

## The body and ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*

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### Abstract

This article explores the role of the body in Thomas Aquinas' ethical thought, focusing on the *Summa Theologiae*. Drawing on Thomas' account of human nature, teleology and ethics, it traces Thomas' account of human embodiment through his discussion of the relationship between human and angelic nature, the beatific vision, law and virtue, and the active and contemplative lives. Against several recent accounts which have presented versions of Thomas as a thinker who is generally positive in his assessment of the human body, it argues that there is a basic tension in Thomas' thought between the desire to locate human distinctiveness in the conjunction of body and soul and the sense that after a certain point, embodiment is precisely that which obstructs progress towards God. This tension is inextricably connected to Thomas' understanding of human calling and discipleship and poses serious challenges to any attempts to draw on Thomas' work as an ethical resource.

### Keywords

Aquinas, embodiment, ethics, angels, beatific vision, human nature

Much has been written about the ethical thought of Thomas Aquinas and its contemporary usefulness, both by theologians and secular thinkers; but until relatively recently, there has been little discussion in this field of the role of Thomas' attitude to embodiment.<sup>1</sup> A flurry of recent works has gone some way to opening up this discussion,

<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest works to take up this topic is G J McAleer's book, *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics: a Catholic and antitotalitarian theory of the body* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). McAleer comments on the paucity of discussions of the role of the body in Thomas' thought, saying that when he began work on *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics* he 'had been struck by the fact that no book-length study of Thomas on the body existed' (*Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics*, xi).

however.<sup>2</sup> Three books in particular have recognised the importance of contemporary discussions of embodiment in relation to ethics and have attributed to Thomas a generally positive attitude towards the human body. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock suggest, in their book *Truth in Aquinas*, that, for Thomas, the incarnation fundamentally restructures the way we acquire knowledge of God and the world; that because of the incarnation our intellect comes to be instructed via our senses, by touch in the Eucharist.<sup>3</sup> Robert Miner's recent book, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*<sup>4</sup> gives a generally positive account of Thomas' understanding of the role of the passions in human life and flourishing.<sup>5</sup> Graham McAleer's *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics: a Catholic and antitotalitarian theory of the body* offers an account of the Thomistic body in which an ecstatic generosity is at the heart of embodiment; in which the body and

<sup>2</sup> In particular, Joseph G. Trabbic, Peter Dillard and Christopher Conn have discussed the role and fate of the body after death and in the beatific vision. Trabbic's 'The Human Body and Human Happiness in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*' highlights the relative paucity of discussion of the role of the body in human happiness, pointing out that although the body is necessarily present in the final beatitude of the human person, the question of whether the body is as important in beatitude as Thomas elsewhere argues it must always be in human nature is a complex one (*New Blackfriars* 91.1041 (2011), pp. 552–564). Christopher Conn's 'Aquinas on Human Nature and the Possibility of Bodiless Existence' (*New Blackfriars* 93.1045 (2012), pp. 324–338) discusses Thomas' account of the status of the body between the death of the individual and the general resurrection, arguing that Thomas consistently and coherently holds that, although individuals are not straightforwardly identified with their souls, they can and do exist for a time as disembodied souls. Finally, Peter Dillard's 'Keeping the Vision: Aquinas and the Problem of Disembodied Beatitude' (*New Blackfriars* 93.1046 (2011), pp. 397–411) elucidates the complex philosophical manoeuvring by which Thomas was able to maintain that disembodied souls were able to clearly and openly see the divine essence alongside the claim that the body would ultimately come to participate in the beatific vision. None of these papers explicitly relate their discussion of human embodiment to ethical questions, although Trabbic does discuss the need for greater discussion of the role of the body in Thomas' account of the virtues and the sacraments; however, insofar as all focus on the question of the final destiny and nature of the human person, all have implications for ethics in the context of Thomas' thought which sees all of human life as directed towards its final end in God.

<sup>3</sup> They say, for example, that since 'bread and wine are now transubstantiated, something material is in excess of our spirits, and our minds must obey our senses, here reattuned.' (*Truth in Aquinas*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 64).

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Miner's book was critiqued by Leonard D. G. Ferry, in his article 'Passionalist or Rationalist? The emotions in Aquinas' moral theology' (*New Blackfriars* 93.1045 (2012), pp. 292–308). Ferry argues that Thomas' attitude to the passions is both more complex and more negative than Ferry allows. While Miner's account of the passions is broadly positive and Ferry's broadly negative, I would argue that both positions should be situated within the broader context of Thomas' account of the body which (as I argue below) is caught between two contradictory tendencies. Where Miner places Thomas on the side of the passions and Ferry sides with Thomas against the passions, I would want to emphasise the centrality of the body to human existence and ethics against those elements in Thomas' thought which ultimately fail to give ultimate meaning or value to embodiment.

mind are fundamentally congruent, allowing for a peaceful ontology of human nature which, McAleer claims, offers *the* solution to the problems of contemporary sexual ethics.<sup>6</sup>

Focusing on Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*, I want to suggest that these cheerful takes on Thomas' theology of the body miss a fundamental ambiguity in his attitude to human embodiment which forms a crucial fault-line at the centre of his discussions of human nature and ethics. This ambiguity renders problematic contemporary appropriations of Thomas' ethics which seek to take seriously questions of human embodiment, and makes it difficult to use Thomas as a resource for ethical reflection without seriously challenging some of his most fundamental assumptions.

This article will explore the role of the body in the ethics of Thomas Aquinas, beginning with the role of the angels within his hierarchical ordering of the cosmos. Angels, as the highest beings within the created order, function in two different ways within Thomas' account of human nature and embodiment. On the one hand, their presence within Thomas' system suggests that a disembodied creatureliness is not only possible but in some sense superior to embodied creatureliness. As the next step up from humankind within the created hierarchy, the disembodied intellect of the angels becomes aspirational: they are the next step on the way towards God. On the other hand, the presence of the angels as disembodied intellectual creatures means that human beings cannot be defined by their intellect alone, but rather by their unique combination of intellect and embodiment. Tracing these opposed tendencies through Thomas' account of the beatific vision, the virtues, and the active and contemplative lives, I will argue that the

<sup>6</sup> As McAleer says, 'this book argues that a return to Thomas's metaphysics of the body provides the theologian and the philosopher with a unique analysis of the body: a conception that avoids conceiving of the body as riven by metaphysical violence' (*Ecstatic Morality*, xi). He also claims, remarkably, that 'it is the failure to adopt Thomas's theory of the body as the foundation of contemporary sexual politics that well justifies the Church in its remarkable claim that Talmon's distinction between liberal democracy and totalitarian democracy is now vitiated' (*Ecstatic Morality*, xi-xii). Although McAleer repeats his claim about the essential peacefulness of Thomas's metaphysics of the body throughout the book (arguing that the relationship between the components of the material world is 'essentially one of desire, order, and peace' (2), and that 'there is no fundamental antagonism within human nature, even after the Fall' (37); and opposing Thomas's metaphysics to those of contemporary thinkers such as Foucault and Merleau-Ponty who, he argues, 'see the body as metaphysically caught in violence' (26)), this assertion of Thomistic peaceableness is complicated by McAleer's account of the Thomistic body as essentially *wounded* in its ecstatic nature: 'the body must become a wounded body' (51). As Gerard Loughlin points out in his review of *Ecstatic Morality* (in *Modern Theology* 25.1 (2009), 144–147), it is by no means clear that McAleer is as successful as he claims to be in his evasion of metaphysical violence.

body is the site of a key fault-line within Thomistic ethics, which contemporary discussions of Thomas would do well to heed.

### *Angels*

Thomas locates human beings within a neoplatonically-tinged participatory hierarchy of being. He divides the created order into four to five categories which are, in ascending order, inanimate objects, plants, animals, human beings and angels. Inanimate objects simply exist; plants exist and are alive; animals exist, are alive and have sensation; and human beings exist, are alive, have sensation and are rational (rationality being a specifically embodied form of intellect).<sup>7</sup> Thomas includes angels in this taxonomy on some occasions, but not on others, and they are, as a result, the most ill-defined of the terms; but it is roughly true to say that angels exist, are alive, and are intellectual, but are distinguished from humans by the fact that they are immaterial; they don't have bodies.<sup>8</sup> This in itself is significant: angels are the first stage in the hierarchy where likeness to God is increased by the *loss* of a particular attribute, the body. Sometimes Thomas leaves angels aside and suggests that intellect

<sup>7</sup> For example, IIa.IIae 179.1, 'Thus the life of plants is said to consist in nourishment and generation; the life of animals in sensation and movement; and the life of men in their understanding and acting according to reason.'; IIIa 19.2 says that 'Christ as man communicates with plants by His nutritive soul, with the brutes by His sensitive soul, and with the angels by His intellectual soul, even as other men do.'; Ia 92.1 says 'Consider the scale of living beings – at the bottom are things which have no procreative power themselves like those plants and animals which are generated without seed by the force of some heavenly bodies out of suitable matter. Next are living things which have their active and passive procreative powers joined together e.g. those plants generated from seed. Then the perfect animals, which have the active power of procreation in the male and the passive in the female. In perfect animals the male and female are joined together only at times of mating so that the mating male and female constitute a whole or unity. But at the top of that scale is man, whose life is directed to the nobler function of understanding things'. Ia 96.2 says that there are 'four things in man: his "reason," which makes him like to the angels'; his "sensitive powers," whereby he is like the animals; his "natural forces," which liken him to the plants; and "the body itself," wherein he is like to inanimate things.'

<sup>8</sup> Ia 50.1 describes angels as incorporeal beings; Ia 50.2 says that they are immaterial; Ia 90.3 describes angels as 'spiritual' rather than 'bodily' substances; Ia 90.4 argues that human soul, whose nature is 'to be the form of a body' would resemble the angels if it were 'in itself a complete sort of thing'; Ia 93.3 describes angels as 'more perfectly intelligent' than humans; Ia 94.2 describes angels as 'separated substances' i.e. subsistent forms which can exist without being realised in matter, and describes them as being able to understand without the need for sense images. Technically, the fact that angels are immaterial means that they are intellectual rather than rational, rationality being a discursive form of thinking dependent on sense-perception, whereas angels, lacking bodies, do not go through the *process* of reasoning: as soon as they know anything (and they are created with all of their knowledge present from the beginning) they understand all of the consequences of that thing or idea (Ia 58.3).

is the distinctly human attribute, setting humankind apart from the inanimate objects, plants and animals.<sup>9</sup> But at other times, the angels are set firmly within the order of creation, and at those times their presence has two effects. First, it implies that the distinctive feature of human nature is rationality, a specifically *embodied intellect* which sets us apart both from the irrational objects, plants and animals *and* from the immaterial angels.<sup>10</sup> But second, the existence of disembodied beings higher up within the hierarchy of creation suggests that human movement towards God is, in some sense at least, movement up the hierarchy of being, and therefore movement *away from* human physicality.<sup>11</sup> This ambiguity in the human relationship to angels is characteristic of Thomas' attitude to human embodiment more generally: throughout the *Summa*, Thomas is caught between the desire to locate human distinctiveness in the conjunction of body and soul and the sense that after a certain point, embodiment is precisely that which obstructs progress towards God. This tension is inextricably connected to Thomas' understanding of human calling and discipleship.

### *The beatific vision*

For Thomas, the ultimate end of human life is the beatific vision.<sup>12</sup> This is the goal to which all human nature and ethical action is directed. It is a destination which humankind has in common with other rational beings but, importantly, *not* with non-rational creatures.<sup>13</sup> Human beings do, however, attain this vision of God in a distinctively human manner, which is to say that the beatific vision

<sup>9</sup> Ia 91.3 describes humanity as 'the noblest of the animals'; Ia 92.1 charts the hierarchy of creation, placing humankind 'at the top of the scale.' Ia2ae 1.3, Thomas states that 'Acts are called human inasmuch as they proceed from deliberate willing'; in IaIIae 55.2 that 'those powers alone which are proper to the soul, namely the rational powers, belong exclusively to man'; and in IaIIae 71.2 that human beings are defined by their possession of rational souls.

<sup>10</sup> In IaIIae 94.2 Thomas defines man as 'a rational animal', and in Ia 98.1, he argues that 'we must consider then that man is established by his nature as a sort of link between perishable creatures and imperishable ones; for his soul is imperishable by nature, his body by nature perishable,' suggesting that it is the combination of intellect and physicality which defines human nature. IIIa 19.2 says that Christ, as man, shares in vegetative life of plants, sensuous life of animals, and intellectual life of angels.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Ia 98.2 says that 'after the resurrection man will be like an angel, having been rendered spiritual both in soul and in body.'

<sup>12</sup> For example: 'There can be no complete and final happiness for us save in the vision of God.' IaIIae 3.8.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas says that 'men and other rational creatures [*homo et aliae rationales creaturae*] lay hold of [the ultimate end] in knowing and loving God, which non-rational creatures are not capable of doing' IaIIae 1.8. It is not clear what Thomas intends by this

is, for humankind, an experience which involves the bodily senses,<sup>14</sup> although sin can render the body a hindrance rather than a help to human knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Yet even before sin, the body functioned in part to obstruct spiritual progress: Thomas says that Adam 'used to see God in riddles because he saw him in created effects'.<sup>16</sup> There is a sense that, to attain the beatific vision, the body and the manner of seeing it requires must be left behind, or at least transformed into something less material.<sup>17</sup> Thomas states that, after the resurrection, 'man will be like an angel, having been rendered spiritual both in soul and in body',<sup>18</sup> and 'his animal life' will be 'over'.<sup>19</sup> There is here a clear tension between the assertion of human distinctiveness as an *embodied* rationality and the upwards tug of the created hierarchy.

### *Virtue and law*

Unsurprisingly, this tension is replicated in Thomas' discussion of the virtues and the laws which characterise the human path towards the beatific vision. Both the virtues and the laws are hierarchically ordered, beginning with those virtues and laws which humans possess naturally and progressing upwards to the virtues and laws as they exist in the divine nature. In both cases, the movement up the hierarchy is a movement away from embodiment.

Thomas defines virtue as 'a good habit of mind.'<sup>20</sup> Virtues are not material, though they engage with and exist in matter insofar

reference to 'other rational creatures': angels would seem to be excluded by virtue of being intellectual but not rational.

<sup>14</sup> In Ia 91.1, Thomas argues that 'the rational soul gets its knowledge of the truth in some fashion through the senses,' and in Ia 94.2 he argues that 'the fact of the soul's being adapted to controlling and perfecting the body in its animal life means that the proper manner of understanding for our souls is by turning to sensible images.'

<sup>15</sup> 'A full and lucid consideration of God's intelligible effects is made practically impossible for man in his present state by the sensible ones which distract and engross his attention... the first man used not to be hampered by external things from the clear and steady contemplation of God's intelligible effects' (Ia 94.1).

<sup>16</sup> Ia 94.1.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as Dillard's 'Keeping the Vision' and Conn's 'Aquinas on Human Nature' point out, Thomas holds that it is possible not only for the individual to exist as a disembodied soul prior to the resurrection but also for that disembodied soul to enjoy (in confident anticipation of its eventual re-embodiment) the beatific vision, a position which requires some rather complicated and not unproblematic work in order to make possible the continued assertion that the human individual consists essentially of an *embodied* soul.

<sup>18</sup> Ia 98.2.

<sup>19</sup> Ia 100.2.

<sup>20</sup> IaIIae 55.4. This is Thomas' gloss on a definition taken from Augustine via Peter of Poitiers as 'a good quality of mind by which one lives righteously, of which no one can make bad use' (IaIIae 55.4). Elsewhere, he describes virtue as 'an ordered disposition of the soul' (IIaIIae 55.2).

as they exist in individual virtuous people and insofar as they have to do with the human passions and actions.<sup>21</sup> Thomas' taxonomy of the different virtues is rather complex, but he starts by drawing a distinction between the moral and the intellectual virtues. The intellectual virtues are exclusively concerned with the speculative intellect, and the moral virtues are all concerned with the application of reason to human passion and action. Aquinas distinguishes between the appetite and the aptitude for doing good, arguing that the intellectual virtues confer the ability but not the desire for good. Consequently, they are less important than the moral virtues, though this is not because they are less connected to human physicality, but because they cannot, on their own, move human beings towards God.

The moral virtues are prudence, justice, temperance and courage. Prudence is a moral and intellectual virtue, located in 'our essentially rational part' and concerns judgments of reason. It is, of the cardinal virtues 'the principal simply speaking,' overseeing the operation of the other three, which are located in 'our derivatively rational part.' Of the remaining virtues, justice belongs to the exercise of the will and is the application of reason to 'what we do.' Temperance and courage concern the application of reason to the emotions which resist reason. Those emotions which 'may incite us to something against reason' are the province of temperance, and those which 'may make us shirk a course of action dictated by reason, through fear of dangers or hardship' belong to the activity of courage.<sup>22</sup> The moral virtues are themselves divided into cardinal and theological virtues. The cardinal virtues are arranged hierarchically into political, purifying, purified and exemplar virtues.<sup>23</sup> The exemplar virtues are the virtues as they exist in God;<sup>24</sup> and human beings progress from the political virtues which 'moderate' the passions to the purifying virtues which 'uproot' them; and then to the purified virtues which 'forget' the passions as they are completely alien to God.<sup>25</sup> The theological virtues – faith, hope and love – are required to enable

<sup>21</sup> Virtue, according to Thomas, 'cannot be in the irrational part of the soul, except inasmuch as this participates in reason'. (IaIIae 55.4)

<sup>22</sup> IaIIae 61.2.

<sup>23</sup> IaIIae 61.5.

<sup>24</sup> 'The divine mind itself may be called prudence; while God's temperance may be seen as his self-containment, somewhat as in us by temperance our reason holds our desires. His courage is his changelessness; his justice the observance of the Eternal Law in his works' (IaIIae 61.5).

<sup>25</sup> 'Prudence of this kind scorns the things of the world and directs its thoughts only to divine truths: temperance sets aside the needs of the body so far as nature allows: courage prevents the soul from being afraid about losing the body in its approach to heavenly things: and justice consists in the soul's giving a whole-hearted consent to following the course thus resolved' (IaIIae 61.5).



human beings to move beyond their natural capacities; and these come entirely from outside of human nature and have little to do with embodiment.<sup>26</sup> In the development of the cardinal virtues and in the progression from moral to theological virtues, the movement towards God is a movement away from the body.

Thomas' varieties of law correspond roughly to the four stages of the moral virtues, and entail a similar move away from human community and embodiment. The Eternal Law is the eternal principle of the laws in God just as the exemplar virtues are the eternal principle of the virtues in God.<sup>27</sup> Human law consists of 'the specific arrangements' arrived at by human reasoning from the first principles of the natural law, and functions at the level of the political virtues, regulating the interactions of human society and limiting the passions.<sup>28</sup> But it is unable to direct human beings to the end beyond their nature, and so Divine Law, divided into Old and New Laws, takes over.<sup>29</sup> The Old and New Laws, compared to childhood and adulthood, are directed to, respectively, human 'material and earthly benefit' and human 'spiritual and heavenly good'.<sup>30</sup> The development of the Divine Law thus mirrors the development of the cardinal virtues, moving ever inwards and upwards, directing human nature away from embodied physicality and towards God.<sup>31</sup>

There is, then, a strong sense throughout Thomas' discussion of the virtues that the pursuit of God draws human beings away from their bodies and towards their supernatural end, despite Thomas' insistence elsewhere on humankind as constituted by body and soul together.

### *Active and contemplative*

In the *Secunda Secundae*, Thomas discusses the different modes of life available to human beings. He offers three alternative ways of life: the active life, the contemplative life, and the life of (physical) pleasure. However, the life of pleasure is a life of bodily pleasure,

<sup>26</sup> IaIIae 62.1.

<sup>27</sup> IaIIae 91.1 describes the eternal law as 'the ruling idea of things which exists in God as the effective sovereign of them all'.

<sup>28</sup> IaIIae describes it as a makeshift affair, lacking 'the inerrancy that marks conclusions of demonstrative science'.

<sup>29</sup> 'Hence the need of a divine law which misses nothing and leaves no evil unforbidden or unpunished' (IaIIae 91.4).

<sup>30</sup> IaIIae 91.5 says that the Old Law 'restrains the hand' and rules by the fear of punishment; whereas the New Law 'restrains the spirit' and rules by 'love shed in our hearts by the grace of Christ'.

<sup>31</sup> Correspondingly, human sin can subject the individual to the 'law of lust', in which circumstance 'he becomes like the beasts who are born along by their sense appetites' (IaIIae 91.6).



which we share with the animals and as such is not properly human; so the fundamental and 'complete' division of human life is into active and contemplative lives.<sup>32</sup> The active life is the life directed towards external action, the life of those who 'are primarily occupied with external activities'; and the contemplative life is directed towards 'truth itself', the life of those who 'especially dedicate themselves to the contemplation of truth'.<sup>33</sup> It initially seems that both are good possibilities for human beings: Thomas suggests that individuals are temperamentally disposed to one or the other according to 'that in which each man most delights ... and that which he *particularly wishes to share with his friends*'.<sup>34</sup>

The contemplative life engages human desire, intellect and will.<sup>35</sup> The moral virtues prepare for it by overcoming the passions which are a hindrance to contemplation, but because of their focus on the passions and hence on the body, they belong more properly to the active life.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the exploration of the created world and the ways it reveals God may prepare the individual for the contemplative life but do not really belong to it:<sup>37</sup> created things play a role in the progression towards the contemplative life, but are ultimately left behind. Thomas sets out a six-step progression towards the contemplative life: the aspiring contemplative begins with the 'consideration of things of sense'; secondly transitions from sensible to intelligible things; thirdly evaluates sensual things with the mind; fourthly considers 'intelligible things which have been reached through the sensible'; fifthly considers intelligible things which 'cannot be reached through the things of sense but can be understood by reason'; and finally, considers intelligible things which surpass the intellect.<sup>38</sup> The movement towards God is a movement away from the sensible towards the intellectual.

For Thomas, it is only within the contemplative life that it is possible to attain to the vision of God's essence when, in rapture, a person completely disengages from their physical senses and even their imagination, which relies on physical images.<sup>39</sup> Insofar as contemplation is difficult, it is due to 'the weakness of our intellect and our corruptible body, which drags us down to lower things ... As a result, when a man attains the contemplation of truth, he loves it the

<sup>32</sup> IIaIIae 179.2.

<sup>33</sup> IIaIIae 179.1.

<sup>34</sup> IIaIIae 179.1, quoting Aristotle in italics.

<sup>35</sup> IIaIIae 180.1.

<sup>36</sup> IIaIIae 180.2 says that they create the necessary disposition for contemplation, which is 'impeded by the vehemence of the passions,' but they belong properly to the active life.

<sup>37</sup> IIaIIae 180.3–4.

<sup>38</sup> 'The sublime contemplation of divine truth wherein contemplation is finally perfected' IIaIIae 180.4.

<sup>39</sup> IIaIIae 180.5.

more, but he deplores the more his own inadequacy and the weight of his corruptible body'.<sup>40</sup> The body is a hindrance to the mind and it is only insofar as the contemplative ceases to 'work with the body' that they are able to sustain contemplation with a continuity comparable to that which all humans hope finally to attain in the beatific vision.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast, the active life is directed to external activity, and is the proper domain of the moral virtues insofar as their works are 'intended as goods for their own sake and not as dispositions for the contemplative life'.<sup>42</sup> The active life is humanly possible in this life only, as the final destination of human nature is the contemplation of God in the beatific vision,. But the angels will continue in both the active and contemplative life, both because the two are not distinguished for them and it is natural to them to administer 'a lower creation'.<sup>43</sup> This is interesting, as elsewhere<sup>44</sup> Thomas argues that it is proper for humankind to have dominion over everything in creation bar the angels, so the cessation of this ruling activity suggests either a change in human nature or the dissolution of the physical world which humankind would otherwise rule.

Thomas is absolutely clear that the contemplative life is superior to the active life, setting out nine reasons for this superiority (eight drawn from Aristotle and one from the teachings of Christ). These include the fact that the contemplative life is 'concerned with divine things, but the active life is concerned with human affairs,' and that 'the contemplative life is lived by that which is most proper to man, namely his mind, whereas the activities of the active life involve also the lower powers, common to men and to animals.' There are situations in which the active life takes precedence 'in view of the needs of the present life,' but even when people must take up external activities again, this is 'not to such an extent as to be compelled to forsake contemplation'.<sup>45</sup> The contemplative life is also superior because it 'has direct and immediate reference to the love of God,' whereas the active life 'is more directly ordained to the love of neighbour'.<sup>46</sup> The active life 'precedes the contemplative life' insofar as it prepares for and leads to the contemplative life,

<sup>40</sup> IIaIIae 180.7.

<sup>41</sup> The contemplative life is continuous 'first, because it is proper to us to us as regards the activity of the incorruptible part of the soul, namely, the intellect, and can therefore continue after this life; secondly, because we do not work with the body in the activities of the contemplative life, so that we are better able to persevere in these activities without ceasing' IIaIIae 180.8.

<sup>42</sup> IIaIIae 181.2.

<sup>43</sup> IIaIIae 181.4.

<sup>44</sup> In Ia.96.

<sup>45</sup> IIaIIae 182.1.

<sup>46</sup> IIaIIae 182.1.

and 'as that which is common to all precedes that which is proper to the perfect.' It is suitable for 'those who are more prone to yield to their passions' whereas the contemplative life suits those who 'have a naturally pure and calm spirit'.<sup>47</sup> However proper it may be to divide human life into active and contemplative, it is clear that the contemplative life is more properly human than the active.

In his discussion of the active and contemplative lives, the balance in Thomas' thought between the affirmation of the goodness of the body and the desire to transcend embodiment tips clearly in favour of leaving behind the body in the pursuit of God. Throughout Thomas' discussion of the active and contemplative lives there is a sense that the body is at best a stepping stone on the way to the realm of the intellect, and at worst a hindrance and a temptation to sin.

### *Conclusion*

Denys Turner argues that 'the better a theologian is placed in his intellectual and cultural context, the more difficult it is for him to be used to inform theology today.'<sup>48</sup> This is surely true of Thomas, whose anthropology relies heavily on angels and a metaphysics of hierarchy for his anthropology; who writes as though monasticism is the only option for those serious about the pursuit of God, and who displays a deeply ambiguous view of the body. None of these sit comfortably with contemporary ethical debates, and nor should they; none can easily be abstracted from Thomas' thought as unfortunate but insignificant. These ideas profoundly shape Thomas' whole vision of human nature, the body, and ethics, and any serious reading must take them into account. The contemplative life which Thomas valorises is the life of the elite and wealthy minority, the life of the mind, a life very far removed from the lives of most human beings, although not (with the possible exception of the wealth!) from the lives of academic theologians. The life of the mind, the life of the academic may be important, but it is not the typical human experience, and theology would do well to recognise this. If academic theology wishes to speak meaningfully to or even about the human condition, about the lives of women, the poor, the excluded and the marginalised, it would do well to question its context and to take more seriously the question of embodiment and all it implies for many people: the struggle to eat, to hold together families, to hold down jobs. Theologians' lives are not the lives of the majority of

<sup>47</sup> IIaIIae 182.4.

<sup>48</sup> 'How to read the pseudo-Denys today?', in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7.4 (2005), p. 428.

people, the majority of Christians; this doesn't much worry Thomas, but it should worry us.

It does a disservice both to Thomas and to contemporary thinkers to do theology as though anything they have said, Thomas has already said, only better.<sup>49</sup> The underlying metaphysics of Thomas' anthropology and ethics raise important questions about the workings of power and elitism, about the role that physicality plays in human nature, about the role of contemplation in a Church which increasingly marginalises the monastic lifestyle, to name but a few. All of these are important questions which are not better answered by making Thomas in our own image and reading him as if he were, somehow, an 11<sup>th</sup> century contemporary theologian.

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<sup>49</sup> This is, I think what McAleer does with Levinas in *Ecstatic Morality* (see especially pp. 28–30), and what Milbank and Pickstock risk in *Truth in Aquinas*.