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The Transcendence of Love According to St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Elizabeth of the Trinity in her writings about transcending one's nature by love expressed, "If anyone were to ask me the secret of happiness, I would say it is no longer to think of self... You see pride is love of ourselves; well, love of God must be so strong that it extinguishes all our self-love"¹. Aristotle, on the other hand, expressed an apparently different attitude when he said, "If as the virtuous man is to himself, he is to his friend also (for his friend is another self): if all this be true, as his own being is desirable for each man, so, or almost so, is that of his friend. Now his being was seen to be desirable because he perceived his own goodness, and such perception is pleasant in itself"². Aristotle seems to think that self-love between friends is a good thing, while St. Elizabeth thinks self-love in relationship to God is not good. Which of these is correct?

For St. Thomas Aquinas, self-love is a prerequisite in the transcending act of love of friendship, both with humans and ultimately with God. In this paper, I will explain the nature of the will, its loves, and how charity perfects its natural action without doing violence to the human nature that God created. In fact, it is the natural structure of human desire that enables God's work of the mystical transformation of love.

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¹ Elizabeth of the Trinity, *The Greatness of Our Vocation*, in: *Elizabeth of the Trinity Complete Works*, vol. 1, trans. A. Kane, 4.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, Bk. 9, Ch. 9, <http://classics.mit.edu/> (access: 12.01.2020).

The will as desiring the good for itself

St. Thomas explains how the will is a rational appetite that is, “nothing else but an inclination of a person desirous of a thing towards that thing”³. If something is inclined to a thing it is due to the fact that the thing is suitable and similar. Every existing thing is a good so that the will must be inclined towards good. Yet since the will desires the form presented to it by the intellect or the senses, it is the form as apprehended as good that the will naturally desires. The will is free to choose between objects since it is not ruled tyrannically by the intellect. Thus, the will acts for some voluntary end perceived as a good.

The human will can choose many ends as ordained to one last end, an ultimate good of happiness that fulfills the desires of the will. St. Thomas asserts, “For happiness is the perfect good, which lulls the appetite altogether; else it would not be the last end, if something yet remained to be desired”⁴. The universal good is the will’s object that it desires to possess and enjoy. The ultimate good perfects the will so that it has nothing more to desire. The will cannot help but will the ultimate good for itself in a type of self-benevolence. St. Thomas says, “Happiness is loved above all, as the good desired; whereas a friend is loved as that for which good is desired; and thus, too, man loves himself”⁵. So man loves himself as someone for whom good is desired.

St. Thomas claims that there are three different acts of love that man partakes in. These three acts are love in general, dilection and charity. He explains that these loves:

“Express act in different ways. For love has a wider signification than the others, since every dilection or charity is love, but not vice versa. Because dilection implies, in addition to love, a choice made beforehand, as the very word denotes; and therefore dilection is not in the concupiscible power, but only in the will, and only in the rational nature. Charity denotes, in addition to love, a certain perfection of love, in so far as that which is loved is held to be of great price”⁶.

Love in general, then, applies to all desires for a good. Dilection, on the other hand, is a rational love as chosen by any person with the use of reason, yet not necessarily human. Finally, charity is a perfection of love that has God for its object.

Of these three, dilection gives the most insight into how the self-love of a person plays into other chosen loves. Dilection has one act with two parts. These two forms are from the object of wishing good toward another person or some thing that is desired for another person. These are the love of friendship

³ STh I-II, q. 8, a. 1.

⁴ STh I-II, q. 2, a. 8.

⁵ STh I-II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 2.

⁶ STh I-II, q. 26, a. 3.

and the love of concupiscence respectively. David M. Gallagher explains that these two loves constitute one act of dilection. He says,

“The distinction between the two loves, then, should not be taken as one between acts which could exist alone, but rather between two inseparable aspects or elements of one single act. We do not love a person without wanting that the person should have what is good for him, nor do we love what is not a person except as good for a person”⁷.

There are two objects then in an act of love for a person: the person and the thing willed for that person. This is not an evaluating of the act of love of friendship as being good nor concupiscence as being bad. Rather they are two loves of good objects, either as loving a person in friendship or loving things as being good for that friend.

The love of concupiscence then should have no negative connotation, since one can will virtue toward another with this same love. Both of these forms of dilection can be either for another person or even for oneself. Thus, in willing good towards oneself as a type of benevolence, a person is willing himself good by love of friendship. When a person wills happiness as the highest good towards himself, he loves himself with a love of concupiscence. Both of these are good and right for a person to will towards himself.

Further explaining man’s naturally good self-love, St. Thomas makes explicit that man possesses this self-love by nature and choice. He explains,

“Consequently both angel and man naturally seek their own good and perfection. This is to love self. Hence angel and man naturally love self, in so far as by natural appetite each desires what is good for self. On the other hand, each loves self with the love of choice, in so far as from choice he wishes for something which will benefit himself”⁸.

This is an important text from St. Thomas since it shows that the natural inclination that man has towards the good is a type of natural inclination to self-love that is as a principle of all other desiring. He makes this explicit saying, “Their natural love is the principle of their love of choice; because, what belongs to that which precedes, has always the nature of a principle. Wherefore, since nature is first in everything, what belongs to nature must be a principle in everything”⁹. Therefore, a man wills both love of friendship and love of concupiscence towards himself naturally. This self-love is what gives rise to all other desires within the soul.

⁷ D. M. Gallagher, *Thomas Aquinas on Self-Love as the Basis for Love of Others*, in: *Acta Philosophica*, p. 27, <http://www.actaphilosophica.it/> (access: 12.01.2020).

⁸ STh I, q. 60, a. 3.

⁹ STh I, q. 60, a. 2.

Self-love's role in loving another human person

St. Thomas's understanding of self-love, as the principle of willing any and all good for oneself, is the basis for loving others persons with the love of friendship also. St. Thomas says, "another's actions, if they be good, are reckoned as one's own good, by reason of the power of love, which makes a man to regard his friend as one with himself"¹⁰. Love of friendship for another person causes that person to be viewed as one's own from the unity of their friendship. One rejoices in his own good, likewise rejoicing in a friend because the friend is seen as one's own good. With the love of concupiscence, one wills a good to that other person on account of the love of friendship. St. Thomas develops this further saying, "As was observed, both angel and man naturally love self. Now what is one with a thing, is that thing itself: consequently every thing loves what is one with itself"¹¹. Thus, any person that is seen as one through love with the subject is naturally loved by him as his own. This then justifies Aristotle's claim that one's self-love is the basis for willing goods towards others, since they are seen as one's own good.

When one has a love of friendship for another person, he seeks no return of goods from the friend. The friend is the good willed since he is seen as another self. St. Thomas says, "When a man loves another with the love of friendship, he wills good to him, just as he wills good to himself: wherefore he apprehends him as his other self, in so far, to wit, as he wills good to him as to himself"¹². So, when there is a love of friendship, the desire that a man has for his own happiness is applied to his friend. His love for his friend is not about receiving goods from that person, but simply willing good to him as another self. Union, mutual indwelling and ecstasy, as being placed outside one's self, are all effects of the love of friendship. The union taking place here is a union of the will, so that the essence and existence of the person are not changed by this union.

There are two ways in which the love of friendship arises from self-love. The first would be when that person is seen as belonging to one's self, such as a parent who sees his children as part of himself. This would be similar to the relationship of the whole and its parts, where the good of the parts is the good of the whole. The second way that love of friendship arises from self-love is by similitude or likeness. St. Thomas says, "likeness causes love of friendship or well-being. For the very fact that two men are alike, having, as it were, one form, makes them to be, in a manner, one in that form"¹³. Any similarity between persons is enough for good will, such as the likeness of a fellow country man. Yet a stronger likeness will cause a stronger bond between the two persons. This shows that the more one's perfection makes him like his friend, the

¹⁰ STh I-II, q. 32, a. 5.

¹¹ STh I, q. 60, a. 4.

¹² STh I-II, q. 28, a. 1.

¹³ STh I-II, q. 28, a. 3.

more they will be united in the love of friendship. The more perfect the persons, the stronger will be their bond of union.

St. Thomas develops the understanding of the union between persons and the difference between this and one's own unity with himself. He says:

“Properly speaking, a man is not a friend to himself, but something more than a friend, since friendship implies union... whereas a man is one with himself which is more than being united to another. Hence, just as unity is the principle of union, so the love with which a man loves himself is the form and root of friendship. For if we have friendship with others it is because we do unto them as we do unto ourselves”¹⁴.

The unity of a person with himself is the source of the union one has with a friend. This unity and self-love are bound up with each other since the unity of a thing is at the heart of what makes a thing work well. For oneself to work well, he must be well organized and united. So also with friendship, the friendship will work well in so far as there is a proper ordering of love and willing of good within the relationship.

Self-love's role in friendship of the human person with God

So far it has been shown how self-love is the basis for willing one's own happiness, which can be extended to include others. Next, St. Thomas explains that this self-love also has a place in a friendship with God.

A human person as a rational animal can have a love of friendship for God. When one obeys the divine law and natural law, he has a type of union of wills with God in wishing to give God His due. Yet the human person is similar to God only analogously since God is an infinite being beyond one's capability of understanding. A human person is His effect, so that there can still be some sort of analogy of proportionality between the human and God. Because of this, the relationship is closer to that of child and parent, as of part to whole, than as friends sharing a similarity (setting aside grace and the infused virtues for now). St. Thomas explains,

“He that seeks the good of the many, seeks in consequence his own good, for two reasons. First, because the individual good is impossible without the common good... Secondly, because, since man is a part of the home and state, he must needs consider what is good of the many. For the good disposition of parts depends on their relation to the whole”¹⁵.

The good of the individual and the good order of the parts to the whole within a community is not possible without the good of the entire community

¹⁴ STh II-II, q. 25, a. 4.

¹⁵ STh II-II, q. 47, a. 10.

being aimed at. A member of the community who is good seeks the good of the community above his own good, thereby securing his own good also. A person can recognize the good of the community and take it as his own as a member of that community.

If one takes God into account within those with whom one is communing, God can take the place of the common good of all creatures. All creatures tend toward God as their good since He is all goodness that causes their perfection. The human person, therefore, becomes part of the whole that is God, not in a pantheistic way, but through St. Thomas's doctrine of participation. Creatures do not have existence of their own accord so that they take part in God's existence by participating in it as limited by the form of their essence. God is existence and the human person participates in God's existence in a limited fashion, according to the person's human nature. The amount of goodness that comes from a man's nature is a reflection of the goodness of God that exists in God in a more exalted form. St. Thomas expounds on this idea saying,

“The good that each person most wishes to be preserved is that which is most pleasing to him, since this is most in conformity with an appetite informed by love. This, however, is one's own good. Whence, according as the good of something is or is thought to be a greater good for the lover himself, he wishes the more that the good be preserved in the loved thing. The good of the lover himself, however, is more to be found where it exists more perfectly. And consequently, since any part is imperfect in itself, having its perfection within its whole, it tends accordingly by a natural love more toward the preservation of its whole than toward its own preservation. Thus an animal naturally exposes its limb to defend its head, on which depends the preservation of the whole. So too, even individual men expose themselves to death to preserve the community of which they are parts. Since, then, our good is perfect in God as in the first, universal, and perfect cause of goods, so it is naturally more pleasing that the good exist in Him than that it exist in us. Consequently, God is naturally loved by men more than self even with the love of friendship”¹⁶.

There are many things to draw from this long text of St. Thomas. Man can love God with a natural love that is greater than man's own love for himself. If this is so, he will be inclined to sacrifice himself for God as the common good rather than preserve himself, if such an occasion arises. The good of the part is intimately tied up with the good of the whole as it is only accomplished through the good of the whole. The good of the part and of the whole are never mutually exclusive. This is not simply a love of concupiscence, then, where one loves God for the goodness received from him, such as happiness, but rather love of friendship, as willing good towards God in Himself.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, in: D. M. Gallagher, *Thomas Aquinas on Self-Love as the Basis for Love of Others*, III, dist. 29, a. 3.

The self-love of the human person is still the basis for this love of God. When he sees that he is part of the whole, he takes the whole as another self, similar to an individual friend. This enables a person to see the good of the whole, God, as his own good. He then loves the whole as himself. This ‘whole’ here is God Whom man loves more than himself with a natural love of friendship. There is also the love of choice, where the person, once realizing that loving God (or at least the common good) is greater than loving himself, must choose to love it over himself in a love of dilection. This is still a type of wanting what is best for one’s self, since the good of the whole fulfills one’s own partial good.

Varying self-loves as compatible or incompatible with friendship with God

After understanding that one’s self-love is the basis for willing one’s own happiness, the happiness of a friend and even God’s goodness, it must be noted that through choice and dilection, one can choose a self-love that is not properly ordered to happiness, friendship with others and willing good to God. There must therefore be distinguished various types of self-love, not all of which are good.

St. Thomas distinguishes three types of self-love. The first is the bad self-love of sinners, wherein they prefer bodily goods to spiritual ones, temporal pleasure to lasting happiness. St. Thomas explains, “The wicked reckon their sensitive and corporeal nature, or the outward man, to hold the first place”¹⁷. Because of this the wicked men in their wicked self-love have no care for the preservation of their integrity of soul, disdaining virtue. For this reason, the wicked do not take pleasure in themselves or other wicked men since their past and present deeds prick their consciences. This self-love is not compatible with charity since the wicked will always put bodily goods before the common good and God’s law. These men run after such lowly goods that cannot be shared, such that they fight over them, putting their consumption of such goods above all common good.

A second type of self-love is where good men understand the higher spiritual goods to be better goods and desire them for themselves. This self-love is not contrary to charity. St. Thomas says, “Now the good look upon their rational nature or the inward man as being the chief thing in them, wherefore in this way they think themselves to be what they are”¹⁸. In other words, good men desire for themselves what is actually good for themselves. In so desiring these goods they actually build up the common good, since they support the common good of the community. In loving themselves, these good men desire real good for society, preserving it while still considering good things for themselves. Their good and the good of society are distinct, but not contraries.

¹⁷ STh II-II, q. 25, a. 7.

¹⁸ STh II-II, q. 25, a. 7.

The third self-love is the same as charity, since “a man loves himself for the sake of God and in God”¹⁹. One’s love of friendship for God is so perfected that even in loving himself he does so only as ordered to the love of God. This love is similar to a love for the common good where one sees one’s self as part of the common good and at its service. His love is for the whole primarily and secondarily for the parts as belonging to the whole. This is a type of perfection of love that still presupposes a good self-love. However, in charity the person with good self-love has decided that the greatest good he could will for himself is to love God more than himself.

In the third love, which is charity, the principle of desire for the good that is natural to the will cannot be annihilated. We have already seen that all desire presupposes a desire for one’s self. It is a first principle that cannot be removed since it is part of human nature. The purpose of charity is not to destroy nature, but to build on nature for the perfection of the human person. St. Thomas explains this when he addresses the diminishing of servile fear in a person. He says, “This fear decreases as charity increases, chiefly as regards its act, since the more a man loves God, the less he fears punishment; first, because he thinks less of his own good, to which punishment is opposed”²⁰. Here St. Thomas makes clear that one who loves God with charity thinks less of his own good than the good of God that by the love of friendship he sees as his own. Thus, with this charitable love, one stops acting for his self-love and actualizes a love for God. The person, in fact, loves God to the forgetting of self. He does not hate himself, but stops acting upon his habit of self-love that was presupposed.

St. Thomas distinguishes between the habit and the act of the will, a distinction that highlights the forgetting of self-love in the actualization of love of God. He says,

“One need not always be thinking of the last end, whenever one desires or does something: but the virtue of the first intention, which was in respect of the last end, remains in every desire directed to any object whatever, even though one’s thoughts be not actually directed to the last end”²¹.

Therefore, one can habitually have an intention of a presupposed end without having to act on it. So self-love, wherewith one desires happiness for himself, can be intentional within the will of one who actualizes a love for God and the common good, all while not actualizing the self-love.

Does St. Thomas’s explanation of self-love agree with the doctrine of the mystical saints of the church who attained to the heights of union with God? What was their understanding of the role of self-love within charity?

¹⁹ STh II-II, q. 19, a. 6.

²⁰ STh II-II, q. 19, a. 10.

²¹ STh I-II, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3.

The transcendence of love according to the mystic saints

The purpose of this paper was to reconcile what St. Elizabeth of the Trinity spoke of concerning mortifying self-love and the self-love that Aristotle said was the basis for friendship. Already Aristotle has been shown as justified by St. Thomas. How can we come to an understanding of what St. Elizabeth meant by self-love?

St. Elizabeth speaks of the transcendence of perfect charity where one can commune with God in freedom from all creatures. She says, "It seems to me the soul that is aware of its greatness enters into that 'holy freedom of the children of God' of which the Apostle speaks, that is, it transcends all things, including self. The freest soul, I think, is the one most forgetful of self"²². St. Elizabeth speaks of charity that not only transcends one's own nature but all of nature to attain to God. In this act, the soul forgets its self-love so as to be actively loving God in Himself through charity. This seems to be exactly what St. Thomas is speaking of as the role of self-love within charity. "Forgetful of self" sounds exactly like the cessation of the act of self-love for the sake of charity. The habit of self-love may be there, but in not actualizing the habit, one can instead actualize love of friendship for God in order to communion with Him.

Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange would also agree that the perfection of the soul is in the total actualization of the habit of union through charity that is transforming for the soul. He says,

"When the soul perfectly possesses the gift of wisdom, the highest of the seven gifts received in baptism with sanctifying grace, it has reached its inner sanctuary where the Blessed Trinity dwells, and union with God is no longer habitual, but actual and in some measure transforming. In spite of the infinite distance separating the creature's being from the Creator, it is a union of quasi-experimental knowledge and very intimate love, in which the soul is deified by receiving perfect participation in the divine nature"²³.

If the habit of union with God is completely actualized within the perfect soul, the charity of such a soul would be perfect and the forgetfulness of self would likewise be perfect. This would seem then to be a transcendence over nature to an eminent degree since the love of friendship of this soul for God and God for the soul has made the soul like to God's equal, by participation in the divine nature.

St. John of the Cross would likewise agree with this assessment of the soul perfected in charity. St. John's works on the mystical life describe emptying the affections of the soul for all creatures so that the union of the soul with God can take place. St. John says,

²² Elizabeth of the Trinity, *The Greatness of Our Vocation*, 4.

²³ R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, trans. M. T. Doyle, Ch. 52.

“Since we are giving instruction to those who would progress farther in contemplation, even to union with God, to which end all these means and exercises of sense concerning the faculties must recede into the background, and be put to silence, to the end that God may of His own accord work Divine union in the soul, it is necessary to proceed by this method of disencumbering and emptying the soul, and causing it to reject the natural operations of the faculties, so that they may become capable of infusion and illumination from supernatural sources”²⁴.

St. John of the Cross here describes the means to the highest state of the mystical life in a similar fashion to St. Thomas. The faculties, as in their activity and actualizing their natural habits, must recede into the background, just as the act of natural self-love must recede.

St. John of the Cross also responds to the objection that one is destroying the way of spirituality by causing the cessation of the acts of these various habits, since one is ceasing the natural acts of the faculties. He explains that in actuality, the acts of the faculties cease because of the perfection of the same faculties. He says, “To this I reply that, the more nearly the memory attains to union with God, the more do distinct kinds of knowledge become perfected within it, until it loses them entirely – namely, when it attains to the state of union in perfection”²⁵. This statement about the memory could easily be applied to the same objection about the will. The will loses its act of self-love for the sake of union with God as the perfection of charity. The activity of the will is now perfect in loving God so that it does not engage in lower acts of love, that are not bad acts, but acts that are not perfected in charity. The self matters little to such a person except in so far as he loves himself for the sake of God.

While much can be said about the role of grace and the infused virtues, contemplation and the passive purgations here that would help develop this argument, nonetheless the basic understanding that self-love has been left behind for charity is true for the heights of union with God also.

Conclusion

Self-love is not contrary to friendship with God but is a presupposition of loving God. The love of friendship extends one’s own good to God by seeing Him as one’s own. The perfection of the love of charity, however, causes a complete forgetfulness of self, such that the habit of self-love is no longer activated, but replaced by perfect union of the soul transformed by participation in God. All lower loves of creatures are forgotten for the one love of God, so that all creatures including one’s self are loved in God and because of God. This is the perfection of the love of friendship for God. St. John of the Cross gives us the ultimate example to illustrate what St. Thomas Aquinas meant in

²⁴ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, trans. E. Allison Peers, (London: Burn Oates & Wasbourne LTD., 1935), Bk. 3, 2, 2.

²⁵ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, Bk 3, 2, 8.

the forgetting of self-love. In speaking of the faculties of a perfect soul he says, "Such were those of the most glorious Virgin Our Lady, who, being raised to the high estate from the beginning, had never the form of any creature imprinted in her soul, neither was moved by such, but was invariably guided by the Holy Spirit"²⁶.

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Summary

The writings of the saints speak against self-love as a hindrance to friendship with God, while Aristotle speaks of self-love as the basis for virtuous friendship. What causes this apparent discrepancy? Not only is there a difference between good and bad self-love, such that bad self-love must be eradicated, but there is also the cessation of the act of good self-love as the soul progresses spiritually. Then only the love for God remains in act within the perfection of charity and Union with God.

Keywords: Self-love, Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle.

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²⁶ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, Bk 3, 2, 10.