

Wisdom Transformed by Love

BY THOMAS S. HIBBS

In his rich treatment of the virtue of wisdom, Thomas Aquinas insists that not only must wisdom be transformed by love, but also love must be transformed by wisdom. Thus the contemplative life overflows into a life of self-giving love and service.

The novelist Walker Percy (1916-1990) writes, “Words are polluted. Plots are polluted.... Who is going to protect words like ‘love,’ guard against their devaluation?”¹ He issues a judgment and a challenge to the modern world, a world characterized by the coarsening of the language of virtue and vice and especially of the language for Christian redemption. As Percy and philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre have observed, one of the problems with our moral and religious vocabulary is that we now possess fragments of what were formerly parts of coherent wholes, ways of life in which the virtues had clearly defined roles. The task of recovery and re-articulation is a complex one. Part of the task certainly involves a return to the authors and texts that represent highpoints in Christian self-understanding.

That self-understanding was concerned with Christianity as a way of life promising virtue, sanctity, and blessedness. In the ancient pagan world with which early Christians were in conversation, there were two principal contenders for the best way of life: the theoretical or contemplative life and the practical or active life. The best way of life, whether one thought it was contemplative or active, was called the life of philosophy, which simply means the love of wisdom. Operating out of the Apostle Paul’s dialectical opposition of worldly wisdom and the folly of the Cross, Christian authors nonetheless embraced the philosophical notion that there is a best way of life, the pursuit of wisdom, identified primordially and ultimately with the Word of God, who is “wisdom incarnate.”

The obstacles we face in attempting to recover this classical Christian understanding of wisdom are many. As Percy, MacIntyre, and Josef Pieper have observed, in many cases our language for virtue provides us with only simulacra or counterfeits of true virtue. The problem may be less severe with the language of wisdom if only because it is protected from abuse by disuse. While we inevitably use terms such as “courageous,” “hopeful,” and “generous,” we almost never employ “wise.” The closest we come to “wisdom” is in our terms “prudent,” or “learned,” or “smart.” These terms themselves, none of which is equivalent to “wisdom,” have been debased and in many cases transformed into what the ancients would have called vices rather than virtues. Contrary to our modern understanding of it, wisdom involves more than accumulation of information; it is more than problem-solving ability. It is not just cleverness. T. S. Eliot wonders at the loss of this virtue in the modern world, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”²

We can begin to recover the lost sense of wisdom by studying one of the richest Christian treatments of this virtue in the writings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). The pursuit of wisdom, he writes, is “more perfect, more noble, more useful, and more full of joy” than all other human pursuits; by it, we attain a “portion of true beatitude” and approach to the “likeness of God.”³

As a member of the newly formed Dominican religious order, Thomas actively participated in a religious revival that began in the twelfth century with a renewed aspiration for the apostolic life (*vita apostolica*). The spirit of a return to the gospel and a recovery of the early life of the church came to fruition in the lives of Dominic (1170-1221) and Francis (c. 1181-1226), the latter of whom founded the other leading religious order in the thirteenth century, the Franciscans. The shibboleth of the Dominicans is “to hand on to others things contemplated” (*contemplata aliis tradere*). The Dominican vision of the Christian life is one in which an initial longing for, and love of, God is deepened and informed by assiduous study and prayer. Thomas believed our love for God and desire to serve God are manifested in the pursuit of wisdom, both contemplative and practical.

WISDOM BEGINS AND ENDS IN WONDER

On those rare occasions when we talk about wisdom today, we usually have in mind practical wisdom—the insight that is associated with a well-ordered active or practical life, as when someone offers sage advice in times of uncertainty. In ordinary life, those we admire for wisdom draw upon a wide range of experience, are able to see what is salient or significant in a specific circumstance, and thus can offer counsel about how we ought to proceed. The wise have a sense of perspective and proportion that others lack. As much as they may provide an answer to a vexing question about behavior, they also help us to step back from the immediate matter and see it in relation to larger and more fundamental concerns.

We recognize practical wisdom more readily than contemplative wisdom, the sort of wisdom that is associated with the well-ordered life of contemplation; however, the latter is not foreign to us. As Aristotle puts it, “all human beings desire to know.”⁴ The desire to know arises from our sense of our own ignorance, from encountering features of our experience whose source or cause is not obvious to us. It is rooted in wonder. Aristotle compares the philosopher to the poet, both of whom are concerned with wonders. For Aristotle, mere knowledge or understanding does not constitute wisdom. Truly wise people would be broadly knowledgeable and capable of seeing the connections among the various parts of learning. They would not restrict their study to a narrow topic, but would be open to the whole range of knowledge and would desire especially to understand the ultimate causes and fundamental principles of the whole. In his *Metaphysics*, where he discusses wisdom in detail, Aristotle argues that there is an ultimate cause of all motion in the universe, the unmoved mover, who moves all things as an object of desire. Aristotle identifies this being as God, whose supreme way of existing and understanding escape our comprehension. God’s state of existence “compels our wonder.” Even for pagan philosophers, then, wisdom overlaps with theology, with the quest for God as first and ultimate cause.

Thus, the hunger to behold the ultimate cause of reality, even to be transformed into that cause, is part of the philosophical tradition, as much as it is part of the Christian heritage. The gospel itself, which identifies Christ as the Word according to whom the universe is created and which invites each of us to “come and see,” is God’s response to this hunger in the human heart. For Thomas Aquinas, God himself is not just wise; he is in fact wisdom itself.

If philosophy begins in wonder, it also ends in wonder, in an “avowal of ignorance,” as Jacques Maritain nicely puts it. Even ancient pagan philosophers recognized that philosophy can never fully attain and possess wisdom; it is always a loving search for wisdom – what Josef Pieper calls a *philosophia negativa*. But this does not undermine its nobility:

To wonder is not merely not to know; it means...that one understands oneself in not knowing. And yet it is not the ignorance of resignation. On the contrary, to wonder is to be on the way, in via.... Out of wonder, says Aristotle, comes joy. In this he was followed by the Middle Ages: “All things worthy of wonder are delightful.”⁵

Thomas Aquinas explains why theoretical wisdom, the contemplation of God, is so delightful or beautiful to us in the following way.⁶ Pleasure or delight arises whenever we encounter what is harmonious to human nature. The effect of pleasure is, metaphorically, the dilation of the human self and expansion of our powers. Our abilities to understand what is good (which

Thomas calls “the apprehensive powers of the soul”) are, in their encounter with beauty, enlarged in the sense that we are increasingly aware of being in the presence of what is really good. Our desires for the good (or “affective powers”) are so taken up into the object of beauty that they can be said to “hand themselves over” to the object of their delight so as to remain in the object. Here Thomas draws upon one of the most striking features of Christian writing about beauty and contemplation, namely, its ecstatic character. Ecstasy means to stand outside of oneself, to be transfixed by the object of beauty to such an extent that one forgets oneself and loses a sense of time. Wisdom is hardly a self-regarding virtue; much less is it a calculative skill or an activity of the intellect utterly isolated from affection or love. The experience of ecstasy in wisdom is an intimation of immortality.

WISDOM BEGINS IN GOD’S GIFT

To this point we have emphasized how much Thomas borrows from the ancient philosophical traditions about contemplative and practical wisdom. But to complete the picture of his thought, we must look at how Thomas transforms that tradition with this idea from Scripture: that God, who is the creator of all that exists, descends to us in wisdom and love in order to raise us to him in friendship.

For Thomas, then, the created order is a manifestation of God’s wisdom: “Through his own wisdom God is the governor of the universe of things to which he is compared as an artist to his artwork. The pattern of divine wisdom, in so far as all things are created through it, has the character of art, exemplar, or idea” (ST, I-II, 93, 1). In creating, God is beholden to no external standard or requirement. This does not mean that what God creates is purely arbitrary, a matter of an unintelligible act of will. Instead, in creating, God acts according to his wisdom. Therefore, creation is one of two ways in which God communicates his wisdom. Revelation is the other.⁷

Scriptural warrant for discerning the likeness of divine wisdom in creation can be gathered from the creation story in Genesis 1,

where human persons are said to be made in the image and likeness of God. As is well known, Thomas follows Augustine in identifying the human capacities to remember, understand, and love as providing analogies to the three persons of the Trinity: “There is an image of God in man not because he is able to remember, understand, and love himself but because he can remember, understand, and love God, by whom he was made” (ST, I, 93, 8;

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quoting from Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XIV, 12). The image present in our original creation is marred and distorted by sin, reformed through grace, and restored to a likeness to God. These are the stages in salvation history: creation, recreation, and restoration of likeness. Though we have been alienated from the good by sin, grace restores our ability to perceive and take delight in the radiant beauty of goodness. Such a restored perception of goodness, for Thomas, is a precondition of loving and caring for ourselves and others (cf. ST, I-II, 27, 1).

We have a tendency to think that theoretical and practical wisdom are dispositions that we can accomplish for ourselves; by thinking harder and longer, or more broadly and carefully, we can come to know reality and know how to live. But for Thomas, our re-creation as knowers and lovers of goodness begins in God's gift of faith, which is not merely a matter of intellectual assent to claims about God; it involves an experience of the divine. In other words, the beginning of wisdom is an encounter with God. Faith, Thomas says, is an "internal inspiration." We are drawn to the faith through an "interior instinct and attraction of teaching."⁸ The object of faith and of the other theological virtues of hope and love is "God himself, who is the ultimate end of things, exceeding the knowledge of our reason" (ST, I-II, 62, 2). Though faith we are drawn to apprehend fundamental truths about God. Through hope, we trust that despite difficulties in this life we shall, through God's grace, attain the ultimate end, which is union with God. Charity "transforms the will into the end," or draws us into willing what God wills for us and the world (ST, I-II, 62, 3).

Following Augustine, Thomas defines charity as the "movement of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for his own sake" (ST, II-II, 23, 2). Charity is a type of friendship: "there is communication between us and God in so far as he communicates his happiness to us" (ST, II-II, 23, 1). It follows that God's wisdom, for Thomas, is indistinguishable from his love. In a manner that would be inconceivable to the pagan philosophers, the contemplation of the highest cause is at once a sharing in, and communing with, the inner life of God.

Thomas goes so far as to call God's gift of charity, or friendship, "the form of the virtues." By this he means that this inspired love gives shape and order to the entirety of human life, not just how we feel and act but also how we think. Indeed, the intellect and the will, understanding and loving, interpenetrate and inform one another in the life of Christian faith. For Thomas faith is a virtue residing in the intellect, since it apprehends principles concerning our end. This end is not only the highest truth, but also the highest good that we seek, the "end of all our desires and actions" (ST, II-II, 4, 2, ad 3). If in one way charity presupposes faith, in another way faith cannot exist without charity, since friendship with God is the form and goal of faith (ST, II-II, 4, 3). Indeed, because charity reorients all of our

desires and actions toward God, Thomas calls it the “mother of the virtues”: like a woman giving birth, charity “conceives the acts of the other virtues, by the desire of the last end” (ST, II-II, 23, 8, ad 3).

In what way does charity transform the moral life? We can see how charity molds us by contrasting it to prudence, the virtue in the natural order that orients all the other natural virtues to the goal of human happiness on earth. Prudence, defined as right reason (or thinking correctly) about practical matters, cannot make us moral all by itself; it presupposes that our desires for things and relationships in this life are rightly ordered. If we did not have natural moral virtues like courage, temperance, and justice (a balanced concern for the good of others), then our practical reason would be derailed by fear and cowardice or sensual desire and intemperance. Now here is the important difference about charity: it does not merely presuppose right desire, it is essentially a new desire for God. Like the moral virtues, charity is called a virtue because it is a habitual way of thinking, feeling, and desiring that allows us to seek our true good easily and readily. The source of his virtue, however, is not the repetition of certain kinds of acts (which is how we attain natural moral virtues); instead, its original and abiding source is divine grace, a wholly unmerited gift.

WISDOM LEADS TO FAITHFUL ACTION

Some Christians of Thomas’s time held that contemplation is superior to action because it pertains directly to the realization of our ultimate end, namely, enjoyment of God. Thomas objects to this view by referring us to the example of Christ, whom he calls “begotten wisdom.” In the Incarnation, God took on humanity in order to manifest divine wisdom through a human life (ST, III,

40, 1, ad 1). So, Thomas argues, “the active life in which, by preaching and teaching, one hands on to others the things contemplated is superior to the life that is devoted exclusively to contemplation because the former presupposes an abundance of contemplation. Christ chose such a life” (ST,

III, 40, 1 ad2). The life in which contemplation overflows into action is an imitation of the divine activity, wherein God, both in his original act of creation and even more marvelously in his redemptive descent, communicates his wisdom, goodness, and beauty to creatures.

Again, the role of beauty is paramount. Contemplation itself has its roots in the affections; as Thomas says, “from the love of God we are

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inflamed to behold his beauty” (ST, II-II, 180, 1). Beauty encompasses the entirety of the contemplative life. Perceiving beauty sparks desire; moreover, the result of contemplation is both a greater appreciation of divine beauty and an impulse to be a vehicle of that beauty’s presence in the world. In Christ, we see the beauty of the divine life and our desire to participate in that life is inflamed (ST, III, 1, 2).

We encounter God and divine beauty, Thomas believes, principally through acts of worship. When God commands in Scripture that we come before him in worship, it is God’s way of meeting us where we live in order to raise us to him. Of course, in our present life we cannot literally see God and gaze on divine truth directly. Thus, through revelation about appropriate ways of worshipping God, divine things are “expressed in words” and “proffered to the senses” (ST, I-II, 99, 3, ad 3). The practice of giving back to God fitting praise and gratitude allows the “ray of divine light to shine on us under the form of certain sensible figures” (ST, I-II, 101, 2).

Of course, the accommodation of God to the human condition culminates in the Incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, Christ, who is enfleshed wisdom. Thomas writes, “the external worship of the Old Law is figurative not only of the future truth to be manifested in the fatherland, but also of Christ, who is the way leading to the truth of the fatherland” (ST, I-II, 101, 2). As the twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, the Incarnation joins “together what in human terms is eternally incompatible: love for one existent is conjoined with love for Being itself.”⁹

CONCLUSION

The genius of Thomas Aquinas’s approach is his insistence that not only must wisdom be transformed by love, but also love must be transformed by wisdom. Just as the contemplative life has its roots in the affections – in the love of God – so too it overflows into acts of charity in the form of teaching, preaching, and acts of mercy. In this, Thomas is articulating the charism, or particular gift, of the Dominican order in which he served. As Guy Bedouelle puts it, the Dominican purpose is to restore the “bond between the Word received and the Word given, and thus to incarnate it in a significant way of life.”¹⁰ That way of life involves the mutual transformation of wisdom and love by one another.

NOTES

1 Walker Percy, “Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time,” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, edited with an introduction by Patrick Samway (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 161.

2 T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from *THE ROCK*,” *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1952), 96.

3 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book I, Chapter 2, translated by Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 61.

4 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book I, Chapter 1.

5 Josef Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, 50th Anniversary Edition (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 136.

6 This paragraph is based on Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 33, 1 (further citations will be in the text). I use "delightful" and "beautiful" interchangeably here because, for Thomas, beauty is simply whatever pleases us when it is seen.

7 That God's wisdom is manifested in two ways – the created order and revelation – is a theme running through the biblical wisdom tradition (see especially Psalm 19). On the basis of this, Thomas concludes that faith and reason, philosophy and theology, nature and grace cannot ultimately contradict one another because both have their source in God who is truth, goodness, beauty, and wisdom.

8 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, c614n7, c1515n5.

9 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of God*, volume 1: *Seeing the Form*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1982), 193.

10 Guy Bedouelle, O.P., *Saint Dominic: The Grace of the Word* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), 245.



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