

## *Contemplativa Vita Est Finis Activae: The Order of the Active Life to the Contemplative Life in Aquinas*

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### Introduction

Aquinas follows well-developed traditions in both ancient philosophy and Christian thought when treating of the active and contemplative lives.<sup>1</sup> There is considerable ambiguity and disagreement within each tradition.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting the intractability of this topic, interpreters of Aquinas

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<sup>1</sup> For contemplation in Aquinas, see especially the work of Rik Van Nieuwenhove, whose *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) is the culmination of a series of articles on the topic. For a summary of recent literature on contemplation in Aquinas, see Gerald P. Boersma, “Divine Contemplation as ‘Inchoate Beatitude’ in Aquinas,” *Thomist* 86 (2022): 446. Little recent scholarship has focused on the relationship of the active and contemplative lives in Aquinas. The most important contributions are Mary Catherine Sommers, “Contemplation and Action in Aristotle and Aquinas,” in *Aristotle in Aquinas’ Theology*, eds. Gilles Emery, O.P., and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167–85; Jörn Müller, “*Duplex Beatitudo*: Aristotle’s Legacy and Aquinas’s Conception of Human Happiness,” in *Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Tobias Hoffmann, Jörn Müller, and Matthias Perkams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 52–71; and Van Nieuwenhove, “The Dominican Calling and the Relation between the Active and Contemplative Lives” (ch. 4 in *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*).

<sup>2</sup> To pick just one instance from each tradition, in 1960 W. F. R. Hardie raised the exclusivist-versus-inclusivist interpretation of Aristotle’s happiness—does happiness consist solely in the activity of contemplation or does it include the acts of the other virtues as well? The debate is still ongoing over sixty years later. For a summary see Roopen Majithia, “On the Eudemean and Nicomachean Conceptions of Eudaimonia,”

disagree about his teachings regarding action and contemplation.<sup>3</sup> This paper focuses on a narrow but fundamental question about action and contemplation in his thought—what is the order of the active life to the contemplative life? A clear understanding of this topic seems preliminary to thoroughly answering the questions of their relationship and their relative superiority. My main concern is with Aquinas's teaching on the order of action to contemplation in his two systematic treatments of the subject, in the commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (the *Scriptum*; ca. 1252–1257) and the *Summa theologiae* (*ST*; ca. 1265–1273). I will argue not only that there is considerable development of his thought on this topic from his first major work to his last, but also that he changes his teaching about an important claim made in the *Scriptum*: the contemplative life is the end of the active life. While in both works the active life is presented as something that can be ordered to the contemplative life, in the *Scriptum* the active life is always ordered to the contemplative life in this world as its end, whereas in the *ST*, the active life can be chosen in its own right.

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*American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (2005): 365–67. In the Christian tradition, the main image of the active and contemplative lives is the story of Martha and Mary. Theologians have drawn contradictory conclusions regarding the hierarchy and relationship of action and contemplation from this story over the centuries. See David Grumett, "Action and/or Contemplation? Allegory and Liturgy in the Reception of Luke 10:38–42," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59:2 (2006): 125–39.

- <sup>3</sup> For instance, Sommers, "Contemplation and Action," and Niewenhove, "Dominican Calling," disagree about the continuity of Aquinas's teaching on the relationship of action and contemplation, and whether he holds at the end of his life that the contemplative life is, absolutely speaking, better than the active. Another subject of disagreement relevant to this paper is whether Aquinas holds that the active life constitutes a type of happiness, real albeit inferior to the happiness of the contemplative life. Müller, in "*Duplex Beatitudo*," holds he does. Antonio Donato argues that Aquinas holds, in contrast to Aristotle, that contemplation even on the natural level is the single goal for human life ("Contemplation as the End of Human Nature in Aquinas's *Sententia libri Ethicorum*," in *Virtue's End: God in the Moral Philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas*, ed. Fulvio Di Blasi, Joshua P. Hochschild, and Jeffrey Langan [South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2008], 27–43). A final, related disagreement finds Katja Krause interpreting Aquinas as restricting happiness to the theoretical intellect ("Remodelling Ultimate Human Happiness: Thomas Aquinas' *Commentary on the Sentences* and Its Sources," *Divus Thomas* 118, no. 1 [2015]: 15–56), while Jacobus M. Ramirez, in contrast, argues that Aquinas holds happiness is primarily an act of the speculative intellect, but secondarily an act of the practical intellect (*De hominis beatitudine*: In I-II Summae Theologiae *Divi Thomae commentaria* (QQ. I–V), vol. 2 [Madrid: Institute de Filosofia "Luis Vives," 1972], 270–319).

### Commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*

#### *The Contemplative Life Is the End of the Active Life*

The phrase “the contemplative life is the end of the active life” occurs twice in Aquinas’s works, both times in the *Scriptum*.<sup>4</sup> It does not appear explicitly in the *ST*, though two related claims—that the active life is a disposition to the contemplative, and that it is ordered to the contemplative life—do occur in the *ST* and throughout his whole corpus.<sup>5</sup> But the claim that the contemplative life is the end of the active life does appear in the *Summa contra gentiles* (*SCG*; ca. 1259–65), though in different formulation.<sup>6</sup>

A similar phrase is found in Augustine. Aquinas quotes this selection from the *De Trinitate* several times (though never in the *Scriptum*): “Contemplation is promised to us, the end of all action, and the eternal perfection of joy.”<sup>7</sup> In Augustine’s text, it is clear that what is meant by contemplation is the beatific vision attained by the blessed in the next life. The end or final cause of action in this life is the heavenly vision. This is one way, perhaps the most natural, to interpret Aquinas’s statement that contemplation is the end of action: Everything humans do is ordered to one end, and that end is knowledge of God’s essence in the next life.<sup>8</sup> It is in this sense that contemplation is the end of action.

But there are several difficulties with interpreting the phrase in this way. First, when speaking of the contemplative life without qualification, Aquinas is typically speaking of it as practiced in this life. This is seen clearly by its division from the active life, which either will not be in heaven, as he teaches in the *ST*, or will be in only a very limited sense, as he says in the *Scriptum*. When he speaks of the contemplative life in heaven, he usually qualifies it by a description to make clear that the beatific vision is intended, rather than the contemplative life of this world.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., *In III sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 4, ad 2; d. 35, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 1. Cf. *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 2. Translations of Latin throughout are mine. All dates for works throughout this paper, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 533–36.

<sup>5</sup> For the active life as a disposition to the contemplative see, e.g., *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 3; *Summa contra gentiles* [*SCG*] II, ch. 83; *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] II-II, q. 181, a. 1, ad 3. For the order of the active life to the contemplative see, e.g., *In III sent.*, d. 33, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 2; *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 2, ad 2; q. 152, a. 2; *Super Psalmos* 45, no. 8 (ca. 1273).

<sup>6</sup> See *SCG* III, ch. 37, no. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 5, sc. The quote also appears in *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 4; *Super Heb* [rep. vulgata] 11, lec. 1; and *Beata gens* II.

<sup>8</sup> See *ST* I-II, q. 1, aa. 4, 6; q. 3, a. 8; q. 5, a. 3.

Second, there are actions in the natural order that do not have their end in the next life, but in this life. Aquinas distinguishes between acquired virtues and infused. The acquired virtues have for their end the good of the state. This being the case, Aquinas says, they totally pass away with this life, as the state does.<sup>9</sup> And so they do not have their end in the next life, but only in this life. If the claim that the contemplative life is the end of the active life is to be taken to include both the acquired and infused virtues, then the contemplative life must be interpreted as referring to contemplation in this life. And indeed, one of the two cases where Aquinas uses the phrase “the contemplative life is the end of the active life” is in reference to acquired virtues.<sup>10</sup> He addresses the argument that moral virtues, since they perfect us in the active life, will cease in heaven, where there will be only the contemplative life. Aquinas responds that even acquired virtues do not disappear when someone moves to the contemplative life. In support of this claim, he uses the division of the neo-Platonist Macrobius, who divides virtues into political, purgative (when someone in civil matters desires contemplation), and those for a purified mind that is devoted to contemplation. For these last, they have the active virtues in a “residual” way, inasmuch as they have attained contemplation, the end of the active life. In this context, it is clear that contemplation, the end of the active life, occurs in this life, not in the next.

Finally, even when speaking of infused virtues, Aquinas indicates in several places that contemplation in this life is the end of the active life. He states that contemplation is both the beginning and end of action—the beginning because the rules of human life (*rationes vivendi*) are supplied from contemplation of eternal things, and the end because it is that towards which the active life leads.<sup>11</sup> It is clear from his comparison of the active and contemplative lives in the same question that he is referring to action and contemplation in this life in distinction from the life of the blessed in heaven. Aquinas begins his response to the question of their relative order by saying that the contemplative life is more noble in itself. Both the active life and the contemplative life strive to attain another life, the life of the blessed in heaven. Yet even so, since contemplative life is more like this life of the blessed, it is “the end of the active life and nearer to the ultimate end.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, he goes so far as to say that the contemplative life as practiced in this life is not really ordered to anything else at all,

<sup>9</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 4.

<sup>10</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 4, ad 2. Cf. *De virtutibus*, q. 5, a. 4.

<sup>11</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 1.

since the life of the blessed is but the consummation of the contemplation in this life.<sup>13</sup>

Though the contemplative life is more noble, the active life is more useful than the contemplative life, since it can be ordered to the salvation of our neighbor, whereas the contemplative life is ordered to nothing outside itself. Nevertheless, if the active life is ordered only to the one acting, and not to another, then it is neither more noble nor more useful, but rather has the relationship to the contemplative life of “a useful thing towards that for which it is useful.”<sup>14</sup> The active life, in this formulation, is a means for acquiring the contemplative life.

### *The Order of Action to Contemplation*

Given that the contemplative life is the end of the active life, how precisely does the active life lead to contemplation according to Aquinas?<sup>15</sup> *Ostium* and *dispositio* are two terms that he uses to describe the order of the active life to the contemplative.

Aquinas describes the active life as an *ostium*, a door, in his discussion of the cardinal virtues. These take their name because they are the hinges (*cardines*) by which the other moral virtues are moved. Developing this metaphor, he says that the moral virtues are like a door, since one goes through them to another thing, namely, the contemplative life. In this respect they are opposed to the theological virtues, which have as their object the ultimate end, and so do not serve as a means to other virtues. They are also opposed in this respect to the intellectual virtues, which

<sup>13</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 1. This quote indicates that there are two sorts of active life, one which is ordered to the perfection of the individual, and the other which is ordered to the perfection of one's neighbor (see also *ST* 188, q. 6). It may be argued, then, that only the first type of active life is ordered to the contemplative life; the other is ordered to the good of the neighbor. The second objection and its reply in the same quaestiuicula are relevant here. The objection is that the good of the nation is more divine than the good of one person; but the contemplative life is the good of only one man, as opposed to the active life, which is involved with the good of many men. Therefore the active life is more divine than the contemplative life. In his reply, Aquinas makes it clear that the good of the individual and the good of the multitude are different orders of goods: there is an action and contemplation of the individual, and an action and contemplation of the whole multitude. It seems, then, that the active life that looks to charity can also be construed as ordered to the contemplative life, though not to the contemplative life of the one practicing it, but to the contemplation of the multitude. I will return to this point below.

<sup>15</sup> This topic has received little attention from recent scholars. For a brief discussion, see Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 77–78.

perfect one in the contemplative life, which is not ordered to another life, but rather is what the active life is ordered to.<sup>16</sup>

How is the active life ordered to the contemplative? Aquinas says it disposes men to the contemplative act.<sup>17</sup> The active life can be concerned with the virtues that order a man within himself (such as temperance) or with the virtues that are *ad alterum*, principally justice. Through the first sort of virtue, a man can dispose himself to contemplation, Aquinas says; through the second sort, he can dispose both himself and others.

To understand what Aquinas means by man disposing himself to the contemplative act, it is helpful to look at his understanding of *dispositio*—a word frequently used throughout his works when describing the relationship of the active life to the contemplative life.<sup>18</sup> *Dispositio* has numerous meanings in Aquinas.<sup>19</sup> It is useful to look at its overall use in his corpus before focusing on its meaning with regard to the active life in the *Scriptum*. Often it is defined with reference to habit. Sometimes it is distinguished from *habitus* as a quality which is easily changed, whereas *habitus* is a stable quality that is changed with difficulty; sometimes it is considered as a genus of *habitus*.<sup>20</sup> *Dispositio* in this sense, however, does not help us explain how the active life is a disposition to the contemplative life, since the active life is defined as being dedicated to the moral virtues. These are habits, and it is unclear how any habits can be a disposition in the sense that is defined in distinction to habits.

Aquinas also uses “disposition” in a more general sense, however. He says in *De virtutibus* that “a disposition to a thing is that through which something is moved to attain that thing.”<sup>21</sup> This general meaning also appears in the *Scriptum*.<sup>22</sup> In the *ST*, he tends to use the description from Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, that a disposition is “the order of a thing having parts.”<sup>23</sup> Even here, though, such an ordering is ordered to something further.<sup>24</sup> It is

<sup>16</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 33, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 2.

<sup>17</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 1, ad 1 and response.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 3; *SCG* II, ch. 83; *ST* II-II, q. 181, a. 1, ad 3.

<sup>19</sup> Gloria Frost, “Aquinas on Passive Powers,” *Vivarium* 59 (2021): 33–51; Robert C. Miner, “Aquinas on Habitus,” in *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu*, ed. Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013), 68–70.

<sup>20</sup> See *ST* I-II, q. 49, a. 2, ad 3. See also Angela McKay Knobel, “Aquinas and the Pagan Virtues,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2011): 346–54.

<sup>21</sup> *De virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 8.

<sup>22</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 24, q. 3, a. 6, ad 6.

<sup>23</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 49, a. 1, ad 3.

<sup>24</sup> See *ST* I-II, q. 49, a. 2, ad 1; see also Frost, “Aquinas on Passive Powers,” 40–41.

in this more general sense that Aquinas seems to speak of the active life (or the moral virtues) being a disposition to the contemplative life.

In the final *quaestiuncula* of the article on the active life in the *Scriptum*, Aquinas discusses the active life as a *dispositio* to the contemplative:

In all natural dispositions it happens that the disposition in its perfect being arrives at [*attingit*] that which it disposes towards, which was also present through a certain beginning, while the disposition was tending towards perfection. This appears with heat and the form of fire; because when heat has completed its term of change, the form of the fire is led in, and heat together with the form of the fire remains. But while there was alteration, the form of the fire was not present, except according to a certain beginning. But the active life is a disposition to the contemplative life; and so Isidore in *Libro de summon bono* says, “The one who first advances in the active life ascends well to the contemplative.” And as long as a person has not arrived at perfection in the active life, the contemplative life is not able to be in him, except imperfectly, according to a certain beginning. For he experiences difficulty performing the acts of the moral virtues, and he has to wholly concentrate on them, and so is held back from the pursuit of contemplation.<sup>25</sup>

This example of heat being a disposition to fire appears in a number of texts on disposition. In one, Aquinas uses it as an example of a disposition that is necessary for the existence of the thing it disposes towards.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, the contemplative life in its full sense is not possible unless one has first perfected the active life. Fire as a disposition to heat also serves as a useful

<sup>25</sup> *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 3. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super X ethica*, lec. 9, no. 887: “The ultimate work of man is only one, namely contemplation of the highest substances, but many other works are ordered to it. Some help, as other works of knowledge, and some dispose, as works of the moral virtue. Likewise the ultimate happiness which belongs to man, insofar as he is man, is one only. But others are ordered to it, because civil happiness is ordered to contemplative happiness as a disposition” — “Ultima operatio hominis est tantum una, scilicet contemplatio altissimarum substantiarum, sed sunt multae aliae ordinatae ad illam, quaedam sicut adminiculantes sicut aliae operationes cognoscitivae et quaedam sicut disponentes sicut operationes virtutum moralium. Et similiter delectatio ultima, quae est hominis, inquantum est homo, est una tantum, sed ad illam ordinantur plures, quia etiam felicitas civilis ordinatur ad contemplativam sicut dispositio” (*Opera Omnia* [Cologne ed.], vol. 14, parts 1–2, ed. W. Kübel [Aschendorff: Monasterium Westfalorum, 1972–1987], 742 [Ins. 7–16]).

<sup>26</sup> See *In II sent.*, d. 21, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1.



example because it illustrates how a disposition that reaches its “perfect being” arrives at (*attingit*) that which it disposes towards, just as the perfect active life arrives at the contemplative life. Finally, the analogy is also relevant to the overall argument here because it is an example of a disposition that remains once the thing that it disposes towards comes into existence. Similarly, the active life can coexist with the contemplative life, as happens with bishops, who should be perfect in both lives.<sup>27</sup>

This text, then, makes three important points about the active life as a disposition to the contemplative life: it is a necessary disposition, in its perfect state it inevitably reaches the contemplative life, and its activities remain once the contemplative life comes into being. But it does not clarify how exactly the active life functions as a disposition to the contemplative life. The only thing it says in this regard is that one needs to be perfect in the active life in order to not be fully taken up with it, so unless one has reached this perfection, he cannot turn to the contemplative, as he will be absorbed by the active life. In short, the active life is a disposition to the contemplative life because, without the perfection of the active life, we will remain absorbed in the active life. But this seems to beg the question of why the active life is needed for the contemplative life in the first place. In the *Scriptum*, Aquinas seems to treat the necessity of the active life for the contemplative life as a given, relying on the statements of the Church Fathers to establish it. He gives a more complete answer to this question in the *ST*.

### *All Called to the Contemplative Life*

A corollary of the claim that the contemplative life is the end of the active life seems to be that all are called to the contemplative life. Several commentators have discussed Aquinas’s reworking of the contemplative life to include those not given to study.<sup>28</sup> This extension of the contemplative

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<sup>27</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 3, corp. and ad 3. See also *In II sent.*, d. 24, q. 3, a. 6, ad 6, where Aquinas divides dispositions into those that turn into that towards which they dispose, and those that do not—heat as a disposition to fire being an example of the latter. Aquinas’s claim that the active and contemplative lives can coexist sits uneasily with his customary explanation of the “lives” as that operation of the intellect, speculative or practical, to which humans are more given. At times he seems to consider “lives” as meaning any significant activity of the moral or intellectual virtues.

<sup>28</sup> Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Aquinas and His Role in Theology*, trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 43–44; Sommers, “Contemplation and Action,” 167–68; Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 3–4, 47–48, 168–74.



life is one of the decisive departures of the Christian treatment of action and contemplation from Greek philosophy.

An indication that Aquinas extends contemplation to all is the place where he treats action and contemplation in his treatise on the gifts in the *Scriptum*—article 3 of the third question in distinction 36 of the commentary on book III. He there joins wisdom and understanding to the contemplative life, and the rest to the active life, but *all* gifts are necessary for salvation. By joining the active and contemplative lives to the gifts, which are all present together in the Christian in the state of grace, Aquinas seems to understand the active and contemplative lives as accessible to all.

The fifth objection in this article is relevant to our topic, as it argues that the gifts are not joined together, since some perfect humans in the active life and some in the contemplative life. But some people are perfect in the active life “who have not yet reached the stage of the contemplative life.” It is noteworthy that the objection calls the contemplative life a *gradus*—it seems to be considered not as a static state in life, but as one step in a series that men go through. In his reply, Aquinas says that “not all who lead the active life arrive at the perfect state of contemplation,” but still something of contemplation is needed, since to contemplate is a precept for all men, enjoined, among other scriptural texts, by the third commandment.<sup>29</sup> He speaks of the contemplative life as that towards which all men travel, but not all reach.

This idea of the active and contemplative lives as progressive stages in the spiritual life is common in the patristic texts used by Aquinas. Perhaps most notably, there is the interpretation of the biblical story of Leah and Rachel by Gregory as representing the active and contemplative lives.<sup>30</sup> Much of the interpretation centers around the fact that Leah is bleary-eyed but fecund—similarly, the active life sees less well but is fruitful in works.<sup>31</sup> But another important aspect of the Rachel and Leah story is that Jacob first spent seven years with Leah before he attained Rachel, thus presenting a picture of the active and contemplative lives as proceeding by stages. It is also noteworthy that Jacob does not desire to marry Leah, and only does so because he believes she is Rachel. Gregory himself draws attention to the sequential aspect of the Rachel and Leah story when arguing that the active life necessarily precedes the contemplative, in both his commentary on Ezekiel and in his *Moralia*. This interpretation by Gregory is quoted

<sup>29</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 36, q. 1, a. 3, ad 5.

<sup>30</sup> According to Chenu, Gregory the Great is the main non-biblical source for the Christian tradition of action and contemplation (*Aquinas*, 41).

<sup>31</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 1.

several times by Aquinas, though not in the *Scriptum*.<sup>32</sup> What is implied in the Rachel and Leah story is stated explicitly in patristic quotes that Aquinas uses in his *Scriptum*. For instance, he quotes Gregory's statement that the one who wishes to ascend to the "fortress of contemplation" must first spend time on the "field of action."<sup>33</sup> And he quotes Isidore, who says that the one who first perfects himself in the active life afterwards "ascends successfully to contemplation."<sup>34</sup>

The Fathers' witness presents the active life and contemplative life as successive stages of perfection, with the active life leading to and preparing for the contemplative life. The story of Martha and Mary may seem a counter to this, in that there is no notion of successive stages in this version. But, even when Aquinas speaks of this symbol of the active and contemplative life, he adapts it to his view of successive stages. Against an objection that the active life and contemplative life cannot be together, since Martha is shown as disturbed by many things, Aquinas replies that she represents an imperfect stage in the active life; a perfect stage can coexist, at least in part, with the contemplative life.<sup>35</sup> Such an analysis seems to implicitly hold a view of the active life as ordered to the contemplative, though in this life the active virtues are never completely done, and so it is not a case of simply transcending the active life.

A strong countervailing tradition seems to be that of Aristotle's *Ethics*, where action and contemplation are presented not as stages one to the other, but as distinct lives, each choice-worthy in its own right. The *Ethics* was a new introduction to the West, and Aquinas was involved in its early reception. His teacher, Albert the Great, wrote the first complete Western commentary on the *Ethics*, *Super ethica* (1250–1252), for which Aquinas likely took the *reportatio*. For his commentary, Albert used Robert Grosseteste's ground-breaking Latin translation of the *Ethics*, written just few years earlier, 1246–1247. In this work, Albert makes a number of important distinctions that influence Aquinas's treatment.<sup>36</sup>

Albert departs from earlier Latin commentators on the first two books of the *Ethics*, who identified the happiness that Aristotle speaks of as an intellectual union with God in the next life. This was seen by some early

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, *ST* II-II, q. 182, a. 2, obj. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 3, obj. 3. In his reply to this argument, Aquinas does not object to the premise that the active life leads to the contemplative.

<sup>34</sup> *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 3.

<sup>35</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 3.

<sup>36</sup> James C. Doig, *Aquinas's Philosophical Commentary on the Ethics: A Historical Perspective* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2021), 25–26.

commentators as unachievable by human effort, or unachievable by human effort without divine aid, and as fully attained only in the next life.<sup>37</sup> Albert resists this rather violent importation of Christian thought into Aristotle's *Ethics*. Instead, he makes a distinction between the happiness of this life and the happiness of the next. Albert follows Robert Kilwardby, Averroes (whose commentary was recently translated into Latin by Herman the German), and particularly Robert Grosseteste's compilation of various Greek commentators, insisting that Aristotle is speaking not of an other-worldly beatitude, but of a happiness that is attainable in this life and that is achievable by our own actions.<sup>38</sup>

This natural happiness is divided into two parts according to Albert, civil/moral happiness and contemplative happiness. Book I deals with civil happiness and book X with contemplative happiness, both clearly acquired, that is, they are the outcome of natural virtues, not supernatural. If this seems to mar the unity of Aristotle's *Ethics*, Albert repairs this unity by insisting that all human activity is finally ordered to contemplation:

The ultimate work of man is only one, namely contemplation of the highest substances, but many other works are ordered to it. Some help, as other works of knowledge, and some dispose, as works of the moral virtue. Likewise the ultimate happiness which belongs to man, insofar as he is man, is one only. But others are ordered to it, because civil happiness is ordered to contemplative happiness as a disposition.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Doig, "Aquinas's Philosophical Commentary," 2–8.

<sup>38</sup> Albert, *Super III ethica*, lec. 6 no. 190: "Civil or contemplative beatitude, which the philosophers consider, is in our power because it is acquired through our works. But the objection is speaking of future beatitude, which we merit through meritorious acts, which we are not able to do of ourselves"—"Beatitudo civilis vel contemplativa, de qua considerant philosophi, est in potestate nostra, quia acquiritur per operationes nostras. Sed obiectio procedit de futura beatitudine, quam per opera meritoria meremur, in quae non possumus ex nobis" (p. 170 [Ins. 65–70]). See Jörn Müller, "La vie humaine comme tout hiérarchique: Félicité contemplative et vie active chez Albert le Grand," in *Vie active et vie contemplative au Moyen Age et au seuil de la Renaissance*, ed. C. Trottman (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2009), 243; Doig, "Aquinas's Philosophical Commentary," 15–22.

<sup>39</sup> *Super I ethica*, lec. 9, no. 887: "Ultima operatio hominis est tantum una, scilicet contemplatio altissimarum substantiarum, sed sunt multae aliae ordinatae ad illam, quaedam sicut adminiculantes sicut aliae operationes cognoscitivae et quaedam sicut disponentes sicut operationes virtutum moralium. Et similiter delectatio ultima, quae est hominis, inquantum est homo, est una tantum, sed ad illam ordinantur plures, quia etiam felicitas civilis ordinatur ad contemplativam sicut dispositio" (p. 742 [Ins.

In much the same words that Aquinas uses, Albert speaks of the moral virtues as “dispositions” to contemplation and “ordered” to it. He understands the moral virtues finally to be for the sake of contemplation, which is the one ultimate end for humans. Indeed, the claim that all moral virtues are finally ordered to contemplative happiness as their ultimate end appears several times in his *Super ethica*,<sup>40</sup> a book Aquinas knew very well. Albert the Great is likely the proximate source of Aquinas’s claim that the contemplative life is the end of the active life.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion

In his *Scriptum*, Aquinas says that the contemplative life is the end of the active life. In this formulation, “contemplative life” should not be understood solely as referring to the beatific vision in the next life. Rather, this statement includes the contemplative life in this world, towards which the active life is ordered as its end. The active life is a disposition to the contemplative life, without which the contemplative life cannot be achieved. In his description of the order of the two lives, Aquinas calls on various Fathers of the Church, who present the active and contemplative lives as successive stages, the active being a necessary step towards the contemplative life. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* seems a strong countervailing argument to

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7–16]). Cf. *Super X ethica*, lec. 10, no. 889 : “The treatise on contemplative happiness is distinguished from the preceding ones because everything is ordered to contemplative happiness—even civil happiness, all the virtues, and friendship”—“Tractatus de felicitate contemplativa distinguitur ab omnibus praecedentibus ex hoc quod omnia ordinantur ad ipsam, etiam felicitas civilis et virtutes omnes et amicitia” (p. 743 [Ins. 73–77]). A note on this page (*Opera Omnia*, 14:743) shows the clear influence of the commentator Michael of Ephesus, a commentator prominent in Grossteste’s edition: note 58 cites to “Mich. Eph. Ed. Heylbut p. 571 v30–34 trans. Gross. f.199ra.”

<sup>40</sup> In addition to the above quotes, further examples are *Super I ethica*, lec. 7 no. 35 (p. 33 [Ins. 4–15]); *Super VI ethica*, lec. 1, no. 460 (p. 393 [Ins. 4–13]).

<sup>41</sup> See Müller, “La vie humaine” and “*Duplex Beatitudo*.” Müller interprets Albert as having an overall exclusivist reading of Aristotle. For Albert, ultimately all human acts are ordered to contemplation. Müller contrasts this with Aquinas’s position, whom he interprets as having an inclusivist interpretation, inasmuch as he sees that there is in this life a *duplex beatitudo*, one from the moral virtues and one of the contemplative virtues, both happiness, though unequal. As will be seen in the second part of this paper, I generally agree with this interpretation as regards Aquinas’s position in the *ST*, but I believe this is a significant development from his earlier teaching. In stark contrast, Donato interprets Aquinas in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Ethics* as holding contemplation as the single goal for human life, with actions ordered to contemplation. This, according to Donato, is in contrast with Aristotle himself, as well as with Albert the Great’s interpretation of Aristotle, both of whom emphasize the political life more than Aquinas does (“Contemplation as the End”).

this tradition, since it appears to present the active and contemplative lives as static states, each choice-worthy for its own sake. But Albert the Great's *Super ethica*, which was composed just prior to Aquinas's *Scriptum* and was well-known to Aquinas, interprets Aristotle as holding that the contemplative life is the end of the active life.

## Relation of Action and Contemplation in the *Summa Theologiae*

### *Division of Action and Contemplation*

In Aquinas's second great systematic work, the *Summa contra gentiles*, he does not use the formula "the contemplative life is the end of the active life." Nevertheless, in several places, he seems to show that he still holds this view. For instance, when arguing that the soul begins to exist with the body, he says:

The ultimate end of each thing is that which the thing strives to arrive at through its operations. But through all his ordered and good operations, man strives to arrive at the contemplation of truth. For all operations of the active virtues are preparations and dispositions to the contemplative virtues. The end therefore of man is to arrive at the contemplation of truth.<sup>42</sup>

He makes an argument about the end of man using as a premise the claim that a person undertakes the active virtues in order to acquire contemplation and the contemplative virtues. He still seems to hold, then, that the contemplative life is the end of the active life.

His views on this relationship, however, seem to change in the *ST*, as the place of the questions on action and contemplation indicate. In the *Scriptum*, action and contemplation are discussed within his treatment of the gifts of the Holy Ghost, all of which are necessary for salvation. Such a placement lends itself to the idea that all are called to the contemplative life. In the *ST*, however, he first treats of the virtues, which are common to all men, and afterwards of the states which belong only to some men.<sup>43</sup> The part devoted to the particular states is divided into three: the first part deals with *gratiae gratis datae*, such as prophecy and miracles; the second

<sup>42</sup> SCG II, ch. 83; see also III, chs. 25 and 34.

<sup>43</sup> See *ST* II-II, prol.; q. 171, prol. For the relationship between the gifts and the active and contemplative lives, see Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 154–55. He argues that, in the course of his teaching, Aquinas gradually loosened "this intimate connection between the gifts . . . and the active and contemplative lives" (155).

deals with the division into the active and contemplative lives; and the third deals with the different kinds and offices of religious life, such as bishops and the various kinds of religious. This identification of the active and contemplative lives as states that appertain to some men but not all suggests that he no longer considers the contemplative life to be the end of the active life in the sense that he does in the *Scriptum*. And indeed, the claim that the contemplative life is the end of the active life appears nowhere in the *ST*.<sup>44</sup>

In his description of the distinction of the active and contemplative lives, Aquinas compares the life of men to other living things. Something is called living because it acts from itself, and so the different lives are based on what is most proper to a thing and what it is most inclined to. For instance, plant life consists in nutrition, animal life in sensation and movement. What is most proper to human beings is that they understand and act according to reason. For each individual man, his life is that which makes him happy and what he most desires to do. And so “some men especially aim at the contemplation of truth, and some principally aim at external actions.”<sup>45</sup> Hence, there are two human lives, one whereby they know and one whereby they act according to reason. In this account, Aquinas does not present them as distinct stages on a route all men traverse, but rather different choices men make about how they will spend their lives. There are two different characteristics proper to man, knowing and acting according to reason. It is from these distinct characteristics that humans are said to have two lives. Aquinas suggests that this proclivity towards either the contemplation of truth or external action is due at least in part to the psychological makeup of the individual. Some have an impulse to action, and the active life is more suited to these restless souls. Others are naturally apt to contemplation due to their more tranquil souls.<sup>46</sup> Contemplatives can benefit from engaging in some action, and those leading the active life can benefit from some contemplation, but a person’s natural tendency makes him apt for one or the other of these.

The division between action and contemplation is rooted in man’s

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<sup>44</sup> The closest approach is *ST* II-II, q. 152, a. 2. We will return to this passage later, but q. 180, a. 4, could also be construed to assert that the contemplative life in this life is the end of the active life. But Aquinas continues by dividing contemplation into that of the future life and contemplation in this life. This text, then, does not establish that the contemplation in this life is necessarily the end of the active life, but only that some contemplation is.

<sup>45</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 179, a. 1.

<sup>46</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 182, a. 4.

intellect. There are two distinct ends of human knowing: the knowledge of truth or of some external action, pertaining respectively to the “contemplative intellect” and the “practical or active intellect.”<sup>47</sup> Aquinas considers that this exhausts the options for humans—the life of pleasure, often included as a third type of life, is common to brute animals, and so is not proper to humans. All rightly ordered human activity is devoted either to “the necessities of this present life according to right reason” or to the “consideration of truth.”<sup>48</sup>

In the parallel passage in the *Scriptum*, Aquinas distinguishes the two lives in a slightly different way. There, he says the intellect has two operations: “One which belongs to it in itself, the other which belongs to it insofar as it governs the lower powers.” So there will be two human lives: the contemplative, which consists in the intellect’s proper activity, and the active, “which consists in the operation of the intellect and reason insofar as it orders and rules and commands the lower parts.”<sup>49</sup> This description of the contemplative and active life that views them with reference to different hierarchical parts of the soul fits better, perhaps, with the view that action is a stage on the way to contemplation. It may indicate that Aquinas is influenced by a more neo-Platonic idea of human nature in the *Scriptum*. Regardless, Aquinas speaks in the *ST* of particular men being drawn to one or other of the lives, and does not speak this way in the *Scriptum*.

In both the *ST* and the *Scriptum* the active and contemplative lives are ordered to distinct ends of the intellect, but how they relate to each other is presented differently in the two works. In the *Scriptum* the active life is always further ordered to the contemplative life as its end. It is here where the *ST* differs.

### *The Order of Action to Contemplation*

In the *ST*, Aquinas asks whether the moral virtues pertain to the contemplative life, and responds in the negative: they are ordered to external actions, whereas the contemplative life, as Gregory says, rests from actions. But although moral virtues do not pertain essentially to the contemplative life, they do pertain dispositively, inasmuch as they remove impediments to the contemplative life.

Even though the active life is a disposition to the contemplative life, Aquinas is clear that moral virtues can be chosen for their own sake, as

<sup>47</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 179, a. 2; cf. q. 182, a. 3; I-II, q. 69, a. 3.

<sup>48</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 179, a. 2, ad 3.

<sup>49</sup> *In III sent.*, d. 35, q. 1.



goods in themselves, and not just for the sake of contemplation.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, it is only insofar as they are chosen for their own sake, and not for the sake of contemplation, that they constitute the active life. If moral virtues are chosen for the sake of contemplation, they fall under the contemplative life. In *Ethics* V, Aristotle says that the one who steals in order to commit adultery is more an adulterer than a thief. Aquinas draws from this passage the principle that an act that is ordered to another act as its end falls under the species of that act.<sup>51</sup> He applies this principle to the virtues of the active life—if they are done for the sake of the contemplative life, they pass in a certain way into the contemplative life. And so the one pursuing the active virtues for the sake of contemplation is leading the contemplative life, not the active life. Only the one who chooses the acts of the moral virtues as good in themselves, rather than as a means to the contemplative life, is properly leading the active life.<sup>52</sup>

One difficulty with this argument is Aquinas's argument for the superiority of the contemplative life to the active life because the contemplative life is more loved for its own sake than the active life is, which he says is "ordered to something else."<sup>53</sup> Is this "something else" the contemplative life, as he holds in his *Scriptum*? In an earlier question in the *ST*, Aquinas similarly argues that the happiness belongs more to the speculative intellect than to the practical because the former is desired for its own sake, whereas the act of the practical intellect is always sought for the sake of something else. Here he identifies this something else as "action," and says that this itself is ordered in turn to some end.<sup>54</sup> A likely interpretation is that the end that actions are finally ordered to is the ultimate end, beatitude.

In the *Scriptum*, the contemplative life is the end of the active life, which is ordered to the ultimate end, beatitude, through the intermediary of the contemplative life. In the *ST*, in contrast, the active life can be ordered directly to the ultimate end, as Aquinas states when speaking of the different beatitudes and their relation to the active and contemplative lives. The beatitudes that have to do with the active life can be ordered either to perfect beatitude directly or to inchoate beatitude—either to contemplation in the next life or contemplation in this life.<sup>55</sup>

This change is reflected in Aquinas's different accounts of the cardinal

<sup>50</sup> See Müller, "Duplex Beatitudo," 60.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, *ST* I-II, q. 18, a. 6.

<sup>52</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 181, a. 1, ad 3. See also *ST* II-II, q. 181, aa. 2, 4.

<sup>53</sup> *ST* II-II, 182, q. 1.

<sup>54</sup> See *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 5.

<sup>55</sup> See *ST* I-II, q. 69, a. 2.

virtues between the two works. In the *Scriptum*, as noted earlier, he explains why we call only moral virtues “cardinal.” “Cardinal” means “hinge,” and moral virtues are like doors in that you enter through them to something else: the contemplative life. The contemplative life does not lead to something else, but rather is the end of the active life. The active life, in contrast, is not about the ultimate end, but rather its own objects.<sup>56</sup> In the corresponding passage in the *ST*, however, when he asks whether only moral virtues ought to be called “cardinal,” he gives a different account. He says that moral virtues have the “perfect *ratio* of virtue,” because they perfect the appetite, and so not only perfect a faculty but also cause good actions. Intellectual virtues perfect a faculty, but do not necessarily cause good actions. So, only the moral virtues are the principle or cardinal virtues.<sup>57</sup> In the *Scriptum*, the name “cardinal” is restricted to the moral virtues because they are a passage to the intellectual virtues, which are by comparison more for their own sake. In the *ST*, they are called “cardinal” because they are superior, in a way, to the intellectual virtues.

There is also a change in the parallel questions regarding the relative superiority of the active and contemplative lives.<sup>58</sup> Both questions occur at the end of the treatments of the two lives. In the *Scriptum*, his reply hinges on two different meanings of “good.” Something is good inasmuch as it is chosen for its own sake, and in this sense, the contemplative life is better, since it is closer to the ultimate end and is itself the end of the active life. But “good” can also refer to what is chosen for the sake of another, and in this way the active life can be better.<sup>59</sup> In the parallel passage in the *ST*, Aquinas takes a very different approach. He lists eight reasons, taken directly from

<sup>56</sup> See *In III sent.*, d. 33, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 2.

<sup>57</sup> See *ST* I-II, q. 61, a. 1. See also ad 3; q. 56, a. 3; q. 66, a. 3.

<sup>58</sup> See *In III Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 1; *ST* II-II, q. 182, a. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Albert, *Super I ethica*, lec.7, no. 37: “Something is called better in two ways: either because it is more honorable, and then the contemplative life is better, and the first arguments hold. Or because it is more useful, and then the civil life is better, and the other arguments hold. Nevertheless, because honorable refers to the good of the end, but the useful to the good which is for the end, simply speaking the contemplative life is better. For what is only loved for itself is better than what is loved because of it. And simply speaking, the civil life is ordered to the contemplative”—“Aliquid dicitur melius dupliciter: aut quia est honorabilius, et sic contemplativa melior est, et sic procedunt primae rationes. Aut quia utilior, et sic civilis melior, et sic procedunt aliae. Quia tamen honorabile dicit bonum finis, utile autem bonum, quod est ad finem, simpliciter loquendo contemplativa melior est, quia quod tantum propter se diligitur, melius est eo quod propter ipsum diligitur. Et simpliciter loquendo civilis ordinatur ad contemplativam” (p. 35 [lines 31–40]).

Aristotle's *Ethics*, why the contemplative life is superior to the active life. He adds a ninth reason derived from the Gospel story of Martha and Mary. Finally, he says that it may happen that accidentally the active life should be preferred, due to the necessities of one's particular circumstances. He does not argue from the claim that contemplation is the end of action. His extensive use of Aristotle seems to reflect a view that both the active and contemplative lives are choice-worthy in their own right, though the contemplative life is, absolutely speaking, higher and better.<sup>60</sup>

This is borne out in his treatment of the different sorts of religious lives, which are first divided into active and contemplative orders. There is little indication that Aquinas considers that the religious life ordered to external works is a step on the way to one ordered to contemplation. Rather, he argues that it is fitting that some religious orders should be dedicated to the active life, since this is an expression of love of neighbor, which, when done for God's sake, flows back to him.<sup>61</sup> He addresses an objection to this position based on a quote from Dionysius which says that, through contemplation of divine things, men are united to God by serving him through an "indivisible and singular life." In his response, Aquinas argues that such a service to God is preserved in the active life when it is done for God's sake. Further, the "singularity of life" is guarded when such a religious focuses solely on serving God through his works.<sup>62</sup>

Aquinas argues that, generally speaking, one should not leave one religious order for another.<sup>63</sup> One reason is that each person can more easily perfect himself in the religious order that he is used to. Aquinas does add that such a change is permitted in a few cases, for instance when one through zeal seeks a more perfect religious order (for instance, one devoted to contemplation, or a stricter active order). Nevertheless, he makes it clear that this is the exception, not the norm. He views the active religious life as a stable state, not as a transitory stage on the way to a contemplative religious life.

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<sup>60</sup> The question of the superiority of the contemplative life to the active life is a complex one, due in large part to the fact that the life of teaching and preaching, actions belonging to the active life, is higher than the contemplative life. Thus Christ himself chooses the active life rather than the contemplative life. This question rests on the order of contemplation to action, and charity and the common good in relation to action and contemplation, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. For recent contributions to this question, see Sommers, "Contemplation and Action," and Van Nieuwenhove, "Dominican Calling."

<sup>61</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 188, a. 2.

<sup>62</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 188, a. 2, obj. 1 and ad 1.

<sup>63</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 189, a. 8.

It is instructive to look at Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle's teaching on action and contemplation in the commentary on the *Ethics*, written nearly contemporaneous with the treatise on action and contemplation in the *ST*. Despite his heavy use of Albert the Great's *Super ethica*,<sup>64</sup> he does not claim, as Albert does several times in his commentary, that the contemplative life is the end of the active life. Instead he speaks of action and contemplation as two distinct lives that can be chosen—unequal, but each choice-worthy for its own sake.<sup>65</sup> The two lives are different ways to attain reason: the contemplative life is rational essentially, or *per se*; the active life is rational through participation. The contemplative life is the principal happiness, the active life a sort of secondary happiness. The active life is called a disposition to the contemplative life once while explaining the order of the books of the *Ethics*.<sup>66</sup> And he speaks of the whole of civil life as ordered to rest, which in turn is ordered to contemplation.<sup>67</sup> But this finality that exists in the civil order does not seem to be present on the level of the individual. There is no claim that, for the individual, the active life is ordered to the contemplative life in this life as to an end. If this seems a breach of the unity that the happiness described in book I demands, it is restored in part by the fact that both lives seek the rational good: the rational in humans is twofold, he says.<sup>68</sup> This good in humans is doubly owing to their nature as a composite of soul and body: they possess both reason and other powers susceptible of being guided by reason.

### *Dispositio in the Summa Theologiae*

None of this is to argue, however, that Aquinas in the *ST* does not see the active life as ordered to the contemplative life. He continues to state this. Further, he continues to say that the active life is a necessary prerequisite for the contemplative life, even if it does not of itself lead necessarily to the contemplative life. And in the *ST*, as in his *Scriptum*, he frequently refers to the active life as a disposition to the contemplative life. What is new, however, is a fuller explanation of this relationship in terms of his philosophical theory of the soul, an explanation inchoate in the *Scriptum* but not spelled out.

The active life is a disposition to the contemplative life in two ways.

<sup>64</sup> See Doig, *Aquinas's Philosophical Commentary*, 24–27; 198.

<sup>65</sup> See Aquinas, *In X eth.*, lec. 12.

<sup>66</sup> See *In II eth.*, lec. 1.

<sup>67</sup> See *In X eth.*, lec. 11; we will return to this point shortly.

<sup>68</sup> See Aquinas, *In X eth.*, lec. 10. See also lec. 20: *In X eth.*, lec. 12; and *De virtutibus*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 11. See Müller, “*Duplex Beatitudo*”; Donato, “Contemplation as the End.”

In one way, it restrains and orders the passions. The active life orders the passions and thus restrains them from turning the soul from intelligible things to sensible things.<sup>69</sup> The specific way the passions can interfere with the soul is by producing *phantasmata* that disturb contemplation.<sup>70</sup> By ordering the passions, the active life stops this effect. This is especially true of the virtue of temperance, and particularly chastity.<sup>71</sup>

In the second way, the active life is a disposition to the contemplative by subduing external disturbances.<sup>72</sup> This is mainly achieved through the virtue of justice, by which quarrels with others are forestalled and which produces peace.<sup>73</sup> Here the ordering does not take place within a person, but in the external world through one's actions. At other times, however, Aquinas speaks of external works of action as a hindrance to contemplation, since someone cannot at the same time perform both external actions and internal contemplation.<sup>74</sup> Further, actions interfere with contemplation because they are produced through the sensitive powers, the working of which inhibits intellectual activity.<sup>75</sup>

How is it that external actions can both impede contemplation and be a disposition for it? Relative to the one acting, external works primarily impede contemplation. But relative to others, they are a disposition to contemplation, inasmuch as they establish the conditions necessary for contemplation to take place. In the commentary on the *Ethics*, though Aquinas seems to depart from his earlier view that contemplation is the end of the active life for the individual person, he nevertheless holds this for the city as a whole, as we saw.<sup>76</sup> The highest moral virtues, those in the political and military sphere, are ordered to the peace of the city, by which contemplation is possible. The politician or soldier exercises moral virtues which impede contemplation for himself but bring about a peace which permits others in the city to engage in contemplation.

In the *Scriptum*, when speaking of the active life as a disposition to the

<sup>69</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 2.

<sup>70</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 182, a. 3. All human knowing in this life is through phantasms, but the more free the soul is from them, the more it can abstract intelligible things from them. See also *ST* II-II, q. 15, a. 3.

<sup>71</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 2, ad 3. See further Viktória Hedvig Deák, "*Consilia sapientis amici*": Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Foundation of the Evangelical Counsels in *Theological Anthropology* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 2014), 358–64.

<sup>72</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 2; cf. I-II, q. 69, a. 3.

<sup>73</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 3, ad 2.

<sup>74</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 182, a. 3.

<sup>75</sup> See *ST* I, q. 112, a. 1, ad 3.

<sup>76</sup> See *In X eth.*, lec. 11. Cf. *De regno* II, ch. 3.

contemplative, he uses the example of heat disposing to fire—at its ultimate limit, it arrives at fire. He does not return to this metaphor in the *ST*, perhaps because it implies that the active life inevitably tends towards the contemplative life. Instead, the impact of the active life on the contemplative is explained psychologically by the influence of the different powers of the soul on each other, or even in terms of the particular characters of individual men.<sup>77</sup>

*Causes for a New Account of the Relationship of Action  
and Contemplation*

What is the reason for the change in Aquinas's account of the relationship between action and contemplation? The basis of the division between action and contemplation remains relatively stable throughout his writings. If, in comparison to the analogous section in the *ST*, the description of the distinction between action and contemplation in the *Scriptum* emphasizes more the internal ordering of the passions than external works, still this difference in emphasis should not obscure the basic agreement of the two works. In both, the distinction between action and contemplation is based on the intellect as either knowing truth for its own sake or knowing for the sake of action. This is not based on any division of the powers of the intellect, but only on the end to which knowing aims.<sup>78</sup>

Why, then, does he modify his teaching about contemplation being the end of action, given that the basis for the division between action and contemplation remains essentially the same throughout his works? One important element of his new position is the principle, received from Aristotle's *Ethics*, that an act ordered to another act as an end is subsumed under the species of that act. As we saw, he uses this principle to argue that moral virtues pursued for the sake of contemplation belong to the contemplative life rather than the active life. This seems to preclude the position that the contemplative life is the end of the active life, inasmuch as such a position eliminates the active life. If it is true that the pursuit of moral virtues for the sake of the contemplative life belongs to the contemplative life, and if moral virtues always have the contemplative life as their end, then there is no active life. This principle, often formulated with reference to *Ethics* V, seems to be first used by Aquinas in *De malo* (ca.1266–1270) and appears several times in the *ST*.<sup>79</sup> While he has the more general prin-

<sup>77</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 182, a. 4.

<sup>78</sup> See *In III Sent.* d. 35, q. 1, a. 1; *ST* II-II, q. 179, a. 2; I, q. 69, a. 11.

<sup>79</sup> *De malo*, q. 8, a. 1, ad 15; *ST* II-II, q. 11, a. 1, ad 2; q. 181, aa. 2, 4; III, q. 88, a. 4.

ciple that the end determines the act in the *Scriptum*,<sup>80</sup> he does not, to my knowledge, have the more specific claim that an act ordered to another act is drawn to that act's species, and he does not apply it to the question of the ordering of action and contemplation.

Another important change is that of the relationship of the practical intellect and the speculative intellect to happiness. In the *Scriptum*, he is unequivocal: happiness is found not in the practical intellect, but only in the speculative intellect.<sup>81</sup> His argument is that man's happiness is through the intellect, since that is what joins him to his ultimate end. The practical intellect, concerned with doing or making, is ordered to what it knows as cause to effect. But the effect of something cannot be its ultimate end. "Therefore it is impossible that happiness consists in the act of the practical intellect, but only in the act of the speculative intellect."<sup>82</sup>

In the corresponding passage in the *ST* (I-II, q. 3, a. 5), Aquinas is less categorical. In response to the question whether beatitude is an operation of the speculative intellect or the practical, he says that it is *more* an act of the speculative intellect, rather than *only* such an act. He gives three reasons for this, each distinct from his argument in the *Scriptum*: it is the operation of the best power with respect to the best object; it is most sought on account of itself, rather than for something else; and through contemplation we lead a life that is common to God and the angels, and are made like them. Thus, the perfect life will consist wholly in contemplation in the next world; in this world, however, it consists principally in contemplation but secondarily in the active life—just as, Aquinas says, Aristotle taught in *Ethics X*.

If the active life is a real, albeit secondary, happiness, then there is little reason to have the contemplative life as the end of the active life. Indeed, placing the contemplative life as the end of the active life would seem to sit uneasily with maintaining that the active life is a real happiness for humans, since what is simply ordered to another end cannot, it seems, be called happiness in any meaningful sense.<sup>83</sup> It is true that, for the Christian, both contemplation and action in this life are ordered to beatitude in the next, so that they have an end beyond themselves. But that is why they cannot be called happiness absolutely, but only relatively. In this world, they have

<sup>80</sup> See *In II sent.*, d. 40, q. 1, a. 1.

<sup>81</sup> See *In IV sent.*, d. 49, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 3. See Krause, "Remodelling Ultimate Human Happiness," 25–26.

<sup>82</sup> *In IV sent.*, d. 49, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.5.1097a15–b6.



the character of finality, since each can be chosen as good in itself and not for the sake of any other activity.<sup>84</sup>

As said earlier, if having the active life as even a secondary happiness seems to mar the unity of man's end, we must remember that the rational is double for human beings, as Aquinas says. Humans are naturally composites of soul and body, which means that reason is ordered not only to knowledge of truth, but to actions and ordering the passions. Aquinas's revised view that happiness can be active as well as contemplative seems more aligned with his teaching, held throughout his writings, that the human being is a composite of soul and body, rather than just a soul. As Jörn Müller points out, the view that happiness consists solely in contemplation seems to fit with a "more Neoplatonic vision of man," while the view that happiness is both contemplative and active fits better with "Aristotle's picture of man as a composite being made up of body and soul."<sup>85</sup>

### Conclusion

Nowhere in the *ST* does Aquinas make the claim that the contemplative life is the end of the active life. That he no longer holds this position is indicated by several arguments. The place of the treatise on action and contemplation within the *ST* shows that not all men are called to the contemplative life—as would be the case if the contemplative life is the end of the active life—but only some. He suggests that innate characteristics determine the suitability of some men for the contemplative life, and others for the active life. He explicitly says that the active life is choice-worthy for its own sake and constitutes a secondary form of happiness. Reflecting this

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<sup>84</sup> One objection to this position is that, as Boersma argues in "Divine Contemplation," the *intuitus simplex* of God in the crowning act of contemplation in this life and the *intuitus simplex* of God, and the beatific vision in the next life have a "fundamental continuity" (489), and for this reason Aquinas calls contemplation in this life *inchoatio beatitudinis*. No such continuity can be posited between the active life and the next life—on the contrary, Aquinas says in *ST* II-II, q. 181, a. 4, that the active life will not be present in the next life. Given this, it seems plausible that all men would strive to attain contemplation in this life as the closest thing to their final end. Indeed, Aquinas gives this continuity as his final reason for the superiority of the contemplative life to the active life through a quotation from Augustine addressing Martha (q. 182, a. 1). But as he immediately goes on to say, some men should still choose the active life, because of the needs of this life ("propter necessitatem praesentis vitae"). I think both positions can be maintained: there is a fundamental continuity between contemplation in this life and in the next, and the active life is not necessarily ordered to the contemplative life in this world.

<sup>85</sup> Müller, "Duplex Beatitudo," 63, 57.

is an explanation of the word “cardinal” as applied to the moral virtues that differs from his explanation in the *Scriptum*, where he incorporates the idea that the moral virtues are not chosen for their own sake, but are a doorway to contemplation. Also aligned with this teaching that the active life can be chosen for its own sake is his treatment of the active religious orders as stable states rather than stages on the way to contemplative orders. He applies the Aristotelian principle that an act which has another act as its end is drawn to the species of that act, to the active and contemplative lives—action undertaken as a disposition to contemplation becomes part of the contemplative life. This precludes the universal claim that the contemplative life is the end of the active life, since it would mean there is no active life. Finally, there is a fuller explanation of the active life as a disposition to the contemplative life in terms of Aristotelian psychology. This explanation does not suggest, as his use of *dispositio* does in the *Scriptum*, that the active life tends inevitably towards the contemplative life.

The evolution of Aquinas’s views on the order of action to contemplation can be construed as an individual instance of his general trend, in the words of René-Antoine Gauthier, “to mitigate the excessive intellectualism that he had first professed.”<sup>86</sup> I do not deny that Aquinas was a catholic thinker who drew from numerous thinkers and traditions as he deepened his thought, but still, in this instance of the relationship of action to contemplation, the influence of Aristotle seems paramount. Unsurprisingly, while writing this treatise he was simultaneously engaged in a deep study of Aristotle’s *Ethics*. His mature teaching on this matter is indebted to a number of positions that he derived from Aristotle: the principle that a moral act directly ordered to another act takes its species from that act; an understanding of the human person as not intellect alone but a composite of soul and body; an explanation of the active life as a disposition to the contemplative life that is rooted in Aristotelian psychology; and the interpretation of the active and contemplative lives not as stages, but stable states, each choice-worthy in its own right. N.V

<sup>86</sup> René-Antoine Gauthier, “La date du Commentaire de saint Thomas sur l’Éthique à Nicomaque,” *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 18 (1951): 103n91 (quoted in Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005], 245). Gauthier indicates a constellation of issues in which this general tendency is at work and suggests that a deeper understanding of the *De anima* is one of the driving forces. Torrell concurs here with Gauthier’s position, stating that Aquinas’s later positions come from “a much more complex grasp of human reality than the one suggested by the earliest analyses” and are enabled at least in part by “technical means” acquired from Aristotle.