


Aquinas, Contemplation, and Theology

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Abstract

Jonathan Lear's account of Aristotle and the human person as a systematic understander can shed light on how Thomas Aquinas sees the passage from contemplation of worldly things to the contemplation of the divine essence. In grasping the essences of mundane particulars, the systematic understander 'spiritualizes' them, and simultaneously comes to grasp both self and God. This account of contemplation can further help illuminate Aquinas's understanding of the nature of the theological task as an exercise of systematic understanding of the particulars from which the scriptural narrative of signs and examples is constructed. Finally, the theologian's own path as a systematic understander is retraced for his or her students in sharing the fruits of contemplation through teaching.

Keywords

contemplation, Jonathan Lear, Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, theology

For Thomas Aquinas, contemplation is an anticipation of the eternal beatitude to which we aspire in hope while now pilgrims, but will one day delight in as comprehensors. As Thomas puts it in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, 'In this life there is nothing so like this ultimate and perfect happiness as the life of those who contemplate the truth, as far as possible here below....For contemplation of truth begins in this life, but will be consummated in the life to come.'¹ But what exactly does Thomas mean by 'contemplation'? Specifically, is he referring to a prayerful act of mind, the apex of the spiritual life, of which saints and mystics speak, or is he speaking simply of thinking, the kind of mundane wonder with which, according to Aristotle, all philosophy begins?

In what follows, I want to draw upon Jonathan Lear's study, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand*, to suggest that this is perhaps a false choice, because the Aristotelian notion of contemplation, while

¹ *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.63.

directed to mundane objects, has a kind of theological *telos*, involving as it does a ‘spiritualizing’ of material substances, in which the knower comes to knowledge of world, self, and God. For Thomas, likewise, there is no sharp division between contemplation of mundane realities and the contemplation that is the apex of the life of prayer.

Systematic Understanders

As Jonathan Lear puts it, for Aristotle the human person ‘is by nature a systematic understander of the world.’² This will hardly come as news to any reader of Aristotle who understands what it means to say that a human being is a rational animal. It is access to the world in its intelligibility that distinguishes human beings from other sense beings and characterizes the distinctive human mode of acting, a mode of action beyond the mere reproduction and nutrition by which species and individuals are sustained. Confronted by a frog, we do not see it as something with which to mate, as another frog might, nor simply as something to eat, as a raccoon might, but precisely as a frog—something that is what it is because of its essential frogginess, which it has in common with all other frogs and which is not reducible to its materiality. We might say that, whatever other appetites for frog we may have, our distinctively human appetite for the frog is an intellectual appetite, a desire to know it, to possess its form intellectually by grasping its essence. This activity of accessing the world as intelligible is what Aristotle calls contemplation or *theoria*, and in this activity we simultaneously grasp our own identity as graspers of such intelligible structure, as well as the identity of the first mover—that which accounts for the intelligible structure of the world.

On Lear’s account, it is this human activity of grasping essences that reveals the distinctive role of the rational animal in the world. He notes, ‘When mind comes to understand the essence of flesh it, as it were, lifts form right out of its material instantiation.’³ Frogginess can exist in a frog only as materially instantiated; in us, however, it can exist immaterially, as a species in the mind. Lear writes, ‘mind contemplating an essence is itself that very essence. It is that essence at the highest level of activity.’⁴ In the act of knowing the human mind frees frogginess from material potency so that it exists, as Lear puts it, ‘at its highest level of actuality.’⁵ Our human contemplation

² Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 117.

³ Lear, p. 121.

⁴ Lear, p. 297.

⁵ Lear, p. 131.

of the world ‘spiritualizes’ material substance through the process of abstraction; our knowledge of frogs is their spirituality.

If contemplation of things raises their essence to their highest level of actuality, then it seems that intelligibility is the *telos* of living substances: ‘For all natural organisms, the strong desire to survive, to sustain life, flourish, and reproduce is, from another perspective, a striving to become intelligible.’⁶ What sets human beings apart from other living organisms is that we are, as Lear puts it, ‘capable of appreciating this other perspective.’⁷ Contemplation not only brings the essence of the object contemplated to its highest form of actuality, but it is at the same time the contemplator at his or her highest level of actuality, the thinker perfected at thinker. It is, for the rational animal, the highest form of pleasure. And this highest of pleasures, this bliss, is not only a grasping of essences and of ourselves as knowers of essences; it is a grasping, if only partial, of God. Lear notes that, contrary to many standard accounts, for Aristotle, no less than for Kant, knowledge involves not conformity of mind to world, but rather conformity of world to mind, but not (as in Kant) to the individual human mind, but to the divine mind. ‘For Aristotle...objects must conform to our knowledge not because they must conform to the human mind, but because they must conform to God or Active Mind.’⁸ This is why, ‘in coming to understand the world we become like God, we become God-like,’ because our mind is conformed to God’s mind.⁹

So, on Lear’s account, Aristotle connects this knowing of the world, ourselves, and God such that one cannot be had without the other. As he summarizes the matter:

So it is by the very activity of understanding the world that we come to understand ourselves....So it would seem that the desire to understand leads us toward an activity of thinking that is at once an understanding of the world, and understanding of ourselves, and an understanding of God.... If we are ignorant of the world’s relation to God, we do not

⁶ Lear, p. 298. As he puts it elsewhere, ‘essence as such remains a potentiality to be comprehended’ (p. 307).

⁷ Lear, p. 298.

⁸ Lear, p. 307-8. In Lear’s reckoning, therefore, Aristotle is an ‘objective idealist.’ He argues that one of the deep continuities in the history of philosophy is the question of the relationship of the world to the mind, and how the intelligibility of world might be understood to be constituted by mind. The differences are in where world-constituting mind is, as it were, ‘located.’ For Aristotle (and, I would argue, in a somewhat different way, Thomas), it is the divine mind; for Kant it is the individual mind. Lear goes on to note that post-Kantian philosophy can be read as a history of dissatisfaction with the Kantian location of mind: ‘one of the central responses to Kant’s philosophy has been an attempt to relocate the mind to which objects are conforming. Hegel tried to locate mind in the Idea or the Absolute; the later Wittgenstein tried to locate it in the activities and customs of a community—what he called a form of life’ (p. 309).

⁹ Lear, p. 298.

know why the world is the way it is. But if we must understand the world in order fully to appreciate what is involved in being a systematic understander of it, it would seem that we must understand God and his relation to the world before we can fully understand ourselves. And in coming to understand God, and thus the world, and thus ourselves, we both fulfill our own essence and imitate God.... That is why we must, paradoxically, transcend our own nature in order to realize it.¹⁰

I am not willing to guarantee that Lear is correct in his presentation of Aristotle; certainly other interpreters of Aristotle give a rather more ‘secular’ account of what is going on in his philosophy. But whatever we think about this as an interpretation of Aristotle, what Lear says about the desire to know as leading to a simultaneous knowing of world, self, and God can cast a helpful light on why Thomas Aquinas does theology in the way that he does, and why theology should be understood as a fundamentally contemplative activity that is not divorced from, indeed illuminates, more mundane human intellectual endeavors.

The Dynamism of Knowing

For Thomas, no less than for Aristotle, ‘contemplation of the divine effects also belongs to the contemplative life, inasmuch as a person is led by this to knowledge of God’ (2-2.180.4). The desire to know essences that is so characteristic of the human animal as a systematic understander finds its ultimate orientation and fulfillment in our knowledge of God. This suggests that the mundane contemplation of ordinary things, such as frogs, is for Thomas ordered to contemplation of the divine essence, precisely because the essence of the frog is not fully grasped until it is grasped as a divine effect. To see how this is the case, let us look at a much-pored-over-and-debated passage near the beginning of the *Prima Secundae* (1-2.3.8).

To show that the human happiness cannot consist in anything other than the vision of God’s essence, Thomas says that we must consider two points:

First, a human being is not perfectly happy as long as something remains for one to desire and seek. Second, the perfection of any power is judged according to the nature of its object.

So perfect happiness—*beatitudo* or, as we might say, ‘bliss’—is connected with a cessation of our desire, an end to our seeking.¹¹ What

¹⁰ Lear, pp. 302-3.

¹¹ The notion that we no longer desire God in the beatific vision seems counter-intuitive to many readers, who might prefer the view of another medieval Dominican theologian, Catherine of Siena, to whom God said concerning beatified souls, ‘They desire me forever, and forever they possess me, so their desire is not in vain. They are hungry yet satisfied, satisfied

perfection consists in depends upon the object of the particular power: sight, whose object is the visible, is perfected by seeing; touch, whose object is the tactile, is perfected in touching, and so on. What about that most distinctively human power, the power of understanding?

The object of the intellect is *what a thing is* [*quod quid est*], that is, the essence of a thing...; for this reason the intellect attains perfection insofar as it knows the essence of a thing. If therefore an intellect knows the essence of some effect, by which it is not possible to know the essence of the cause (i.e., to know of the cause *what it is*), that intellect cannot be said to reach that cause in an absolute sense, although it may be able to gather from the effect the knowledge *that* the cause is [*an sit*].

The object of the intellectual power is the essences of things, and to know the essence of something we must know its cause—not simply that it has a cause, but the essence of the cause, since it is by its essence that the cause brings about the effect. To know merely that there is a cause is profoundly unsatisfying; it leaves the intellect unfulfilled and still seeking in its desire. To put it in an Augustinian idiom, it leaves us restless in our desire to know. So, Thomas concludes,

Consequently, in knowing an effect, and knowing that it has a cause, there naturally remains in a human being the desire to know about the cause *what it is*. This desire belongs to wondering, and causes inquiry, as is stated in the beginning of the *Metaphysics* (bk. 1 ch. 2 982^a).... Nor does this inquiry cease until he arrives at a knowledge of the essence of the cause.

Thus far we have Thomas on the natural human desire to know the essences of mundane primary substances and how this involves knowing their causes. Thomas invoking Aristotle's *Metaphysics* suggest that, at least up to this point, he and Aristotle are singing from the same song sheet. But what if we shift the register, as Thomas does here in a somewhat sneaky way, from the desire to know the essence, and therefore the cause, of this or that mundane primary substance, to the desire to know the essence of the world of primary substances as a whole? What if, beginning from some mundane effect, we stretch the desire to know to extend across the *totus mundus*—the entire web of effects and causes—such that we desire to know the cause of the world taken, as Peter Geach puts it, 'as a great big object'?¹² If the pattern of desire that

yet hungry' (*The Dialogue* ch. 41). It should be noted that Thomas gives a somewhat different account of beatitude and desire in the *Summa contra Gentiles*: 'Nothing that is contemplated with wonder [*cum admiratione*] can be tiresome, since as long as the thing remains in wonder it continues to stimulate desire. But the divine substance is always viewed with wonder by any created intellect, since no created intellect comprehends it. So, it is impossible for an intellectual substance to become tired of this vision' (bk. 3 ch. 62 n. 9). This account would seem to bring Thomas's view closer to that of Catherine.

¹² G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott Ltd., 1961), p. 112.

holds true in the case of knowledge of individual essences holds true in the case of the world as a whole, then knowledge merely that there is a cause of the world as a whole would leave our desire unquenched and our bliss unattained. So Thomas says,

If therefore the human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, knows no more of God than *that he is*, its perfection does not yet reach the first cause in an absolute way, but there remains in it a natural desire to seek the cause. For this reason it is not yet perfectly happy. Consequently, for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very essence of the first cause.

And so Thomas reaches his conclusion:

Thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object in which perfect human happiness alone consists, as stated earlier (1-2.1.7; 1-2.2.8).

I have spent so long on what may be an extremely familiar passage in order to bring out the congruity of Lear's account of Aristotle with Thomas's account of what we might call the dynamism of human knowing and its orientation toward knowledge of God as first cause. We might say that Thomas and Aristotle continue to sing from the same song sheet even when the register shifts from contemplation of mundane essences to contemplation of the *totus mundus*. As with Aristotle, we know ourselves as knowers in the act of knowing the world, since the human intellect, like anything else, is knowable only to the extent it is actual, and the natural object of the act of knowing is the essence of material things.¹³ But our knowledge of the world does not simply give us knowledge of ourselves as knowers; it also launches us on a quest to know the first cause of the world that we know. As Thomas says at the outset of his commentary on John, 'the height and sublimity of contemplation consists most of all in the contemplation and knowledge of God.'¹⁴

If for Thomas, as for Lear's Aristotle, contemplation of God, self, and world are so thoroughly intertwined, this suggests that it is a bit trickier that it might initially appear to separate out contemplation as a theological topic in Thomas. Indeed, 'contemplate' proves to be a remarkably plastic term in Thomas's hands. At its broadest stretch it seems more or less equivalent to thinking itself: to contemplate is to think about some thing so as to know its truth. Natural philosophers who study aquatic life or the motion of heavenly bodies lead contemplative lives of a sort. This is not, obviously, the most perfect form of contemplation, since it is a contemplation of things that are more (aquatic life) or less (heavenly bodies) mutable, and therefore less

¹³ See *Summa theologiae* 1.87.1, 3.

¹⁴ *Super Io.* prol. n. 2.

intrinsically knowable, but it is truly contemplation. What makes it contemplation, however, is not simply the plasticity of the term ‘contemplate’ but the fact that the essence of both frogs and planets cannot be fully grasped until one arrives at contemplation of the first cause, without which there would be neither frogs nor planets. And, we should note, this contemplation of the first cause is not simply the bare knowing that there is a first cause, but knowledge of the divine essence.

But this account of Thomas on the mutual implication of mundane and divine contemplation would be incomplete were we not also to note that the knowing of contemplation passes over into loving. Sometimes, in our concern to defend Thomas’s ‘intellectualism’ from the depredations of Scotists and others, we underplay the role of the will in contemplation. But Thomas notes that, were our wills not drawn to the good at which the contemplative life aims, we would never embark upon such a pursuit: ‘through loving God we are aflame to gaze on his beauty.’¹⁵ Moreover, the will delights in that good once it has been attained. Thomas writes:

Although the contemplative life consists chiefly in an act of the intellect, it has its beginning in the appetite, since it is through charity that one is urged to the contemplation of God. And since the end corresponds to the beginning, it follows that the term also and the end of the contemplative life has its being in the appetite, since one delights in seeing the object loved, and the very delight in the object seen arouses a yet greater love. Therefore Gregory says (*Hom. xiv in Ezech.*) that *when we see one whom we love, we are so aflame as to love him more*. And this is the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life, namely that the divine truth be not only seen but also loved.¹⁶

Here it might seem that we have located the point of Thomas’s parting of the ways with Aristotle. But even though he lacks a developed account of the will, something like love of God is not entirely absent in Aristotle. For Aristotle the first mover moves the world only by the attractive power it exerts, and so the world we contemplate has the character it does because it is driven by an appetite to imitate the first mover, to replicate in itself the intellectual order of God. We rational animals, we systematic knowers, more than any other beings, are moved to know the world out of a desire to imitate God.¹⁷ Indeed, there is even a sense in Aristotle of a kind of ecstatic transcendence in which contemplation terminates; as Lear puts it in the passage I quoted earlier, ‘we must, paradoxically, transcend our own nature in order to realize it.’¹⁸

¹⁵ *Summa theologiae* 2-2.180.1.

¹⁶ *Summa theologiae* 2-2.180.7.

¹⁷ Both Lear and Thomas think that Aristotle’s God is not quite so self-enclosed as is often claimed. See Lear, pp. 302-303, and Aquinas, *Sententia Metaphysicae* bk.12 lec. 11 nn. 2614-16.

¹⁸ Lear, p. 303.

Where Thomas does differ from Aristotle is in his belief that the phrase ‘love of God’ can be read as a subjective genitive as well as an objective genitive: that is to say, the God we desire to imitate is one who has loved us first. The God of Christian faith causes mundane actuality not simply by being lovable, but by loving and by willing to call forth a world from nothing. Such a thought clearly does not, perhaps cannot, enter into Aristotle’s understanding of the cosmos. This understanding of God as agent has a dual effect on Thomas’s understanding of the relationship of contemplation of the world and contemplation of God.¹⁹

In one sense, it renders the natural world more opaque as an effect of God. Because God is an efficient cause of mundane essences, and not, as with Aristotle, simply a final (and, perhaps, exemplary) cause, this means that the world flows freely from the divine will. Because the world is a contingent effect of God, it is less informative concerning its cause than would be a necessary effect. Since a frog, in reproducing, necessarily produces another frog, the shared frogginess of the effect and cause makes it possible for us to know the essence of the cause, whereas an artifact that an artisan chooses to produce might tell us that there *is* an artisan who is distinct from the artifact and of such a nature as to be able to produce the artifact, but it cannot really give us knowledge of the artisan’s essence. Because God, as a free creator, bears an ‘artisanal’ relation to the world, this means that by contemplation of nature we can know of God ‘that he is cause of all creature; and that creatures differ from him, so that he is not any of the things that are caused by him; and that this is not attributed to him on account of any defect in him, but because he surpasses all things.’²⁰ But we cannot arrive at the divine essence itself, and the paucity of the payoff of mundane contemplation perhaps makes the natural world less intrinsically interesting for Thomas than it is for Aristotle.

In another sense, however, God as agent is *more* knowable. Thomas famously said, ‘no philosopher before the coming of Christ could, solely by the total effort of his own powers, know as much of God and the things necessary for eternal life as an old woman after the coming of Christ knows by faith.’²¹ God who freely acts to call the world into being also freely acts to show himself to humanity. Contemplation is not simply the terminus of the natural desire of humans as systematic understanders, but is a gracious gift bestowed upon us, so that knowledge of God does not remain something ‘available only to a few, and even then after a long time, and with the mixing in of many errors.’²² If God as agent makes the natural world less interesting to Thomas than it is to

¹⁹ My thanks to Dr. Zena Hitz for posing a question to me, after a public presentation of some of this material, that prompted the reflections in the remainder of this section.

²⁰ *Summa theologiae* 1.12.12.

²¹ *Expositio in Symbolum Apostolorum*, sermon 1.

²² *Summa theologiae* 1.1.1.

Aristotle, it perhaps makes history *more* interesting, because it is in the timeful flow of human events that God speaks. Thomas notes, ‘while in every other *scientia* words refer to things, this *scientia* [of theology] is distinctive in that the things referred to by words also themselves refer to things.’²³ The people and events of human history are for Thomas a kind of divine speech that shows God to us in a way that nature alone never could.

In contemplating the relationship of God, self, and world Thomas clearly differs from Aristotle on the relationship of God and world, and consequently on how the world might signify God. But he also differs from Aristotle in his account of the self, for there is yet another thought that seems beyond Aristotle’s ken: the damage that sin has wrought upon our contemplative capacity. Why does our mundane contemplation so often fail to lead to contemplation of God? While Aristotle certainly has an account of *akrasia*—a lack of self-mastery that inhibits virtue—because he doesn’t really have a fully developed notion of willing, he likewise lacks an account of that willful wrongdoing that we call ‘sin.’ To put it briefly, for Thomas the natural dynamism of the intellect is diverted from its final end not only by the body’s passions, as in the case of Aristotelian *akrasia*, but also by a defective rational appetite, a will that has been wounded by sin. So we are doubly inhibited in what should be our natural passage from contemplation of the world to contemplation of God—not only by the world’s timeful contingency, but also by our willful perversity—inhibited in such a way that we need not simply self-mastery, but also divine grace, not simply elevating but also healing. All of this requires a vision of God, self, and world in which God’s act of love has priority, and this seems clearly a thought Aristotle could not think.

Contemplation in Theology

Which at last brings us to the subject of theology. With all that I have said thus far as background, I would like to say something about how this account of contemplation shapes Thomas’s understanding of theology.

As is well known, Thomas claims that *sacra doctrina*, holy teaching, is an enterprise that is both speculative and practical, but primarily speculative,²⁴ and in the *Summa theologiae* he gives us a model of what this looks like, in which the practical inquiries of the *Secunda pars* are framed by and enfolded in the speculative explorations of the *Prima pars* and the *Tertia pars*. But we should not think that Thomas means

²³ *Summa theologiae* 1.1.12.

²⁴ *Summa theologiae* 1.1.4.

by ‘speculative’ what we might mean. He certainly does not mean spinning out theories about God as personal reveries. What Thomas intends by characterizing holy teaching as ‘speculative’ is to highlight the contemplative nature of this undertaking. And the particular nature of theology for Thomas is determined by his understanding of the nature of contemplation as having its beginning in God’s effects, those mundane things that we desire to understand.

In asking the question of whether theology is *scientia*, one of the arguments Thomas addresses is that *scientia* is not of particular things, whereas holy teaching deals with particular facts, ‘such as the deeds of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the like.’²⁵ Theology would be, it seems, what he calls in his *Sentences* commentary a ‘narrative of signs...and examples,’²⁶ which suggests that it is not a science, and certainly not a speculative science. But, Thomas responds, the particular facts concerning Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and so forth are not in fact the principle concern of theology—they are included either as recounting miraculous events that point us toward the truth of revelation or as moral examples for us to follow (since practical reasoning needs examples). They are, in other words, instrumental, directing us toward a truth that exceeds the time-bound narrative of signs and examples, a truth that is nothing less than the timeless essence of God. Thomas speaks of how theology makes use of God’s effects, ‘either of nature or of grace’²⁷ so as to move from the effect to the cause. In this way, the narrative of divine revelation witnessed to in Scripture is, like the natural order itself, a created effect that should point us to God as first cause.

We can see how this works in considering the most perfect of all created effects: the sacred humanity of Christ. For as the most actual of God’s created effects it must therefore most clearly point us to the divine essence. In considering devotion, which is the chief act of the virtue of religion, Thomas addresses the question of whether contemplation causes devotion. One of the arguments against the thesis is that if contemplation were the cause of devotion then the higher object of contemplation—i.e., the divine essence—would cause greater devotion, but in fact it seems that it is often contemplation of the humanity of Christ that causes the greatest devotion. So, the argument concludes, something else must be causing devotion. Thomas replies:

Matters concerning the divinity are, in themselves, the strongest incentive to love and consequently to devotion, because God is supremely lovable. Yet the weakness of the human mind is such that it needs a guiding hand, not only to the knowledge, but also to the love of divine things by means of certain sensible objects known to us. Principle among these is the humanity of Christ, according to the words of the preface, *that*

²⁵ *Summa theologiae* 1.1.2 arg. 2.

²⁶ *Scriptum super Sententiarum* bk. 1 prol. a. 5.

²⁷ *Summa theologiae* 1.1.7 ad 1.

through knowing God visibly, we may be caught up to the love of things invisible. Therefore matters pertaining to Christ's humanity, leading us there like a guiding hand, are the chief incentive to devotion, although devotion itself has for its object matters concerning divinity.²⁸

We see here not only the integral role played by elevating and healing grace in Thomas's account of contemplation, but also the Christological character of that grace. For it is through the humanity of Christ as narrative sign that we encounter the preeminent effect of God, by which is effected through the gift of faith the passage from visible to invisible. Even in the case of Christ's humanity, it is only through abstracting from the particular created effect that one arrives at the invisible divine essence.

This movement from the visible to the invisible, from humanity to divinity, is seen in Thomas's discussion of the scene in John's Gospel where Thomas the Apostle encounters the risen Christ. He draws upon Gregory the Great's sermon on that scene, especially doubting Thomas's profession of 'my Lord and my God,' in which Gregory brings out the seeming disjunction between what Thomas's senses see and what his lips profess: 'He apprehended a mere man, and testified that this was the invisible God.'²⁹ Aquinas, in his own commentary, writes:

It seems that Thomas quickly became a good theologian by professing a true faith. He professed the humanity of Christ when he said, 'my Lord'... and he professed the divinity of Christ when he said, 'and my God'.... Thomas saw one thing and believed another. He saw the man and the wounds, and from these he believed in the divinity of the one who had arisen.³⁰

It seems that what it means to be a good theologian is to be able to pass from knowing Christ after the flesh to being caught up in love of the invisible divine essence that he shares with the Father and the Spirit.

I would like to suggest that what is going on in becoming a good theologian is something analogous to what the marine biologist must do to become a good scientist. If theology is, as Anselm described it, *fides quaerens intellectum*, then what 'seeking understanding' involves is something like a process of abstraction by which we move from the particular frog to its essential frogginess. To recount the narrative of God's dealings with the world through Abraham, Isaac, Israel, Jesus, and the Church, as important as that is, is not yet to be doing theology. Like the marine biologist seeking to grasp the intelligible structure of a frog's frogginess, the theologian seeks to grasp the intelligible

²⁸ *Summa theologiae* 2-2.82.3 ad 2.

²⁹ Homily 26 in Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, Dom David Hurst, trans. (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1990), p. 207.

³⁰ *Super Io.* ch. 21 lec. 6 nn. 2562, 2564.

structure of that narrative—and this intelligible structure is what I believe Thomas means by *convenientia* or ‘fittingness,’ the coherent convergence of elements by which the narrative comes together. To grasp this coherence is an activity of the systematic understander. For the narrative of signs and examples to be not merely perceived but to be grasped, there is needed the labor of contemplation, by which the facts of salvation history are ‘spiritualized’ in our seeking to know them, raised to a higher level of actuality by being grasped by the intellect. Of course, the narrative itself can no more be left behind for the higher realms of speculation than actual frogs can be left behind by the marine biologist. But the labor of contemplation allows the narrative to be understood with a new depth as the narrative of God.

Of course ‘grasping the intelligible structure’ is said analogously of frogs and narratives. A narrative, being an artifact woven by humans, does not have a substantial form in the way that a frog does. But Thomas is not interested in just any narrative (indeed, he seems quite uninterested in narrative in general), but in the particular narrative of signs that is God’s dealings with the world. This narrative is not simply a human artifact, but has God as its author, and is a story woven not with words but with real people and events.³¹ And while it might be odd to speak of a story having a substantial form that the mind grasps, to know the coherence of this particular story is, like knowing a substantial form, to know it as God knows it. It is to see at the center of the story the figure of Christ, the incarnate God to whom all prior history points and from whom all subsequent history flows, the one who is, quite literally, the *logos* or *ratio* of salvation history. Perhaps this is why, when an image of the crucified spoke to him in prayer, saying, ‘Thomas, you have written well of me; what reward would you have for your labor?’ Thomas is reported to have replied, *Non nisi te, Domine*—‘Nothing but you, Lord.’ To possess Christ is to grasp the essence of the narrative of salvation.³²

So for Thomas ‘contemplation’ is not a code word for a kind of mushy mysticism in which thought plays no roll. Nor is it solely a non-discursive beholding of God’s essence. Rather, as Thomas notes in his commentary on the *Ethics*, ‘contemplation’ includes both investigation to attain the truth and reflection on the truth already attained; and while the latter is the superior activity, since it is the end toward which investigation is ordered, the hard intellectual work of seeking the

³¹ See *Summa theologiae* 1.1.10. See also my essay, ‘God as Author: Thinking Through a Metaphor,’ *Modern Theology* 31: 4 (October 2015), pp. 573–585.

³² See Guillaume de Tocco, *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, Claire le Brun-Gouanvic ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1996), cap. 34. My thanks to the anonymous reader for *New Blackfriars* who pressed the issue of the disanalogy between narratives and substances, as well as the question of the truthfulness of the narrative in question.

truth is no less truly contemplative.³³ Making the same point somewhat more expansively in the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas writes:

the contemplative life has one act wherein it is finally completed, namely the contemplation of truth, and from this act it derives its unity. Yet it has many acts whereby it arrives at this final act. Some of these pertain to the reception of principles, from which it proceeds to the contemplation of truth; others are concerned with deducing from the principles, the truth, the knowledge of which is sought; and the last and crowning act is the contemplation itself of the truth.³⁴

To contemplate the mysteries of faith is to apply the mind to them, to approach them as the ‘systematic understander’ that we are by nature, by discerning principles and deducing conclusions until we arrive at the point where, Thomas says, ‘discoursing must be laid aside and the soul’s gaze fixed upon the contemplation of the one simple truth.’³⁵

This is the first movement of theology. While contemplation of one simple truth may be the crowning act of theological inquiry, it is not the last act of the theologian. There is a second act that follows, for the theological task terminates in sharing with others the fruits of contemplation, a process that might be thought of as the contemplative path run in reverse. For the theologian, fired by love of the divine essence, the discernment of principles and deducing of conclusions that have led to that one simple truth are put on orderly display so that others might retrace the path of that knowledge and love. Thomas is well known for saying that when theologians are instructing an audience and ‘helping them understand the truth they already believe...reason should be used to get to the heart of the truth and enable them to know just how it is true.’ If we determine a theological question by sheer appeal to authority, without argumentation, we may inform people of the truth, but we ‘leave them empty.’³⁶ The ministry of the teacher is to fill the mind of the student with his or her own discursive path as a systematic understander of the scriptural narrative of signs and examples, now bathed in the light of the teacher’s own contemplation of the one simple truth that is the divine essence. But then, in order to become a systematic understander of the truth being taught, the student must non-identically re-enact the teacher’s journey, not simply as an intellectual path but as a spiritual itinerary.

Jonathan Lear notes something analogous in seeking to grasp the fruits of Aristotle’s contemplation. ‘[W]e have come to understand his world by working through the very problems and thoughts Aristotle did. Thus our understanding of Aristotle is to some extent a

³³ *Sententia libri Ethicorum* bk. 10 lec. 10 n. 2092.

³⁴ *Summa theologiae* 2-2.180.3.

³⁵ *Summa theologiae* 2-2.180.6.

³⁶ *Quodlibet* 4.9.3.

re-enactment of his thinking.³⁷ We who study Thomas Aquinas can likewise say that as we work through the same problems and thoughts that he did, we seek to reenact his thinking, so that we might catch a glimpse of the one for love of whom Thomas studied, watched, labored, preached and taught. Through the many question and articles of the *Summa theologiae*, through the textual divisions and intellectual sifting of his Scripture commentaries, even through the tediously detailed commentaries on Aristotle, Thomas continues to share with us the fruits of his contemplation. It seems appropriate that the Ambrosian liturgy, in the Eucharistic Preface appointed for his feast day, should praise Thomas with these words:

He turned his back on wealth and honours
and opened his heart to the light of your word,
aspiring to teach with clarity and insight
what he had received in loving contemplation.³⁸

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³⁷ Lear, p. 316.

³⁸ English translation from *We Give You Thanks and Praise: The Ambrosian Eucharistic Prefaces*, Alan Griffiths, trans. (Sheed & Ward, 2000), p. 173.