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Caregiving, Self-Care, and Contemplation: Resources from Thomas Aquinas*

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Abstract

In the last decade, the helping professions have increasingly recognized compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma as hazards integral to care-work, and in response, they have turned to self-care to build caregiver resilience. To examine the theological and ethical assumptions implicit in self-care literature, I turn to Thomas Aquinas's account of the active and contemplative lives in the *Summa Theologiae*. In correlating the two lives as meeting neighbors' needs and beholding God, Thomas offers three competing accounts. Rather than synthesizing these differences, I argue that they map a range of interactions possible between one's own wellbeing and another's: care for the neighbor can hinder, prepare for, or be referred to contemplation and its consolations. While affirming self-care's recognition of human limits, my reading of Thomas also offers a correction, insisting that divergent experiences of caregivers are possible. This depends on the particulars, among which include the grace of divine assistance.

Keywords

caregiving, contemplation, necessity, self-care, Thomas Aquinas

In the last decade, the helping professions have increasingly recognized compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma as hazards integral to care-work, and in response, they have turned to self-care to build caregiver resilience.[1] Caregiving exacts its toll upon those

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[1] Resources for practitioners include Martha Teater and John Ludgate, *Overcoming Compassion Fatigue: A Practical Resilience Workbook* (Eau Claire, WI: Pesi Publishing, 2014); Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self while Caring for Others* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2009); Francoise Mathieu, *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Traumatization* (New York: Routledge, 2012);

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who labor for others' wellbeing: the demands of human need exhaust, and institutional constraints overwhelm. While important work has considered the economic, political, and gendered dimensions of care,[2] this piece approaches the theological and ethical assumptions in contemporary deliberations between care for others and care for self through a surprising route: Thomas Aquinas's writing on the active and contemplative life in the *Summa Theologiae*.[3] Drawing from Augustine before him, Thomas too is concerned with the burnout occasioned by love's duties, and thus, he interrogates the appropriate relation of these two states of life, organized around twin necessities: beholding God and caring for the neighbor's need. While addressing Dominicans-in-training, Thomas participates in the long traditions of ecclesial discernment about the relation of the two love commands. In this discussion, I suggest, striking resonances emerge with professional caregiving and its costs.

In defining its scope, self-care literature[4] regularly includes spiritual wellbeing as integral to appropriate care for the self.[5] This often entails invocations of contemplative practices, such as mindfulness, meditation, yoga, prayer, and occasionally participation in religious

Thomas Skovholt, *The Resilient Practitioner: Burnout and Compassion Fatigue Prevention and Self-Care Strategies for the Helping Professions. 3rd edition* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Babette Rothschild and Marjorie Rand, *Help for the Helper: The Psychophysiology of Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma* (New York: Norton, 2006). Recent studies span a variety of helping professions, including nurses, police officers, pastors, teachers, family caregivers, clinicians, and therapists. For example, see Kyle Killian, "Helping Till it Hurts? A Multimethod Study of Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Self-Care in Clinicians working with Trauma Survivors," *Traumatology* 14.2 (2008), pp. 32-44.

[2] See for example, the essays in *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency,* edited by Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder (Landam, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002); Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Arlie Russell Hoschschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2012).

[3] In placing Thomas in conversation with the ethical concerns of ordinary life, I undertake a project similar to the essays found in *Aquinas and Empowerment: Classic Ethics for Ordinary Lives*, ed. G. Simon Harak, S.J. (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1996). Further, this article seeks to supplement more recent juxtapositions of the contemporary interest in mindfulness and Thomas's account of practical reason or prudence. See Thomas J. Bushlack, "Mindfulness and the Discernment of Passions: Insights from Thomas Aquinas," *Spiritus* 14 (2014), pp. 141-165; Warren Kinghorn, "Presence of Mind: Thomistic Prudence and Contemporary Mindfulness Practices," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35.1 (2015), pp. 83-102.

[4] I use this as a shorthand for the body of literature encompassing the exhaustion of professional caregivers and its redress.

[5] For example, see Wanda Lott Collins, "Embracing Spirituality as an Element of Professional Self-Care," *Social Work and Christianity* 32.3 (2005), pp. 263-274; Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, et. al., "Caring and Thriving: An International Qualitative Study of Caregivers of orphaned and vulnerable children and strategies to sustain positive mental health," *Children and Youth Services Review* 98 (March 2019), pp. 143-153.

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communities.[6] By-in-large, the literature assumes that these activities occupy discrete periods of time, removed from the demand of helping relations. Thus, they exhort caregivers to maintain 'work-life balance' and to guard against the creep of caring obligations. This often looks like delimiting the responsibilities of care through 'leaving work at work' emotionally and materially, taking vacation time, and not answering calls or emails at home – all to preserve the windows of leisure which makes self-care possible.[7] Thus, the caregiver removes herself from the overwhelming demands of human need in order to rest and be well.

This contemporary opposition between another's needs and one's own finds an unexpected analogy in Thomas Aquinas's thirteenth-century account of the active and contemplative states of life. Thomas writes of a twofold division of human life, determined by the preponderance of one's attention distributed between beholding God and caring for neighbors. Both forms of life concern necessities: on the one hand, the spiritual necessity of contemplating God and, on the other hand, neighbors' material necessities. And yet, unlike contemporary self-care material, I argue that Thomas offers more than a stark choice between resting in God and caring for neighbors. Rather, Thomas portrays three possibilities for caregiving: care may become in itself beholding God, it may prepare the caregiver for beholding God, and finally, it may hinder her from beholding God. While these three relations of action and contemplation appear to result from an inconsistency in Thomas, I suggest that rather than resolving these tensions, we let them stand. In doing so, my reading of Thomas affirms self-care literature's acknowledgement of creaturely limits and the need for spiritual nourishment, while correcting its narrow opposition between the care of self and other. More options are possible. Thus, Thomas provides resources for a deeper understanding of the divergent experiences of contemporary caregivers in their labors of love.

This paper proceeds in four parts. First, I begin with Thomas's discussion on the love of God and neighbor. Second, I introduce his account of the subsidiary relation of the active and contemplative lives. Third, I isolate three contrary modes by which Thomas relates these two states of life: referral, preparation, and hindrance. Finally, I sketch how one might attempt to resolve the contradictions present

[6] For example, Mathieu offers a list of activities for "spiritual self-care," p. 119. See also R. Michael Stuart, "Practicing Contemplation for Healthy Self-Care," *Chaplaincy Today* 28.1 (2012), pp. 33-36; Tessa McGarrigle and Christine A. Walsh, "Mindfulness, Self-Care, and Wellness in Social Work: Effects of Contemplative Training," *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 30 (2011), pp. 212-233.

[7] For an example, see Babette, p. 196 on "end-of-the-day rituals for leaving work at work," and Mathieu, pp. 97-120.

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in these three possibilities, before suggesting that letting the tensions stand promises to be more instructive for illuminating the limits of caregiving and the response of self-care.

1. Loving God and Neighbor

In II-II.25-27, Thomas addresses the relation of God and neighbor as objects of love. For Thomas, the axiomatic character of the good and its relation to charity grounds the connection between God and neighbor. The good attracts love, and love wishes and communicates the good to its object.[8] As God is the source of goodness and the First Principle of love, God is "supremely loveable" and orders all other loves.[9] Thus, all creatures derive their 'loveability' through partaking in God.[10] It follows then that neighbor love is derived from the love of God. As Thomas explains, "God ought to be loved chiefly and before all . . . whereas our neighbor is loved as receiving together with us a share of happiness from [God]."[11]

However, Thomas also indicates a way in which human creatures love neighbors first. As accessible to the senses, the neighbor is "the first loveable object we meet with . . . [s]he is the first thing to demand our love."[12] In the order of temporal emergence, neighbor love precedes love of God.[13] While God is more loveable, the neighbor is more visible.[14] Thomas then continues the Christian tradition of attributing neighbor love as a barometer for gauging a person's love of God: if a person fails to love her neighbor, then she also fails to love God. Despite these distinctions, Thomas draws these two forms of love closely together. He insists that loving God without any corresponding care for the neighbor is but an "inadequate and imperfect" love.[15] Congruently, a rightly formed love for the neighbor includes loving God.[16] The love of God is more meritorious, as its reward is

[8] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II.23.1. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominic Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981). Hereafter *ST.*

[9] *ST* II-II.26.1; II-II.83.3.

[10] *ST* II-II.25.12.

[11] *ST* II-II.26.2.

[12] *ST* II-II.26.3, reply 1.

[13] "[I]f any man loves not his neighbor, neither does he love God, not because his neighbor is more loveable, but because he is the first thing to demand our love: and God is more loveable by reason of His greater goodness." *ST* II-II.26.3, reply 1.

[14] Simone Weil's essay "Implicit Forms of the Love of God" elaborates this point. She identifies four objects of love in which "God is really though secretly present": the neighbor, the beauty of the world, religion, and the friend. In *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), p. 83.

[15] *ST* II-II.27.8.

[16] "[L]ove of our neighbor includes love of God." *ST* II-II.27.8.

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the very "enjoyment of God."[17] Yet these two loves cannot be drawn apart. Any separation malforms both.[18]

While Aquinas suggests that both love for God and neighbor rely upon the existence of each, he underscores the dependency of neighbor love on God using three modes of relation. First, the proper unfolding of neighbor love occurs "under the aspect of God" (*sub ratione Dei*).[19] God provides the reason and cause for loving the neighbor.[20] He explains that this happens when "what [we] love in our neighbor is that he may be in God," making possible the unification of loving God and neighbor in "the same act."[21] Love wishes the good to its object, and as God is the highest good, it follows that love hopes that the neighbor will also behold divine goodness.[22]

The second mode of relating love of the neighbor with God is "for God's sake" (*propter Deum*). Because of God and on account of God, the neighbor is loved. To do otherwise is "wrong": to regard the neighbor "as though he were his last end" is a failure to recognize the creaturely nature of the neighbor.[23] God serves as God's own justification for being loved, yet the neighbor in herself does not. She "falls short of the true reason for the friendship of charity, which is good."[24] Thus, Thomas again locates the suitability of neighbor love in relation to God.

In the third and final relation, Thomas indicates that the infused virtue of charity makes possible the referral of neighbor love to God (*referre*).[25] By love, the agent bears, draws, or gives back the act to

[17] *ST* II-II.27.8.

[18] For further discussion of the unity of loves in Thomas, see Gerald J. Beyer, "The Love of God and Neighbor According to Aquinas: An Interpretation," *New Blackfriars* 84.985 (2003), pp. 116-132.

[19] *ST* II-II.25.1. Thomas employs this same maneuver in *ST* I.1.8 when he asks whether God is the object of sacred doctrine: "in sacred science all things are treated under the aspect of God; either because they are God Himself; or because they refer to God as their beginning and end."

[20] For etymological background on *ratio*, see *Lewis & Short, s.v.* 'ratio.' (Apologies for these adjustments!).

[21] *ST* II-II.25.1.

[22] It is worth noting the expansive possibilities of *sub ratione Dei*. As Thomas notes, God's goodness forms the ground of all creaturely goodness, and God also provides the possibility and reason for all subsequent loving. Thus, all interior movements of human love may be said to occur *sub ratione Dei* insofar as they are attracted to the good in created things.

[23] *ST* II-II.25.1, reply 3.

[24] *ST* II-II.27.8, reply 2.

[25] "[W]e love all our neighbors with the same love of charity, in so far as they are referred to one good common to them all, which is God." *ST* II-II.25.1, reply 2.

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God.[26] Thomas distinguishes two modes of this referral: actual and habitual.[27] In II-II.44.4, reply 2, Thomas explains it this way:

> To love God with one's whole heart has a twofold signification. First, actually, so that a man's whole heart be always actually directed to God: this is the perfection of heaven. Secondarily, in the sense that a man's whole heart be habitually directed to God, so that it consent to nothing contrary to the love of God.

Both forms of referral depend upon the divinely infused habit of charity. With actual referral, the agent explicitly thinks of God in directing her action to this ultimate end. In contrast, habitual referral occurs only because the agent loves God as her end in a broad sense, even though she does not consider God in a particular action.[28] In either case, the point remains: Thomas places neighbor love in a dependent relation on the love of God.

This coordination of love's objects troubles modern Kantian sensibilities. However, while Thomas insists that human beings are not final ends, loveable in themselves, he does not reduce human persons to instrumental means for loving God. Thomas' account of intention clarifies this.[29] Intention moves the soul to both a final end of "rest" and "enjoyment" and to proximate points along the way.[30] This is especially fitting when these several ends are "ordained to one another, of the same movement and in the same direction."[31] And this is the case with love of God and neighbor.[32] God is the only fitting

[26] For etymological background, see *Lewis and Short*, *s.v.* "refero."

[27] According to Thomas Osborne, Thomas deploys a third category (virtual) in the *Sentences*. For his very apt discussion, see "The Threefold Referral of Acts to the Ultimate End in Thomas Aquinas and His commentators," *Angelicum* 85 (2008), pp. 715-736, and *Human Action in Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham* (Washington D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2014), pp. 204-207, 210.

[28] Thomas develops this distinction in two discussions of venial sin, which can be referred to God habitually but not actually. II-II.24.10, reply 2; II-II.44.4, reply 2; I-II.88.1, reply 2. Again, see Osborne, "Threefold Referral," pp. 719-722 for an extended discussion. Or as Gerald Beyer concludes: "Christians who love the neighbor, and are not in the state of mortal sin, simultaneously love God as all of their actions are referable to God, even if individual actions are not explicitly intended to do so." "The Love of God and Neighbor in Aquinas," p. 118.

[29] Steven Jensen offers an alternative mode of addressing this problem through Thomas's distinction between love of concupiscence and love of friendship in I-II.26.4: "[Thomas] contrasts the love we have for others as a subject of the good and the love of others as useful or pleasurable." See *Good and Evil Actions: A Journey Through Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), pp. 134-138. For a further defense of Aquinas against the charge of instrumentalizing neighbors, based on the ontological unity of the love of God and neighbor, see Beyer, pp. 123-124.

[30] *ST* I-II.12.1, reply 4; *ST* I-II.12.2.

[31] *ST* I-II.12.3, reply 2.

[32] Aquinas inherits this from Augustine's distinction of 'use' and 'enjoy': only God is to be enjoyed; all creatures are to be 'used.' Karl Barth solves this differently: rather than

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final end, and neighbors may appropriately be proximate ends of human intention. To identify any creature as a final end frustrates love and fails to satisfy the desire for perfect happiness. While Thomas does equate intending proximate ends with "willing the means," this does not flatten the value of intermediaries as in the contemporary semantic register.[33] Appropriate love recognizes the neighbor as a proximate end, not for final rest and enjoyment, but as a temporary object already in the same direction as the soul's movement towards its final end.

To conclude this section, Thomas argues that love of God grounds and directs neighbor love. Further, these loves are so closely intertwined that any separation diminishes the other. And yet a subtle tension is present: love for God is primary *and* the neighbor is sensibly immediate. As Thomas stretches this relation to encompass the contemplative and active states of life, stress begins to appear at the seams, to which we now turn.

2. The Active & Contemplative Lives Introduced

In II-II.179-182, Thomas examines the contemplative and active lives and their relation. This discussion continues in questions 185 and 188 on the episcopate and different kinds of religious life. Thomas divides human life based on two movements governed by reason and most characteristic of the human creature: internal understanding and external acting.[34] These states of life "differ according to the different occupations of men intent on different ends": namely, "the consideration of the truth" or "external work."[35] As Thomas develops them, they gain more content: it is not just the contemplation of any truth but divine truth,[36] and it is not just any action but that concerned with "the necessities of the present life,"[37] especially in "our relations with other people."[38] Thus, an orientation toward God and neighbor divide these two lives. The contemplative life "seeks

making God the end of neighbor love, he insists that neighbor love is responsive to God's love. While the horizontal love of neighbor "will not take place without love to God," the neighbor must be loved freely for her own sake. There can be "no ulterior thought of another end . . . The neighbor will notice the fact, and he will not find himself loved even in the most fervent and zealous works of Christian charity, if this love is one that looks away." *Church Dogmatics* IV.1, pp. 105-107.

[33] *ST* I-II.12.4, ad contra.

[34] *ST* II-II.179.1, 2.

[35] *ST* II-II.181.1.

[36] *ST* II-II.180.4.

[37] Or those activities "directed to the requirements of the present life in accord with right reason." *ST* II-II.179.2.

[38] *ST* II-II.1801.1, reply 1.

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to devote itself to God alone" and therefore "belongs directly to the love of God," while in contrast, the active life "ministers to our neighbor's needs" and accordingly "belongs directly to the love of one's neighbor."[39] As we might expect, the story of Mary and Martha serves as both the paradigm and basis for this division.[40] However, these two categories do not encompass all of life, namely "minister[ing] to any concupiscence" does not fall within the active life.[41] Further, Thomas rejects Augustine's "mixed life," insisting that either contemplation or action predominates, based on a person's aptitudes.[42] Thus, two discrete necessities distinguish these two states: the one thing necessary of beholding God and the material needs of sustaining human life in community.

Given Thomas's twin invocation of necessity here, a short excursion is in order. Thomas explains in I.82.1 that there are many uses of necessity. For something to be necessary, it "must be." Thomas divides this "must be" into three categories: "absolute necessity" ("natural"), "necessity of end" ("utility"), and "necessity of coercion" ("forced by some agent"). The first is intrinsic, whether material or formal, while the latter two are extrinsic, whether directed by an end or agent respectively. The type of necessity that concerns us here is "necessity of end": "when without it the end is not to be attained or so well attained." Internal to this category, Thomas indicates a strict necessity (without which the end is not attained), such as food for life, and a harmonious or convenient one (without which the end is not so well attained), such as a horse for a journey or a ship for crossing the sea.[43]

Transposed to our present topic, addressing the neighbor's need is a strict necessity for sustaining her life and for the beatific vision. In contrast, contemplation is only a convenient necessity: as we will see, the active life alone is strictly necessary for entrance into heavenly beatitude.[44] Further, rather than indicating moral obligations, these necessities illuminate how God orders human creatures towards their end in God, which as we have seen, also depends on the love of

[39] *ST* II-II.188.2.

[40] ST II-II.179.2; II-II.180.8; II-II.182.1.

[41] *ST* II-II.179.2, reply 2.

[42] *ST* II-II.179.2; II-II.182.4, reply 3; cf. Augustine, *City of God* xix, 1-3. For example, if a person demonstrates an "impulse to action" and a "restless spirit," then she is inclined towards the active life. In contrast, a person possessing a "mind naturally pure and restful" is apt for the contemplative life, and it would be "detrimental" if she were to apply herself "wholly to action." II-II.182.4, reply 3.

[43] *ST* I.82.1. For more discussion of necessity in Thomas and this form of necessity in particular, see J. J. MacIntosh, "Aquinas on Necessity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72.3 (1998), pp. 386-387.

[44] *ST* II-II.182.4, reply 1.

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neighbors.[45] In other words, each necessity places the human being in relation with God and creaturely others respectively: she depends on them for her life, in both a bodily and beatific sense.

And yet, Thomas does not underscore this intimacy between God and neighbor in his discussion of the active and contemplative lives, as he does in the treatment of charity. He celebrates contemplation's perfections but does not renew his earlier warnings of an imperfect love of God which excludes the neighbor.[46] The contemplative life is "simply more excellent" than the active life, the proper end of the human creature, and merits a greater reward.[47] Thomas cites nine reasons for this, including contemplation as more becoming, "more continuous," "more delightful," "more self-sufficient," "loved more for its own sake," and "according to Divine things."[48] While presently imperfect, contemplation still bestows "a certain inchoate beatitude," a delight which "surpasses all human delight," to be perfected in the next life.[49] Contemplation promises "quiet" and "rest."[50]

Thomas implies a direct link between the soul's consolation and beholding God, recalling our opening remarks about contemporary discussions of self-care and spiritual practice. Borrowing from Gregory, Thomas observes that while Martha is busy serving, Mary enjoys "heartfelt relish" and "a foretaste of the coming rest."[51] Thus, in contrast to the noise and nuisance of the active life, contemplation yields delight and renewal. While the pleasure of beholding God is appropriately desirable in itself, because of God's own attractive qualities, the human creature also receives interior comfort as the fruit of this loving.[52]

Although, Thomas insists on the priority of contemplation, he does preserve his previous recognition of contemplation as depending upon human neighbors as sensible intermediaries to the love of God.[53] Citing Gregory, Thomas concludes that while

[45] Delight in God forms "the end of the whole human life." *ST* II-II.180.4. For more on how God prudentially moves creatures by necessity, see Eugene Rogers, *Aquinas and the Supreme Court: Race, Gender, and the Failure of Natural Law in Thomas's Biblical Commentaries* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell: 2013), pp. 76-78.

[46] cf. *ST* II-II.27.8.

[47] *ST* II-II.182.1; II-II.180.4. Thomas offers eight Aristotelian reasons for this conclusion, adding scriptural support – five of them citing the periscope of Mary and Martha – and he adds a ninth reason, again citing Luke 10.

[48] *ST* II-II.182.1.

[49] *ST* II-II.180.4; II-II.180.7. Thomas posits that the heavenly operation of contemplation is of a different manner. *ST* 180.8, reply 1.

[50] *ST* II-II.180.6, reply 1. As Thomas notes, in the "quiet of contemplation," there is "rest from outward occupations" and "[e]xternal bodily movements."

[51] *ST* II-II.182.2.

[52] For Thomas's discussion of self-love, see *ST* II-II.25.2 and II-II.25.4.

[53] Thomas also moderates this priority through noting a handful of rather unspecified conditions where the present necessities of neighbors are to be preferred to contemplation.

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contemplation possesses greater excellence, the active life *alone* is necessary for heaven. This coheres with the visibility of the neighbor, as the first to make the demand of love, and thus the necessity of the active life for expressing "any degree of the love of neighbor."[54] Implicitly, then, all those in the contemplative life have entered by way of loving neighbors first: there is no other approach to the love of God.[55] In other words, providing for the neighbor's present necessities is necessary for not only the contemplative life but the beatific vision as well.

3. Referral, Preparation, and Hinderance

As Thomas bases the division of the active and contemplative lives on the love of God and neighbor, we might expect occasions of referral here as well, when care for the neighbor's need might be ordered towards God, whether actually or habitually. Again, our concern in this exploration is whether or not the caregiver must retreat from her caring labors to find consolation in God, which contemporary self-care literature assumes to be case (although it does not speak explicitly the God). Throughout his discussion, Thomas offers three competing answers concerning the relation of the active life with the contemplative life. I have organized them here under the headings of referral, preparation, and hindrance. The resulting tensions among these three possibilities, among other things, leads Simon Tugwell to judge that Thomas's treatment of the active and contemplative lives is "not entirely coherent."[56] Rather than synthesizing, however, I preserve these tensions, finding them to be indicative of something true about coordinating the love commands and, further, offering a correction to the univocal conclusions of self-care literature.[57]

First, Thomas shows occasional optimism about the coordination of activity and contemplation, drawing upon two modes of relating

For example, "in a restricted sense and in a particular case, one should prefer the active life on account of the needs of the present life," II-II.182.1. He notes similar "cases of necessity" also in *ST* II-II.182.2, II-II.185.2, and II-II.188.6, but unfortunately, they exceed the scope of this article.

[54] *ST* II-II.182.4, reply 1.

[55] *ST* I-II.4.8. Ironically, then, we could reverse Jesus' admonition to the sisters of Bethany: "One thing is necessary, and Martha has chosen the better part, namely neighbor love."

[56] Simon Tugwell, "Introduction: Aquinas," in *Albert & Thomas: Selected Writings*, translated, edited and introduced by Simon Tugwell, O.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 279.

[57] In contrast, Beyer seeks to "synthesize Aquinas's ruminations as cogently as possible," guided by an "hermeneutic of appreciation," p. 128. While I too am guided by appreciation, I think the problems themselves offer instruction.

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discussed in Section 1. While *sub ratione Dei* does not return here, there are several instances of *propter Deum* and *referre* in the discussion of active religious orders. For example, "religious occupy themselves with the works of the active life for God's sake," and "the services we render our neighbor redound to God . . . in so far as we refer them to God."[58] In both instances, caring for neighbors may be ordered towards God. Further, if "external actions" are "referred to the question of contemplation, for that very reason they belong to the contemplative life."[59] Thus, the agent transforms the active life into beholding God through referring it to God as its ultimate end. Action can become contemplation in the "same act."[60] Thus, applied to our present case, the caregiver simultaneously intends a proximate end of caring for the neighbor *and* her final end of beholding God. While Thomas does not revisit whether this referral is actual or habitual, we may assume that infused charity is present, directing the labors of caregiving towards God.

The second category, however, introduces a more ambiguous possibility of the active life as preparation for the contemplative life, without referral's explicit transformation. Thomas speaks of this training in two ways: first, the active life can be "a help to" (*adiuvat ad*) the contemplative, and the agent can "make use" (*utitur*) of the active life for contemplation. Both senses are congruent with Thomas's necessity of utility discussed in Section 2: the active life readies the caregiver for contemplation, as loving the visible neighbor love is a strict necessity for beholding God.

When Thomas introduces the active life in question 181, he first names *utitur* as the relation between the two lives. As he explains,

> when a man makes use (*utitur*) of things pertaining to the active life, merely as dispositions to contemplation, such things are comprised under (*comprehenduntur sub*) the contemplative life. On the other hand, when we practice the works of the moral virtues, as being good in themselves, and not as dispositions to the contemplative life, the moral virtues belong to the active life.[61]

[58] *ST* II-II.188.2. He further observes that such action "results from their contemplation of divine things," and thus, active religious orders are "not entirely deprived of the fruit of the contemplative life."

[59] *ST* II-II.181.4. In the same response, Thomas posits that external occupations will cease with the next life, but if they continue, they will be "referred to contemplation as their end."

[60] As he claims for love of God and neighbor in *ST* II-II.25.1: "Now the aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved, is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbor is that he may be in God. Hence it is clear that is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbor."

[61] *ST* II-II.181.1. "*[I]ta etiam quando aliquis utitur his quae sunt vitae activae solum prout disponunt ad contemplationem, comprehenduntur sub vita contemplative.*"

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External occupations become part of the contemplative life conditionally: when they are intended as a proximate end and training for contemplation.[62] Sustaining neighbors' lives may train the agent for the interior labors of resting in divine truth, rather than as a temporal engagement that lacks a reference beyond itself. If an external occupation inclines the human creature towards beholding God, then, it merits incorporation into the contemplative life. Conversely, if attending to human need stands as its own end, as a good in itself, then it remains within the active life.

In II-II.182.3, Thomas asks whether the active life hinders the contemplative life, and in reply, he introduces another dimension of this second category of preparation, as well as the third category of hindrance. There are "two points of view," he explains. In the first, "the attention to and practice of external works . . . hinders the contemplative, in so far as it is impossible for one to be busy with external action and at the same time give oneself to Divine contemplation."[63] Here action and contemplation become a zero-sum game: there are no possibilities of referral. Human attention cannot coordinate proximate and final ends, whether habitually or actually.

In the second view, Thomas continues, the active life may be "a help to the contemplative."[64] Here Thomas explains the mechanism of this assistance: external works provide for the "quieting and directing the internal passions of the soul," which otherwise deter contemplation. Thus, external care for the neighbor prepares the soul for the interior labors of contemplation. Thomas goes on to explain that he does not address the objections – all of which insist that the active life hinders the contemplative life –, because they are concerned with "the occupation itself of external actions, and not the effect, which is the quelling of the passions."[65] In other words, Thomas grants the opposition between contemplation and action present in the first point of view (i.e., there can be no referral of the action itself), and he implies that the second point of view should be our principle concern (i.e., the internal outcomes of the action may be beneficial). Thus, this account of *adiuvat ad* mirrors *utitur* already outlined in II-II.181.1: through making use of the activity, assisting neighbors readies the caregiver for future contemplation. However, this is not contemplation and action in the same act, united by referral, as Thomas insists here that such simultaneous attention for God and neighbor is impossible.

[62] In the subsequent article on prudence (*ST* II-II.181.2), Thomas states the operative principle: "if one thing be directed (*ordinatur*) to another as its ends, it is drawn (*trahitur*), especially in moral matters, to the species of the thing which it is directed."

[63] *ST* II-II.182.3.

[64] *ST II-II.*182.3. "*[V]ita active adiuvat ad contemplationem.*"

[65] ST II-II 182.3.

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Thomas multiples this incongruity by continuing to oscillate bewteen the possibility or impossibility of referring contemplation to action. In II-II.181.4, Thomas maintains again that in the present life, action forms "a hindrance to contemplation."[66] Here, he admits no exceptions or alternatives, leaving the reader to puzzle how this relates to his other claims about referral and preparation. And then, in II-II.182.1, Thomas names only preparation: the active life "serves" (*servit*) the contemplative, offering "dispositions to the contemplative life."[67] Here again, he charts no other options, neither warning of hindrance nor extolling the promises of referral. Further, in II-II.182.3, he explains that the contemplative person who returns to the active life does so "by way not of subtraction but of addition."[68] Activity here is not hindering contemplation. Rather, than replacing, it supplements it. Thomas drops the competitive character asserted earlier.

Thus, we find woven throughout Thomas's account of the active and contemplative lives a strange irregularity.[69] Efforts to track this relation in his thought lead only to bafflement. At times, he asserts that like neighbor love, the active life may be referred to God and thus *become* contemplation in the "same act." More frequently, he insists on the active life's preparatory value for future contemplation: disposing, helping, and useful for this subsequent purpose. And finally, he also concludes that activity hinders contemplation: the creaturely limits of attention mean that one cannot do both at once. While Thomas understands the second and third categories to possibly coexist, they exclude the first, or what we might call synchronous action and contemplation. And thus, we have Thomas simultaneously exhorting and dismissing the active life's referral to contemplation.

4. Resolution, Tension, Instruction

From here, there are at least two options. First, we can try to resolve this contradiction using resources from Thomas elsewhere. I will sketch how this might be done. However, I find this effort remains unsatisfactory. Thus, I will propose a second alternative, where we let the tensions stand and consider how they may instruct the contempo-

[66] *ST* II-II.181.4, reply 2. While for angels "the active life does not differ from the contemplative life," for human creatures, "the works of the active life are a hindrance to contemplation."

[67] *ST* II-II.182.1, reply 2. "Wherefore it is evident that the active life does not directly command the contemplative life, but prescribes certain works of the active life as dispositions to the contemplative life (*disponendo ad vitam contemplativam*); which it accordingly serves rather than commands."

[68] *ST* II-II.182.1, reply 3.

[69] Tugwell, 283.

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rary coordination of the love commands in general and contemporary self-care literature in particular.

First, we might attempt to resolve these inconsistencies through a generous application of Thomas's distinction between actual and habitual referral. For example, when Thomas insists that the active life hinders contemplation, we might render this as inhibiting only actual referral, or "the actual reference of the human act to God's glory."[70] When Thomas announces that "it is impossible for one to be busy with external action and at the same time give oneself to Divine contemplation,"[71] we might conclude that human creatures lack the capacity to explicitly and intentionally love the immediately sensible neighbor and the invisible God in the same act. When Thomas seems more optimistic about activity for God's sake or referred to God, then these occasions indicate habitual referral, when "a man's whole heart be habitually directed to God, so that it consent to nothing contrary to the love of God."[72] Powered by infused charity, habitual referral directs all a person's acts to God as her ultimate end, without the intentional direction of each particular action.[73] For example, we might apply this to Thomas's description of active religious orders who direct their minds to God in the thick of activity:

> Although, then, religious who are occupied with the works of the active life are in the world as to the presence of the body, they are not in the world as regards their bent of mind, because they are occupied with external things, not as seeking anything of the world, but merely for the sake of serving God.[74]

Thus, to keep Thomas consistent, we would read this reorientation of external occupation as habitual, not actual, referral. Such a reading fits with Thomas's own account of the "two points of view" on the question, as he excludes synchronous action and contemplation but affirms the benefits of action for future contemplation.

However, to my mind, such charitable application of these categories cannot adequately close the breach. This reading requires the *impossibility* of actual referral. In other words, on no occasion might one (even by grace) be able to behold God in the act of caring for a neighbor. In Thomas's concern to preserve the priority of contemplation, he overstates his case and departs from his own earlier, carefully interwoven account of the love of God and neighbor. Rather

[70] *ST* I-II.88.1, reply 2.
[71] *ST* II-II.182.3.
[72] *ST* II-II.44.4, reply 2.
[73] Osborne, *Human Action*, p. 205. This article largely sidesteps the question of infused charity. A longer project would expand upon this, in its ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions.
[74] *ST* II-II.188.2, reply 3. Thomas follows this with a citation from 1 Corinthians 7:31 about using the world.

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than trying to stitch up Thomas's account, I propose leaving open its raw edges.

In doing so, we let Thomas sketch three competing possibilities for the active life, open to referral, preparation, and hindrance simultaneously. Thus, with the neighbor before her, the caregiver may experience any of one of these three. First, she can endeavor to love this person for God's sake, recollecting God to be her good in a piecemeal fashion through her activity – whenever by grace God comes to mind. Second, she can make use of her caregiving as preparation for her next occasion of withdrawal, knowing that in loving this one, her own interior life inclines more to loving God. And finally, she can admit that in the thick of addressing another's need, she forgets God and focuses only on that one. And thus, she acknowledges the boundaries of her creaturely love and seeks for God in the cracks of the workday (on the way to a meeting or at the sink washing up) or when she leaves work and is alone in her car, during the brief window before picking up her children.

All three of these pictures, I believe, say something true about coordinating the love of God and the love of neighbor. The conditions for the realization of each depend on the particulars. We have already noted Thomas's observation that people are variously inclined towards contemplation and action in different proportions.[75] In addition to human temperament, we may also add the type of care-work with its material demands, the spiritual formation and practice of the caregiver, and God's own action, all as shaping what is possible. Thus, preserving a range of options holds open the possibility that in certain places and times and for certain persons, one avenue may be rendered more viable than the others. That is to say, in some cases, the intentional reaching for God within the act of care may exceed present capacities, while in others, this very reaching allows for conveying love otherwise inexpressible. Despite the differences between the three options, their shared aim is clear: to seek God however one may, whether through recollecting in the midst of care, reorienting care, or interspersing it with periodic withdrawals.

What this reading of Thomas shares with self-care literature is the recognition of creaturely limits. Finitude interrupts love – whether love for God, one's self, or others, and it also jeopardizes a perfect coordination of these loves. Exhortations to self-care draw on an appreciation for these humanly restraints, although not in the theological register which I present them here. Of course, such exhortations alone remain inadequate to the task of resolving the question of caregiver fatigue,[76] especially in cases when human institutions and not human

[75] *ST* II-II.182.4, reply 3.

[76] Such responses may disproportionately blame caregivers for failing to balance life and work when the principle source is structural factors. Killian gestures in this direction:

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need are the principle sources of burnout. And yet, admonitions of self-care continue to be a source of wisdom insofar as they mark the fragility of human care: even those who understand themselves to be helpers stand in need of help.

At this juncture, Thomas offers a richer portrait of the care that caregivers need. It is not merely what they can offer themselves – going to a yoga class, seeing a therapist, or turning off their phone. Rather, it is receiving God's help, in the rest that comes from beholding God. Thomas knows that the duties of care "overwhelm" if contemplation of God is neglected.[77] This is why he warns against volunteering for the episcopate, although an appointment ought not to be refused.[78] In responding to "the necessity of assisting the neighbor," the person bearing such responsibility "suffer[s] separation from the sweetness of Divine contemplation for the time being, that God's will may be done and for his glory's sake."[79] As with previous examples, Thomas here underscores the cost of neighbor love: the caregiver sacrifices her own consolation in God to meet her neighbor's need, *and* she does this for God's sake. Thus, Thomas insists on periods of withdrawal in the midst of the active life – to taste God's sweetness – as necessary for the caregiver's wellbeing and the continuation of her activity. In my reading of Thomas, this punctuation of action with contemplation remains the case even for those individuals who by grace refer their activity to God and, in doing so, realize contemplative beholding in the same act. This emphasis on receiving God's care (which I am suggesting as one crucial mode of what is called self-care) does not instrumentalize contemplation for action, however. God is loved for God's own sake. And yet, through resting in God, the human creature receives strength for her labors of love. This is a secondary good, but it is indeed a good. In this also, Thomas offers a correction to self-care literature: God too is

"we may need to shift paradigms, moving our focus away from individualistic efforts at education and training toward a more systemic approach of advocacy for healthier working conditions . . . bureaucracy, paperwork, workaholism, low internal locus of control at work, and social alienation are allies to the *externalized* problem of compassion fatigue," p. 43. For a discussion of both the risks and value of self-care, see Liz Kinnamon, "Attention Under Repair: Asceticism from Self-Care to Care of the Self," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 26.2-3 (2016) pp.184-196.

[77] *ST* II-II.182.1, reply 3, citing *City of God*, xix.19. Thomas records Augustine's remarks: "The love of truth seeks a holy leisure, the demands of charity undertake an honest toil . . . If no one imposes this burden upon us, we must devote ourselves to the research and contemplation of truth, but if it be imposed on us, we must bear it because charity demands it of us. Yet even then we must not altogether forsake the delights of truth, lest we deprive ourselves of its sweetness, and this burden overwhelm (*opprimat*) us." Alternative renderings of *opprimat* include "swamped" and "crushed."

[78] *ST* II-II.185.2. It is a mark of an "inordinate will" to both desire such an appointment "to the government of others" and to refuse it once it comes.

[79] *ST* II-II.182.2.

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an actor, sustaining and transforming the caregiver and her love by grace.

Finally, holding onto the three possibilities that I have identified in Thomas also presses self-care literature beyond a singular opposition between self and other. While it recognizes that caring for others may compete with one's own wellbeing, such hindrance stands as only one option among others. There may also be occasions in which the caregiver beholds God in the very act of care and, thus, finds her consolation there. When such referral happens, it is always a divine gift: the infusion of charity makes possible the elevation of the caregiver's gaze to God. Further, even if such beholding does not happen in meeting another's need, the labors in themselves may train the caregiver for greater stillness and attention when she comes to rest in God. Thus, the threefold relations of hindrance, referral, and preparation expand the options for connecting action and contemplation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Thomas's thirteenth-century account of the active and contemplative lives uncovers surprising points of contact with how contemporary helping professions have moved towards self-care as a response to the limits of human love. Although Thomas describes the relation of caring for neighbors and beholding God in three competing terms, I have suggested how these tensions yield greater insight into the uneven experiences of caregivers: attending to others may hinder, prepare for, or be referred to contemplation. The difference depends upon the particulars, and yet each approach shares the aspiration to rest in God however one may: reaching towards God in the density of care's demands, letting the work ready one for God, and punctuating it with pauses to behold God and receive God's care.

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