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DESIRE FOR GOD: GROUND OF THE MORAL LIFE IN AQUINAS

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THE ANCIENT Christian conviction, that a desire for God lies at the root of the moral life, plays a primary role in Thomas Aquinas' moral theology as developed in the *Summa theologiae*.[1] Its significance for him may be gathered from his introduction to the second volume of the *ST*, which is devoted to a discussion of moral theology and related questions. There he notes that in the second part of his exposition of sacred doctrine he will discuss the rational creature's advance towards God. In this way he relates his discussion of the moral life to the overall purpose of the *ST*, which is meant to be a discussion of God, not only as He is in Himself but also insofar as He is the beginning and end of all creatures, particularly of rational creatures (I-II, Intro.). Since Thomas holds that all creatures have a natural desire for God insofar as they tend towards Him as their last end, we are thus prepared to find that Thomas grounds the moral life in our natural desire, as rational creatures, for God. And so he does; but the way in which Thomas relates the natural desire for God both to the actual desire for God inspired by grace and to the moral life is far more subtle and interesting than the standard interpretation of Thomas would lead us to expect.

According to the standard interpretation, *ST* portrays a two-tiered universe, a realm of natural affairs, intelligible and seemingly self-contained, which is nonetheless supplemented and completed by participation in a supernatural economy of revelation and grace.[2] On the basis of this interpretation, Thomas' disciples have traditionally argued that the natural world, and more particularly the moral life, naturally have some positive intimations of supernatural grace. Transcendental Thomism, with its insistence on the human person's constitutive openness to transcendence, is currently the most influential expression of this line of thought.[3] Classical and neo-orthodox Protestants rightly object that

[1] Kenneth Kirk's *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) is perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the development of this motif in Christian thought.

[2] See, e.g., ibid. 379–82; Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1931) 263–72; Etienne Gilson, *Moral Values and the Moral Life* (St. Louis: Herder, 1941) 1–51.

[3] See, e.g., Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 51–71.

this two-tier account of the universe threatens to blur the qualitative difference between God and His creatures and to call into question the gratuity of grace.[4] But they do agree with the Thomists that this is what Thomas had in mind.

In this essay I will try to show that the standard account of Thomas does not do justice to his account of the relation between the moral life and the economy of grace. Thomas was far too conscious of the qualitative difference between God and His creatures, and moreover too eager to do justice to the inner integrity and completeness of the created realm, to claim that any created process or activity is inherently oriented to a share in God's own proper life. At the same time, he was too much of a theological rationalist to adopt what would later become a standard Protestant approach, the assertion of a radical discontinuity between grace and the moral life. His attempts to resolve these tensions in his moral theology reflect more subtlety and greater care in maintaining the qualitative distinction between God and creation than either his critics or his admirers usually acknowledge. Finally, what he offers us is that comparative rarity in Christian thought, a theological interpretation of common morality, seen as having its own inner integrity apart from the Christian life. In other words, Thomas attempts to formulate a genuine moral theology in the *ST*, and that attempt (successful or not) invests his work with interest for all those who grapple with the ambiguous discipline of Christian ethics.

NATURAL DESIRE FOR GOD IN CREATION

Strange though they may sound, the *ST* is scattered with remarks about the natural desire, or love, for God on the part of irrational and even inanimate creatures (e.g., I 6.1; I-II 26.2, 109.3,7). Obviously, for Thomas, the rational creature's desire for God is importantly dissimilar to the cat's, or the stone's, desire for God. Nonetheless, Thomas sees fit to use the same expressions in all these instances, and the fact that he does so provides an important clue to the way in which we should interpret his moral theology.

To make sense of Thomas' assertions that all creatures desire (or love) God in some way, it is necessary to place them in the context of his discussion of creation at I 44 and 45.[5] There we read that everything that exists in any way must be said to be created by God, since only God is self-subsisting being, and all other entities enjoy only a participated

[4] Karl Barth's objections to the moral theology of Thomist Catholicism in *Church Dogmatics* 2/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957) 528–34 are representative of this line of argument.

[5] Throughout this section I am indebted to David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1979) 135–40.

existence (I 44.1). The act of creation itself can only be described as making something from nothing, and for this reason it cannot be said to be a change in the proper sense, since "change" means an alteration in something already existing (45.1, 2 ad 2). Hence we cannot identify creation with any distinctive characteristic of creatures; we can only affirm that creation is in creatures as a relation of absolute dependence on God (I 45.2 ad 2; 45.3). And this point is crucial, because it indicates that we are not meant to take these remarks as adding new facts to our store of information about the world. We cannot identify creation, or the condition of createdness, with some particular feature of things, precisely because our concepts of cause and effect, which are grounded in experiences of change, cannot properly be applied to creation at all. Hence, when Thomas says that all things are created by God, he is not calling our attention to some characteristic of finite existence that is discernibly subsequent upon being created by God; he is asserting that everything stands in an inconceivable but real relationship of absolute dependence upon a creator. Thomas does *not* want to assert some spark of divinity, some family resemblance to the Godhead, that we can recognize in creatures by comparing them to God as their cause.

How, then, are we to read Thomas' remarks on creation? David Burrell provides us with a key to interpreting these remarks by reminding us that Thomas' discussion of God's existence is designed to show that the formula "the beginning and last end of all things and of reasoning creatures especially" may be shown in diverse ways to have some application to reality.[6] To carry through on this project, Thomas also needs to indicate the conceptual parameters of talking about entities under the aspect of created being, insofar as this area of discourse bears on our discourse about God. This is apparently just what he does in his remarks on creation. These remarks do not give us any new information, but they do draw out the conceptual implications of affirming that all finite entities depend on a self-subsisting being for their existence. That is, they spell out the conceptual parameters of discourse about reality under the aspect of created being.

Nonetheless, the remarks on creation taken alone do not completely set out the parameters of discourse about creatures. As Thomas notes, "creation" implies a relation of the creature to the creator with a certain newness or beginning, and therefore it is not necessary to say that the creature is created as long as it continues to be (I 45.3 ad 3). But entities are understood not only as coming to be but also as subsisting through time in virtue of their own intrinsic operations. Under this latter aspect

[6] Ibid. 12–13.

they are said to return to God as their last end. We will see that Thomas' remarks on the natural desire for God are meant to provide one way of talking about creatures under the aspect of entities that are directed to God and return to Him as their last end. However, this language is confusing in itself. How can we say that all creatures *return* to God?

A key to interpreting this way of speaking about creatures may be found in I 44.4, in which Thomas asks whether God is the final cause (that is, the purpose or goal) of all things. He answers that He is. If we say that God creates, the logic of our concept of agency requires that we say that He has some purpose in the act of creating. Otherwise we would be forced to understand creation as an arbitrary occurrence. But at the same time, God cannot be understood as being in any way a passive recipient, and so we cannot say that He acts so as to acquire something for Himself. Therefore we can only say that God Himself is the purpose of His act of creation, insofar as He acts to communicate His own goodness. Of course, in the act of creation there is nothing (as an already existing subject) to which to communicate goodness. Hence, when we say that God acts so as to communicate goodness, we are saying something like this: God acts in creation in such a way as to bestow participation in being. Thomas has already told us that goodness does not really differ from being; that is, both goodness and being are formal notions under which we understand entities as having actuality (I 5.1). In other words, whether we say that God acts so as to communicate goodness or to communicate being, we are pointing to the same strictly inconceivable reality of creation.

Nonetheless, these phrases indicate different logical aspects of an account of creation. When we speak about creation in terms of bestowal of being, we indicate that finite beings are not self-subsistent, but depend entirely on God for their actuality. When we speak of creation as the communication of goodness, we introduce the notions of desirability and purpose into the discussion. Goodness most properly signifies that complete actuality towards which all things move in the processes of development through which they attain their specific forms, although by extension anything is said to be good insofar as it is actual (I 5.1). Since the notion of good is logically correlated with the notion of desirability, Thomas says that all things desire their proper good (same article). He clearly does not mean to say that all creatures enjoy awareness or anything of the sort; he is simply noting that the natural dynamisms of each creature have the character of desire insofar as they are intrinsically pointed towards the ever fuller actualization of that creature's form. Thus, when we speak of creation as the communication of goodness, we are reminded that creation has its terms in entities which exist in and

through operations, which move intrinsically towards ever fuller actuality according to intelligible forms.

When he discusses God's relation to finite being from this perspective, Thomas typically says that God directs all creatures to their proper ends (e.g., I 22.2, 103.1; I-II 93.5). His favorite image in reference to irrational creatures is the arrow, directed unknowingly to its target by the archer (e.g., I 103.1 ad 3,8). To prevent any possible misunderstanding, he makes it clear in these same texts that God directs creatures to their end precisely by bestowing on each creature the principles proper to its own nature, not by some special divine intervention into creation.

When he speaks of the creature's relation to God from this perspective, Thomas typically speaks of its natural desire for or love of God. We are now in a position to understand how he uses this sort of language. Creatures are said to desire or love God in exactly the same way in which they are said to desire or love the good which is their complete actuality; in fact, the creature's natural desire for God *is* the natural desire for its proper good, since all goodness is in some way (unknown to us) a similitude of divine being (I 6.1). Similarly, Thomas sometimes says that all creatures act insofar as every creature subsists in and through operations intrinsically directed to a purpose. Of course, the purpose towards which each creature is said in this way to act is simply itself in its fullest actuality. But insofar as it attains its actuality more fully, the creature may also be said to appropriate God's communication of goodness more fully. Therefore creatures are said to have a natural desire for God insofar as they have a natural tendency to be themselves, understood as terms of His communication of goodness. According to Thomas, each creature returns to God by becoming ever more completely itself.

In short, Thomas' remarks about a natural desire or love for God on the part of all creation convey, in condensed form, the doctrinal framework that he brings to everything in the *ST*. They suggest one key to what he sees as the proper Christian interpretation of reality; they do not give us new facts about reality to add to what we already know on the basis of empirical investigation.

The same can be said about Thomas' assumption that the human person, like the rest of creation, has a natural desire for God. I will argue that this assumption functions in the same way for Thomas as does his more general account of the desire of all creatures for God; it conveys a theological interpretation of our common psychology, but it does not imply an actual, positive desire for God as an object (however inchoately known) of common human striving. For precisely this reason, Thomas is able to maintain a qualitative distinction between the desire for God inspired by grace (which *is* an actual, positive desire) and the natural desire for God that grace presupposes.

RATIONAL DESIRE FOR GOD IN THE HUMAN PERSON

When we turn to Thomas' discussion of happiness as the ultimate goal of all human striving (I-II 1–5), we find that he is reluctant directly to assert here that human beings have a natural desire for God. (Elsewhere he is less reticent; see, e.g., the *Summa contra gentiles* III.I, ch. 48.) But this is not surprising, since Thomas, like so many of his predecessors, shifts back and forth between two senses of "natural," as "innate, inherent in a particular species" and as a contrast to "rational." Thomas uses "natural" in the latter sense when he contrasts the rational creature's conscious, self-directed activities towards a goal with the irrational creature's natural inclination towards a state of optimum existence (I-II 1.2). Given the importance of this contrast, we can appreciate why Thomas avoids phrases like "the natural human desire for God."

Nonetheless, since we are a part of creation, it would be odd indeed if Thomas did not assume that we, along with the rest of creation, have a natural desire for God in the former sense of an innate, specific inclination towards our optimum way of being in the world. Moreover, since we are distinguished from other corporeal beings by our rationality, we would expect to find that each of us fulfils that natural desire for God by becoming ever more fully the rational creature he or she is. In fact, Thomas often does speak as if this is his understanding of the human person's natural desire for God. He asserts that the happiness proper to this life consists in the fullest possible exercise of the speculative intellect in contemplation, together with the rational control of passions and actions by the practical intellect (I-II 3.5).[7] Accordingly, he insists that reason is the norm of human actions (e.g., at I-II 19.3, 64.1,2). Similarly, he argues that the objects of the cardinal virtues are accessible to reason (I-II 63.2) because they direct their subject to that happiness that is proportionate to human nature (I-II 62.1). Remarks like these suggest that, for Thomas, the natural desire for God is the foundation of the moral life in a very straightforward way: the moral life, through which each of us develops as a rational being according to the proper principles of human nature, enables us to approximate our specific perfection and thereby to attain God's communication of goodness to us as creatures.

Or that would be our conclusion if Thomas had not explicitly said something very different about the actual object of true happiness. In his treatise on the final end of human life, he begins by asserting that each of us naturally desires the fulfilment of our capacities for perfection through the enjoyment of a completely satisfying good (I-II 1.5,7, 2.8).

[7] Compare Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 10, esp. chaps. 7 and 8. Thomas is no more successful than Aristotle in delineating the interrelationship of reasonable action and intellectual speculation in natural human happiness; but he has perhaps more excuse than Aristotle for neglecting this problem, since his main interests are elsewhere.

That is, everyone seeks happiness as the ultimate goal (I-II 1.8), and insofar as they are properly human, all actions are directed to this goal (I-II 1.5,6). Properly understood, human happiness consists in the direct vision of God, for nothing else could satisfy our fundamental hunger for intelligibility (I-II 3.5,8). All the same, many persons falsely identify the object of true happiness with some created good (I-II 1.7, 5.8).

At this point it is tempting to appeal to the two-tier interpretation sketched above. Is not Thomas saying that all persons naturally feel a hunger for God, even though we may not know what it is that we seek so restlessly, through so many delusive satisfactions? Is this not for him the great service of Christianity, to make clear to us what it is that we really want and to show us the way to get it?

No, not if we are to take seriously Thomas' answer to the question whether every person desires happiness (I-II 5.8). If he had any notion of an implicit or prethematic desire for communion with God that is built into human nature, this would be the place where we would expect to find it. But Thomas makes no such claim. Instead, he replies that in a formal sense everyone does indeed desire happiness since everyone desires whatever he or she believes will perfectly satisfy his or her will. But not everyone recognizes that true happiness can only be found in the vision of God, and consequently not everyone desires happiness in the sense of desiring that in which happiness truly consists. In other words, while Thomas holds that many persons have made a mistake about the nature of happiness, he does not argue that such individuals are mistaken about what they really want. People of this sort do want riches or power or whatever more than anything else; even though their desires are based on a mistake, those really are their desires.

Similarly, Thomas carefully distinguishes between the moral virtues, which are directed to natural human happiness, and the theological virtues, which enable their subject to attain the true happiness of direct communion with God (I-II 62.1–3). True, the moral virtues by themselves could direct the reason and will to God "inasmuch as He is the beginning and end of nature, *but* in proportion to nature" (I-II 62.1 ad 3; my italics). Here we see Thomas acknowledging the possibility of a natural love for God; but when we place this comment in the context of his general remarks on the natural love for God, we realize just how minimal this possibility is for him. For Thomas certainly holds that God is the ultimate source of intelligibility and goodness; that is why irrational creatures can be said to love God, simply by developing into the creatures that God has willed them to be, and that is why the rational creature, who can grasp the fact that all things are grounded in a first cause, can be said *from the Christian perspective* to have some knowledge of the living God

that is in fact the primal source of creation. But this natural knowledge of God is mediated by creation and by the created intellect's own limitations, and as such it cannot serve as a basis for that friendship with God in which true happiness consists (I 12.5,9; I-II 5.5, 23.1, 109.3; cf. II-II 2.3). The theological virtues are distinguished from the moral virtues precisely on that basis. They relate the human person directly to God Himself, as He is in Himself and not as the obscure cause of the finite creation (I-II 109.3). Hence they cannot be attained by the development of our own innate powers (unlike the moral and intellectual virtues) but have to be given to us directly by God, "entirely from without" (I-II 63.1; cf. II-II 23.2).

We can only conclude that, for Thomas, there is a qualitative difference between the object of natural happiness, as it would exist without an economy of grace, and the true supernatural happiness to which God has in fact called us. Or, to be exact, there is an infinite qualitative difference between these objects *as they are attained by us*, even though we know, from the perspective of Christian revelation, that these objects are in fact one and the same. Natural happiness would consist in a life of moral and intellectual reasonableness, culminating in the philosophical contemplation of the first cause of everything; true happiness consists in an inconceivable direct union with the inconceivably living God.

Thomas' firm distinction between the natural and the supernatural is religiously quite satisfying, at least to those who are sympathetic to the Protestant insistence on the absolute distinction between what we can do and what God can do for us. But it renders his account of morality more problematic than it seems at first glance to be, because Thomas also insists that true happiness is the ultimate end of the moral life. Yet, according to Thomas, we cannot know the essence of God in this life (I 12.5,11).[8] And since true happiness is nothing other than the enjoyment of God as He is in Himself, that is to say, in His own proper essence, it follows that we cannot know what true happiness is, either.

So Thomas seems to be committed to the difficult claim that in order to live a truly moral life, we must somehow direct all our actions toward

[8] I do not believe that Burrell has overstated the case for Thomas' insistence that God's essence cannot be known *at all* except through the supernatural elevation of the beatific vision; see *Aquinas* 12–67. If Burrell's interpretation of Thomas is correct, then his doctrine of God as developed in *ST* would naturally lead him to rule out the possibility of even partial or implicit conceptions of God's essence that might serve as guidelines for action. Hence Thomas' distinction between natural and supernatural happiness is quite consistent with his doctrine of God, as Burrell reads it.—In deference to scriptural tradition, Thomas admits that Moses and St. Paul may have seen the essence of God in this life, but he insists that even they did not see God through the exercise of any natural faculty (see II-II 175.1–3).

a goal we cannot even conceive.[9] The difficulty is compounded by the fact that when we turn to Thomas' detailed discussions of moral virtue, it is the natural desire for God that seems to do actual normative work, through his repeated appeals to ordinary human reasonableness as the form of the moral virtues.

But in spite of these initial difficulties, it is possible to interpret Thomas' moral theology in such a way as to preserve his distinction between natural and supernatural happiness, while still presenting a cogent account of the moral life and its place in the overall economy of grace. To do so, it is necessary to investigate in more detail what Thomas says and implies about the relation of true happiness to our capacities for the natural happiness of rational action and contemplation.

RATIONAL CAPACITY AS THE SHEER POSSIBILITY FOR BEATITUDE

Let us return to the first question mentioned above. If we cannot even begin to know the essence of God in this life, then, since happiness is nothing else than the enjoyment of God in His essence, it follows that we cannot conceive of or rationally desire happiness, either. What, then, might it mean to say that all our actions should be directed to that happiness which is the true purpose of human life? As far as I know, Thomas does not pose this question anywhere in the *ST*. However, he does discuss the relationship between moral rectitude and happiness from another standpoint, and this discussion provides a starting point for reconstructing what his answer to our question would be.

At I-II 4.4, Thomas asks whether rectitude of the will is necessary to

[9] Thomas does suggest that contemplation provides an inchoate beatitude in this life, which will be continued in the life to come (II-II 180.4). But contemplation cannot be the end of the moral life, in the sense of providing a goal towards which the actions of the moral life are directed. While the moral virtues do serve to prepare the soul for contemplation, they do not belong essentially to the contemplative life; rather, they have their own proper function in the regulation of our external actions, and especially in directing us to serve our neighbor (I-II 180.2, 182.4). Moreover, the contemplative life is not necessary to attaining beatitude—which is fortunate, because not everyone is capable of it (I-II 182.4 ad 1). Finally, when we examine Thomas' remarks on contemplation more carefully, we see that it provides us with an inchoate foretaste of beatitude only if it is grounded in the supernatural virtue of charity (I-II 180.1, 182.2); and, as we will see, it is also charity that directs the actions of the moral life to the vision of God. Indeed, Thomas carefully notes that "The manner of contemplation is not the same here as in heaven" (I-II 180.8 ad 1).—At the same time, the analogous similarity between contemplation and the vision of God may well serve as a reason to prefer a life that includes as much contemplative activity as possible for those who are intellectually and temperamentally suited for it. John Langan reaches a similar conclusion in "Beatitude and Moral Law in St. Thomas," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 5 (1977) 183–95.

happiness. We are not surprised to read that rectitude is indeed a necessary preparation for happiness. What *is* surprising is his further conclusion that rectitude is a necessary concomitant of happiness. That is, he holds that moral goodness remains even in the beatified; and this seems to be an odd conclusion at first, because it is not at all clear that the beatified are doing anything that calls for moral goodness. Nonetheless, Thomas insists that moral rectitude remains even in the blessed dead because "the due order to the end is necessary" even in those in whom that end has come to fruition. He goes on to explain that the beatified possess rectitude of the will in that they love all creatures insofar as those creatures are directed to God, whom they see directly and therefore love necessarily—just as wayfarers enjoy rectitude insofar as they love whatever they love under the common notion of goodness. Hence Thomas draws a parallel between the direct knowledge of God enjoyed in the beatific vision and the common notion of the good that guides the righteous in this life.

Before we can unpack the significance of this parallel, we must clarify what Thomas means by "the common notion of the good." While it is tempting to equate this phrase with "goodness" in the most formal sense (see I 5.1,4), this cannot be what Thomas means, since even sinners desire whatever they desire under the notion of goodness understood in this sense (I-II 74.1 ad 1; I-II 78.1). Rather, in this context "the common notion of good" can only refer to the concept of the goodness of human beings as a natural species, and by extension to a reasonably well-developed notion of what promotes or hinders human flourishing.

To justify this interpretation, it is necessary to examine Thomas' understanding of freedom of the will. According to Thomas, the human will is best understood as a rational appetite which intends its objects as they are presented to it by the intellect under the formal notion of goodness (I-II 9.1). The key contrast for him lies between the rational appetite of the human person and the desires and operations of irrational creatures, which are determined to particular objects by the exigencies of their specific natures (I-II 13.2). Just because the proper object of the will is the universal good, it is not similarly determined to any particular object, since, as Thomas points out, no finite object can be understood as being good in every respect (I-II 10.2; I-II 13.6). In short, Thomas understands human freedom as a kind of rational indeterminacy with respect to its particular objects. At the same time, Thomas does hold that the will is necessarily directed to the formal object of happiness (I 82.1; I-II 1.7). Furthermore, he asserts that human persons naturally seek certain general goals proper to us as existing, living, and rational beings, without specifying whether these goals are necessary, or simply

natural and proper, goals of human desire (I-II 94.2).[10] The rational indeterminacy of the will finds its exercise in each person's efforts to achieve these formal and general goals for himself or herself. And it is here, too, that the moral life finds its context, since, for Thomas, to be moral is precisely to direct oneself to one's natural fulfilment as a human being in accordance with a rational conception of what is truly good for humans.

How does Thomas understand this process to work? It is difficult to reconstruct what he had in mind. Nonetheless, it is important to attempt to do so, since it is here that we will find the key to the way in which the natural and supernatural ends of the human person fit together for him.[11]

[10] The exact status of the natural inclinations enumerated in I-II 94.2 is far from clear. A full discussion of this issue would call for a separate essay, but a few observations are in order. (1) Thomas is certainly saying that these inclinations are characteristic of us as a natural kind and can therefore be expected to show up in everybody. But I cannot see anything in his remarks that would force us to conclude that these inclinations will necessarily be present in every human being or will override all other considerations when they are present. Elsewhere he asserts that it is possible to act contrary to the inclinations to live (II-II 64.5) and to have sexual intercourse (II-II 142.1, 152.2). So apparently the human will is not strictly determined even to the objects of these natural inclinations. (2) As Germain Grisez rightly points out in "The First Principle of Practical Reason," in Anthony Kenny, ed., *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1969) 340–82, these inclinations form the basis for all practical reasoning, not simply for moral reasoning. But I cannot agree with his further contention that these inclinations set positive injunctions to maximize the attainment of the goods in question. Indeed, it is not clear to me that this claim makes any sense. How, then, do these inclinations come to have moral relevance? At this point I can only state my own interpretation of Thomas, without attempting to argue for it in any detail. As I read him, the inclinations are morally relevant in two ways. (*a*) They provide an indication of the *permissible options* for human action. Although this claim is problematic, I believe that Thomas would say that no human pursuit is legitimate unless it can be subsumed under these inclinations in some way. Certainly he holds that the manipulation of the natural faculties for procreation and the sustenance of life, simply in order to produce the attendant pleasure, is wrong (II-II 148, 150, 154). (*b*) They set the context for the *prohibitions* subsumed under justice, by indicating what counts as harming another (and, for Thomas, the most fundamental general obligation to the neighbor is not to harm him or her; see I-II 100.5). (3) Thomas includes "to know the truth about God" among the natural inclinations. Is this contrary to my overall thesis? I think not. Thomas certainly admits the possibility of a natural knowledge of God (see, e.g., I 2.2). But the content of this natural knowledge of God is highly abstract; it appears to be equivalent to the knowledge that there is a universal principle of goodness and being (II-II 2.3). Hence, as a *natural* inclination, the desire to know the truth about God is hard to distinguish from a general inclination for philosophical speculation about first causes and, by extension, for philosophical speculation generally. Note that Thomas immediately adds a corollary that this inclination corresponds to a general injunction to avoid ignorance.

[11] Throughout this section I am indebted to W. F. R. Hardie's analysis in "The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics," in J. M. E. Moravesik, ed., *Aristotle* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1967) 297–322. Hardie argues that in his account of happiness Aristotle confuses two conceptions, that of an inclusive end for human life and that of a dominant end for life. A desire for happiness seen as an inclusive end would be a second-order desire

Recall that Thomas holds that every rational person necessarily desires happiness. Moreover, he says, all rational desires and actions are necessarily directed in some way towards attaining whatever the agent believes to be happiness (I-II 1.5,6). Now these are dubious propositions on their face. They become somewhat more plausible once we recall that Thomas has a very formal concept of happiness as the attainment of a perfectly satisfying good, but even so, they are difficult to maintain, and Thomas himself does not consistently defend the latter claim.[12] Nonetheless, they provide an important key to his understanding of moral rectitude. For on Thomas' own terms, everyone *ought* to desire happiness and to act always with that end in view, even if it is not always the case that everyone *does* do so. The distinguishing capacity of the rational animal, for Thomas, is precisely this capacity to direct oneself to one's own proper good by acting on the basis of a rational apprehension of what that good is (I 103.5; I-II 91.2). But it is possible to proceed along this course either well or badly. The morally virtuous person proceeds well, because he or she proceeds in accordance with reason, that is, in accordance with a proper conception of what is appropriate to human nature and what is not. It is in this sense that the morally good person characteristically acts on the basis of "the common notion of good," that is, the good that constitutes human flourishing (cf. I-II 94.2).

But Thomas also holds that it is possible to bungle the process of rational self-direction through some form of sin.[13] While he recognizes

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that one's first-order desires be fulfilled in an orderly and harmonious way, whereas a desire for a dominant end would be a first-order desire for a specific good. It is not surprising that Thomas suffers from the same confusion to some degree. However, when Thomas' remarks on happiness and the natural inclinations are taken together, they suggest that he does understand natural happiness to be an inclusive end, in Hardie's terms. On the other hand, the sinner who locates happiness in one particular good *does* make that his or her dominant end.

[12] Even here Thomas equivocates (see I-II 1.6 ad 1,2). Elsewhere he discusses the case of the person who is swayed by some immediate desire or aversion to act contrary to his or her convictions about what the human good involves (I-II 77, esp. 77.2; II-II 156). Venial sins also seem to be actions that are not directed to one's ultimate goals (see I-II 88.2).

[13] Of course, Thomas does recognize other causes of sin, namely, those due to negligent ignorance (I-II 76) and those produced by passion (I-II 77; see n. 12 above). The sin of certain malice is apparently equivalent to the kind of sin that results from attempting to build one's life around some specific good (see esp. I-II 78.4). It is noteworthy that both negligent ignorance and a sin of passion undermine human freedom to some degree for Thomas. The person who is sinfully ignorant neglects to obtain knowledge that he or she should have, even though knowledge is a condition for free action, whereas the individual who sins through passion does not act upon his or her convictions about the true good, and in that sense does not exercise full human freedom.—The scope of this essay does not permit us to sort out all the issues here. Note especially that Thomas' remarks on sin are complicated by the fact that he does not clearly distinguish between two senses in which actions can be said to be rational. Sins of any sort are contrary to reason for Thomas,

more than one kind of sinful misdirection, he gives special importance to the kind of sin that results when an individual falsely identifies happiness with some one concrete object of desire and attempts to build a whole life around attempting to attain that specific good (I-II 2.4; cf. I-II 78.1,4). What is significant about this kind of sin is that it undermines, in an especially invidious way, the rational indeterminacy that is constitutive of human freedom. The actions of the individual who sins in this way are so constrained by his or her overriding attachment to some particular good that he or she inevitably loses out even on other finite goods appropriate to human life (see I-II 2.4). What Thomas apparently has in mind here are cases such as that of the politician who lies, cheats, neglects his family, and acts against his perceptions of the good of the country, in order to hold onto power—all the while, perhaps, regretting the harm to himself and others brought about by his single-mindedness. A person in this frame of mind will necessarily direct the overall pattern of his or her life in such a way as to attain (or hold onto) the desideratum; moreover, he or she will not be free to do anything that would impede the attainment of, or risk the loss of, that good.

Contrast this to the situation of the morally virtuous person, who does preserve his or her freedom, if only by avoiding the pitfalls represented above. Admittedly, this is not immediately apparent, because the morally good person also lives within certain constraints. But these constraints are far less arduous than those assumed by the individual who sinfully seeks his or her happiness in some concrete good. Furthermore, they are congruent with human nature itself and serve to maintain the degree of orderliness necessary to proper human functioning. The individual who attempts to attain happiness based on a true conception of the human good knows that he or she is not free to do certain kinds of actions—those, specifically, that express contempt for one's neighbor or for God, and those that involve manipulating natural impulses for unnatural pleasures. Moreover, he or she is guided by some knowledge of human inclinations to realize that happiness can be sought legitimately and safely through the time-tested routes of marriage, family life, civic activity, and philosophical speculation (and, of course, these generally bring positive obligations with them). But beyond that, the morally good

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because they involve a violation of the true human good as apprehended by reason (see, e.g., I-II 71.2,6). However, sins must still be rational acts in some sense; otherwise they would not be voluntary, and therefore sinful, for Thomas (I-II 76.2, 77.7). At various points he explains that sins are rational acts, in the sense that the sinner acts on the basis of a rational apprehension that such-and-such particular object is good in some sense, even though he or she does not consider, or deliberately discounts, the fact that it is not consistent with what would be truly good for a human being at that point (see, e.g., I-II 77.7, 78.1). But a fuller discussion of this distinction would have been welcomed.

individual is free to seek happiness in and through the pursuit of any combination of particular objects that seem likely to suit: to choose to marry this or that person, to pursue this or that career, and so on. On the other hand, the individual who identifies happiness with some particular good has a much narrower set of options. He or she must be prepared to renounce a whole range of innocent pursuits if they stand in the way of the one supreme desideratum. Moreover, he or she will be forced to pattern his or her life towards attaining that desideratum. Hence he or she takes on a huge, disordered positive injunction, and as all good moralists know, positive injunctions bind more tightly than prohibitions.[14]

I have dwelt on the significance of Thomas' concept of freedom because it is this concept that provides his bridge between the natural, formal desire for God that grounds the moral life, and the actual desire for God, inspired by grace, that is ordered towards true happiness. For as we have just seen, Thomas holds that the moral life preserves and enhances the freedom, understood as rational indeterminacy with respect to particular objects, that makes it possible in the first place, whereas sin tends to undermine that freedom. At the same time, the fact that the rational intellect and will are not determined to any particular good, and are therefore open to universal intelligibility and goodness, is a logically necessary condition for enjoying God, who is infinite and perfect goodness (I-II 5.1; cf. I 93.4). Therefore the person who lives in accordance with the rational principles of morality thereby preserves those qualities that

[14] Is Thomas saying that all serious, nonmoral commitments are immoral? No. He does not hold that everyone is obliged to try to combine all the natural inclinations into one lifetime (II-II 152.2). This suggests that, in principle, Thomas would not object to the life-plan of an individual who chose to forgo some natural human goods in order to make a serious commitment to one particular good, say, philosophical speculation. What is the difference between the person who makes a serious commitment of this sort, and the individual who locates his or her happiness in some particular good? In Hardie's terms, in the first case, the individual would maintain an inclusive life-plan, even while giving special importance to one good. He or she would recognize that the good in question, while very desirable, is not going to be perfectly fulfilling, and therefore would remain open to other pursuits and commitments, even if they kept him or her from attaining quite as much of the supreme desideratum as might otherwise be the case. He or she would even remain open to changing life-plans, and would not consider a life spent in pursuit of something else to be a life not worth living. None of this would be possible to the individual who locates his or her whole happiness in some particular object. Moreover, in the former case the individual would not be willing to violate the laws of morality to pursue the desideratum, whereas the person who locates his or her final good in some particular good could easily be forced to do so, by the logic of that commitment. Note, by the way, that the difference here does not lie in the good chosen. Philosophical speculation, artistic accomplishment, service to one's family—all can be the objects either of serious, legitimate commitments, or of idolatrous single-mindedness.

are the logical conditions for the attainment of true happiness. But these are necessary conditions only; they are not even partly sufficient to the attainment of happiness. Thomas makes it clear that a life of moral rectitude does not give rise to any exigency for grace, so that in fairness God would have to meet us halfway, so to speak, with the infusion of the theological virtues (I-II 109.6). Without God's altogether unconstrained offer of Himself in grace, the virtuous unbeliever is actually as far from true happiness as the worst of sinners.[15]

If the moral life is nothing but a necessary condition for the attainment of beatitude, what can it mean to say (as Thomas clearly does want to say) that the morally good actions of the justified, who possess supernatural faith, hope, and charity, are directed towards true happiness as their ultimate goal? Thomas' remarks on charity point the way to resolving this question, since for him it is charity that unites the diverse acts of the moral life and directs them to their proper end, by effecting an inner transformation of the acting subject.

Thomas holds that charity is the greatest of the theological virtues (II-II 23.6) because it directs the human person to friendship with God (II-II 23.1). That is, it directs us to union with God as He is in Himself (I-II 62.3; II-II 23.6) and therefore it remains in the blessed dead, who enjoy full union with God (I-II 67.6). Thomas insists that charity intrinsically transforms the soul of its subject in such a way that the person contains an internal principle of action whereby he or she is enabled to love God as He is in Himself; otherwise the act of charity could not properly be said to be the act of the person at all (II-II 23.2; cf. I-II 110.2 & 3). Moreover, if we are to love God above all things, then we must direct all our actions to God in some way. For this reason, Thomas holds that charity is the form of all the moral virtues (I-II 65.2), in that it directs their acts to the final end of human life (II-II 23.7 & 8). Hence the moral virtues are said to be infused together with charity (I-II 65.2). In another sense, charity cannot be said to exist without the infused moral virtues, since they provide the proximate principles for the life of charity in which the love of God must be lived out (I-II 65.3).

I believe that Victor Preller's remarks on the first theological virtue, faith, offer a useful key to interpreting Thomas' remarks on the relationship between charity and the moral life.[16] In his discussion of the revealed

[15] In fact, the existence of moral virtue within a particular subject is not even a temporal precondition for God's gift of charity, since God infuses the cardinal virtues together with the theological virtues in any case (I-II 63.3). And since the infused cardinal virtues differ specifically from the acquired cardinal virtues, in that the former are directed through charity to a supernatural end (I-II 63.4), it is difficult to say whether, for Thomas, naturally acquired moral rectitude has any relevance at all to the life of grace.

[16] Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1967) 266–71.

propositions of sacred doctrine, Preller argues that since we cannot form a concept of God, the propositions of sacred doctrine (at least, those that refer directly to God) must necessarily be conceptually meaningless. Nonetheless, the mind of the believer really is conformed to God through assent to these propositions. God Himself correlates the propositions of faith to the full knowledge of God enjoyed in the beatific vision. Through the supernatural transformation of faith, the believer is enabled to judge that the propositions of sacred doctrine really do have God as their intention, and to affirm them accordingly, even though no one is able in this life to see how these propositions are correlated with God. I would suggest that something similar can be said about the relation of charity to the acts of the moral life. Thomas insists that through charity the human person attains God Himself (II-II 23.6). Nonetheless, in this life God is attained as one unknown in the conceptual sense (II-II 27.4). Like all other forms of love, charity is directed to its object as it is in itself, whereas our knowledge of God in this life remains conditioned by our human modes of knowing even in grace. The love of charity begins at the point where our cognitive knowledge of God ends; that is, it goes beyond the formal affirmations of a beginning and end of all things that are possible to human reason to unite the soul to God Himself through a kind of connaturality with Him (II-II 27.4 ad 4). Accordingly we can affirm that charity transforms the acts of the moral life in such a way as to direct them to the final fulfilment of the human person. But we cannot say *how* the acts of the moral life, so transformed, are ordered to the true happiness of the vision of God.

Does it follow that Thomas' interpretation of the doctrine of God leads him to a kind of skepticism or relativism in moral matters? At least one of his recent interpreters, Anthony Battaglia, draws just this conclusion.[17] As Battaglia reads him, Thomas holds that "all language about God and, by extension, about his creation, is inadequate, analogous, reformulable. On the other hand, in Thomas' language, it is also true that we participate in the creativity and spontaneity of God, that grace does not replace or destroy our human nature, it perfects it."[18] Hence, Battaglia argues, Thomas' theory of practical and speculative reason is equivalent to that suggested by the writings of Victor Preller, Wilfred Sellars, and Thomas Kuhn. All human reasoning is reformulable because it take place in the terms set by the central paradigms of particular cultures. There is no universally valid set of canons of rationality to which we can appeal; nor can we hope to base our theoretical and moral beliefs directly on what is the case, because we can never know the way in which our true statements

[17] Anthony Battaglia, *Toward a Reformulation of Natural Law* (New York: Seabury, 1981).

[18] Ibid. 31.

attain reality. Fortunately, God correlates our paradigm-bound statements to reality in virtue of our participation in the divine mind. Hence he reads Thomas as holding that there are no substantive, culturally invariant moral norms, any more than there are universally known substantive truths. All we can do is attempt to be reasonable within the paradigms of our given societies, trusting that God will thereby guide us, in ways that we cannot fully understand, to true happiness.

While Battaglia realizes that, for Thomas, true happiness, the vision of God in His essence, cannot function as a cognitively known purpose for human action, his further conclusions about Thomas' moral agnosticism are unjustified. True, Thomas does hold that adequate rational knowledge *of God* is impossible, but it does not at all follow that he holds that our knowledge of creatures is "inadequate, analogous, reformulable." Battaglia just assumes that Thomas' remarks on our knowledge of and speech about God can be extended to our capacities for true speech in general. He offers no evidence that Thomas ever made any such extension, and I contend that there is decisive evidence that he did not. In the first place, Battaglia does not do full justice to the carefulness and subtlety with which Thomas develops his account of theological language and relates it to his general epistemology. According to Thomas, ordinary modes of language and speech cannot really attain God because these always presuppose some kind of composition in their object, and God is altogether simple (I 13.5,6; cf. I 12.12).

A further, still more decisive objection to Battaglia's interpretation is that it makes Thomas' epistemology too similar to Augustine's, in the face of textual evidence that on this point Thomas departed from the great master of the medieval West, consciously or not. In his treatise *The Teacher*, Augustine expresses views on the possibilities of adequate knowledge of creation very similar to those that Battaglia attributes to Thomas.[19] Having asserted that material things are completely opaque to us except insofar as they are signs of the eternal Ideas, or exemplary types, that exist in the mind of God, Augustine concludes that true knowledge of things is only possible by virtue of the direct illumination of the Eternal Word of God that dwells within each of us, infusing us with knowledge of those eternal Ideas. In other words, Augustine does hold that our knowledge of creation is directly dependent on our participation in God's mind (through the Second Person of the Trinity) and on the consequent guarantee that our cognitions attain reality in a way that is finally mysterious to us. On the other hand, Thomas explicitly

[19] Augustine, *On the Teacher*, tr. J. H. S. Burleigh, in Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974) 20–33; see esp. 31–33.

denies that we know creatures directly in the eternal Ideas, on the grounds that this would amount to a vision of God such as is only granted to the blessed dead (I 84.5). He goes on to say that the light of our intellect is ultimately dependent on the uncreated reason of God, which contains these Ideas. This, he adds, is the correct interpretation of Augustine's claim. And given the authority that Augustine had for Christian theologians at that time, it is hardly surprising that Thomas is reluctant flatly to contradict his views. Nonetheless, the two men clearly do disagree on this point. For Thomas, the human mind achieves knowledge of corporeal things through its own innate processes, by way of an Aristotelian-type process of abstraction (see I 85, esp. 85.1). His epistemology does not require the direct intervention of God, as Augustine's does. Of course, Thomas does hold that God is the creator of our minds, and as such He is the ultimate cause of our abilities to know anything; furthermore, as creator, He is the ultimate source of all reality and therefore of all truth. In both these senses Thomas calls God the principle of knowing, and it is in these senses that we can be said to know all things in the eternal exemplars. But then, Thomas insists that all things have God as their ultimate cause; and to say that God is the ultimate cause of knowledge is a far cry from claiming that He is the immediate and direct cause of our knowledge of creatures, as Augustine does, and as Battaglia thinks Thomas does. On these grounds I conclude that Thomas' doctrine of God does not commit him to epistemic or moral skepticism or relativism.

How, then, does Thomas manage to derive the content of his moral system from the final end of human life? I would suggest that the simplest answer to this question is also the correct one: He does not. To the contrary, Thomas' moral theology presupposes that the content of morality can be derived from independent, nontheological grounds.[20] That is, what Thomas offers in the *ST* is essentially a theological interpretation of a phenomenon, the moral life, that exists quite well without special doctrinal underpinnings (unlike the institution of the Church) and is intelligible on its own terms. He does not hold that the content of morality can only be established on theological grounds. But he does argue that doctrine gives the Christian a distinctive insight into the ultimate significance that the moral life can have—for the Christian. To borrow a distinction from William Frankena, his overall moral theology is teleological in the sense that it holds that the final purpose of human life gives the moral life its ultimate point, but it is not teleological in the sense that actions and virtues are evaluated by the degree to which they directly foster or hinder the attainment of that final prupose.[21]

[20] Langan reaches a similar conclusion.

[21] William K. Frankena, "MacIntyre and Modern Morality," *Ethics* 93 (1983) 586.

CAN THE NATURAL DESIRE FOR GOD BE FRUSTRATED?

The classical question, whether the natural desire for God can be frustrated, has special relevance for the interpretation offered here, since a direct or implicit argument in Thomas for a negative answer to this question would blur the distinction between the natural and the supernatural that I see as maintained in the moral theology of the *ST*. But as I read him, Thomas makes no such argument.

In the course of his discussion whether any created intellect can see the essence of God, Thomas adduces the argument that the rational creature has a natural desire for the complete intelligibility of all that is known, which would be void if the intellect could not somehow attain the first cause of things, in favor of the claim that the blessed dead see the essence of God (I 12.1). The implications of this argument are not immediately clear. Are we to read Thomas as saying that the existence of a natural desire for God implies that the conditions for the fulfilment of this desire, that is, the existence of God and His self-disclosure, must be said to exist? Or is he simply saying that our hope for the supernatural fulfilment of our natural desire to see God is not logically absurd? There is nothing in I 12.1 that forces us to go beyond this latter interpretation, and the following considerations lead me to believe that it is the correct one.

As we have seen, the rational creature's natural desire for God is grounded in the indeterminate character intrinsic to the rational mind and will. The rational intellect and will are not determined to specific objects, unlike the natural operations of irrational creatures, and for this reason the intellect and will can only be satisfied by an infinitely intelligible and desirable object. Within the context of Christianity, we affirm that this object is in fact the God who has called us to the fulfilment of our hunger for Him in the beatific vision. But it does not follow that we could conclude to the existence and self-revelation of God from the existence of a natural desire for Him outside the framework of Christian doctrine. As noted above, our natural desire for God is not a positive desire for a known but absent object, since by our natural capacities we cannot know what God is. For this reason, it would seem that outside the context of Christian revelation, which promises us the perfect fulfilment of our hunger for intelligibility and goodness, we could only conclude that this natural desire cannot be fully satisfied by any finite object. We could not conclude that this desire is in fact going to be satisfied with an infinite object; much less could we argue on the basis of this desire to some conclusions about the character of that object.

The following objection might be raised.[22] Suppose, it might be said,

[22] R. Garrigou-Langrange, *Beatitude: A Commentary on St. Thomas' Theological Summa, Ia IIae, qq. 1–54* (St. Louis: Herder, 1956) 79–81.

we grant that we might never arrive at the infinitely intelligible and desirable object that alone could satisfy our natural desire for intelligibility and goodness. In other words, suppose the natural desire for God is frustratable. If so, then the innate human search for truth and goodness would ultimately be meaningless, since it could never reach anything more than finite and necessarily provisional objects. This would imply that the proper operations of the human person are ultimately pointless or self-frustrating. But we do not want to say that the natural operations of irrational creatures are otiose, since obviously creatures achieve their full actuality through these operations. It seems strange to say that we alone, of all creation, are ultimately frustrated in the process of attaining full actuality in accordance with our own proper principles. Thus, it might be argued, we have at least probable reason to believe that the conditions for the attainment of the full actuality of the human person (that is, the existence and self-revelation of God) are in fact fulfilled.

This objection has a plausible ring, and yet it is not compelling. We have already noted that, generally speaking, all creatures are said to have a natural desire for God insofar as their natural dynamisms move towards their specific actuality, understood as an instance of God's communication of goodness. The irrational creature is thus said to attain God insofar as it attains its own proper actuality. Nothing is required for the fruition of the irrational creature's desire for God beyond the natural conditions of its own intrinsic development, because the irrational creature's attainment of God *is* the attainment of its full actuality, understood in a certain way.

The case of the rational creature is not entirely similar (I-II 5.5). The indeterminate character of the intellect and will is an intrinsic component of the full actuality of the rational creature. Because we are not determined to specific objects, we are capable of attaining an infinite object, that is, God. In other words, rationality is a necessary condition for the enjoyment of God as He is in Himself. But the fulfilment of the rational intellect and will in the direct vision of God cannot be an intrinsic component of the full actuality of the rational creature. There is nothing in the intrinsic structure of human knowing and desire to indicate that either dynamism is directed to an infinite object. Such a dynamism would seemingly have to be without determinations or limits in itself; that is, it would have to constitute a positively infinite object itself. In other words, it would have to be God. The human intellect and will can also be said to be infinite, but *only* in the negative sense of being open to a potentially infinite variety of finite objects.[23] This line of reasoning is consonant with Thomas' assertion that the knowledge of God in Himself is natural to God alone, and can only be enjoyed by the created intellect

[23] I believe that Rahner departs from Thomas at this point; see *Foundations* 61–65.

through a supernatural transformation whereby the creature is shaped into God's own proper image (I 12.2,4,5).

Furthermore, there is no reason I can see to deny that the proper operations of the rational creature could function quite well without the supernatural transformation of grace and glory. In particular, Thomas indicates that the operations of the moral life could function so as to direct the human person to that natural perfection of operations as a rational creature that would constitute natural happiness (I-II 5.5, 62.1, 91.4). And while Thomas does not encourage speculation on the kind of happiness that would be possible outside the order of God's call of grace, we have already seen some indications in the *ST* of what that natural happiness would look like. For most persons, it would be a life in which the natural inclinations of the human person are all attained in a balanced, orderly way, without injury to one's fellows; imagine the life of a happily married, inoffensive professor of philosophy with a pleasant social life and a bent towards civic affairs. If the limitless fields for rational speculation and social endeavor always exceed human strivings to know more and to do better, then that would not necessarily be a cause for lamentation. Indeed, this fact might be taken as a cause for rejoicing among these naturally happy men and women, because it would at least guarantee to the race, and to each individual, a life freed of boredom.

If is is hard to imagine such a life, if it seems that there could be no such thing as an inoffensive philosopher or a harmonious marriage, if the limits to human knowledge and power strike us as tragic rather than stimulating—none of this necessarily indicates that Thomas' overall schema is flawed. These facts simply serve as reminders that no one has in fact ever lived outside a supernatural order of grace and sin. The modern sense of universal lostness and tragedy that we feel so keenly could only be one more sign of the universal corruption of sin, for Thomas, and no cause for surprise.[24]

[24] I am indebted to Walter J. Burghardt, George Lindbeck, Gene Outka, and an anonymous reader for *TS* for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.