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Charity as the Perfection of Natural Friendship in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*

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Abstract

In contrast to many of today's sectarian religious figures, Thomas Aquinas was interested in engaging the best of secular philosophy; seeing what his tradition could gain from philosophy and how his tradition could contribute to philosophy. Speaking from within the Christian tradition, he offers helpful insights that contribute to our understanding of Aristotle. Aquinas' writings are largely devoted to the project of demonstrating that the works of Aristotle are complementary to, and in agreement with, Christianity. The excerpts of *Summa Theologiae* examined in this paper deal with friendship and are a sample of Aquinas' larger project. This paper examines how Aquinas undertakes to reconcile the Christian idea of charity (love for enemies) with Aristotle's conception of preferential friendship. Aquinas' finding is that in Christian charity, the classical understanding of friendship has been perfected by grace.

Within western civilization, there is a long-running dispute over which authority, the Christian tradition or Greek philosophical tradition, is the more trustworthy and comprehensive. Like other topics written about by Plato and Aristotle, friendship became part of this controversy. During Thomas Aquinas' time, this struggle was focused on whether the works of Aristotle could be reconciled with Christianity. Aquinas' writings are largely devoted to the project of demonstrating that these two sources are, in fact, complementary and in agreement. The excerpts of *Summa Theologiae* that deal with friendship are a sample of Aquinas' larger project; in them, he undertakes to reconcile the Christian idea of charity with Aristotle's conception of friendship. Other Christian commentators on Aristotle rejected his formulation of friendship because they thought it did not allow for love towards enemies or for God to befriend man. Aquinas' treatment of love and charity anticipates and rebuffs these arguments as to why Aristotle's ideal of friendship is incompatible with Christian notions of charity. Aquinas holds that in Christian charity, the classical understanding of friendship has been perfected by grace.

For Aquinas, the inaccuracy of human understanding, due to its reliance on sense perception, creates the appearance of disagreement between knowledge acquired through reason and that which is received through revelation. Ultimately however, these two sources find the same truth, because "the revealer of divine truth, is also the author of nature" (Fortin, 252). In order to eliminate the perceived disagreement between reason and revelation, Aquinas undertakes to "reinterpret Aristotle on the basis of the Christian faith and to reform Christian theology in terms of Aristotelian philosophy" (Fortin, 248).¹ Aquinas holds that theology and philosophy will be found to be in agreement when they are both properly understood.

The most obvious difference between the Christian treatment of friendship and its treatment by Aristotle is that Christian writings pay comparatively little attention to the topic. More often than mentioning friendship, "scriptures draw upon familial and kinship metaphors" (Heffernan, 171). In place of friendship, the gospel emphasizes charity – loving God, loving our neighbours as ourselves, and even loving our enemies. In relation to Christian charity's universality, classical friendship seems discriminatory, preferential and self-serving. As a result, friendship has rarely been emphasized in Europe's Christian theological tradition. The writings of Aquinas are one of the principal exceptions. Friendship is particularly important for Aquinas because he understands that efforts to establish peace and justice will not succeed unless they are grounded in love and friendship (Finnis, 227). In contrast to much of the Christian tradition both before and after him, "we find in Aquinas neither a rejection nor even a diminution of friendship; rather we find friendship elevated and transformed by the order of grace" (Heffernan, 175). As in his works on other topics, Aquinas' writings on love and charity emphasize that revelation completes and perfects nature, rather than casting it aside.

Aquinas' first extensive discussion of friendship in *Summa Theologiae*

occurs in Questions 26-28 of section I-II within a discussion of love as a passion. In Aquinas' thinking, this is the same kind of love dealt with by earlier secular philosophers. He argues that desire for good things for oneself and desire for good things for one's friends largely overlap – our individual self-interests are obscured as friendship causes us to rise above egoistical concerns and pursue a common good. The second treatment of friendship, consisting of Questions 23-46 in section II-II, is more theological than philosophical. The insights about human friendships offered in this section are based on Aquinas' conception of God's relationship with humans. The purest form of friendship is charity; its characteristics are perfected forms of what we see in natural friendship (Pakaluk, 146). Consequently, understanding charity helps us to understand the limitations of natural friendships as well as the full potential for what natural friendships can be.

At the beginning of the first section, Aquinas defines friendship, dilection, and charity, each of which is closely related to love, the object of his inquiry. Whereas friendship is a habit, love and dilection are expressed in passion and action. For its part, charity can be either a habit or wilful action. Charity and dilection are love, but love is not necessarily charity or dilection. Specifically, dilection is love that is entered into solely as the result of a wilful decision of the intellect (Aquinas, 153). To further define friendship, Aquinas modifies Aristotle's threefold categorization of the types of friendship. Love of friendship, which corresponds to Aristotle's complete friendship, is towards someone for whom the lover desires the good, while love of concupiscence encompasses Aristotle's friendship for pleasure and friendship for utility. Love of concupiscence is towards the good that we desire for ourselves or for our beloved. Objects which are the focus of this love are not loved for themselves but for the good they bring (Aquinas, 154-155). By distinguishing between these two kinds of loves, Aquinas shows clearly that there is no real friendship unless we act for the good of others (Finnis, 112).

Having identified the types of love, Aquinas tries to discover what effects love causes. His conclusion is that every human action and all human emotions are caused by love (Aquinas, 170-171). For instance, pleasure might seem to be the cause of some action, but really love of pleasure causes the person to act to obtain pleasure (Aquinas, 161). Union is one of the principal effects of love, both bringing lovers together physically and uniting them in affection (Aquinas, 162-163). Even as these two types of union usually overlap, so do love of concupiscence and love of friendship overlap in our relationships. We love our friends with the love of concupiscence, meaning that our good depends on them, because it is derived from them. We love friends with the love of friendship which means that we also want them to experience the good for their own sake. Our self-love and love for others coincide – we altruistically want the best for them because we care about them, and we egoistically want the best for them because our good depends on their good. The lover apprehends the beloved as his other self because they share a common good (Aquinas, 165). According to Thomasian friendship, individuals desire each

others' good for the common good, not for their own sake (Finnis, 115).

In Questions 26-28 of section I-II, Aquinas succeeds in describing an Aristotelian conception of friendship that is quite compatible with the Christian tradition. The challenge that Aquinas next faces is to account for the bible's radical teachings about charity within the framework of Aristotelian friendship. Scriptural passages such as Luke 6:23 show the Greek understanding of friendship to be manifestly insufficient: "if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (NRSV). Aquinas acknowledges that the Greek understanding of friendship is inadequate, accounting only for human friendships apart from God and failing to satisfy the New Testament's moral imperatives. However, Aquinas still values Aristotle's philosophy as the best available account of human friendship. As Robert Sokolowski explains, friendship serves the important function of anticipating that which charity is, elevated by grace (qtd. in Heffernan 181). Charity is described in Questions 23-46 of section II-II as an explicitly Christian form of friendship pertaining to man's friendship with God and to man's friendship with his neighbours which is undertaken because of love for God.

To illustrate the relationship of charity to friendship and to define the place of friendship within Christian theology, Aquinas (172) quotes John 15:15, "I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends" (NRSV). Accordingly, God's relationship of charity to humans is a type of friendship (Heffernan, 176-77). As divine friendship, charity is a perfection of the flawed friendships that humans experience apart from God. Humans who respond to this God-initiated friendship, love God and love their neighbours for God's sake, extending charity towards all of humanity. Christian charity, like Aristotelian friendship, demands that friends wish good things for each other. The difference, notes Aquinas, is that charity desires friends to possess eternal spiritual goods (Heffernan, 179). Charity refines rather than replaces friendship. As a love that desires good for someone else, charity can be strictly understood as a type of friendship. The other important requirement of friendship that charity meets is that it is based on relationship and mutual love. Man's response to God, love's initiator, is charity. It is actually quite possible for man to enjoy the kind of fellowship with God that can be called friendship; however, it is a spiritual rather than a corporeal relationship (Aquinas, 172). The metaphor suggests itself that, as the spiritual is to the temporal, so is charity to unredeemed friendship.

Though Aquinas can explain how charity between God and man is a type of friendship, it is more difficult to explain how charity between a man and his enemy can be friendship. At the root of this question is the requirement of charity that humans love their enemies as an extension of loving God, because all people belong to God. Since Aristotle insists that friendship requires love to be reciprocated, the greatest obstacle for Aquinas in reconciling Aristotelian friendship with Christianity is that he must explain how loving an enemy includes reciprocal love (Heffernan, 180). Aquinas himself recognizes that "a

certain mutual love is requisite, since friendship is between friend and friend" (172). If friendship is necessarily between two friends, it does not seem that charity directed towards an enemy can be friendship. To explain how charity still qualifies as friendship, Aquinas claims that we love enemies by extension when they are loved by our friends. We love our enemies indirectly because, within a few degrees of separation, we are related to them in friendship. Friendship thus extends to everyone through friends of friends (Heffernan, 180). Though our enemies do not reciprocate our friendship, God ultimately does on their behalf. Rather than being autonomous friendships, charity towards sinners is an integral component of friendship with God: "it is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbour" (Aquinas, 175). As Aquinas states in *De caritate* 7 and 9, "in loving our neighbour... charity has God for its formal object and not merely as its ultimate end" (cited in Aumann). Charity towards our neighbour is conjoined with charity towards God because the good which we want for our neighbour is the same as the good that we want for God: that they may dwell in each other (Aquinas, 175). Our reciprocal relationship of charity-friendship with God causes us to be in charity-friendship with all those who belong to God (ie. everyone, including our enemies).

The next difficulty for Aquinas in harmonizing charity with the classical understanding of friendship is that, in the classical world, friendship was understood to be contingent on virtue.² It seems that charity cannot be understood as being only between the virtuous, because it is extended to enemies and to the unrighteous (Aquinas, 171-72). Nevertheless, Aquinas maintains that charity is friendship that is based on virtue. The friendship of charity is first and foremost directed towards God, because of his virtue; charity directed to sinners does not consist of autonomous friendships but is a necessary part of friendship with God (Aquinas, 173). However, it must be admitted that virtue is not the cause of God's friendship towards man: "God does not love things because they are good... but they are good because God loves them" (Aumann). Aquinas partially maintains the classical requisite that friendship be based on virtue, only he specifies that charity is based entirely on God's virtue, not ours or our neighbour's.

Another objection to the reconciliation of charity with classical friendship arises from the incongruity between the requirement of charity to love sinners and Aristotle's claim, in *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.8, that to be loved is to be honoured (cited in Aquinas, 175). If charity denotes love in Aristotle's sense, it would follow that sinners must be honoured. Aquinas argues that since honour is always given in proportion to virtue, honouring unrighteous friends does not require ascribing spurious honour to them, but only recognizing them for whatever virtue they have (175-76). Like other types of friendship, charity functions on the basis of proportionality; it gives honour to those who merit honour as classical friendship requires it to.³

Aquinas is further criticized that borrowing from the classical

understanding of love has made him a proponent of selfishness rather than true charity. Christians who emphasize a gospel of self-denial and renunciation are suspicious of Aquinas' ideas about self-love (Aumann). As evidence that we ought to love ourselves, Aquinas (182) cites Leviticus 10:18 "Thou shalt love thy friend as thyself". Though we cannot be friends to ourselves, if we did not love ourselves, we would not be able to love others. Charity requires us to love others, but loving others is rooted in and dependent on our love for ourselves. However, the common good should be sought more than private goods (Aquinas, 183), and love for God should exceed self-love (Aumann). The best-informed and most appropriate form of self-love is to desire one's own salvation (Aquinas 180-182). Grace can elevate self-love above sinful appetites to find expression in the truest kind of self-love, desire for nothing other than fellowship with God. The strength of Aquinas' conception of self-love is that it advocates a healthy understanding of self-love rather than succumbing to hypocritical self-denial. By arguing that individuals should seek the common good, he allows an appropriate amount of concern for one's own spiritual good, while not rejecting sacrificial love as embodied by the cross. The product of Aquinas' syncretism between Greek and Christian thought actually seems to be more accurate and noble than the sum of its parts.

Through his questions on love and charity in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas is largely successful in harmonizing Aristotle's insights into friendship with Christian doctrine on love and charity. Believing that imperfect, temporal goods are nonetheless blessings intentionally bestowed on man by God, Aquinas does not reject classical friendship for being below the grace of charity (Heffernan, 182). Instead, he argues that the classical comprehension of friendship helps us to understand the nature of the perfect relationship of charity that God intends for us. Having recognized that the Christian tradition does little to account for friendship, Aquinas borrows from Aristotle, who articulates the most accurate human understanding of the topic. There are however, several undeniable incongruities between the two authorities that Aquinas must reconcile. He argues that as all friendship has its source in virtue, charity is derived from God, the initiator of charity towards whom our response of charity is directed. The reciprocation in this friendship happens between God and man, though the nature of this relationship is spiritual rather than corporeal. The love of enemies that is commanded by charity does not consist of autonomous friendship-relationships with enemies, but is an extension of man's love for God since all humans belong to him. Having navigated through these challenges, Aquinas has delivered a satisfactory account of charity as a divinely perfected type of natural friendship.

About the Author

Philip Ney is in his third year of BA in Political Science and Economics.

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Endnotes

1. It is beyond the scope of this essay to which authority Aquinas adheres to in cases of irreconcilable differences. Ernest Fortin's position is that "in Aquinas' works it is rather theology which is justified before the bar of reason or philosophy" (250).
2. In Book VIII of Nichomachean Ethics, friendship as Aristotle describes it is based on virtue and is between virtuous people (cited in Aquinas, 172).
3. The principal of proportionality is important to Aquinas' discussion of friendship in other cases, particularly in the sixth article of ST II-II Question 26 where he discusses whether all neighbours must receive the same amount of love.

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