

Pleasure: A Reflection on *Deus Caritas Est*

G. J. MCALEER

*Loyola College in Maryland
Baltimore, Maryland*

THERE IS a strange peculiarity in the history of Catholic ideas. Thomas is the only truly great Thomist, but there are a number of great Augustinians. At least this is true of philosophy. Most philosophers would accept three Catholics after Thomas amongst the absolute giants of the discipline: Malebranche, Pascal, and Scheler. All three were Augustinians. It seems that when Catholic philosophy replenishes itself it does so either with a renewal of Thomism or with original thinkers who draw upon Augustine. To the philosopher, it is interesting that there are no references to Thomas in Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, but quite a few to Augustine. Of course, Thomas spoke about love—indeed he has a fascinating theory of love—but for Augustine love is basic to the analysis of man and human action. It is quite fitting then that Augustine is a substantial presence in Pope Benedict's encyclical on the distinctiveness of Christian love. Media pundits found something very reassuring about Benedict's choice of love as the topic of his first encyclical. It is such a “nice” subject and one that everyone can agree on. The Church and our media elite agree: Love is good! Benedict's choice, however, is subtle. He is well aware that humanitarian love is not at all the same as Christian love (see the remarkable nos. 36–37) and that these two loves are the difference between the culture of death and the culture of life. Perhaps he even means to signal this difference with his preference for the phrase “social charity” rather than “social justice” (nowhere used) for the latter, as anyone familiar with American Catholic colleges knows, is readily co-opted by a “diversity” agenda antithetical to Christian morals.

But love has also been a “wedge issue” inside Catholic Christianity itself. There are at least four distinctively Augustinian theses that medieval

philosopher-theologians of various stripes used when disputing with Thomists. St. Augustine said of his stealing pears one night that “if any part of one of those pears passed my lips, it was the sin that gave it flavor.” About that night, he reflects, “the evil in me was foul, but I loved it.”¹ Thomas argued that the will requires no virtue to order it internally because the will is structurally responsive to the good.² Augustine’s example raises the possibility of will unmoored from the good, having as its object not a good, nor even an apparent good, but evil. Scotus finished Augustine’s thought for him arguing that it is possible to love and take pleasure in hate.³

Augustine chillingly described the City of God and the city of man as two loves: the one marked by a love of God, the other by a self-love contemning God and others. The first is a love of generosity, the other a love of domination where government, though intent on building security for the enjoyment of the “lowest goods,” does not stop at crime being inspired by “diabolical envy.”⁴ This powerful vision of the city of man makes Thomas’s conviction that secular government is part not of a fallen but natural order seem naïve. For Augustine’s analysis of government suggests that even if there is a “pull” in the will toward the good, it is fatally compromised by man’s destructive ambition and joy in domination.

Quite apart from diabolical grip, the good are beset by their own lower nature. While wayfarers, the good will have to fight against the wicked but they will even fight amongst themselves “as a result of that part” that makes a man fight against himself.⁵ Importantly, it is not Augustine’s position that this struggle is a simple consequence of the Fall. The Fall exacerbates a structural tension within human nature.⁶ Whereas Aquinas argues that sensuality in relation to reason is like the “freemen

¹ St. Augustine, *The Confessions* (London: Penguin, 1961), 49 and 47.

² J. Capreolus, *On the Virtues*, ed. K. White and R. Cessario (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 265. Capreolus’s text is a remarkable compilation of passages from Thomas and his detractors arranged as a series of arguments. Readers who want to find the exact references for the texts of Thomas, Durandus, and Scotus will find them cited in Capreolus.

³ *Ibid.*, 331. Respecting the damned, Scotus claims, “they, simply speaking, hate God with pleasure and without remorse of conscience. It is clear, therefore, from these points that the right dictate can be, simply speaking, present in the intellect without the right choice of that dictate being present in the will.”

⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (London: Penguin, 1984), 593, 599 and 601.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 601.

⁶ For the late thirteenth-century Augustinian Giles of Rome on this point, please see my “Sensuality: An Avenue into the Political and Metaphysical Thought of Giles of Rome,” *Gregorianum* 82 (2001): 129–47.

in cities who have the right and the means” of opposing their royal ruler,⁷ Augustine says reason rules sensuality, “the irrational desire which submits to rule,” despotically.⁸ Thus Aquinas argues that there is a continuity of freedom between the three principles of human action—intellect, will, and sensuality.⁹ If the *actus voluntarius* is to reflect the *man*, this continuity of freedom is necessary. Augustine’s restriction of freedom to man’s “higher part” echoes in Scotus’s idea of the will as the only free power and the principal site of the virtues.¹⁰ The question raised here is—and it is of enormous significance for philosophical anthropology, and so for apologetics, ecumenism, and pastoral theology—to what degree can sensuality be a constituent of an act of love?

These three theses are related and relevant to the principal topic of this reflection, the fourth of Augustine’s theses: his stunning, and surely true, phenomenology of sexual pleasure.¹¹ There are a number of aspects to this description, some a Thomist has little difficulty accepting. But Augustine’s description of the orgasm’s assault on the integrity of the person proves deeply troubling for Thomism. Famously, Augustine describes sexual pleasure as a “mental emotion” mingling with a “physical craving” that ends in “an almost total extinction of mental alertness.” The excitement of sexual pleasure culminating in orgasm, “disturbs the whole man,” says Augustine.¹² Troubling to the Thomist is the implication that an aspect of the natural order is (now) depersonalizing. Augustinians are less perplexed than Thomists by the sense that nature and grace relate with a certain degree of antagonism; they are less surprised by the role dialectal antagonism plays generally. Benedict writes, for example, of God’s forgiving love being so great that “it turns God against Himself, his love against his justice” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 10, see also no. 12). I do not know if this formulation is inspired by Augustine, but it certainly runs counter to Aquinas’s conceptual “serenity” (Gauthier). Aquinas can only marvel at Augustine’s image of the married man, a “friend of wisdom,” overwhelmed by the (now) “perverted emotions.”¹³ To the Thomist, sacramental conjugal love is a supernatural *perfecting* of sexual love and expressive of a *certain continuity* between nature and grace: After all, Thomas

⁷ Capreolus, *On the Virtues*, 249.

⁸ Augustine, *The City of God*, 584 and 586.

⁹ Capreolus, *On the Virtues*, 248–49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 256–57.

¹¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, 577–81.

¹² *Ibid.*, 577.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 577 and 580.

argues that *natural* love can have God as its primary object; were it otherwise the general principle that grace perfects nature fails.¹⁴

Augustine's phenomenology makes one wonder whether there might be a problem not merely with sexual pleasure but pleasure as such. It is something of a commonplace in contemporary theological circles that many of today's woes can be traced to the nominalism that swept the Christian universities in the fourteenth century. Is it well-appreciated that Augustine stood warranty for some of nominalism's essential ideas? An early fourteenth-century Dominican (d. 1332?), Durandus of St. Pourçain argued that pleasure is indeed morally problematic and so much so that it raises a problem with Thomas's naturalistic ethics *in toto*. Scotus certainly disagrees with Thomas that God because "by essence goodness, cannot be displeasing to any will."¹⁵ Durandus is skeptical for another reason: He argues, and the argument will come to have a principled role in modern thinking, that pleasure is always self-referential and that a naturalist or eudaimonistic ethics is only ever a metaphysical egoism.¹⁶ According to Durandus, Thomism holds that the good satisfies human appetite, and this is just to say that the good is what satisfies our love of concupiscence, a love that has man as its object. Durandus is not just some medieval contrarian—he agrees with Benedict, "whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28)—but he thinks ethical naturalism is precisely the elimination of love. Benedict and Durandus agree with Scheler when he writes that "the important thing is not the amount of welfare, it is that there should be a *maximum of love* among men."¹⁷

Benedict thinks Durandus completely wrong, however. The encyclical has as one of its aims to clarify the unity between *eros* and charity. There is no fundamental break between these two loves: *eros*, a human love capable of giving a "foretaste . . . of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 4) and the love that God is, has him as its object, and him as its source, charity. Benedict says *eros* is a love between a man and a woman, "where body and soul are inseparably joined" (no. 2), and, of course, what he means is, as Aurel Kolnai puts it, "mature people are absolutely never in love without also being sexually attracted."¹⁸ So when he says that "human beings glimpse an apparently

¹⁴ Capreolus, *On the Virtues*, 165.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹⁶ Kant objects to an ethics expressing desire for this is, as Spiegelberg puts it, to "subordinate all our actions to the rule of self-love and happiness, hence our lower nature." H. Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 289.

¹⁷ M. Scheler, *Ressentiment* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2003), 62.

irresistible promise of happiness” in *eros* (no. 2), that love is refracted through sexual pleasure and we quickly return to the problem posed by Augustine’s analysis. Benedict wants to argue that there is a unity in love, but we must wonder both whether there really is a continuity between sexual love and charity and what this can mean for Thomism where sensuality is significantly valorized. Some of Augustine’s theses on love cut against the hope of the encyclical respecting the unity of love. The stakes are high for Benedict reaffirms the basic direction of Catholic theoretical engagement with the world: “The Church’s social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being” (no. 28).

But how is Durandus’s criticism blocked? What matters here is to get clear about the intentionality of pleasure. In Capreolus’s treatment of hope he reviews a dispute between Thomas and Durandus. Durandus denies that hope, at least as explained by Thomas, is a theological virtue. In Thomas’s account, hope is a perfection of the irascible appetite¹⁹ because it seeks an “arduous good” difficult to secure: eternal life.²⁰ The theological virtue of hope helps establish an inclination in the will for an “eternal good,”²¹ and Thomas argues blessedness or happiness “enters into the definition of hope” because it is “the aggregation of all goods.”²² If a virtue is a theological virtue, God must be the object; but if human happiness is the object of hope, then it appears to collapse into a love of concupiscence, and such a love always has the human agent as its principal object. Durandus argues that the Thomistic analysis makes hope have the pleasure of eternal life as its immediate object, though he concedes God may appear as a remote object within this pleasure. That is, “created blessedness,” a state of human happiness, is the immediate object of hope²³ and not the uncreated living God. In a love of concupiscence, says Durandus, we always will “a good for ourselves.”²⁴

¹⁸ A. Kolnai, *Sexual Ethics: The Meaning and Foundations of Sexual Morality* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 129.

¹⁹ Spiegelberg’s classic essay on medieval and modern conceptions of intentionality confines medieval interest in intentionality to acts of the intellect and denies the idea was connected with acts of love, joy, and other emotions and appetitive states. This is not right: See H. Spiegelberg “‘Intention’ and ‘Intentionality’ in the Scholastics, Brentano, and Husserl,” in his collection of essays *The Context of the Phenomenological Movement* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 4 and 12.

²⁰ Capreolus, *On the Virtues*, 124–25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

²² *Ibid.*, 127.

²³ *Idem.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

About this argument, Capreolus says a Thomist can accept that a love of concupiscence is a love of self, but must reject Durandus's claim that because hope is a hope for blessedness God is not an immediate object of a love of concupiscence.²⁵ Capreolus argues that Thomas shows that a love of concupiscence is not *exclusively* a love of self: that God and the self can *both* be immediate objects of such a kind of love. Thomas argues that eternal blessedness is an intentional pleasure double in object having the use-experience of blessedness and the contemplative-experience of the essence of God.²⁶ Even if we love God only with a love of concupiscence, God is still an immediate object of that love. Thomas denies, therefore, that pleasure is uniform. Pleasure may be self-seeking but this does not warrant the assumption that my use of an object is the *full content* of the pleasure; rather, besides my use, there stands the object, immediately experienced, and so not merely an object refracted through my use-experience. There is, if you like, an estoppel on the use-experience by a contemplative, disinterested aspect of the pleasure. Hope as a virtue that perfects human desire generates a pleasure double in object then. The formal object of the pleasure generated by hope is God; the material object, created blessedness.²⁷ Put otherwise, hope ordering appetite in relation to God has a complex intentionality with one object being God as "Himself in Himself"²⁸ and another object being God as benefactor. Since it is Thomas's position that objects give the species of acts, Thomas argues that hope is a genuine theological virtue because it has God as an immediate (formal) object. As Capreolus puts it, a Thomist can concede to Durandus that God is not the *total* immediate object of hope but one of two partial objects of hope. This subtlety is enough to save Thomas's position—and therewith eudaimonistic ethics!—because Durandus is right to point out that every pleasure has, as at least a partial object, an operation and this must needs belong to the one having the pleasure.²⁹

The example used by Thomas to clarify this point is that of drinking wine. Because of the position he wants to hold, Durandus is forced to argue that taking pleasure in a glass of wine has but one object, the pleasure I have from the use of the wine. Aquinas had argued that besides this pleasure object there is also the object of the wine itself: One can take pleasure *in* the wine and not merely from it.³⁰ Pleasure can rest in the

²⁵ Ibid., 127–28.

²⁶ Ibid., 140.

²⁷ Ibid., 139.

²⁸ Ibid., 128.

²⁹ Ibid., 137.

³⁰ Ibid., 140.

wine as its intentional object and not only upon the effects of the wine. Of course, Aquinas has also to argue that these two partial objects of pleasure in wine stand in a hierarchy, the contemplative-experience standing as the formal object of the pleasure and the use-experience of the wine as the material object.

The example is interesting because it seems that Thomas's analogy between pleasure in wine and pleasure in God is weak. Even if Aquinas is right about the wine example and that our appetites expressed in love of concupiscence can genuinely rest *in* objects, Durandus is nevertheless right about the crucial example. Our pleasure in wine is not a compelling analogy to our pleasure in God, for Benedict is certainly correct that the personal love of marriage is a better analogy for the personal love of God. Pope Benedict argues with plenty of scriptural warrant that the pleasure of conjugal love offers a "glimpse" of a "promise of happiness" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 2): Conjugal love is a "joy which is the Creator's gift [and] offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine" (no. 3). Conjugal love certainly has the double intentionality of partial objects that Aquinas seeks. Marriage is a relationship in which a man and a woman have a use-experience of one another, but also experience a genuine beloved, not merely someone loved but someone privileged in the field of my experience. These two partial objects also stand in a hierarchy, but sexual pleasure appears to rupture the relationship between the formal and material objects and to invert the intentional order within conjugal love. The wine analogy is weak because taking pleasure in wine is not an analogous pleasure to the peculiar nature of sexual pleasure. Durandus did not believe that marriage was a sacrament and perhaps on account of this inversion: If marriage is an affirmation of sexual love then marriage cannot be a sacrament, for sexual love expresses a pleasure that is, inevitably, one of egoism; namely, where the use-experience takes precedence over and occludes the contemplative, affirmational aspect of pleasure. As Augustine puts it, excitement and orgasm overwhelm the "intellectual sentries."³¹ Aquinas rejected the Augustinian (and later Scotist) position that perversity is a love of an evil object. Aquinas had a number of explanations for the phenomenon of perversity,³² but one regards the inversion of values. Scheler and Karol Wojtyła held that an inversion of value was the mark of an evil will,³³ and Aquinas agrees: Perversity

³¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, 577.

³² His use of the idea of velleity is especially interesting. See *On Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), q. 16, a. 3.

³³ M. Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 25; and K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 159.

is the turning away from a high good towards a preferred low good.³⁴ Built into sexual love is perversity. This is not meant to be shocking, but an explanation for the phenomenological evidence of what Kolnai calls the “ethical precariousness” of sex.³⁵ The phenomenology of sexual pleasure favors Durandus’s position that pleasure is always a love of concupiscence and thus a matter of use. Even if sexual pleasure is a perverse pleasure, the role it has in conjugal love will be enough to derail Pope Benedict’s hopes for the unity of love.

Kolnai accepts Augustine’s analysis of sexual pleasure, but argues nonetheless that sexual *love* is rather Thomistic than not. The depersonalizing quality of sexual pleasure is not only because of the domination of the partner implicit in Augustine’s analysis,³⁶ but also a “drowning” of the person in a homogeneous, anarchistic “stream of life.”³⁷ Drowning in sexual pleasure is phenomenologically the eclipse of the person, for distinction between person and object all but disappears: There is, says Kolnai, a “quasi-absolute pervasion of the object.”³⁸ Sexual pleasure is morally a problem, “something which extremely easily and quickly *becomes sinful*,”³⁹ because the pervasion of excitement and orgasm is an experience happening within one, an abandonment. Wojtyła identified the experience of efficacy as opposed to something happening in one as a basic fault line in the experience of our personhood.⁴⁰ Sexual pleasure is not only not experienced as efficacy, but precisely as pervasion. Benedict writes: “[I]t is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love—*eros*—able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 5). The unity of love—wherein *eros* and charity both affirm the person—is lost if *eros* is not an act of the person or, to use Wojtyła’s terms, efficacy is replaced by activation.

Sexual pleasure is a threat to the person but one framed by, and in continuity with, sexual love, and so not a decisive threat. Sexual pleasure structurally is found with sexual love—which is not to deny the two can be separated—and whilst sexual pleasure is a felt narrowing of intentional life, sexual love is a felt expansion. Even within sexual pleasure there is a definite intentional structure wherein essentially a union with the other sex is

³⁴ Capreolus, *On the Virtues*, 352–53.

³⁵ Kolnai, *Sexual Ethics*, 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 45 and 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁰ K. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), 87.

sought. Two poles exist in sexual pleasure: Pulled toward irresponsibility by the binding power of excitement and orgasm,⁴¹ sexual pleasure is also a response to the concrete value of someone of the opposite sex.⁴² This value response is (normally) initiated by sexual love and magnified by marriage, an institution that, amongst other things, serves for the personalizing of sex. To use Thomas's double-object analysis of the intentionality of pleasure: Sexual love has for one of its two partial objects the use of the other as an instrument of diversion,⁴³ the occluding of the "beloved" amidst the pervasion of voluptuousness; but the other partial object of sexual love is human devotion, a reaching out for personal closeness,⁴⁴ what Kolnai calls the "proximity-intention."⁴⁵ This second object is the "intrinsic ennoblement" of sex, while the first is its innate moral precariousness. The "proximity-intention" of sexual love is an expression of an appetite for "the *more real presence* of the person possessed"⁴⁶ and "an *intention which embraces the two lives* [of the man and the woman] *in their entirety*."⁴⁷ As Scheler has it, all love, including sexual love, is a response to the value-saturated essence of a particular person⁴⁸ abstracted from the utility value of the person.⁴⁹ Indeed, conjugal love is anticipated in sexual love as the latter already "radically exalts" the beloved.⁵⁰ There is then "an emphatic and thoroughgoing moralization of sexuality" from *within* sexual love as it places sexual pleasure, despite all its precariousness, within "the sphere of feeling,"⁵¹ the site of the cognition of value. Kolnai's analysis of the intentionality of sexual love shows that Augustine is right about sexual pleasure. The use-experience of sexual pleasure is, however, only one of the two partial objects of pleasure initiated by sexual love. It is by returning to Aquinas's treatment of the intentionality of beatitude that helps make this point. Sexual love has a double intentionality with an object fixing use and another fixing the affirmation of the beloved, a devotional encounter with her value-saturated essence.

⁴¹ Ibid., 237–38.

⁴² For why homosexuality does not refute this essential structure of sexual pleasure, see Kolnai, *Sexual Ethics*, 46, 186–94.

⁴³ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 124, original emphasis.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 125, original emphasis.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 128, n. 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 131.

⁵¹ Ibid., 132.

This reflection wanted to show that Benedict's interest in the unity of love can only claim in Augustine an ambiguous filiation. I reviewed the Thomas-Durandus debate to show that in the history of Catholic ideas an Augustinian heritage had been used to counter what I take to be a signature Thomist theme: That there is a deep continuity in human and divine love because there is a continuity between nature and grace. Returning to this old debate helps better explore the essential thesis of the encyclical in its full richness. To appreciate the double intentionality of *eros* with its problematic object of use and its ennobling object of devotion is to identify a connective tissue between *eros* and charity. Benedict's unity of love thesis is thoroughly defensible on Catholic grounds, but these grounds are not naïve. They show, as Kolnai puts it, that the sacrament of marriage "fulfils a double goal, to affirm and seal the goodness laid down in nature itself, and also to complete it supernaturally and to fence it off from the *evil and anarchic powers of natural reality* with the help of a special grace."⁵² In marriage the devotion of sexual love is elevated into promises of commitment to the good of the other, and to the good of others who will issue from sexual love; these promises craft donations that then serve as a substructure of sexual love and orders that love to the generosity of the hour known by a Mother and her Son (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 41) and definitively away from egoism. N V

⁵² Ibid., 147, emphasis added.