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Loving Oneself for Whose Sake? A Thomistic Response to Dietrich von Hildebrand

One might wonder whether the essence of love involves self-transcendence. If it does, then philosophers who speak of self-love could not really be addressing love at all. Perhaps they address a related phenomenon, maybe even a good, positive reality, but not love itself. Since St. Thomas Aquinas speaks to the legitimacy of the love of self, philosophers who argue that the essence of love involves self-transcendence criticize the scholastic's position. In fact, this is the exact criticism Dietrich von Hildebrand advances in *The Nature of Love*.

While there would be great merit in a comprehensive and systematic analysis of these two very rich accounts of love, I will devote this paper to a more modest thesis, namely, defending Aquinas against von Hildebrand's suggestion that "self-love" is not really love at all. I will argue that, based on both natural and supernatural principles, Aquinas's notion of the love of self, as far as it relates to the love of God, involves transcendence.[1] I am not arguing that love essentially

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[1] Von Hildebrand offers other conditions for love, which I will state, but his chief contention regarding self-love is that it lacks self-transcendence.

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involves transcendence, although I think that is a very reasonable view; rather that, for Aquinas, love is certainly oriented toward transcendence, and complete acts of love, even in the case of self-love, are self-transcending. During my analysis, I will show how love in general achieves transcendence, and hopefully disarm some of the hesitancy to accept the centrality of self-love within Aquinas's account.

I will proceed by offering an overview of von Hildebrand's critique. He demonstrates a general concern regarding eudaimonistic commitments he deems undermine the possibility of acting from anything but self-interest. To situate this aspect, I will begin with a brief word on Blessed John Duns Scotus's analysis of the same issue. In a narrower sense, though, von Hildebrand's criticisms stem from a feature specific to his own account, namely, that human beings can transcend themselves to respond to values that are important-in-themselves and that love falls under the category of this sort of self-transcending response. While a suitable defense of Aquinas on the general eudaimonistic worry would not necessarily work as a response to the specific issue of whether the love of self is self-transcending, I do think that a reasonable defense of the latter works for the former. Consequently, I will proceed as such. The second section of the paper will address the place of something akin to von Hildebrand's notion of a value response within Aquinas's thought. The third part will turn to Aquinas's account of the love of self in relation to the love of neighbor and the love of God. In the closing section, I will focus on the transcendent character of self-love and how this notion defuses the worry over Aquinas's construal of eudaimonism.

Dietrich von Hildebrand

Dietrich von Hildebrand maintains that love is a value-response. A person perceives the value of something as important-in-itself and then

must go out of oneself, as it were, to give the object an adequate response. Consequently, for von Hildebrand, if a given philosopher's account of love does not allow for this sort of response, either generically or specifically, as in the case of the love of self, then the philosopher is offering an inadequate explanation of reality. Von Hildebrand is clearly not the first to express this kind of worry. For example, we can go all the way back to Blessed John Duns Scotus's fears about this very sort of thing regarding any traditional Aristotelian account of the will.

Scotus contends that love in the traditional Aristotelian characterization of the will turns out to be too self-interested and impoverished. The will, marked only by an *affectio commodi*, that is an inclination toward what is advantageous for the person, seeks only what is beneficial for him. This is what I am referring to as the problem of eudaimonism. While affirming that the *affectio commodi* is part of the will, Scotus notes a second, higher inclination, the *affectio iustitiae*, that is, an inclination toward the just.[2] This inclination frees the will from mere self-interest and allows a person to respond to God's commands out of justice, regardless of whether it is perceived to be in one's interests to do so. In turn, this creates the possibility of a person loving God for his own sake and not just as a means to personal happiness.

This objection, and others like it, maintains that on any account of eudaimonism, love will lack transcendence, since ultimately the lover loves the other for his own self-interested pursuit of happiness. Von Hildebrand treats this concern as one extreme flanked by another extreme, namely, altruism. Here is his characterization:

> There are two fundamental misunderstandings of man and of his nature and dignity as a person. One of them goes in the direction of obscuring his transcendence, holding that man is in principle incapable of taking

[2] John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* III, suppl., dist. 46.

> an interest in something having value in itself but that he can only be moved by something beneficial for himself [...]. Both conceptions [eudaimonism and altruism] are disastrous errors. Whoever does not acknowledge the transcendence of human beings fails to understand what distinguishes them as persons from all impersonal creatures.[3]

If, as a eudaimonist, Aquinas's account entails a wholesale immanence, then it, too, would be disastrously erroneous.

There are plenty of good Thomistic responses to this. Most responses focus on the participation metaphysics of the good, with special consideration given to Aquinas's notion that each individual is part of a larger whole; thus, the good of the individual essentially connects to goods outside of oneself that ought to be pursued in ways that even require self-sacrifice.[4] In this paper, I will employ the same participation metaphysics. However, I think that the full extent that the love of God plays in relation to God as the absolute, non-participated good in Aquinas's account does not receive enough credit. I will develop my case accordingly.

Before turning to my specific argument, what I think is obvious from the texts of Aquinas is that he thinks loving others for their own sake is a given. In other words, his analysis of the phenomenon of love includes both the possibility of and robust role for transcendence. The only controversy would be whether that claim is consistent with his commitment to eudaimonism. What makes von Hildebrand's account, relative to Scotus's, more problematic for the Thomist, is the insistence that love itself essentially involves transcendence; therefore, a proper

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[3] Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, trans. John F. Crosby and John Henry Crosby (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2009), 205–206.

[4] For a very good recent example, see Wojciech Golubiewski, *Aquinas on Imitation of Nature: Source of Principles of Moral Action* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 250–266.

self-love cannot really exist. There may be things like legitimate self-concern, but whatever their nature, they do not rise to the level of love.

Turning then to von Hildebrand's constructive views, he sees three spheres of personal existence: intellect, will, and heart. It is the last of these from which affectivity and love flow. He thinks the will and heart differ in terms of the will acting and the heart responding:

> The will in the positive sense of the word is always directed to some state of affairs that is not yet real but can be realized. I cannot will things or persons but only a state of affairs. [...] The object of love is not a state of affairs nor is its theme the realization of something not yet real [...]. Love is clearly an affective response.[5]

He further distinguishes genuine affectivity, particularly what he calls "tender affectivity," from sentimentality and petty self-indulgence. True affectivity is the felt response to values, particularly those values which are important-in-themselves. Love is the proper response to the intrinsic value of a person. Owing to the centrality of affectivity and particularly the tender affectivity of love-relationships, the heart, more so than the intellect and will, is the real self.

> In the moral sphere it is the will which has the character of a last, valid word [...]. In many other domains, however, it is the h e a r t which is the most intimate part of the person, the core, the real self, rather than the will or the intellect. This is so in the realm of human love: conjugal love, friendship, filial love, parental love. The heart is here not only the true self because love is essentially a voice of the heart; it is also the true self insofar as love aims at the heart of the beloved in a specific way. The lover wants to pour his love into the heart of the beloved, he wants to

[5] Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 42.

> affect his heart, to fill it with happiness; and only then will he feel that he has really reached the beloved, his very self.[6]

Here, the person is truly in a state of "being affected" by the value before him. If that value is another person, then the will must necessarily say "yes" and endorse that love, fully cooperating in it so that love precedes the will.

Upon being affected, a person transcends himself to respond to the value appropriately. Not all value-responses involve persons or love, as when one responds to the values of a splendid work of art. However, love is always a value-response and always a response to the value of a person. Furthermore, love is superactual as it endures in a deeper level of the person in opposition to mere momentary responses.[7] The lover takes delight in the beloved. Delight is not the motive for the response, but it is its natural effect. Love seeks a union with the beloved and a desire to make the beloved happy, the *intentio unionis* and *intentio benevolentiae* respectively. Love involves self-donation and commitment to the beloved, which brings happiness. Lastly, love involves a desire for reciprocity.

Von Hildebrand affirms what he labels *eigenleben*, which is a self-solidarity one has in virtue of being a unified being. Moreover, it is from *eigenleben* that a genuine self-concern flows.[8] He adamantly

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[6] Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2007), 67.

[7] I think that Aquinas has a notion similar to what von Hildebrand terms "superactual," namely that which is "virtually" ordered to the good. While I do not address similarities with von Hildebrand, I treat the topic extensively in "Virtual Ordering and the *Affectiones* in Aquinas," *Nova et Vetera* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2022).

[8] John Crosby expands on *eigenleben* as a basis for self-love in "Developing Dietrich von Hildebrand's Personalism," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (Fall 2017).

rejects any attempts to characterize this as love and, even more so, attempts to ground the love of others in it.

> That is the case with all attempts to derive love from self-love. In doing this one overlooks the specifically transcendent dimension of love, the ability to take an interest in someone because he is so beautiful, so precious, that is, the value-responding character of love [...]. It is true that in every human being there is an instinctive and even inevitable solidarity with oneself [...]. This naturally given solidarity is not the result of love, however; it is not a bond that grows out of a love for myself but is given prior to all loving, given the unity of our personal nature.[9]

Love requires an "I-Thou," something relating to oneself in any way simply cannot provide.

In *The Nature of Love*, von Hildebrand shies away from making Aquinas a specific target, though it is clear from the terminology that he has Aquinas in mind. Moreover, Aquinas is as unequivocal as one could be that the love of self is possible and that the love of self grounds the love of other human persons. On this score, the two thinkers seemingly could not be further apart. However, there is a self-transcending aspect even to the love of self in Aquinas, which makes his account far less vulnerable to von Hildebrand's critique.

Aquinas on Goodness and Love's Response

A key aspect of von Hildebrand's criticism is that Aquinas lacks an understanding and place for a value-response, particularly regarding that which is important-in-itself. I believe that there are irreconcilable

[9] von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 7.

differences between their accounts. I neither want to imply the two thinkers are saying the exact same thing nor suggest in any way that von Hildebrand offers nothing original or new relative to Aquinas. Such a view is simply false; von Hilderbrand is a profoundly original thinker with much insight into the modern world. In fact, the two are closer on some key points than sometimes acknowledged even by von Hildebrand himself.

I think one can find a notion of a value-response in Aquinas. Furthermore, I surmise that it is the way Aquinas relates this notion to the love of self that creates the apparent gulf separating the two accounts. Von Hildebrand thinks Aquinas's account of self-love fails as love due to a lack of transcendence, and this is related to the issue of a value-response regarding that which is important-in-itself. He thinks Aquinas does do justice to the difference between the merely subjectively satisfying and objective goods for the person, but his characterization of the good in relation to human appetites entails that the important-in-itself is missed as a metaphysical category altogether. I will first briefly turn to Aquinas's notion of the good and then to love as the response to the good.

For Aquinas, none of these goods is absolutely good other than God himself. All other goods are good as participatory in the absolute, divine good—the divine good is their exemplary cause.

> Everything is therefore called good from the divine goodness, as from the first exemplary effective and final principle of all goodness. Nevertheless, everything is called good by reason of the similitude of the divine goodness belonging to it, which is formally its own goodness.[10]

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[10] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., ed. and revised by The Aquinas Institute and its collaborators (Lander: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), I, 6, 4. For the mechanics of divine exemplary

Every being is good. Moreover, the goodness is formally and inherently part of each being. However, it is God who is goodness itself, while everything else participates in him. In relation to the will, goods can be understood as useful, pleasant, or integral (*bonum honestum*), but the nature of goodness comes first.

Appealing to this priority of the good, Michael Waldstein has offered an extensive response to von Hildebrand's criticism that Aquinas lacks a notion of a value-response. Waldstein maintains that von Hildebrand views Aquinas through the lens of a strand of Thomism which Waldstein terms "Entelechial-Thomism." In this view, appetites, including the will as rational appetite, are viewed in a Kantian manner whereby they are prior to the good. In this reading, the inclinations of human nature determine what is good for human beings.

> The Entelechial-Thomistic concept of *appetitus*, Hildebrand claims, refers to an urge which is the reason or determining factor (*principium*) of the goodness of an object—that goodness in turn begin the *principiatum*, something determined by the urge.[11]

If goodness is determined by appetite, then, by definition, nothing could be good as important-in-itself. Waldstein proceeds to comment on several texts of Aquinas, showing that Entelechial Thomism is at

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causality in Aquinas, see Gregory T. Doolan. *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

[11] Michael Waldstein. "Dietrich von Hildebrand and St. Thomas Aquinas on Goodness and Happiness," *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition 1, no. 2 (2003): 404. Francis E. Feingold also treats the parallel between Aquinas's notion of the *bonum honestum* and von Hildebrand's notion of the important-in-itself in "*Principium* Versus *Principiatum*: The Transcendence of Love in von Hildebrand and Aquinas," *Quaestiones Disputatae*, 3, no. 2 (2013). While seeking a rapprochement between the two thinkers, he is more willing to reject some principles of Aquinas relative to Waldstein and me.

odds with Aquinas's own view. Aquinas consistently affirms the priority of goodness over its status as an end. Objects are ends because they are good, not vice versa.[12] We see this most clearly in Aquinas's notion of the *bonum honestum*, and ultimately in terms of God's goodness as absolutely independent and prior to anything in creation.

Robert Miner's gloss on the role the *bonum honestum* plays relative to a person's response to the good both provides a helpful note to Waldstein's defense and facilitates a shift in focus from the nature of the good to the mechanics by which a person responds to the good.

> The threefold division of the good [useful, pleasant, befitting/*honestum*] corresponds neatly to the single formal object of the rational appetite and the two formally distinct objects of sensitive appetite. The will formally tends toward the *bonum honestum*, even if what is willed is materially unsuited to human flourishing.[13]

Aquinas and von Hildebrand may not be on the same page, but they are reading the same book. There are goods to which a person should tend due to their goodness as such.

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[12] For instance, in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 17, "Nothing tends to something as to an end except inasmuch as that very same (end) is good. Therefore, it is the good as good that is the end." Waldstein, 414. John Crosby, in his introductory study to *The Nature of Love*, acknowledges Waldstein's analysis and thinks it does justice to part of the issue, though he adds, "On the other hand, it can hardly be claimed, and Waldstein does not claim, that St. Thomas had the concept of value and of value-response and that he used these concepts, or equivalent concepts, at the level of his theoretical discourse on good and happiness. This means that St. Thomas does not capture the moment of transcendence in moral action with the precision with which von Hildebrand captures it." xix, note 4.

[13] Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 47–48.

Von Hilebrand sees the response to the good as something issuing principally from the heart and not the intellect or will.[14] Aquinas focuses on the will as the primary locus of relating to the good. One should not conclude from this that Aquinas misses the role affectivity plays in relation to the good. Aquinas has a rich account of affectivity, but he simply connects it to the nature of the will.[15] His account of the will and affectivity begins with what he calls *simplex voluntas*, that is, simple willing. Before any commanded acts of the will, the will's immediate act is toward the good as such as apprehended by the intellect.[16] Michael Sherwin notes that, in the context of human rela-

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[14] Mark Spencer gives a helpful overview of what von Hildebrand means by "sphere." It is not identical to a power, as Aquinas would understand it, but I think it is close enough for my argument. He states, "However, "A 'sphere' is not a single power, nor a genus of powers, but a broad way of engaging with the world according to a single 'theme' or family of formal objects. As we have already seen, the 'I' arises from the soul and is present in all intentional acts. It is this 'I,' this center, rather than any power, that is properly called free; though I perform free acts through the will, it is always out of this free center." "The Many Powers of the Human Soul: Von Hildebrand's Contributions to Scholastic Philosophical Anthropology," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (Fall 2017), 728.

[15] Aquinas uses the term "heart" to refer to the highest operations of the intellect and will. It represents the deepest interior and is the "place" where God dwells most fully. "We see from this that this man was not cured in vain, but having been converted to a religious way of life, he visited the temple and found Christ: because if we desire to come to the knowledge of the Creator, we must run from the tumult of sinful affections, leave the company of evil men, and flee to the temple of the heart, where God condescends to visit and live." *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Fr. Fabian R. Larcher, O.P., ed. by The Aquinas Institute (Lander: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), 730.

[16] "The act of the will is twofold: one is its immediate act, as it were, elicited by it, namely, to wish; the other is an act of the will commanded by it, and put into execution by means of some other power, such as to walk and to speak, which are commanded by the will to be executed by means of the motive power." *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 6, 4. For a full articulation of all the acts of the elements of Aquinas's account, see

tionships, this immediate act of the will is an affirmation of the goodness of the other.

> Integral to Aquinas' account is the recognition that this personal love exists prior to and is more fundamental than love's role as the principle of action. Before becoming the principle of our subsequent actions, love already exists as a response to the goodness and value of a person. This is love at the level of the will's *simplex voluntas* arising in response to reason's recognition of a person's goodness.[17]

The will's basic loving impulse is toward goodness as goodness. Aquinas further specifies love into four forms:

> We find four words referring in a way, to the same thing: viz., love (*amor*), dilection (*dilectio*), charity (*caritas*) and friendship (*amicitia*). They differ, however, in this, that friendship, according to the Philosopher is like a habit, whereas love and dilection are expressed by way of act or passion; and charity can be taken either way.[18]

Amor serves as a genus for dilection and charity, as the latter two necessarily involve *amor*. The principal reason for this is that the passive element found most acutely within *amor* remains even in the higher forms of love. It is this passivity that bestows the general character of love on these latter three.

Thomas M. Osborne Jr. *Human Action in Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

[17] Michael S. Sherwin, O.P., *By Knowledge and By Love: Charity and Knowledge in the Moral Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 92–93.

[18] *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 26, 3.

Amor is fundamentally a passive response as moved by and dependent upon the sensory apprehension of a (sense) good or evil. This sort of love is rooted in the first change in the appetite itself: "Accordingly, the first change wrought in the appetite by the appetible object is called love [*amor*], and is nothing else than complacency in that object."[19] Complacency is a felt attractiveness for an object. I find Sherwin's and Christopher Malloy's characterizations of *complacentia* as a "pleasing affective affinity"[20] and "an affective 'acceptance of' or 'conformation to'"[21] some good instructive. There is a definite affective dimension to how a person encounters goodness. The movement of the desire of love is toward a union with the object in question, the possession of which occasions a further affective state of delight, though with *amor*, the affective state is strictly tied to the sense appetite.

Proper human and personal love begins with *dilectio*, which is the natural development of *amor* in a being with rational powers. Moreover, *dilectio* possesses the same basic structure as *amor*, but instead of the sensory apprehension of sense goods providing the driving force, a rational apprehension of the good, objects understood *sub specie boni*, moves the rational appetite of the will in a non-corporeal manner. As with *amor*, Aquinas begins with the basic tendency of the rational appetite, its essential movement, and then the affective end state of resting with the good, namely, joy (or sorrow over a failure to obtain it). The will's simple tendency is the love of or response to the good.[22]

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[19] *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 26, 2.

[20] Sherwin, 64.

[21] Christopher J. Malloy, "Thomas on the Order of Love and Desire," *The Thomist* 71, no. 1 (2007), 67.

[22] While a full account of affectivity in Aquinas is well beyond the purview of this paper, it is worth noting that he distinguishes between the passions of the sense appetite and spiritual affections pertaining to the soul. For instance, "Therefore spiritual joy, which is about God, is caused by charity." *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 28, a. 1. He also

The complacency of *dilectio* follows from the rational apprehension of the good. *Dilectio* is first passive because the will undergoes the affective pull from the good acting upon it. Its active dimension is the commanded act of choice (*electionem*) to pursue a union with the good. If the union sought is with a person, then we have friendship love. Finally, from the supernatural perspective, if a person seeks a union of friendship with God (and God provides the graces necessary to promote this), then we have the love of charity.

Aquinas on the Love of Self and Others

With Aquinas's general taxonomy of love as a backdrop, we can turn to the three forms of personal love: love of God, self, and neighbor. To confront von Hildebrand's concerns about self-love as directly as possible, I will begin with some texts of Aquinas where he states seemingly the exact view to which von Hildebrand strenuously objects. Terminologically, Aquinas uses the term "self-love" based on Aristotle's use of it and the biblical commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. He contends the natural interpretation of the command is that, first, a person is to love himself—to have self-love–and, second, the person ought to use that love as the guide for loving others. Speaking to the relationship between love of self and love of another, Aquinas notes the following:

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refers to joyful affectivity and the affectivity of intellectual operations as "spiritual" versus bodily or sensitive pleasures. *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 31, a. 5. For a good overview of the differences between passionate delight and affective joy, see Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *Passions and Virtue*, trans. Benedict M. Guevin, O.S.B., forward by Michael Sherwin, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 42–45.

> [I]n this way we must hold that, properly speaking, a man is not a friend to himself, but something more than a friend, since friendship implies union, for Dionysius says (*Div. Nom*. Iv) that love is a unitive force, whereas a man is one with himself which is more than being united to another. Hence, just as unity is the principle of union (*unitas est principium unionis*), so the love with which a man loves himself is the form and root of friendship.[23]

Elsewhere he notes: "Man's love for himself is the model of his love for another."[24] Love is a unitive force, and with this von Hildebrand agrees insofar as he recognizes the *intentio unionis* inherent to love. However, Aquinas claims that, first, the love of self—"the love with which a man loves himself"—is a real form of love; second, it is more basic than the love of others; and third, it is the model and template for how to love another. The ways a person loves himself, both good and bad, condition, if not determine, how one loves others.[25] These three points represent key points of divergence between the two thinkers.

Aquinas elaborates on this structure by analyzing what he calls the three unions of love, with the first divided into two: substantial unity, and then the unions of similitude, affection, and possession.

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[23] *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, 25, 4.

[24] *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, 26, 4, *sed contra*.

[25] Some acts of self-love are not good. In fact, Aquinas will often use the same term to speak of the beginning of sin. For instance, "In desiring to excel, man loves himself, for to love oneself is the same as to desire some good for oneself. Consequently it amounts to the same whether we reckon pride or self-love as the beginning of every sin." *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 84, 2, *ad* 3. Obviously, my comments above pertain to proper self-love. For more on the differences between wicked and proper self-love, see Anthony T. Flood, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Love: Aquinas on Participation, Unity, and Union* (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), and Christopher J. Malloy, *Aquinas on Beatific Charity and the Problem of Love* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2019).

> Union has a threefold relation to love. There is union which causes love; and this is substantial union, as regards the love with which one loves oneself; while as regards the love wherewith one loves other things, it is the union of likeness [...]. There is also a union which is essentially love itself. This union is according to the bond of affection, and is likened to substantial union, inasmuch as the lover stands to the object of his love, as to himself, if it be love of friendship; as to something belonging to himself, if it be the love of concupiscence. Again, there is a union, which is the effect of love. This is real union, which the lover seeks with the object of his love.[26]

Substantial union, or unity as he calls it in the passage previously cited, forms the conditions for love. Love as a moving force, as the impulse and drive for union with goods and other persons, springs from unity. The affective dimensions of love are consequent to the unity as a cause of the love. If love is unimpeded, then it brings about real union with the good or other person loved. Unity is the principle of the affective and real union: "there arises in every lover the desire to be united as far as possible with the beloved: hence nothing gives greater pleasure to friends than living together."[27]

The end of love is union with the object or person loved, while the beginning is unity. Since unity is the principle of union, a union can never achieve the same level of reality as unity. The passage above on the three unions of love concludes as follows:

> [Real] union is in keeping with the demands of love: for as the Philosopher relates (*Polit*. Ii, 1), Aristophanes stated that lovers

[26] *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 28, 1, ad 2.

[27] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., ed. and revised by The Aquinas Institute and its collaborators (Lander: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2018), III, 153.

> would wish to be united both into one, but since this would result in either one or both being destroyed, they seek a suitable and becoming union—to love together, speak together, and be united together in other things.[28]

Unity causes love, and love impels union. Nevertheless, the union must remain, not a unity, but two separate beings, two separate unities united. The measure of a friendship is the degree to which its union approximates to the substantial unities forming the structural basis for it. The greater the friendship, the more the two friends are united in affections, presence, and activities. The weaker the friendship, the less united they are in such matters.

While I am laying the groundwork for the claim that the love of self involves transcendence, given these passages, one might legitimately wonder if even the love of others involves transcendence. Aquinas clearly thinks it does. He employs Aristotle's distinction between the love of concupiscence and love of friendship to establish it.

> With the love of concupiscence we draw external things or persons to ourselves, and we love these others insofar as they are useful to us or give us pleasure. But in the love of friendship we have the opposite, for we draw ourselves to what is external to us [...]. Notice that the love of concupiscence is not a love for the thing desired but a love for the person desiring [...] in this kind of love, one is rather loving himself than the other [...]. But the love of friendship is concerned rather with the thing loved than with the one loving, because here one loves another for the sake of the one loved, and not for the sake of the one loving.[29]

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[28] *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 28, 1, ad 2.

[29] *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 2036. See also *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 26, 4.

One can love a person as a means to one's own interests, but this need not be the case. Loving others for their own sake as they are in themselves is possible and even required for friendship. In the case of the former, the love of the other would amount to a love of self. As far as the goodness of the beloved within true friendship draws a person out of himself to seek the other's interest, he is not reducing the other to a means to his own interest or happiness, since friendship requires a transcendence of self.

Transcending oneself to dwell with the beloved admits of degrees. Any love of friendship satisfies the condition for a baseline transcendence, but Aquinas notes that the more intense the love, the greater the ecstasy (*extasis*). "To suffer ecstasy means to be placed outside oneself [...] in the love of friendship, a man's affection goes out from itself simply, because he wishes and does good to his friend, by caring and providing for him, for his own sake.[30] As Peter Kwasniewski summarizes, "In Thomas's treatment of it, *extasis*, though it may at times include a bodily going-forth, indicates essentially a standing outside of oneself at the level of mind and heart, thought and affection."[31]

A Transcendent Love of Self

I now address how the love of self relates to transcendence. While the love of self precedes the love of neighbor, one ought to have a greater love of God over self, both by natural principles and grace. "Therefore man, by his natural powers alone, can love God more than himself and

[30] *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 28, 3.

[31] Peter A. Kwasniewski, *The Ecstasy of Love in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2021), 240.

above all things."[32] Sin has damaged these natural powers, but they remain oriented toward the greater love of God. On the supernatural level, both of the theological virtues of hope and charity elevate the will's love in relation to God. Interestingly, though, only charity directly involves a greater love of God than self, entailing self-transcendence. Aquinas defines the supernatural virtue of hope as the desire or movement for the infinite good of God as the source of perfect happiness and as relying on divine assistance to achieve that end. Charity is friendship with God as made possible by a supernatural act of communication by God that allows for a sufficient basis of similitude for that friendship.[33] Both hope and charity are habits of love. As such, Aquinas offers distinctions within love to characterize the difference between the two virtues.[34]

Hope involves an act of self-love that is more immanent than transcendent. Through hope, a person loves God with a love of concupiscence in which the person is the recipient of the goodness of God. Through charity, one loves God with a love of friendship in which God is loved for his own sake. "Hope presupposes love of that which a man hopes to obtain; and such love is love of concupiscence, whereby he who desires good, loves himself rather than something else. On the other hand, charity implies love of friendship."[35] Aquinas characterizes this same point with a distinction between imperfect and perfect love.

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[32] *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 109, 3, *sed contra*. See also *Summa Theologiae*, I, 60, 5, ad 1, and II–II, 26, 4. For a reconstruction of Aquinas's argument, see Thomas M. Osborne Jr., *Love of Self and Love of God in Thirteenth-Century Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 78. Also, Christopher J. Malloy, *Aquinas on Beatific Charity and the Problem of Love*, 104–119.

[33] *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, 23, 1.

[34] I am indebted to Sherwin's work *On Love and Virtue: Theological Essays*, (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2018), particularly 102–105.

[35] *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 66, 6, ad 2.

> Now there is a perfect, and an imperfect love. Perfect love is that whereby a man is loved in himself, as when someone wishes a person some good for his own sake; thus a man loves his friend. Imperfect love is that whereby a man loves something, not for its own sake, but that he may obtain that good for himself; thus a man loves what he desires. The first love of God pertains to charity, which adheres to God for His own sake; while hope pertains to the second love, since he that hopes, intends to obtain possession of something for himself.[36]

The passage specifies that hope precedes charity in the order of generation, but charity precedes hope in the order of perfection. In the order of perfection, the ultimate act of the human being is a love of the absolute good purely for God's sake—a full response to that which is absolutely important-in-itself. A person apprehends the goodness of God, which affectively pulls the person to respond adequately, which in this case is the going out of oneself to God for his sake because he is God.

Before turning to the way in which self-love itself involves transcendence, it is important to consider one more note on the will. There are two ways of understanding Aquinas's account of the will in relation to self-love. On the first way, we might take his claim that since the will is oriented to the good as such, the *simplex voluntas*, the will can act in diverse ways relative to different kinds of good. In other words, the love of God and love of self need not have any essential connection to one another, other than that they issue from the same power. This interpretation would be structurally like Scotus's notion of the will as having two fundamental inclinations that are irreducible to each other in either direction. On the second interpretation, we would say all acts of love essentially are instances of the love of self. Self-

[36] *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, 17, 8.

love is the basis for all other acts of the will/love one may have. The texts of Aquinas are somewhat ambiguous for determining which view is correct. Nonetheless, one could reasonably infer from what he does say that all love flows from self-love. For instance, Miner observes, "Aquinas is remarkably unconcerned to dispel any fear that all love is a sublimation of self-love."[37]

If one reads along the lines of different inclinations in the will, making a case for transcendence is straightforward. There would be no essential inconsistency in Aquinas's claims of the love of self and a greater love of God. However, if one takes the second interpretation, then Aquinas does seem to affirm an immanent view of love at odds with his claims of charity and related considerations. While I am not sure which interpretation is correct, for the sake of giving the most honest response to von Hildebrand, I will grant that Aquinas endorses the second position, namely, the priority of self-love. If with this starting point we can show transcendence, the case will be much stronger. Put simply, we can still claim there is transcendence to love, since, for Aquinas, there is transcendence even in self-love.

The natural dynamism of self-love is toward oneself as good b e c a u s e that is the first and inescapable good that one experiences. However, this trajectory does not terminate in one's substantial goodness but rather in goodness as such. Self-love is always present simply because the goodness of one's own being and the power of the will is a structural precondition to acting at all in this case. For an analogy, if I shine a red light on a white object, the object will be red, but, inescapably, so will the source of that redness itself—the red light. The red light cannot cast the red light without itself being red and illuminating itself. The will cannot love an object without itself loving itself/willing the good to itself. This need not be the ultimate reason

[37] Miner, 133.

why the will is loving the object, but it is inescapably part of any act and eventual habits of willing.

The last step in my argument concerns the effect that the will's inner tendency to love the highest good over self has on self-love. We see this effect principally with charity, though also with references to natural love. Aquinas maintains that a person ought to love both others and himself out of charity. As discussed above, charity entails loving God for his own sake. It then extends to loving what God loves because he loves it. When a neighbor is loved out of charity, one is loving the neighbor proximately with a love of friendship for that person's own sake, but ultimately one is loving him for God's sake. In other words, loving others for their own sake does not eliminate the possibility of also loving them for God's sake. Aquinas even cautions against neighborly love if done without due reference to God. "A man's love for his friends is sometimes less meritorious insofar as he loves them for their own sake, so as to fall short of the true reason for the friendship of charity, which is God."[38] The point is that even in the closest of friendships, with all of the ecstatic transcendence entailed within them, the love of charity demands and entails a greater transcendence toward God.

This is even more so, then, with the love of self out of charity.[39] In his *Commentary on Matthew*, Aquinas offers his take on the second commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself:

> And when [Jesus] says, 'as yourself', it should not be understood to mean as much as yourself, for this would be against the order of charity, but 'as yourself', i.e., for the same end as yourself, or in the same way as yourself. For the same end, because you should not

[38] *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, 27, 8, *ad* 2.
[39] *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, 25, 4.

> love yourself for your own sake, but for God's sake, so also your neighbor.[40]

A person is to love himself, but not ultimately for his own sake. One is to love himself for God's sake. Again, this would be the case even for the natural powers were it not for sin; fortunately, charity restores and expands the possibility.[41] With an act of fully realized proper self-love, then, a person goes out of himself to God and then returns to himself for God. Self-love is not a love of an "I-I" but rather an (admittedly ineloquently put) "I-Thou and then I because of Thou." A person returns to himself as an effect of that love of God. This is the inner tendency, even if not fully realized, in any proper act of the love of self, as far as self-love is proper only when it is subordinate to a greater love of God. Thus, transcendence is part even of the love of self.

Relating this to the general worry over eudaimonism, I mentioned earlier that the only possible problem is that Aquinas's account of love and underlying eudaimonistic principles are not consistent. I suppose that this comes down to how one characterizes eudaimonism itself, but I do not see this as an issue for Aquinas. In his full philosophical and theological account, he affirms three principles: one, human beings have the ultimate end of union with God; two, human beings naturally seek the ultimate end; and three, the obtainment of the ultimate end requires loving God for his own sake.[42] It is also clear from how

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[40] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mathew*, trans. Jeremy Holmes, ed. The Aquinas Institute (Lander: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), 1819.

[41] Based on unfallen natural principles, we would love God more than self, as well as for his own sake. Charity adds to nature as far as God communicates his life to us for the sake of establishing a friendship.

[42] Aquinas expresses the first principle in *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 2, 8 and the second in *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 5, 8. The third principle is the conclusion of my analysis in this section.

Aquinas articulates his view that, while union with God makes one happy and serves one's interests, this need not be the ultimate intention for why one loves God. It can intended, and that is exactly what occurs with the virtue of hope. However, charity demands a love of God for his sake alone—a love for God because he is God.

I think that von Hildebrand's worries over Aquinas's endorsement of a robust place for self-love leads him to suppose that Aquinas's account of the will is restricted to self-interest. In turn, von Hildebrand interprets the second principle above along those same lines. As Waldstein points out, contemporary to von Hildebrand, there were many Thomists who no doubt offered a similar take on the second principle. However, I hope I have shown that, for Aquinas, self-love is oriented to a greater love of God and must be conditioned and tempered by that same love. This consideration shifts the perspective from a fundamentally self-interested self-love to a fundamentally benevolent love entailing self-transcendence. While this is clearly the case with his considerations of grace, it is the same basic view he takes on the natural powers in their intact condition.

To conclude, while I grant that there are irreconcilable differences between the two thinkers, I wonder how much of the disagreement comes down to the word "love." If something like *eigenleben* turns out to be what Aquinas means by the term "self-love," (or Aquinas's full understanding of self-love is what von Hildebrand means by *eigenleben*), then maybe a greater rapprochement is possible. For now, I conclude that Aquinas affirms a robust role for personal transcendence even within the structure of self-love itself.

Loving Oneself for Whose Sake? A Thomistic Response to Dietrich von Hildebrand

SUMMARY

Abstract: One might wonder whether the essence of love involves self-transcendence. If it does, then philosophers who speak of self-love could not really be addressing love at all. Perhaps they address a related phenomenon, maybe even a good, positive reality, but not love itself. Since St. Thomas Aquinas speaks to the legitimacy of the love of self, philosophers who argue the essence of love involves self-transcendence criticize the scholastic's position. This is the exact criticism Dietrich von Hildebrand advances in *The Nature of Love*. This paper defends Aquinas against von Hildebrand's suggestion that "self-love" is not really love at all. I will argue that, based on both natural and supernatural principles, Aquinas's notion of the love of self, as far as it relates to the love of God, involves transcendence.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, Dietrich von Hildebrand, love, value-response, transcendence, self-love

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