, if my arguments, and as well as the testimony of Saint Thomas, be convincing enough to compel the audience to engage in the arduous search for truth: (1) contemplation is not an isolation, but a unity; (2) external acts are demanded but not with the expense of contemplation; (3) it is most important to highlight that its object is charity.

Thinking is one act involving the one man. His health is to consider, relationships, and as well as businesses. Today is presented with necessities. Hence, not all the time should man immerse himself in isolation, but better if he trains himself to attain the skill of finding the unity of truth among all his activities.³⁰

Secondly, while man is busy thinking with his whole self, it is easy to amass a great number of occupations. But he must also train to un-box the truth that is presented before him. Contemplation requires silence. The more conducive the atmosphere, the more tranquil the mind becomes. The more silence, the more space can the truth occupy. The intellectual must also train to acquire the habit of setting aside time for contemplation, so as he runs not dry and “to be compelled to forsake contemplation altogether.”³¹

The final pre-caution is the most important one: everything is ordained towards charity. Wherefore the active life may dispose man to the contemplative, or the fruits of contemplation produce good works, every life

consists in participating in that overflow of charity which starts and ends in God.³²

THE PRACTICALITY OF TRUTH

Every truth is practical... The only holy truths are redeeming truths.³³

A thing requires practice inasmuch as its nature consists in the will moving it. But the truth requires practice. Therefore, the nature of truth consists in the will moving it – and this is aforementioned shown; since it is the will that moves the attention of the intellect. And this movement is done inasmuch as the object is loved and has the potential for delight. But the latter description also pertains to truth. Therefore, the will naturally moves towards what is true because the truth is delightful. That is how God presents himself to us: by presenting His truth in our intellects, He seizes that opportunity to invite us to move closer to him.³⁴

In regards to the mixed life, I have thus far argued that the intellectual is lead to the mixed life since goodness communicates itself. At this juncture, I conclude as far as to say that loving God and neighbor are inseparable. As far as my endeavor has done, I can only explicate the theological premise with one philosophical claim: the act of the intellect, [which is intelligence], and the act of the will [which is desiring], as knowing and loving, cannot be separated.³⁵ Knowing is a Ferrari, Loving is a Porsche. They are distinct in engine, but either which may be picked, both of them are designed for movement. In the strict sense, from the start they were already inseparable

³⁰ c.f. II, In “The Virtues of a Catholic Intellectual”, p. 20.

³¹ ST., II-II, 182, 1, ad. 3.

³² The origin is both start and finish. c.f., ST., II-II, 180, 7, co.

³³ II., p. 13.

³⁴ The Truth of God is contained in Divine Revelation and through His Divine Effects.

³⁵ Here I spark comparison between intelligence and knowing, also to desiring and loving. Knowing is attributed analogously, yet only accordingly, to intelligence. This too applies to the latter, since love is the first act of the will.

because both are caused by charity. Saint Thomas lays it as:

“Although the contemplative life consists chiefly in the act of the intellect, it has its beginning in the appetite, since it is through charity that one is **urged** to the **contemplation** of God.”³⁶

This I will try to work in detail with three reasons: (1) We receive an outpour of love from God; and (2) the overflow of that outpour moves the will; finally, (3) the will directs our attention towards the source of that outpour. Imagine water is suddenly poured on your head, we automatically turn our attentions

to look for the source. When we suddenly receive a mail, we directly look for the name of the person who sent it. This is what Saint Thomas meant by saying that we are “urged” – its reflex.

Since we know that loving and knowing are inseparable, the same can be attributed to loving God and neighbor. Loving God is knowing God. But knowing God entails loving our neighbors. Therefore, loving our neighbors consequently means that we love God. And the better explanation to this juncture would already be venturing on the commentaries about the order of the Lord’s two commandments.³⁷

³⁶ ST., II-II, 180, 7, co. Emphasis mine.

³⁷ See Matthew 22: 37-40.

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