

12

Aquinas's Shiny Happy People

Perfect Happiness and the Limits of Human Nature

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Aquinas's epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics all culminate with God: God as perfect truth is the highest object of our intellection; God as first cause is also our final cause; God as highest good (*summum bonum*) is the ultimate object of our volition. In the beatific vision, human beings are joined to this God in a never-ending act of contemplation of the divine essence, a state which utterly fulfills the human drive for knowledge and satisfies every desire of the human heart.¹ The activity of cognizing the essence of God, though, and the sort of knowledge of God's essence that would let our wills rest completely is not something human beings could ever achieve on their own, even at the height of their intellectual powers.² In this chapter, I examine the specifics of Aquinas's account of the

¹ Aquinas's canonical description of human happiness is simple: it is knowing and loving God (*Summa theologiae* IaIIae 1.8.co). Perhaps as a result, the precise details of Aquinas's account of the beatific vision do not always receive the sort of careful attention one might expect of such a crucial component of his theory. For example, two relatively recent magisterial treatments of Aquinas—Eleonore Stump's *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003) and John Wippel's *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas's: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000)—contain no sustained discussion of the nature of our ultimate end, much less how we transition from the limited happiness of this life to the complete happiness of the next.

² In his extensive discussion of this topic in *Aquinas on the Two-Fold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 531, Denis Bradley refers to this as the “natural endlessness” of human beings; the ultimate end of human beings is “the vision of God, which nature demands but cannot provide”.

beatific vision and argue that it represents less a *fulfillment* of human nature than a *transcendence* of that nature—and that what’s transcended is not incidental. For those of us attracted to radical hylomorphism and its emphasis on the importance of embodiment, the beatific vision comes at a significant price. The main goal of this chapter is demonstrate just how high that cost is.

1. The Beatific Vision

Aquinas addresses the nature of perfect human happiness primarily in discussions of our knowledge of God, the nature of our ultimate end, and our resurrected state.³ In this section, I examine his main claims in each of those discussions to present a unified picture of what the beatific vision entails for human beings.

1.1 *Knowledge of God*

First and foremost, the beatific vision is unending contemplation of the divine essence. Although he insists that in this life we can have no direct knowledge of God,⁴ Aquinas holds that in the life to come we will see God “face to face” by contemplating God’s essence; only this vision will satisfy the natural human desire for knowledge. As he says,

If the human intellect, through knowing the essence of some created thing, knows of God merely *that* he is, the perfection of that intellect has not yet reached the First Cause in an unqualified sense; instead, there remains in it a natural desire to seek the cause. For this reason, [the human being] is not yet perfectly happy. Therefore, perfect happiness requires that the intellect reach all the way to the very essence of the First Cause. (*ST IaIIae* 3.8)

In the life to come, we will know not just *that* God exists—we will eternally cognize *who* God is.

³ For the most detailed and extended discussions of these topics in Aquinas’s mature works, see (respectively) *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) Ia12, *Summa contra gentiles* (*SCG*) 3.51–63; *ST IaIIae* 1–5, *SCG* 3.25–48, and his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*; *SCG* 4.79–97. (The discussion of the resurrection of the body in *Summa theologiae* is, regrettably, contained in the supplement that was compiled by others—largely from Aquinas’s much earlier *Sentences* commentary—after his death.)

⁴ Instead, in this life, we rely on divine revelation and natural theology, which proceeds by way of the *via negativa*, as exemplified in book 1 of *SCG*.

But what does it mean for us to cognize God's essence? Aquinas is clear that it does not entail *complete* comprehension: Only God (in whom essence is identical to existence) has or could have complete comprehension of his own being.⁵ Not even divine assistance can transform our intellects to the point where they (or any other non-divine intellect) could achieve the sort of knowledge of God that God possesses. Thus, even in the beatific vision, human beings can contemplate God's essence only to the highest degree possible for finite intellects.

Our act of comprehension in the beatific vision will nevertheless be radically different from any cognitive act we can manage in this life. In this life, the use of our natural intellectual powers requires sense perception. Because our intellects are not just finite but the weakest of all created intellects,⁶ the typical process of human cognition requires moving from multiple sense experiences of particular physical objects to the abstraction of phantasms (roughly, mental pictures), and from the abstraction of phantasms to the formation of intelligible species (the basic objects of thought). Higher intellects, such as angels, are able naturally to receive and employ intelligible species directly via illumination, but human intellects require the aid of sensible particulars in arriving at and using intelligible species. In fact, according to Aquinas, in the normal course of things, *any* time we cognize, our intellects must refer back to the phantasms that ground the intelligible species that serve as the objects of our thought. In marked contrast with this usual process, however, "in that perfect happiness in heaven to which we look forward . . . the operation by which the human mind is joined to God will not depend on the senses" (*ST IaIIae* 3.3.co). The knowledge of God's creative effects that we can reach through our experiences of the world around us can get us only to the conclusion that God exists.⁷ To know God's essence, we need more.

In particular, Aquinas claims that the beatific vision requires a two-fold process of divine intervention. First, the only way that we could possibly have God's being as an object of cognition would be for God to join his essence to our intellects as the intelligible form—i.e. the

⁵ See *SCG* 3.55.

⁶ See e.g. the extended discussions of human cognition in comparison to other intellects in *ST Ia* 84–9, *SCG* 2.94–101, *SCG* 3.37–60, *Quaestiones de anima*, and *De veritate* 8–10.

⁷ In the life to come, however, we contemplate those effects by means of our grace-infused vision of God's essence.

object—of that act of contemplation.⁸ In Aquinas’s words: “To know subsisting being itself belongs naturally only to the Divine Intellect, and is beyond the natural faculty of any created intellect (since no creature is being itself, but has [only] participated being). Therefore, a created intellect can only see God through his essence to the extent that God joins himself to the created intellect through his grace” (*ST Ia 12.4.co*). The beatific vision is an intellectual vision of God’s essence, which God himself has to give us.

Even having God join our intellects to his isn’t itself sufficient for us to cognize the essence of the First and Final Cause, however: in order to be raised so far above anything they are naturally capable of, our intellects also require a second sort of divine assistance—namely, a gift of illumination that allows us to comprehend that essence when we are joined to him in this way. As Aquinas puts it, “Since the natural power of a created intellect is incapable of seeing the essence of God, as was shown above (12.4), something must be added to that power of understanding by divine grace. And we call this increase in the intellectual power the illumination of the intellect” (*ST Ia 12.5.co*).⁹ Human beings can thus attain the beatific vision only when God first joins himself to our intellects as their intelligible form and then illuminates our intellects so that our powers of understanding are capable of cognizing that form. In short: “In such a vision, the divine essence must be both *what is seen* and *that by which* it is seen” (*SCG 3.51*).

Human beings have a natural desire for the beatific vision (insofar as we have a natural desire to know and understand the ultimate cause of our existence), then, but the activity itself is utterly unlike any sort of cognition we experience in this life. The beatific vision also entails a drastic shift in our temporal experience of cognition. Human beings employ discursive reasoning: When following an argument, for instance, we move from premise to premise to conclusion, rather than instantly comprehending the entire argument in its entirety. This process not only occurs *in* time—it *takes* time. God, on the other hand,

⁸ “When any intellectual creature sees God through his essence, the essence of God is itself the intelligible form of that intellect” (*ST Ia 12.5.co*). Those who see the divine essence do so not by any likeness of a created thing to that essence, but purely by the divine essence itself united to their intellect (*ST Ia 12.9.co*).

⁹ See *SCG 3.53* for an extended discussion of this process.

participates in just one eternal and complete act of comprehension. (Angels, who exist in an intermediate state between eternity and temporality called “sempiternity”, have a form of cognition that is correspondingly neither discursive nor complete and simultaneous.) Because in the beatific vision we contemplate God’s eternal and unchanging essence, however, Aquinas argues that “what is seen in the Word is seen not successively, but simultaneously” (*ST Ia 12.10.co*).¹⁰ That is, perfect happiness involves a single, sustained act of *unchanging* contemplation on our part—what Aquinas refers to as “one continuous and sempiternal activity” (*ST IaIIae 3.2.ad4*).

The reason for this, according to Aquinas, is that our natural desire for knowledge will be completely satisfied only if that act of knowledge is complete. And, he takes it, a complete act of knowledge is unchanging, for change entails a move from one object of thought to another—and “each thing rests when it reaches its ultimate end, since all motion is for the sake of acquiring that end, and the ultimate end of the intellect is vision of the divine substance, as was shown above. Therefore, the intellect which is seeing the divine substance does not move from one intelligible thing to another” (*SCG 3.6o*). Once we have reached our ultimate end and are cognizing God’s essence, our intellects will have no need for other objects of cognition. Everything that we know we will know by means of our union with God’s unchanging essence.

1.2 *The Nature of our Ultimate End*

Aquinas also presents the beatific vision as the fulfillment of human nature. According to Aquinas, we are hylomorphic composites of matter and form that possess all the capacities of animals (e.g. nutrition and growth, locomotion and sense perception) while being differentiated from other animals by our possession of rational capacities (most notably, reason and will). We are also made in the image of God, where “what it means for us to be an image is that we are intellectual creatures endowed with free choice and capable of controlling our own acts” (Prologue to *ST IaIIae*). Our ultimate end is the fulfillment of our nature as rational animals. Thus, as Aquinas puts it in his *Treatise on Happiness*,

¹⁰ It’s worth noting, though, that the cognition of created beings doesn’t comprehend everything simultaneously with respect to the knowledge of the natural world—just with respect to knowledge of God (*10.ad2*).

“Human beings and other rational creatures attain their ultimate end by knowing and loving God” (*ST IaIIae* 1.8.co).¹¹

The beatific vision thus fully satisfies both our intellects *and* our wills—our rational appetite for the highest good. Once we are enjoying the fulfillment of this appetite by contemplating the very essence of the *summum bonum*, there will be nothing left for us to want. This is why Aquinas believes the beatific vision deserves the title of *perfect* happiness. Direct vision of God’s essence perfects us in such a way that any further change on our part would be a move away from perfection: We rest complete in the satisfaction of our deepest desires.¹² Contemplation of the divine essence through the divine essence is not an activity that will change or develop. Once it begins, it is utterly unchanging.¹³

The fact that our intellects and wills are perfected in the beatific vision does not, however, imply that this experience will be the same for all the rational creatures that are enjoying it. Whenever he discusses the question of whether one human being can be happier than another in the afterlife, Aquinas answers strongly in the affirmative.¹⁴ All rational beings share an ultimate end (God), but only God participates fully in that end, and so only God is fully happy: “The happiness of God comprehending his essence through his intellect is greater than that of a human being or an angel, who sees God’s essence but does not comprehend it” (3.8.ad2). All created rational beings are capable of happiness, but even ultimate happiness thus admits of degrees depending on the extent to which a being is capable of enjoying it.

What distinguishes one being’s happiness from another is the extent to which the being loves what they see when they contemplate God’s essence. Rather than involving a greater understanding of the intellect, seeing God more clearly is the result of having a will disposed to enjoy the vision more deeply. In *SCG* 3.57, for instance, Aquinas explains that although human intellects will be raised to a state where they will be

¹¹ See also *Compendium theologiae* 2.9, where Aquinas describes complete happiness as a union of our minds with God that consists in the activity of knowing and loving God.

¹² See e.g. *Ia* 12.7–8 and *SCG* 3.48.

¹³ Aquinas’s is not a conception of the afterlife in which we continue to grow in knowledge or love. Separated souls can (at least according to Aquinas’s early *Sentences Commentary*) increase in knowledge after death and before the bodily resurrection, but even in such early writings, Aquinas claims that, come the Day of Judgment, everything is finished and complete: we reach perfect stasis and remain that way for the rest of eternity.

¹⁴ See e.g. *ST Ia* 12.6, *ST IaIIae* 5.2, *SCG* 3.58.

considered equal to the highest angelic intellect, that sort of intellectual equality does not entail equal happiness among created beings.¹⁵ Instead, “The one who will have more charity will see God more perfectly and will be happier” (*ST Ia 12.6*). Even when two people both possess perfect happiness, then, one person can be happier because “the greater one’s enjoyment of this good, the happier one is”; a person can enjoy the good more when her will is “better disposed and ordered to this enjoyment” (*ST IaIIae 5.2.co*). Differences in our will’s dispositions and affections that were formed over the course of our earthly lives thus appear to have a lasting effect. In the beatific vision, our wills rest in eternal and perfect enjoyment of the ultimate end, but the degree of that unchanging enjoyment depends on how we have disposed our wills in this life.

1.3 *Our Resurrected Bodies*

Human beings are not, however, merely composites of intellects and wills. They also possess bodies—bodies that are included in the very definition of human being as “rational animal.” And Aquinas is clear that perfect human happiness involves the perfection of our bodies just as it involves the perfection of our intellects and wills: Our bodies will be raised immortal and incorruptible versions of their original selves. We will not hunger or thirst; we will not tire or suffer pain, for those are states of “want.” After the bodily resurrection and the final judgment, we will have glorified bodies lacking in and for nothing.¹⁶

The beatific vision is, moreover, not an activity that requires sense perception.¹⁷ Although we will still be *capable* of sense perception, there will be no *need* for our bodies to use their senses. In this life, we require bodies for gathering the information from the world around us that grounds our cognitive processes and thus makes our moral lives possible. Such bodies need to be mutable in order to be changed by what we experience—Aquinas, like Aristotle, believes that human cognition requires

¹⁵ “And so we refute the error of those who have said that the human soul, no matter how elevated, is not able to reach equality with the higher intellects” (2336).

¹⁶ Well, the blessed will have glorified bodies, anyway. The damned will have bodies that persist forever more, but they will not have the same qualities and will be subject to e.g. pain and suffering. In what follows, I will discuss only the case of the resurrected bodies of the glorified, for the sake of simplicity.

¹⁷ This fact is obvious if we think of the other beings who share it with us: God and the angels, who are wholly immaterial.

the knower to become relevantly like the known. As we've seen, though, the senses are unnecessary for the sempiternal contemplation of God's unchanging essence that constitutes our final end.¹⁸

Rather than actively contributing to our experience of the beatific vision, our bodies will share in perfect human happiness by receiving an overflow of the glory and happiness our souls receive from their vision of God. In both this life and the life to come, our senses are receptive capacities. In this life, however, the role of our sensory capacities is to provide our intellectual capacities with their proper objects of intellection (intelligible species), and our senses are perfected through their reception of their proper objects of perception (color for vision, sound for hearing, odor for smell, etc.). In the life to come, by contrast, our senses will be perfected by an outpouring from our newly perfected intellectual capacities. In the *Treatise on Happiness*, for instance, Aquinas quotes Augustine to this effect, saying that after the resurrection "there will be such an outflow to the body and the bodily senses from the happiness of the soul that they will be perfected in their operations" (*ST IaIIae* 3.3.co). This "inside-out" model of the perfection of the senses and the body is an exact "flip" of the "outside-in" model prevalent in this life.

What else will this "inside-out" model entail besides ideally functioning senses? Aquinas, following longstanding tradition, claims that our resurrected bodies will possess four new qualities that will place them above the heavenly bodies: "[T]he glory of resurrected bodies will exceed the natural perfection of celestial bodies, since they will be *brighter*, more firmly *impassible*, much more *agile*, and with a more *perfect dignity* of nature" (*SCG* 4.86).¹⁹ The first quality, *claritas*, captures the way in which light of glory will literally shine forth from us. The soul enjoying the divine vision will be filled with spiritual clarity or brightness—so full that it will spill over from the soul to the body and make the body bright.

¹⁸ See also *SCG* 3.62, where Aquinas explains that the enjoyment of the beatific vision never ends; our intellects will not tire in their contemplation (with God's assistance), "and no act which is carried out through a physical organ coincides with this vision" (8). Aquinas is careful in all his discussions of the beatific vision to make it clear that this vision is purely intellectual and not physical.

¹⁹ Aquinas discusses the bodies of the resurrected at length in *SCG* 4.83–8; the corresponding discussion in *ST* is contained in the supplement which (as already noted) was compiled after Aquinas's death, primarily from his much earlier *Sentences* commentary. These qualities are possessed only by the bodies of the blessed, however. The bodies of the damned Aquinas describes as dark, heavy, suffering, and degraded. (See *SCG* 4.89.)

In Aquinas's words, "As the body is now dark, then it will be bright" (SCG 4.86). The second quality, "impassibility," entails that our resurrected bodies will be impervious to suffering and harm. (Our bodies will remain responsive to sensory stimuli, though: Aquinas claims, for instance, that the use of the senses for pleasure is compatible with being incorruptible.) Third, our resurrected bodies will have a "more perfect dignity of nature"—we will possess greater clarity of the senses, as well as perfectly ordered bodily appetites; we will possess ideal beauty as well as strength and perfect health. Finally, our bodies will be able to respond to the commands of our intellects and wills with "much greater agility" in the beatific vision. In this life, I cannot run as fast or as long as I would like, but in the life to come our bodies will carry out our perfect desires in an optimal fashion. We won't *have* to move (since all our desires will be completely fulfilled by our union with God), but if we make a decision to move, our bodies will respond instantly and completely to our rational capacities' commands.²⁰

The beatific vision is everlasting and unchanging; there will be no change or corruption of any kind in the life to come. Aquinas believes this entails that there will also be no eating and no sex—no physical activities of any kind aimed at filling basic physical needs. As he puts it, "All the occupations of the active life (which seem ordered to the use of food and sex and those other things that are necessary for corruptible

²⁰ Surprisingly, the bodies of the vampires from Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series serve as perfect examples of what possession of these four qualities might be like. So e.g. in addition to being impassible and incredibly beautiful, Edward's body famously possesses *claritas*: "Edward in the sunlight was shocking... His skin... literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface... A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal." *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2005), 205. The first-person account of Bella's experiences upon awakening as a vampire in *Breaking Dawn* is especially illuminating for the quality of agility: "I was momentarily preoccupied by the way my body moved. The instant I'd considered standing erect, I was already straight. There was no brief fragment of time in which the action occurred; change was instantaneous, almost as if there was no movement at all" *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2008), 391.. Her response to seeing Edward for the first time with her enhanced vampire senses also presents an interesting take on the culminating vision of the beloved: "How many times had I stared at Edward and marveled over his beauty? How many hours—days, weeks—of my life had I spent dreaming about what I then deemed to be perfection?... I may as well have been blind. For the first time, with the dimming shadows and limiting weakness of humanity taken off my eyes, I saw his face. I gasped and then struggled with my vocabulary, unable to find the right words. I needed better words." *Breaking Dawn*, 390.

life) will cease. Only the activity of the contemplative life will remain after the resurrection” (SCG 4.83). All desire comes to rest in perfect happiness, and the only activity that persists will be the knowing and loving of God.

2. Imperfect Happiness and the All-Sufficiency Thesis

The beatific vision reaches beyond anything human beings are capable of on their own or in this life. Aquinas does, however, claim that there is a sort of happiness available to us in earthly life, which he calls “imperfect” happiness.²¹ In this section, I examine the difference between imperfect and perfect happiness and demonstrate that, on Aquinas’s view, it is the all-sufficient nature of our final end that explains the extent to which the beatific vision both fulfills and transcends our status as rational animals.

Aquinas follows Aristotle closely in his account of what human flourishing consists in in this life, emphasizing the necessity of material and bodily goods such as wealth, health, and strength.²² Our need for these goods on earth means that even the pinnacle of such happiness is contingent and subject to change—and, thus, imperfect. As we’ve seen, Aquinas holds that perfect happiness must be static and complete. What, then, is the relation between imperfect and perfect human happiness?

²¹ He sometimes uses *beatitudo* vs. *felicitas* to indicate this difference (especially in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*), but he’s not consistent about the distinction, and in the *Treatise on Happiness*, he uses *beatitudo* for both earthly and heavenly happiness and distinguishes between them with the modifiers ‘imperfect’ or ‘perfect’.

²² The relation between imperfect and perfect happiness has attracted a great deal of attention from scholars interested in the extent to which Aquinas is an Aristotelian. For instance, does Aquinas share Aristotle’s vision of our final end? Does the beatific vision’s reliance on supernatural grace and the infused virtues fundamentally divide it from Aristotelian virtue theory? See e.g. Anthony Kenny’s “Aquinas on Aristotelian Happiness,” in S. MacDonald and E. Stump (eds), *Aquinas’s Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 15–27, and Anthony Celano’s “The Concept of Worldly Beatitudo in the Writing of Thomas Aquinas,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 25/2 (1987): 215–26. For a recent exchange, see Eleonore Stump’s “The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas’s Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 28/1 (2011): 29–43, and Jeffrey Hause’s “Aquinas on Aristotelian Justice: Defender, Destroyer, Subverter, or Surveyor?” forthcoming in T. Hoffmann, J. Müller, and M. Perkams (eds), *Thomas Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Sometimes, Aquinas describes perfect happiness as though it is just imperfect happiness with all the earthly obstacles removed:

Now in human beings under the conditions of this present life, there is ultimate perfection through an activity by which they are joined to God; but this activity cannot be continuous, and consequently it cannot be unitary either, since after each interruption there is an additional activity. For that reason human beings cannot have perfect happiness in this present life. That's why, when the Philosopher [Aristotle] says in *Ethics* I [1101a20] that human beings can have happiness in this life, he calls it imperfect happiness, concluding (after much discussion) that “we call them happy *as human beings*.” But God promises us perfect happiness, when we will be “like the angels in heaven,” as is said in Matthew 22.30 . . . [I]n that state of happiness, the mind of a human being will be joined to God in one continuous, sempiternal activity. But in this present life, we fall short of perfect happiness to the extent that we fall short of the unity and continuity of such an activity. Still, though, there is a certain participation in happiness; and the more continuous and unitary the activity can be, the greater that participation in happiness is. (*ST IaIIae* 3.2.ad4)

The main difference between perfect and imperfect happiness in this passage appears to be the sustained nature of the activity involved—imperfect happiness falls short of our final end because our contemplation of God in this life is constantly being interrupted (by our need for food, sleep, and the other sorts of activities required for keeping rational animals alive and well).

Aquinas is clear that our primary goal at all times is to know and love God; even in this life, our greatest happiness is found in contemplation of the truth (and our wills' corresponding enjoyment). The way in which we are unable to sustain intellectual contemplation of God in this life is not the only difference between imperfect and perfect happiness, however. In particular, Aquinas claims that imperfect happiness involves distinct tasks for the speculative and the practical intellects: contemplation of God in the first case, and proper ordering of our actions, emotions, and habits in the second. As he puts it, “Imperfect happiness, such as we are able to have in this life, does consist first and principally in contemplation, *but it consists secondarily in the operation of the practical intellect directing human actions and passions*” (*ST IaIIae* 3.5.co, added emphasis).²³ The practical intellect plays a vital role in our attaining imperfect

²³ He attributes this view to Aristotle as well, ending this sentence with “as is said in *Ethics* X [1177a12, 1178a9].”

happiness, from coordinating the mundane tasks of daily life to (ideally) managing the development of an increasingly virtuous character through prudent decisions. Furthermore, it is this virtuous character that allows us to spend as much time in contemplation in this life as is prudent, thus disposing our wills (at least after the infusion of charity by the Holy Spirit) toward greater enjoyment of perfect happiness in the life to come and maximizing the happiness possible for us in this one. Yet, insofar as earthly happiness still concerns itself with active human striving for virtue and conformity to God's nature—as opposed to unchanging contemplation and enjoyment of that nature—it falls short of our ultimate goal.

This distinction between the roles of the speculative and practical intellect in earthly happiness is compatible with the principal activity of both imperfect and perfect happiness being, as Anthony Celano describes it, linked “by means of the same operation, which is the contemplation of the highest beings.”²⁴ In the rest of this section, though, I challenge the claim that the contemplation in which we engage in this life can fairly be characterized as “the same operation” as the contemplation that forms the central activity of the beatific vision.

First, as already discussed, in this life all our intellectual activity—even our contemplation of eternal and unchanging truth—is inherently bound up with sense perception and phantasms. Among other things, this means that even the highest sort of contemplation a human being could achieve in this life has the speculative sciences (which includes theology) as its upper limit. And Aquinas explicitly claims that the contemplation involved in the speculative sciences cannot be the same as the contemplation of the beatific vision: “It should be said that our intellect is brought into actuality in some way through the consideration of the speculative sciences, but not into highest or complete actuality” (*ST IaIIae* 3.6.ad3). The principles of the speculative sciences are acquired through sense perception and “cannot extend any further than what the cognition of sensibles is able to lead to” (3.6.co).²⁵ Aquinas illustrates the relation between imperfect and perfect happiness by comparison to the sort of imperfect prudence that non-rational animals possess. In the same way that a certain imperfect likeness of prudence (namely,

²⁴ Celano, “Concept of Worldly Beatitude,” 222.

²⁵ See also *SCG* 3.47–8.

“particular instincts for acts that are like the acts of prudence”) can be found in non-rational animals (whereas perfect prudence involves “the power of reasoning about the things they can do”), so a certain imperfect likeness of happiness can be found in human beings when they think about the theoretical sciences. The sort of intellective cognition we are capable of in this life *resembles* “true and perfect happiness,” then, but we should be cautious about claiming that the activity of contemplating anything by means of sensible forms in this life and the activity of contemplating God’s unchanging essence in the next are the same operation.

For one thing, cognition in this life is an essentially temporal activity that moves discursively from one thought to another and cannot comprehend an entire demonstration simultaneously. As we have seen, however, the beatific vision is a sempiternal activity that requires both that God join his divine essence to our intellects and that God, through his grace, enhance our intellects with a gift of illumination so that our intellects are able to comprehend what they see. Although the acts of contemplation in this life and the next share a common object (the universal truth), they are as different in nature as our current contemplation of God’s essence and an angel’s contemplation of God’s essence.

In addition, Aquinas claims that even the “order of perfection” is fundamentally different in the life to come—the very process by which human beings are completed and fulfilled will “flip” from top to bottom. In this life, we begin with sense perception and struggle to gain knowledge, first of the world around us and then the deeper structures and causes of that world. Our intellects and wills are perfected through our participation in physical activities and our corresponding responses. Furthermore, if our participation in physical activities is somehow impeded or compromised, this directly affects our ability to grow in knowledge and moral character. (This is the real bite of the contingency of earthly goods and one of the main reasons earthly happiness is imperfect.) The beatific vision, in contrast, has no contingency attached to it: instead of being dependent on our bodies’ good functioning, perfect happiness flows from God in a way that perfects our bodies. As Aquinas puts it, “The whole human being is perfected in perfect happiness, but the perfection of the lower part comes about through an overflow from the higher part. In the imperfect happiness of this present life, however, perfection proceeds in reverse fashion—from the perfection of the inferior parts to the perfection of the superior parts” (*ST IaIIae* 3.3.ad3). In the

life to come, our bodies will be perfected in their sensory operations, but those operations will no longer be directed towards their original activity (namely, gathering information necessary for cognition). God will have replaced the body's role in our intellectual functioning.

At the center of the difference between imperfect and perfect happiness lies Aquinas's commitment to what I'll call the "all-sufficiency thesis"—namely, that full possession of our final end must complete us in such a way that (a) any and all natural desires are completely fulfilled, and (b) any change in our possession of that end would constitute a falling away from this state of perfection. In every discussion of the beatific vision, Aquinas stresses the point that anything deserving of the name "ultimate" happiness must be just that: Perfect, in the sense of being complete and finished. As long as a human being has an unsatisfied natural desire, that person cannot be considered fully happy.²⁶ But, he claims, human beings naturally desire *perpetuam stabilitatem* or complete peace. As long as we are still striving to know and love God (as opposed to resting in the fullness of that knowledge and love), we both want something we don't yet have and fear the things that can interfere with our attaining that state. Perfect happiness cannot involve any sort of movement toward our final end, because that would imply that we were moving toward further actualizations or perfections we do not yet possess. Rather, perfect happiness must consist in the full and unchanging possession of our final end. Our intellects must be fully actualized, our wills must be fully satisfied, and our bodies must be incorruptible and unchanging.

3. The Cost of Perfect Happiness

In the remainder of this chapter, I want to focus on the philosophical attractiveness of this account of the beatific vision. Addressing its implications for Aquinas's epistemology, ethics, and philosophical anthropology in turn, I argue that, although internally consistent with those other accounts, Aquinas's account of perfect happiness—in particular, his commitment to the all-sufficiency thesis—undermines much of what makes them appealing in the first place.

²⁶ See e.g. the extensive discussions in *Compendium theologiae* 2.9, where Aquinas discusses what it means for us to participate in God's glory, and *SCG* 3.48, where he explains what happiness in this life lacks.

3.1 *Cost for Epistemology*

It seems right and fitting both that our final end would be knowing and loving God and that this activity would require God's help, as opposed to being the sort of thing rational animals can accomplish on their own power. One would hardly expect sensible forms to be helpful in cognizing an immaterial God's divine essence, after all. In this, Aquinas's claims about our ultimate end seem perfectly in keeping with his general theory of cognition and his claims about what perfects our intellects (namely, cognition of necessary and universal truth). As Anthony Kenny puts it, "A full understanding of human nature shows . . . that humans' deepest needs and aspirations cannot be satisfied in the human activities—even the speculative activities—that are natural for a rational animal. Human beings can be perfectly happy only if they can share the superhuman activities of the divine, and for that they need the supernatural assistance of grace."²⁷

What seems less fitting, however, is that this ultimate act of cognition doesn't involve the body's assistance in *any* way. If Aquinas held a version of the substance dualism prevalent in his day, this would be less worrying; given his emphasis on the unified nature of matter and form in human beings, however, the belief that the body will no longer be required for cognition in the life to come appears to undermine the body's continued importance. In short, although the body provides us with the starting-point for all future knowledge, and although our cognizing in this life makes an important difference for how we are disposed with respect to the afterlife—and in that sense the body plays an important role in our *attaining* perfect happiness—it plays no epistemic role in the central activity of that everlasting state.

It's important to note that nothing in Aquinas's account here seems inconsistent. He's clear that the reason human souls require union with matter in the first place is that they are the weakest sort of intellect and need the repeated examples provided by individual sensible forms and corresponding phantasms.²⁸ Once we have God's assistance in cognizing his essence and cognize everything else through that essence, we hardly need the body's assistance. The worry here is more subtle: if, once the beatific vision begins, our bodies simply drop out of the cognitive picture, in what sense are they integral to the everlasting activity of our final end?

²⁷ Kenny, "Aquinas on Aristotelian Happiness," 15–27, 24.

²⁸ See e.g. *SCG* 2.68 and *De veritate* 8.3.ad3.

In a recent article on the body's role in perfect happiness, Joseph Trabbic presents one possibility, arguing that in the life to come, "The body can help the intellect to function excellently when it is a well-disposed body."²⁹ In the life to come, our bodies will be entirely well-disposed towards fulfilling their original function—supporting the actualization of our rational capacities. This seems rather to miss the point, however, that the body is no longer necessary for the intellect's optimal functioning in the afterlife. The primary sense in which Trabbic thinks the perfected body can help the intellect function is by being free of the desires, needs, and flaws that impede cognition in this life. Not impeding the continuous, sempiternal act of cognizing God's essence is hardly *helping* the intellect in that activity in any meaningful sense, though; if all the perfected body is doing to support the beatific vision is not getting in the intellect's way, this hardly makes that body integral to the activity of our final end.

A more promising possibility is that the body allows us to cognize things other than God's essence in the life to come—the resurrected bodies of our friends and loved ones, for instance, and the recreated world around us. Aquinas is clear that the beatific vision itself does not involve the uses of the senses or related faculties,³⁰ but perhaps human beings use their perfected senses and their glorified bodies to cognize the new creation in much the same way they used their original sense faculties to cognize this world.

One reason for thinking the resurrected body might play this role comes from Aquinas's account of separated souls—i.e. human souls persisting in separation from matter between death and the bodily resurrection. According to Aquinas, our souls will be able to know things in this

²⁹ Joseph G. Trabbic, "The Human Body and Human Happiness in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*," *New Blackfriars* (2011), 552–64, 562. Trabbic argues that the body plays an important role in Aquinas's account of perfect happiness in virtue of the fact that there is no human being in the absence of the body, and also because "The body must be rejoined to the soul in its role as the soul's servant. The body's perfection is to serve the soul and to do this well, and the body can only do this when it is itself well-disposed. The body can help the intellect to function excellently when it is a well-disposed body" (562).

³⁰ Our cognitive experiences in the afterlife will resemble angelic cognition much more closely than "normal" human cognition. Aquinas himself relies heavily on the belief that once we receive perfect happiness, we will be 'just like the angels in heaven' (Matt. 22: 30). See *De veritate* 8 for an extended (and extremely complex) discussion of angelic cognition, including its non-discursive nature.

period of separation from our bodies, but only imperfectly and through an influx of intelligible species from God (and the angels).³¹ The knowledge we have in this state is confused and “general,” and the separated soul’s cognition of particulars, for instance, is limited to things that the human being knew (or relate in specific ways to things that human being knew) before death.³² Such cognition is obviously not ideal for human knowers. Union with matter is what allows our intellects to grasp the intelligible species of material things; without physical bodies to assist our intellectual efforts, even God’s illumination can get us only vague understanding of creation. Given this framework, one might think our glorified bodies could function as perfected vehicles of sensory perception in the beatific vision, providing our intellects with optimal objects of cognition that supplement our supernaturally enhanced cognition of God’s essence.

In some of his earlier works, Aquinas does appear to leave room for this possibility. In both his very early *Sentences* commentary and the supplement to *Summa theologiae* (compiled after Aquinas’s death primarily from the *Sentences* commentary), for instance, Aquinas distinguishes between direct and indirect sight in his discussion of whether God will be seen by the blessed. The most direct and best vision of God, of course, is the one granted to us when we are joined to God’s essence as object of intellection and are given the grace to comprehend what we see (within the limits of our still-finite abilities). But Aquinas also claims in these passages that we will have vision of the glorified bodies around us—especially the glorified body of Christ (IIIa 92.2). Our bodies thus provide indirect vision of God’s essence by allowing us to see and marvel at the effects of God’s glory in an enhanced version of the way that we are able to see and marvel at the effects of God’s glory in this life.

Aquinas seems to eliminate even this indirect role for the body in his later descriptions of the beatific vision, however, claiming in both *Summa contra gentiles* 3.51 and the first part of *Summa theologiae* that the beatific vision does not involve any sort of literal vision. In fact, in

³¹ The nature of Aquinas’s views on the exact source of this illumination/influx—and whether those views changed over the course of his career—has been a subject of much debate. See e.g. John Wippel’s “Thomas Aquinas on the Separated Soul’s Natural Knowledge,” in J. McEvoy and M. Dunne (eds), *Thomas Aquinas: Approaches to Truth* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 114–40.

³² See e.g. *ST*Ia 89.4.

his discussion of the beatific vision in *SCG*, he claims that our knowledge not just of species but of individuals existing within those species will come through our vision of the divine essence: “It belongs to the perfection of an intellectual substance that it cognize the natures and powers and proper accidents of all species. Therefore, this will happen in final beatitude through vision of the divine essence. Moreover, through its cognition of natural species, the intellect seeing God will cognize individuals existing within these species” (*SCG* 3.59). If we know even individual substances through our direct vision of God, though, any further knowledge of them we could gain through sense perception would seem at best a pale shadow of the knowledge we already have access to.

Furthermore, none of this changes the fact that the central activity of the beatific vision is divinely assisted cognition of God’s essence. Even if it were the case that our perfected bodies continue to support the cognitive work of our intellects in some indirect fashion while we enjoy the beatific vision, the body remains completely extraneous to the primary activity of our final end.

3.2 *Cost for Ethics*

As we saw in section 2, Aquinas holds that possession of our final end completes us in such a way that any change in our participation in that end would constitute a falling away from this state of perfection. This claim has important implications for Aquinas’s ethics, for it entails that there will be no ethical growth or development in the life to come. Instead, we will remain everlastingly unchanged and unchanging.

It’s not immediately obvious, perhaps, why this fact would constitute a *cost* for Aquinas’s ethical theory. We are created in the image of God, after all, and it is this fact that explains our ability to reach perfect happiness in the first place.³³ Furthermore, Aquinas holds that “*the moral project is to conform our nature to God’s.*”³⁴ Perfect happiness is the

³³ “A human being exists *in potentia* with respect to the knowledge of the blessed, which consists in the vision of God, and toward which the human being is ordered as to an end. For a rational creature is capable of the sort of knowledge of the blessed (*illius beatae cognitionis*) insofar as it exists in the image of God” (*ST IIIa* 9.2.)

³⁴ Rebecca DeYoung, Colleen McCluskey, and Christina Van Dyke, *Aquinas’s Ethics: Metaphysical Foundations, Moral Theory, and Theological Context* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), 173.

culmination of this project because, as Aquinas claims, “It is through the beatific vision that we are made most like God, participating most fully in his happiness” (SCG 3.51). Given that God is unchanging and eternal, if what’s most important about human beings is that we are beings with intellects and wills (and not that we are rational animals), then we should expect our final end to be a transformation as much as it is a fulfillment of our earthly strivings for the ethical life. The beatific vision completely satisfies our wills’ desire for the universal good and puts an end to our need to strive for that Good.³⁵ As such, however, it constitutes the end of the ethical life; it is this end to the ethical life that seems worrisome in the larger context of Aquinas’s thought.

Why? In short, Aquinas’s account of the move from imperfect to perfect happiness significantly downplays the importance of the moral life. In this life, virtues move us toward our ultimate end, and (as we’ve seen) Aquinas believes that they dispose our wills for greater happiness in the next life. But even in this life, our own strivings are ultimately useless without the Holy Spirit’s gift of the infused virtues—virtues that belong to us by grace rather than habits that we’ve formed through the interaction between intellect and will.³⁶ Thus, although the lasting effect of our moral efforts in this life is supposed to be that greater charity allows us to participate more fully in God’s essence in the beatific vision, the importance of our own efforts towards the moral life ultimately seem swamped in light of our need for the infused virtues, which are given not according to our desert but according to God’s will. *All* our efforts are subsumed by grace, ultimately.

More importantly, Aquinas’s emphasis on the all-sufficiency thesis and the radically unchanging nature of the beatific vision leaves no room for the exercise of the moral virtues in the life to come. Although the moral virtues will remain “formally” in human beings, there will be no situations in which the moral virtues would need to be exercised. As Aquinas remarks in SCG 3.63, “the contemplation of truth begins in this life and reaches its fulfillment in the future, but the active and

³⁵ See *Compendium theologiae* 2.9 for an extended discussion of the peace that we will experience in heaven as the result of the satisfaction of all our natural desires.

³⁶ See *ST IaIIae* 62, as well as his treatise *On the Virtues in General*. Jeff Hause provides a thoughtful discussion of the nature, relation, and need for both the moral and infused virtues in his “Aquinas on the Function of Moral Virtue,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 81/1 (2007): 1–20.

civic life does not go beyond the end (*terminos*) of this life.” Because the beatific vision consists entirely in the contemplation of God’s essence, “in the future life, there will be no place for the desires and pleasures of eating and sex; nor for fears or daring concerning dangers of death” (*ST IaIIae 67.1.co*) . . . and, thus, no situations in which the moral virtues would be relevant. Even the theological virtues of faith and hope pass away, for we will see God face to face (and thus have no need for faith in “things unseen”), and all our desires will be filled (leaving us with nothing to hope for).³⁷ Charity and understanding are the only virtues that continue to be exercised in the beatific vision: the first, a virtue of the will, the other an intellective virtue. Moreover, we require even these virtues to be divinely “juiced” in order to contemplate God’s essence.

So much the better, some might say. The gap between God and his creatures is not one that human beings could hope to bridge; of course we must rely on God’s grace to bring us to union with him. That seems right. At the same time, Aquinas spends the majority of the *Summa theologiae* discussing the moral life: it seems troubling that the entirely static conception of the afterlife required by the all-sufficiency thesis renders his extensive focus on human virtues extraneous. At the end of the day, it appears that we can spend as much time as we like attempting to become just or courageous or charitable, but ultimately, even the effort of developing the gift of divinely infused charity does nothing more than increase our level of enjoyment of the perfect happiness that all who believe experience. There’s no growing in grace in the life to come; no continued moral or epistemic development.

3.3 *Cost for Philosophical Anthropology*

A great deal of the recent resurgence in interest in Aquinas has been motivated by his emphasis on human beings as necessarily embodied creatures—composites of matter and form—and his attempt to carve out a conceptual space in his account of human nature between substance dualism and reductive materialism. It is precisely here, however, where his account of the beatific vision and the realization of our final end comes at the highest cost.

³⁷ See *ST IaIIae 67.3–4*.

According to Aquinas, human beings are rational animals: we are unique in having both material bodies and immaterial intellects. One might expect, then, that the final end for human beings would involve full involvement from both. Instead, as we've seen, Aquinas concentrates almost entirely on our rational capacities. In the beatific vision, our intellects and wills are aimed at their highest possible objects: the first cause and the highest good. Our bodies seem left out in the cold in this respect. Their primary function in earthly life is gathering and processing information for our intellects—information necessary for us to live the moral life. In the beatific vision, however, we no longer need such information.

Does the problem lie with Aquinas's account of the beatific vision or with human nature itself? Some scholars seem to imply the second: "The inherent imperfection associated with human nature will never permit [human beings] to attain absolute perfection on earth. The best that one can achieve on earth is what is fitting to the human composite" (Celano, "Concept of Worldly Beatitude," 224). Identification with the "human composite" is here seen as something that needs to be overcome in order for us to achieve perfect happiness. This seems not at all in keeping with Aquinas's radical hylomorphism, however, and his stout (and repeated) rejection of substance dualism.

Aquinas does appear to have significant difficulty fitting the body into his account of the beatific vision. It's clear that he is committed to the bodily resurrection, and that human beings remain matter-form composites in the life to come. Indeed, we *have* to be re-embodied to count as "us" in the life to come. As he writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15, "Since the soul is part of the human body, it is not the whole human being, and I am not my soul; for this reason, although the soul might achieve salvation in another life, it nevertheless does not follow that I or any other human being has salvation in another life."³⁸ Beyond the bare fact that human beings are necessarily embodied and thus require bodies for our enjoyment of everlasting life, however, it's simply not clear

³⁸ Aquinas makes this same claim in a number of places throughout his corpus. See e.g. his gloss on Job's famous claim that "In my flesh shall I see God". Aquinas draws the same distinction here between "me" and "my soul", writing that "Job says, 'whom I myself shall see' as if to say 'not only my soul, but I myself, who subsist from soul and body, will see God'" (ad Job, Lectio 2).

what vital role our bodies play in the activity of our final end. Aquinas himself repeatedly describes the difference between imperfect and perfect happiness as the difference between our being happy “as human beings” versus our being happy “as the angels are happy.”³⁹ The main difference between angels and human beings, however, is that human beings have intellects so weak they require union with the body in order for cognition. Once we’re receiving God’s assistance and experiencing perfect happiness, Aquinas claims that we are considered equal to the angels.

The body’s main function apart from assisting in cognition is to help us participate in the active life. But, as we’ve seen, Aquinas holds that the only activity that persists beyond this life is contemplation. As he puts it, “In the active life, which is occupied with many things, there is less of the nature of happiness than in the contemplative life, which centers on one thing, namely the contemplation of the truth” (*ST IaIIae* 3.2.ad4). All the physical activities that we regularly participate in now will end, for their intended purposes (e.g. nourishment and reproduction) will be obsolete. In fact, in *SCG* 4.83, Aquinas writes that in the life to come we will not participate in things like eating or sex even just for the pleasure involved, claiming that it would be ridiculous to want such lower pleasures when the highest pleasures (those we share with the angels) were available to us: “It is clear that the resurrected will not while away their time eating and drinking, or engaging in sex acts.”

Ultimately, Aquinas’s account of the beatific vision appears to render our bodies nothing more than glorious hood ornaments. They will not be integrally involved in our contemplation of God’s essence, and they will be not carrying out any of the other activities in which human beings participate in this life, either. Our perfected bodies will be signs of the completion of human nature and the corresponding glory of God, but they serve no deeper purpose. To use another analogy, Aquinas’s claims about the activity of our final end make the body look like a ladder that we require in order to climb up to perfect happiness . . . and then gold-plate when we reach that state instead of continuing to use it as a ladder.

³⁹ This contra Trabbic, who writes: “If Aquinas denies that the body is involved in our happiness, we would assume that he would not see much difference between human and angelic happiness, but that is not the case” (“Human Body,” 553).

4. Conclusion

I have argued that a close examination of Aquinas's account of the beatific vision suggests that perfect happiness represents less a fulfillment of human nature than a transcendence of what it means to be human. In particular, his emphasis on the radical all-sufficiency of the beatific vision leaves him without an integral role for the body to play in our final end. Scholars attracted to Aquinas's philosophy would do well to address these implications of his account of perfect happiness to other aspects of his thought.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ My thanks to the participants in the Baylor/Georgetown/Notre Dame 2011 Philosophy of Religion Conference—particularly, Thomas Williams for his insightful comments and insistence that I hadn't gone far enough in critiquing the beatific vision—and to the audience of the 2012 Logos Conference on Minds, Bodies, and the Divine—especially Susan Brower-Toland for her helpful comments. This chapter is much improved as the result of those conversations, as well as many more, including those with my own department at Calvin College.

