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Relative Disability and Transhuman Happiness:
St. Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision

Thomas M. Ward
Baylor University

Abstract:

Medieval Christians took it that the highest human good is a certain kind of relationship to God, a relationship of *enjoyment*, often referred to as *beatific vision*, in which the intellect has immediate access to the divine essence such that the desires of the will are fully satisfied. But, according to one of the most prominent medieval theologians, Thomas Aquinas, no human being is naturally equipped to have such access to the divine essence. We need both an extrinsic power added to our nature, and divine actualization of that power. This tells us something about the relationship between human nature (conceived along broadly Aristotelian lines) and human well-being. For Aquinas, success in the category of human nature radically underdetermines human well-being. Our human nature just doesn't give us the capacities we need in order to achieve the highest human good. Therefore, relative to the saints who enjoy beatific vision, every merely human being is disabled.

Many medieval Christian theologians taught that the highest human good is a certain kind of relationship to God, a relationship of *enjoyment*, often referred to as *beatific vision*, in which the intellect has immediate access to the divine essence such that the desires of the will are fully satisfied. It was a commonplace among these theologians that a human being does not have the ability to enjoy the divine essence exclusively by his or her own efforts. This disability is not just due to the fact that human beings were understood to be damaged by original sin. Even supposing there had been no sin, we still would not be able to reach beatific vision

by our own abilities. No other person or any created thing is equipped to help us, therefore only God can raise us to that naturally unobtainable natural end of beatific vision. On Thomas Aquinas's account of beatific vision—probably the most well-known medieval account—we need both an extrinsic power added to our nature, and a divine actualization of that power, that is, God both adds an ability to our human nature which we do not by nature possess, and also activates that power. Fancifully, to reach God's heaven, God himself must strap the rocket pack onto your back and then turn it on. This view warrants the following claims, which I want to develop and defend in this paper: for Aquinas, human well-being does not consist in the full actualization of the powers intrinsic to human nature. In this respect, Aquinas's understanding of human being and well-being constitutes a radical departure from the eudaimonistic essentialism of Aristotle. Relative to the ones blessed with beatific vision, every merely human being, however excellent by Aristotle's standards, is disabled.

Relative disability

Disability is a relative concept. A blind person and a rock are similar in that neither can see. But the rock is not disabled in virtue of being unable to see, whereas a blind person, just insofar as she is blind, is disabled. These judgments are warranted, if at all, because the abilities of some particular rock are not assessed relative to standards such as human nature, or human societies, or human subjective preferences, whereas the abilities of some particular human being are assessed relative to these sorts of human standards.¹ There is a legitimate question here about

¹ In the language of some contemporary disability studies, we roughly can correlate the standards set by human nature, societies, and subjective preferences, respectively, with the medical, social, and cultural “models” of disability. Ronald Berger, *Introducing Disability Studies*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 26-30. Human nature considered as a standard relative to which we can assess disability is, depending on your metaphysical view about what a human person is, potentially more expansive than the medical model of disability. The relevant similarity is that the human nature model and the medical model each take it

what warrants the ability-assessment of some particular human being relative to any of these standards, and in our own time perhaps especially to the standard of human nature. This standard, for better or worse, is the one most relevant to thinking through Aquinas's reflections on human well-being. Aquinas assumes that human nature gives us one kind of standard for making judgments about human well-being. Whatever the merits of this assumption on its own terms, it is worth thinking about, if for no other reason, because it is an assumption in play in our own ordinary-language practice of referring to persons who lack certain abilities as "disabled". This practice invokes some, albeit hazy, notion of what it is to be human and what it is for a human to be well: we assume some norm about the abilities a human, qua human, ought to have, and apply the label "disabled" to those who lack one or more of these abilities.

This is neither a consistent nor morally neutral practice. Judging by the grammar of "disabled" and cognate words in ordinary English, we all give ourselves a pass when it comes to *moral* defect, such that a person who lacks moral or intellectual virtues, but otherwise has "normal" physical and cognitive powers, is not described as a disabled person, despite the fact that moral defect is arguably more a hindrance to living a good human life than cognitive or physical disability. We judge by the wrong standards, to be sure, and a properly impartial practice of using the term "disabled" would leave us all disabled, and many of the able-bodied among us far more disabled than our physically disabled brothers and sisters.

Yet, inconsistent, unfair, and liable to abuse as our practice is, it is usually intelligible. And the practice is only intelligible with some idea in mind of what a human body or mind (and character!) *ought* to be. Moreover, we assume that a human's having the abilities a human qua human ought to have is part of what it is

to be the case that there are objective facts about what it is for any human, qua human, to be and to be well.

for a human being to have well-being. Complete well-being for a human, by this standard, just is the life in which all abilities intrinsic to human nature are present and fully actualized. To the extent that a human is disabled relative to this standard, that human lacks one or more goods that are part of what human well-being consists in. The practical impossibility of *perfect* well-being, by this standard, is no knock against the standard: as we (asymptotically, to be sure) approach the standard, we are happier; the farther away from it we are, the less happy we are.

Various lines of criticism can be pursued against this essentialist account of disability: metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical. Metaphysically, we might wonder whether there is such a thing as human nature which can legitimate judgments about disability relative to it. Epistemologically, we might wonder whether, even if there were such a thing as human nature, we have or can have a sufficient grasp of it to legitimate disability judgments relative to it.

Ethically, we might interrogate the assumption implicit in disability judgments that the disabled person lacks some value which a “normally” abled person has. At one extreme, explicitly or implicitly a disabled person might be considered less valuable, objectively or third-personally, than a non-disabled person. Few would embrace such a position explicitly, though it seems to linger implicitly in some of our cultural practices, such as high relative rates of abortion of fetuses diagnosed with abnormalities such as Down’s Syndrome. Even where we balk at deeming a disabled life less objectively valuable, we might wonder whether disability as such detracts from the disabled person’s ability to live a life which is subjectively fulfilling for him or her, and how seriously to take first person reports, where they are possible.

It is probably impossible to say how seriously Aquinas would take first person reports of subjective well-being, but we can be certain he thought each mere

mortal, in this life, however abled, not only cannot be perfectly fulfilled or happy, but desires to be happier than he or she currently is. Aquinas's essentialism is metaphysically realist and epistemologically optimistic about human nature: there is such a thing and we can know a lot about it. His essentialism also holds that there is a sort of happiness-lite which is available to some of us in this life and which has nothing to do with God, a natural fulfillment of human powers and desires which are accurately sketched in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. No human life can perfectly live up to this standard—as Aristotle himself was the first to admit—but the closer we get to this standard the happier—relative to that standard—we are. But Aquinas's assessment of the imperfectability of human nature is far more dramatic than Aristotle's. Aquinas not only agreed with Aristotle that by merely human standards no human being can be perfectly happy; he also held that every human being by nature desires something—the infinite good—which it cannot by its natural powers achieve. Our natural desiring aims at a condition of life which our natural powers—all of them working together in concert, maxing out human nature—cannot attain.

If the abilities intrinsic to human nature are not sufficient to make it the case that, were those abilities fully present and fully actualized in some particular person, that person would not thereby enjoy complete well-being, then maxing out human nature is at best instrumental to or merely a part of complete well-being. That is to say, maxing out human nature is, at best, necessary but not sufficient for complete well-being. And this view is implicit in Aquinas's view that the highest human good involves an activity—enjoyment of God—which our nature does not equip us to perform. Yet it is, according to Aquinas, the one and only activity which can give a human life complete well-being. It is immensely attractive; it is longed for, explicitly by Christians and implicitly by everyone else. Human living is incomplete, unfulfilled, restless, without it. So, simultaneously, beatific vision is beyond human ability and is that in which complete well-being consists. Relative

to those who have been given the ability to have beatific vision, *the saints*, as I will call them, we mere mortals, *wayfarers*, as I will call us, are disabled.

Transhumanization and the preparation for Paradise

As a nice picture of what I have in mind by saying that relative to the saints, we are all disabled, I want to mention one aspect of Dante's attempt to put the experience of heavenly transformation into words. In *Paradiso* I, Dante has just arrived in Paradise, guided by his beloved Beatrice. Blinded at first by the brilliance of Paradise, he turns his eyes to Beatrice and in that gaze undergoes a great change:

'Twas even thus a change came over me;
As Glaucus, eating of the weed, changed race
And grew a god among the gods of sea.

Transhumanized—the fact mocks human phrase;
So let the example serve, till proof requite
Him who is called to experience this by grace.²

Transhumanization is a startling description of this change from wayfarer to saint. But Dante was not being licentious when he coined the term, *trasumanar*. Similar thoughts, expressed rather differently, can be found in Aquinas's discussion of beatific vision. I'll discuss this in what follows, but I want to first spend some time setting up Aquinas's view by discussing his reasons for thinking that complete human well-being consists in something transcendent of human nature.

Aquinas on the natural end of human nature

In Questions 1-5 of the First Part of the Second Part of *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas argues that there is one ultimate end of human life (q.1, a.4-7), that this

² *Paradiso* I.67-72, trans. Sayers and Reynolds (London: Penguin, 1962).

ultimate end is beatitude (*beatitudo*) (q.1, a.8; q.5, a.8), that beatitude cannot be found in any created thing (q.2, a.8), that it in fact is found only in the beatific vision (q.3, a.8), and that God alone makes us both able to have beatific vision and actually have it (q.5, a.6 & 8).³ Human beings will everything they will for the sake of the ultimate end. This is evident because whatever they will, they will under the aspect of the good. Whatever is willed under the aspect of the good is willed either for the sake of some other good or for its own sake (q.1, a.6, corp.). But there must be some good which we will for its own sake, since the goods that are willed move the will to its willing, and in essentially ordered series of movers there cannot be an infinite regress of movers (q.1, a.4, corp.). So there must be some good on account of which we will all other goods and which we will for its own sake. Aquinas calls this good the complete good (*bonum perfectum*). All things act for the sake of their complete good, but humans do so with reason and will, and this warrants calling the human end beatitude (q.1, a.8).

The complete good for a human being cannot be found in any created thing. This is because the complete good is a good which “totally satisfies appetite”. The object of the will is the universal good, and this is found only in God. So only God can satisfy the appetite and therefore only God can be the complete good for a human, its ultimate end (q.2, a.8). Aquinas’s point here is that the will, by nature, desires goodness as such, not just this or that particular good. Whatever degree and kinds of created goods the will enjoys, it will always desire more goodness. Aquinas of course believes that there is such a thing which is infinite goodness, the source of all finite goodness. So this feature of the human will, its dissatisfaction with finite goodness, is not ultimately tragic: the heart’s deepest desires can be realized.

³ Quotations from *Summa theologiae* are taken from the Dominican Fathers translation, easily found on the internet at www.newadvent.org/summa/.

God totally satisfies the appetite in a very specific way. It is not enough simply to know that God exists or that God is infinitely good. Unless the intellect has a vision of God's essence, it will not be satisfied. This is because, until we have such a vision, the intellect's ignorance of the essence of the First Cause of all things makes the will restless. By nature we human beings want to keep asking *why?* until we get the deepest possible understanding. In this state of epistemic restlessness we are not perfectly happy. Only when the intellect achieves the union with God in which God's essence is known can the will's appetite be satisfied (q.3, a.8).

But this union with God in which we find ultimate happiness is beyond the natural powers of human beings. As Aquinas puts it, "The ultimate happiness that has been prepared for the Saints outstrips human intellect and will (q.5, a.5, s.c.)." We can't get God in our intellects in the way required for beatific vision, because our intellectual powers are oriented toward material reality. No other creature can equip us for beatific vision, either (q.5, a.6). So only God can do it for us.

You might think, with judgment, punishment, and reward in mind, that there is one way in which we do bring ourselves to beatific vision. After all, this vision is reserved for the saints, and the saints are the ones who have followed God's laws and have approached perfection in the love of God and neighbor in this mortal life. Beatific vision, you might think, is the reward for such a life. Aquinas only sort-of agrees. He thinks that it is "fitting" that we achieve happiness by doing good works and receiving beatitude as a reward for those good works (q.5, a.7, corp.). But Aquinas concedes that our good works play no real *causal* role in getting us to our reward. Aquinas reasons this way: rectitude or rightness of will is required for happiness; it is impossible for God to make an evil will happy, the will remaining evil. So the will has got to have rectitude logically *prior* to receiving beatitude. But, Aquinas continues, God could simultaneously cause the will to have rectitude and to receive beatitude. God, in his wisdom, does what is "fitting" and lets us play a

role in bringing ourselves to have rectitude of will, at which point God takes over and raises us to beatitude (Ibid.). However wise or fitting this is, however, Aquinas's reflections show that no human's activity, however morally perfect, is enough to compel or cause God to give that human beatitude. So blessedness is something we cannot do for ourselves and something we can't get God, through our good behavior, to do for us. We are in every way dependent on God for beatitude.

Aquinas on the unnatural means of achieving the natural end

So what is it that God has to do to us to give us beatitude? To answer, we turn from the early questions of the First Part of the Second Part, to Question 12 of the First Part of the *Summa*. Here we get the marvelous claim that in the beatific vision, God himself—not an intellectual likeness of God, or a concept, or anything mental like that, but God himself—becomes, in Aquinas's words, “the intelligible form of the intellect (q.12, a.5, corp.)” At least part of what this amounts to is that in beatific vision, we have immediate cognitive access to God. We don't think God *via* any likeness or concept. When it's the divine essence we're cognizing, God himself plays the role a likeness or concept would play in the cognition of anything else.

This elevation to such sublimity (as Aquinas describes it), demands some special preparation of our cognitive faculties. We need a “supernatural disposition” added to our intellect, which Aquinas calls a “created light”. Aquinas goes on, “since the natural power of a created intellect does not suffice for seeing the essence of God [...] it is necessary that this power of understanding be added onto it by divine grace. We call this augmentation of intellectual power the illumination of the intellect, just as the intelligible thing itself is called light or illumination [...] Through this light [the saints] are made deiform, that is, similar to God [...] (q.12,

a.5, corp.)” Here we have God first prepping the intellect to have beatific vision by adding to or augmenting the intellect with this supernatural disposition. So disposed, the intellect is then prepared to enjoy immediate cognitive access to God. Aquinas’s talk of deformity here should put us in mind of Dante’s Glaucus image: just as Glaucus was transformed from man to god when he ate the magic seaweed, the saint changes from human to God-like in the beatific vision.

But this immediate cognitive access to God is not the whole story of beatific vision. Beatitude, as we’ve seen, involves the will’s achieving its desire to enjoy the universal good. So it’s not enough just to think the divine essence. The supernatural disposition of the intellect prepares the soul to cognize God in such a way that God is known to be a completely satisfying good with no possible drawback. The will responds to this clear intellectual vision of God with complete and unwavering love. As Aquinas says, “The vision of the divine essence fills the soul with every good (ST I-II, q.5, a.4, corp.)” According to Aquinas’s understanding of the will, it necessarily wills God when the intellect has the power to present God to the will as unqualifiedly desirable. From this it follows that, having achieved beatific vision, it is impossible for the will ever to turn itself away from God. Thus, enjoying the goodness of God and secure in its ability to go on enjoying this goodness, the desire of the will is fulfilled. So the full story of beatific vision, for Aquinas, involves, primarily, the intellect’s union with God as the immediate object of its activity, and secondarily, the will’s necessary perpetual adherence to God thus cognized.

Aquinas against the idol of human nature

Let’s take stock. From the preceding discussion of Aquinas on the beatific vision it should be clear that the beatific vision is not *contrary* to our human nature in any way. The will, by nature, wills the universal good which is God. The

restlessness itself of the will is not due to a supernatural disposition whereby God suits the will to be happy only with God; that restlessness rather is just built into the nature of will. Thus, given our human nature as partially constituted by our faculty of will, it makes sense that God would provide a way to satisfy the will's transcendent longing. In this sense beatific vision, while outside our natural powers, is the natural completion of the will's willing. While God must augment our nature in order to get us to beatific vision, this augmentation is to be expected given what the will is and given God's care for his human creatures. But the naturalness or expectedness of this augmentation still leaves it the case that beatific vision requires gaining a power that is beyond our nature. In beatific vision we remain human, but we are made more than human. We are, to return to Dante's word, transhumanized.

I said earlier that relative to the saints, we wayfarers are disabled. I hope now that we're in a position for this claim to make more sense. If the saints were non-human, not simply beyond the human, then success-in-the-category of sainthood would be as alien and irrelevant to us wayfarers as success-in-the-category of being a rock. It would make no sense for us to assess our own abilities as wayfarers against the standard set by the saints. But the saints are not non-human. We are supposed to be able to recognize in the saints the achievement of what we all long for: union with the supreme good, perfect beatitude, complete well-being. And, according to Aquinas, the saints have this achievement because they have an ability we wayfarers lack. Relative to the saints, we are not just differently-abled, we are disabled, because that extra ability they possess is precisely what enables them to have the complete well-being we all want.

What this shows, I suggest, is that in Aquinas we see how human nature and human well-being come apart. A person in possession of all the powers intrinsic to human nature, full of virtue, blessed with all the goods of fortune Aristotle tells us the *eudaimon* must have—health, wealth, good looks, a good upbringing—is still

radically deficient with respect to the one thing which can make his or her life completely blessed. Moreover, possessing all these goods is not even *instrumentally ordered* to complete well-being. For a Christian like Aquinas, believing that the good life according to Aristotle is the final word about human flourishing is idolatrous, because it implies that we have no need of God for our well-being. And believing that the good life according to Aristotle is instrumentally ordered to our supernatural end of union with God is heretical, because it is Pelagian: it assumes that by our own efforts we can activate a beatifying response from God. So Aquinas opposes the whole Aristotelian tradition of identifying human flourishing with realizing the full potential of human nature. He is undoubtedly an essentialist; but he is a *transessentialist*.

Human aspiration and tragedy

Let me close by suggesting what an atheist or agnostic might be able to value in Aquinas's reflections on the beatific vision, as these pertain to the relationship between disability and human well-being. Suppose there is no God; then there is no beatific vision. But Aquinas's teaching about the will's restlessness, its natural tendency to go on desiring goodness no matter what degree or kinds of finite goodness it enjoys, is plausible. If it's right, then no finite good, *including complete success in the category of being human*, can be that in which human well-being consists. So an Aristotelian conception of human nature should not dictate the conditions under which a human being has well-being. Being *disabled*, in current ordinary linguistic practice, involves lacking some ability belonging to human nature, an ability which is taken to make one who has it better off, *ceteris paribus*, than another who lacks it. But if we have no good reason to suppose that success in the category of being human is the key to a happy life, then we should resist current practice. Human desiring does not max out when human nature maxes

out, and maxing out human nature is not even instrumentally ordered to maxing out human desiring.

What to do then with this desiring, this infinite longing? Aquinas's answer is to affirm the longing but to reject as mere fantasy a trust that human medicine or politics or commerce will satisfy this longing. A different sort of answer is to reject the longing. It makes us restless; unhappiness is a necessary corollary of it. We might then acknowledge the wisdom in the Four Noble Truths, that human desire is the cause of suffering and the only way to alleviate suffering and so achieve whatever degree of not-horribleness we humans are capable of achieving, is to quell desire through asceticism. A third way, more reflective of current practice in so-called postmodern societies, is to go all in for desire but reject the transcendent and (by merely human powers) unreachable conditions for its full satiation. For all we know about the human condition in a godless world, we should let our restless wills seek out their own paths to their own versions of the best life. Of course, in such a world, it also turns out that human well-being is impossible. With a restless will and no God, human life is fundamentally tragic. Hopefully those inclined to this tragic vision can make the best of it. But making the best of it will not entail, or even make it likely, that only those lives possessing all the goods intrinsic to human nature are candidates for the best sort of happiness we human beings can have. In this respect, a modern hedonist consumerist and the medieval Dominican friar are allies.