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LOVING GOD AND ONE'S NEIGHBOR: THOMISTIC CHARITY

Don Adams

St. Thomas Aquinas defines charity (*caritas*) as a “friendship of a person for God” and he claims that charity “extends itself to sinners, whom we love from charity because of God (*propter Deum*)” (*Summa Theologiae* q. 23 a.1 and ad 3). However, it is not clear what it means to love someone “because of God,” nor is it clear how a friendship which is “for God” can “extend itself” to someone other than God. This paper clarifies what Aquinas means here by focusing on three questions. (1) Is charity for a sinner anything more than an insipid, kindly attitude? (2) If charity is *by definition* “for God,” then can a human being count as a genuine cause of charity? (3) If with charity we love our fellow human beings only “because of God,” then is charity a genuine form of friendship between human beings?

Section 1: *Introduction.*

A friend of mine once got into trouble when she was very young during her brief career at a parochial school. The teacher asked, “Who here loves Jesus with his whole, entire heart?” Every one in class raised his hand—except my friend. She innocently explained that she didn’t love Jesus with her whole heart, because with a part of her heart she loved her mother. She was sent down to the priest who tried to explain to her that she should love her mother “through” Jesus, and that was how she could love Jesus *and* her mother. This made no sense to her, and soon she had her mother take her out of that school.

I assume that my friend’s intuition involved something like the following two claims. Claim 1: If you love someone with your whole heart, then you love that person to the exclusion of all others. Claim 2: You should not love one person to the exclusion of all others. Claim 2 seems correct. Loving *only* one person is dangerously obsessive and unhealthy. Claim 1 is reasonable as well. If your “whole heart” is devoted to one person, then there seems to be nothing left of your “heart” to devote to anyone else. So we can construct a dilemma. Either we accept (1) and reject (2), in which case it seems that Christians will appear to be dangerously obsessive and unhealthy; or we accept (2) and reject (1) in which case Christians cannot be “wholly” devoted to God. For Christians there is something unattractive in both alternatives, so it would be preferable to find a way “between the horns.”

Something very like this dilemma can be raised for Aquinas’ theory of Christian charity (*caritas*). On the one hand, Aquinas defines charity as a



“friendship of a person for God.”¹ Taken out of context, this definition seems to entail that charity is a dangerously obsessive and unhealthy love, because it seems to rule out friendship for sinners *by definition*. The friendship of a person for a sinner seems not to be a “friendship of a person for God,” and so seems *ipso facto* not to be an instance of charity. Hence charity seems to have God as its object to the exclusion of all other persons.

But of course the context in which the definition is given seems to rule out this interpretation. Aquinas tells us in the same article that charity “extends itself to sinners, whom we love from charity for God’s sake (*propter Deum*).”² Of course this allows charity to have many objects, hence we might worry that this multiplication of objects of love will undermine a total devotion to God. Aquinas answers this worry by adding that sinners are objects of charity only “for God’s sake” or “because of God” (*propter Deum*). In some sense God is the “primary object” of charity while others are only “secondary objects” of charity.

So Aquinas seems to have a clear way to avoid the dilemma I have posed. On the one hand, Christian charity is not dangerously obsessive because it has many objects besides God. On the other hand, this multiplication of objects does not compromise total devotion to God because even though there are many objects of charity, there is only one “primary object,” and that object is God. This is right as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go far enough. We still need to know precisely how a “primary object” of charity differs from a “secondary object” of charity.

One straightforward way in which God could be the “primary object” of charity while fellow sinners are “secondary objects” is suggested by Aquinas’ claim that “in love of a neighbor is included love of God as an end is included in the means.”³ Perhaps the “primary/secondary” distinction should be understood as the “end/means” distinction. Perhaps with charity I am to love my neighbor “for God’s sake” just as I love wine for the sake of, i.e. as a means to, pleasure. But the problem with this suggestion is that the wine example is used by Aquinas (following Aristotle) to point out a deficient kind of love.⁴ We don’t love wine for its own sake, and so there is no true friendship for wine. What we can have for wine is “concupiscence.” So if Aquinas takes seriously the apparent suggestion of the quoted passage, he seems to be forced into the conclusion that with charity there is no true friendship for fellow sinners. God is the “primary object” of charity in the sense that God is the only genuine object of charity. Fellow sinners are “secondary objects” of charity in the sense that they are not genuine objects of charity, they are somehow merely means to the love of God, as the wine is merely a means to pleasure. On this view, charity does not involve a genuine friendship for God *and* one’s neighbor; the genuine friendship is for God alone.

This strikes me as a problem. It seems to me that a uniquely Christian form of love should be capable of including a very intimate and genuine friendship with our fellow human beings. In this paper I want to argue that Aquinas' theory of charity does not make the complete devotion to God incompatible with a genuine friendship for our fellow human beings.⁵ My argument comes in the following three parts.

First, all friendship is based on some shared, common interest or "association" (*communicatio* is the usual Latin translation of Aristotle's *koinonia*). The association which serves as the necessary basis of charity is the mere capacity to attain the same end, i.e., union with God. The problem is that this association is so rudimentary that we might think charity will end up being little more than an insipid kindly attitude. If I am devoted to attaining union with God, and I notice that you have the capacity to attain that union, I may have reason to consult with you in "friendly" ways, but it seems that my concern with you will be merely instrumental to my attainment of union with God. So my first question for charity as a type of human relationship is whether it can be something more than an insipid, and perhaps purely instrumental, kindly attitude.

The second issue I want to focus on has to do with the causes of charity. Aquinas follows Aristotle in recognizing four types of causes, and he thinks that charity has each of the four. I want to see in what way one's neighbor can be a cause of charity. If I love you, then you or something about you must in some way be a cause of that love. Otherwise it is not clear how it could be true to say that it is *you* that I love, or at the very least my love for you might be insulting to you. If your character, abilities, personality or even appearance do not factor in as causes of my love for you, then I may be treating as irrelevant or worthless everything that matters most to you about your own life. So my second question for charity as a type of human relationship is whether (and if so, in what way) one's neighbor can count as a cause of charity.

The third issue I want to focus on follows from the fact that as a type of friendship, charity must involve a love for the other for her own sake and not merely instrumentally. To use the classic example again, I might love wine, but not for its own sake, only as a means to my own pleasure. Aquinas marks this distinction by separating genuine friendship (*amicitia* or *amor amicitiae*) from concupiscence (*concupiscentia* or *amor concupiscentiae*).⁶ He quotes Aristotle as saying that "someone is said to love wine for its sweetness (*propter dulce*) which he desires (*concupiscit*)." So we have mere concupiscence for the wine instead of genuine friendship on the grounds that we love the wine *propter dulce* and not *propter vinum*.⁷ But Aquinas also explicitly states that with charity we are to love our neighbor *propter Deum*. He says that "it would be reprehensible if someone loved his neighbor (*proximum*) as

his principle end, but not if he loved his neighbor *propter Deum*, which pertains to charity.”⁸ If it also turns out that loving a neighbor *propter Deum* entails that you do not love the neighbor *propter proximum* (“for the neighbor’s own sake,” or *propter seipsam*, “for his own sake”), then it would seem that charity for a neighbor is really a form of concupiscence and not a genuine form of friendship. The embarrassing conclusion would then have to be that when they acquire charity, Christians cease to have genuine friendship for other human beings. So my third question for charity as a type of human relationship is whether charity can involve genuine friendship between human beings.

Together, the answers to these three questions will help to clarify the concept of charity (*caritas*). I take up these three issues in the order in which I have just mentioned them.

Section 2: Association

According to Aquinas, every friendship is based on association.

[E]ach friendship principally regards that in which principally is found that good upon which the association is founded, as political friendship principally regards the ruler of the city upon whom the whole good of the city depends.⁹

Aquinas recognizes many different types of associations, but it will be convenient to divide them into two groups: “co-operative associations” and “co-relative associations.”¹⁰ What I will call “co-operative associations” are introduced thus:

The different types of friendship are distinguished—according to the different associations upon which they are founded, e.g. kinsmen have one type of friendship, and fellow citizens or fellow travellers have a different type.¹¹

What all these types of association seem to have in common is that they involve some sort of co-operation in the pursuit of one and the same goal. Fellow citizens co-operate for a good society, kinsmen co-operate for a good family, fellow travellers co-operate for a good journey to the common destination (and fellow soldiers co-operate for victory).¹²

Of course there can be more and less intimate types of co-operation. On the one extreme, fellow bus-riders have a kind of “association of fellow travellers” and so there are spoken and unspoken rules of conduct for bus riders so as to facilitate a good journey for as long as the association lasts. Perhaps on the other extreme is the “association of grace” (*communicatio gratiae*).¹³ Concerning this association, Aquinas quotes Ambrose as saying the following:¹⁴

No less do I love you, whom I have begotten in the Gospel, than if I had begotten you in marriage. For nature is not more vehement for love than grace. Surely we ought to love more those with whom we expect to be forever than those with whom we expect to be only in this world.

Aquinas responds as follows:

Ambrose is speaking of love with respect to the benefits which pertain to the association of grace (*communicatio gratiae*), namely moral instruction. For in this someone ought to help spiritual children, whom he has begotten spiritually, more than biological (*cor poralibus*) children, whom he is more bound to support bodily.

This is an instance of Aquinas' general answer to the question of article 8: whether blood relatives are to be loved most of all. His general answer to this question is that degrees of love need to be relativised to the associations upon which the friendships are based.

The intensity of love is from the union of lover and beloved. For this reason the love of different people is to be measured according to the different types of union, so that one person is loved more in that which pertains to the union according to which he is loved.

So he goes on to say that when it comes to matters of "nature," blood relatives are to be loved more. But when it comes to political matters, fellow citizens are to be loved more, and when it comes to war, fellow soldiers are to be loved more.

This is enough to give us a preliminary answer to my first question about charity. Charity can indeed be much more than in insipid, kindly attitude. In fact, it can be as intense and intimate as any secular friendship, because it can be based on associations as important and as intimate as any secular association. In fact, as may very well be the case with the "association of grace," a particular instance of charity might be even more intense and intimate than any other relationship, since it may involve an intimacy in spiritual matters in addition to an intimacy with respect to the affairs of this world. Of course not everyone will be loved from charity with exactly the same intensity and intimacy, but that is as it should be. The love of one human for another, even if it is in some way "supernatural love," should still to some degree reflect the variety of human relationships.

But charity need not be based on something as intimate as what I have been calling "co-operative associations." There is only one association necessary for charity: the "association of everlasting happiness" (*communicatio beatitudinis aeternae*).¹⁵ This entails that we cannot have charity for any non-rational being, since only rational beings are capable of attaining "everlasting happiness" (i.e., "beatitude").¹⁶ Aquinas says that

according to that by which something has association (*societatem*) in rational nature with us, so it is lovable from charity. Therefore rational nature is the object of charity.¹⁷

Aquinas uses this fact in his argument that charity does not stop at God but extends to our neighbor as well.

The aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved is God, for this is what we ought to love in our neighbor: that he be in God. From which it is clear that it is one and the same species of act by which we love God and by which we love our neighbor.

Of course this will serve to extend charity well beyond our “neighbor” in the parochial sense. With charity we are to love *every* rational being, including the angels, because we share the “association of everlasting happiness” with them.¹⁸ Aquinas even gives us the primary content of this love: we are to love each rational being “that he be in God.” For two reasons this may give the impression that charity is an insipid, kindly attitude.

First, mere rationality is not a robust foundation for love. How deep can my love for you be if the only thing I know about you is that you have a rational nature and so are capable of attaining beatitude? Second, “that he be in God” seems to be a rather narrow focus for love. It seems to be caring about only one limited aspect of someone’s life. Two things should be said in response.

First, there is a significant benefit which derives from the fact that loving someone with charity depends only upon her having a rational nature: this makes charity “unconditional.” While it is good that some forms of human love must in some sense be “earned,” it is also good that some form of love need not be earned, that one need not pass any test or satisfy any special conditions to be a recipient of it.¹⁹ Because the requirements for being an object of charity are so minimal, charity insures that no human being will go entirely unloved, and that in itself makes charity worthwhile.

Second, loving someone “that he be in God” is neither insipid nor “merely kindly” because it involves a deep concern for the beloved. Consider Christy the christian who has charity for Betty the hardened criminal. Christy and Betty have very few interests in common and the directions of their lives are very different. How is it possible for Christy to love Betty? First, Christ will consider that she would not be doing Betty any favors by showing sympathy for Betty’s lawless interests. Those interests are dangerous for many, and encourage Betty in a life which is not a good one; in fact, it is a life which is not good even for Betty. In other words, Christy will distinguish Betty’s true good from her merely apparent good, and will wish for (and perhaps do things to help Betty achieve) the former and not the latter. Here we can distinguish the following two attitudes.²⁰

Simple Altruism: The fact that P desires x is by itself a reason for giving P x.

Metaphysical Altruism: The fact that P desires x is not by itself a reason for giving P x; we have reason to give P x only if doing so promotes P’s true welfare.

Simple altruism can be little more than the “I wish you few irritations” attitude toward someone. When it gives rise to actions it can be dangerous because sometimes our own desires can be ill considered. Sometimes the

satisfaction of one of our desires precludes the satisfaction of another more important desire. Metaphysical altruism considers not merely the gratification of the other, but the overall, long-term welfare of the other. Of course there are problems with this type of altruism, since there are many possible alternative metaphysics of human welfare, but this type of altruism is sensitive to the fact that human welfare is much more complex than the mere gratification of desire. So even in cases where charity does not involve a very rich or intimate association between two people, and even when it gives rise to no direct involvement in the other's life, since it involves metaphysical and not merely simple altruism, it is incorrect to call it an "insipid" or "merely kindly" attitude.

Section 3: *The Causes of Charity*

Aquinas takes over Aristotle's theory that there are four kinds of causes: material, efficient, final and formal.²¹ In which ways, if any, is one's neighbor a cause of charity?

3.1 *The Material Cause*

The material cause of the burning of the table is the table's intrinsic disposition to burn, but this is simply the wood of which the table is made. The material cause of charity is what is responsible for one's disposition to love with charity, that is, what first inclines one's affections to the beloved. Since charity is the friendship of man *for God*, the material cause must explain our first inclination to love God, what it is which first drew us to God. Aquinas mentions three such causes: benefits God bestows on us (an example may be a favorable answer to a prayer), rewards we hope to receive from God in the future (presumably this includes heaven), and punishment we hope to avoid (presumably this includes hell).²²

We can deal with this briefly because Aquinas is quite clear that the material cause is the explanation only of what *first* inclined us to love God (and thereafter our neighbors). This tells us nothing about the character of the love after it has begun. He mentions that after we begin to love a friend, we no longer love her because of the benefits she confers on us, but because of her virtue. Perhaps I began loving my parents because of the gifts they gave me, but now that my love for them is more mature, the character of my love for them is quite different. Perhaps I began loving you only because of the rewards I hoped to receive from God by doing so, but once my love has a chance to mature, the character of my love for you may be quite different.

3.2 *The Efficient Cause*

Aquinas does not explain what he means by the efficient cause of charity; he simply gives us an example. He says that "with respect to the efficient cause, we love some people in as much as they are children of such and such a

father.”²³ The one to whom others must be related in order to be lovable by charity is God; so God is the efficient cause of charity. There are three things he might mean by this. He might mean that (a) you love the son because the father wants you to, or that (b) you love the son because he reminds you of the father, or that (c) knowing and loving the father is (at least partially) responsible for your coming to see certain lovable features in the son.

If Aquinas intends (a) or (b), then it might appear that with charity, one does not really love another human being for her own sake. It is no comfort to be told by someone who supposedly loves you that she loves you only because some third person wants her to love you. This might appear to imply that you don't really *deserve* to be loved. But if Aquinas intends interpretation (c), there is no problem. If I loved your father because of his lovable qualities, and then I see that you have those qualities also, I may love you because of your resemblance to your father, but that would not be incompatible with loving you for your own sake.²⁴

3.3 *The Final Cause*

The final cause or “ultimate end,” the point or goal, of charity is God.²⁵ There are, however, two ways Aquinas speaks of an ultimate end.²⁶ On the one hand, the ultimate end of a human being is the object the attainment of which completely fulfills the specifying capacities of a human. Of course according to Aquinas this object is God. But the ultimate end can be (and, according to Aquinas, more properly is) said to be the attainment of that object. In this sense, the ultimate end of a person is a state of that person. So while in the first sense the “ultimate end” of charity is God, in the second sense the “ultimate end” of charity is union with God (i.e., having the “beatific vision”).

But if the ultimate end of charity is union with God, can one, with charity, love someone other than God for her own (i.e., the other's) sake and not only as an instrumental means to union with God? If God is *the* ultimate end, can a human being be *an* ultimate end of charity? Perhaps. If we interpret the efficient cause of charity in way (c) mentioned above (see section 3.2), then it may be possible to love human beings as ultimate ends, even if God is *the* ultimate end of charity. If we love God as our ultimate end because of properties P₁-P_n, and if human beings can exhibit P₁-P_n, then we could possibly love those human beings as ultimate ends. If those properties are essential to those human beings, then with charity one can love those people for who they are essentially, in addition to loving them as ultimate ends. This is reinforced by what Aquinas says about the formal cause of charity.

3.4 *The Formal Cause*

The formal cause of charity is, again, God.²⁷ Aquinas tells us that charity loves God *ratione sui ipsius* (roughly, “because of himself”) and loves other

people *ratione Dei* (roughly, “because of God”).²⁸ He also tells us that friendship for virtue (other than charity) loves humans *ratione sui ipsius* and not *ratione Dei*. This seems to raise a problem (see table).

	<i>ratione sui ipsius</i>	<i>ratione Dei</i>
Charity for God	YES	YES
Charity for a neighbor	?	YES
Aristotelian friendship for a neighbor	YES	NO

With friendship (other than charity) one loves another human being for what he or she is, while with charity one appears to love another human being not for what he or she is. Aquinas, however, never says this, because he never explicitly tells us whether or not with charity one can love a human *ratione sui ipsius* as well as *ratione Dei*. We must see exactly what Aquinas means when he says that with charity one loves human beings *ratione Dei*; then we will be in a position to see if with charity one can love a human being *ratione sui ipsius*.

Section 4: *Charity for Humans*

What does Aquinas mean when he says that with charity we love others *ratione Dei*? Different texts suggest three different meanings for this: (1) with charity one loves another person only in virtue of certain relational properties of hers (i.e., her relation to God), (2) charity loves God “through humans,” and (3) charity loves God “in humans.”

4.1 *Loving a Relational Property*

There are four types of texts which may seem to suggest that when one loves another with charity, one loves a relational property of the other.

4.1a: *Referuntur*

One example of the first type of text is this: “...by the same love of charity we love all our neighbors insofar as they are traced back [*referuntur*] to one good in common, which is God.”²⁹ Texts of this first type may be interpreted in three ways. They may be (a) intended as allusions to other texts where he more clearly explains the relational-property interpretation,³⁰ or else (b) the “to one good in common” part of the text shows that here he is not trying to specify the object of charity, but only to point out how the association condition for friendship is satisfied by charity for humans. Finally, it may be (c)

an expression of whatever he means by the claim that “we love some people in as much as they are children of such and such a father.”³¹ If these texts are relevant for showing how charity can take a human being for its object, then we must turn to other texts to see just how they are relevant.

4.1b: *Ad Deum Pertinentia*

In the second type of text which appears to support the view that we love others only for some of their relational properties, Aquinas says, for example, that charity is the

friendship of a human being to God principally, and consequently to those things which are God’s...and so among the other things which one loves out of charity as pertaining to God, one also loves oneself out of charity.³²

To put the question somewhat awkwardly, if with charity I love you “as pertaining to God,” do I love *the pertaining*, or do I love *you*? Fortunately we don’t have to make a choice here (or figure out what precisely it would mean to love “the pertaining”) since Aquinas reveals what he means when he talks about loving someone “as pertaining to God”:

For just as it is good to love a friend insofar as he is a friend, so also it is bad to love an enemy because he is an enemy; but it is good to love an enemy insofar as *he pertains to God*...[T]o love a friend insofar as he is a friend and an enemy insofar as he is an enemy would be contrary; but to love a friend and an enemy insofar as either is *of God* is not contrary.³³

I think the proper way to interpret this is to say that Aquinas is using the idea of loving someone “as pertaining to God” interchangeably with the idea of loving someone for what they have “of God.” So we need not worry about these texts now, for I will discuss below what Aquinas means by loving someone for what they have “of God” (see section 4.3).

4.1c: *Secundum Propinquitatem*

In the third type of text which appears to support the view that when we love others with charity we love them only for some of their relational properties, Aquinas says, for example:

Since the principle[s] of love [are] God and the one who loves, it is necessary that the affection of love be greater by greater propinquity to one of those principles...[since] in all things in which some principle is found, the order of those things is determined by the relationship to that principle.³⁴

So the “greater propinquity” you have to God or to me, the greater is my affection for you if I love you with charity. The question here is, in what does this “propinquity” consist?

All neighbors are not equally related to God, but some are closer to Him (*ei propinquoeres*) because of greater goodness. Those people we ought to love from charity more than the others who are not so close to Him (*ei minus propinqui*).³⁵

The better one is, the closer to God one is. I will argue below that this is what Aquinas means by loving someone because of what they have “of God” (see section 4.3).

4.1d: *Beatitudinis Capaces*

In the fourth, and final, type of text which appears to support the view that we love others with charity only for some of their relational properties, Aquinas says, for example:

But since the object of love taken universally is the good taken in common it is necessary that for each type of love there be a corresponding good object. For example, of natural friendship (i.e. the friendship of blood relatives) the proper object is a natural good derived from their parents. In political friendship the object is a good city. Therefore charity has a corresponding good as its proper object, namely the good of divine happiness...therefore in so far as some things are related to this good, so also are they related to their being lovable from charity.³⁶

According to Aquinas, what applies to political friendship also applies to charity. But it might seem that in political friendship one loves the other only for expediency, only because the beloved is (currently) useful in achieving one’s own political aims. In effect, you love the other as a tool, and what you love about the other is certain of her relational properties, i.e. the relations she bears to one’s own political aims. Perhaps this is an unreasonably cynical (and un-Thomistic) understanding of political friendship, but if that is what Aquinas has in mind, then it could show that something very similar happens with charity.

Fortunately we can avoid this interpretation. Compare the following:

[I]n sinners two things are to be considered: nature and guilt. According to his nature, which he has from God, he has the capacity for happiness (*capaces sunt beatitudinis*), upon which the association of charity is founded, as was said above. Therefore according to his nature he is to be loved with charity.³⁷

With charity we are to love sinners for their capacity for happiness. But that does not entail loving them for a relational property of theirs in a way that would make charity like the political friendships I described above. The capacity for happiness is not a mere relational property, it is the sinner’s *nature*. So when I love you for this capacity of yours, it is not like loving you only as a means to my own aims. In fact I am loving you for what you are. I will clarify this below (see section 4.3), but this makes it clear that these texts do not show that with charity we are to love mere relational properties of others. Therefore there is no solid textual support for the view that with charity we are to love relational properties of others.

4.2 *Loving God through the Beloved*

There are three types of texts which may seem to show that Aquinas intends

to say that the only object of charity is God, and that charity relates to humans only insofar as it loves God through them. Before we examine them, however, we should notice two things which might be meant by loving God “through” some human being.

First, we might love God “through” human beings by loving them not for their own sakes but only for the sake of God (if this counts as loving the human being at all). One obvious way to understand this is to employ the relational-property interpretation we have just gone through. Loving God “through” humans might, however, be taken a different way.

A second way we might love God “through” human beings is by loving them (perhaps as ultimate ends) out of obedience to God’s wishes. If I love others in this way, however, exactly what is it I love about them? If what I love about them is the respects in which they deserve to be loved, then this interpretation seems to collapse into the God-in-the-beloved interpretation (as I shall argue in section 4.3). On the other hand, if what I love about them does not deserve to be loved, at most this love will be perverse, or the command to love them will be perverse, or at least this love will be insulting to the beloved. We must look at the passages which seem to support the God-through-the-beloved interpretation to see if Aquinas intends either of these readings.

4.2a: *Ad Deum*

The obvious place to look for support for this interpretation is in texts which clearly state that God is the object of charity. In fact, his brief definition of charity is that “charity is a kind of friendship of a human being for God.”³⁸ This, however, is inconclusive. God’s being the object of charity will be compatible with humans being objects of charity if with charity I can love God *in humans* (see section 4.3).

4.2b: *Ad Finem, Propter Finem*

Certain logical grounds would seem to rule out all but God as objects of charity. According to Aquinas, those things which are *ad finem* we wish for *propter finem*.³⁹ I will refer to this as the *ad-finem-entails-propter-finem* principle. Now if Aquinas claims that with charity we are to love our neighbor *ad Deum*, then, since God is the end (*finis*) of charity, we must love our neighbor *ad finem*. Putting this together with the *ad-finem-entails-propter-finem* principle we can derive the claim that with charity we are to love our neighbor *propter finem*, i.e., *propter Deum*, apparently just like the doctor who gathers herbs “to make a potion to heal someone, by collecting the herbs he intends health for the sake of which [*propter quam*] he makes the potion.”⁴⁰ But would this show that our neighbor is not a genuine object of charity? Not necessarily.

Aquinas notes that *propter* can denote “not only the material cause, but in a certain way the formal.”⁴¹ If it denotes the material cause, then the object loved is God and not humans; but if it denotes the formal cause, and if humans have some of God’s formal properties, then the logical grounds may indeed commit us to the conclusion that humans are loved *propter finem*, but this will not be sufficient to show that they are not loved for their own sakes. If the formal property I have of God is my rationality, and another person loves this feature of me, then the other can love me *propter finem* but also for my own sake, because this property constitutes my essence (or at least what is most important about my essence). Hence, loving someone *propter finem* need not be incompatible with loving her for her own sake, *propter seipsam*.

4.2c: Heavenly Charity

The third group of texts which may seem to commit Aquinas to the claim that we are to love God through the beloved regard the lover’s attitude to the beloved. Every person’s aim is union with and enjoyment of God.⁴² But on earth other human beings are the best reflections of God suited to our limited faculties, so with charity one loves them as poor second bests.⁴³ If I have no hope of attaining what I really want, then this may not have unfortunate results for love: given my sorry condition, the very best thing for me is to love other human beings as fully as possible. But if I do have a hope of attaining what I really want, and not just attaining things that are somewhat like what I really want, then there might be reason to treat humans as poor second bests in a way which might seem objectionable. If what I really crave is dark chocolate, then I might settle for cheap milk chocolate if that is all I can get right now in the way of chocolate, but I’ll cast it aside in a second if I have a real chance of getting dark chocolate. However, this cannot be what Aquinas has in mind.

If Aquinas thought that we loved humans only because they are somewhat like what we really want, then he would have to think that once we get what we really want, we forget about humans, just as when I finally get dark chocolate I would throw the milk chocolate away. This is not, however, the way Aquinas thinks we love humans. Aquinas argues that even in heaven, when we finally attain what we really want, we still love other humans.⁴⁴

On the contrary, Aquinas says of the soul in heaven that the “heavenly charity fulfills the entire potentiality of the rational mind, insofar as every actual motion of it is drawn to [*fertur*] to God.”⁴⁵ This might sound as if in heaven one is occupied with God *to the exclusion of* human beings. However, if what one loves is God “in the beloved,” and what the other has “of God” is essential to that person, then one’s mind can be referred to God directly by loving a human being *per se*. So I now turn to what it means to love God “in the beloved.”

4.3. Loving God in the Beloved

Aquinas does explicitly say that with charity God can be loved in humans. For example, he says that charity loves God “*in omnibus proximis*” and “*in omnibus aliis*.”⁴⁶ He clarifies this a bit by mentioning the “similitude” between humans and God,⁴⁷ that humans are “one with God”⁴⁸ and that humans having something “of God.”⁴⁹ But he is clearest when he discusses our “participation in God.” Two passages in particular from *ST IIaIIae* q.26 a.2 are important for understanding what it is to have something “of God,” to be “like God” and to be “one with God.”

ad 2: ...the similitude which we have to God is prior to and a cause of the similitude which we have to our neighbor; for from the fact that we have by participation in God that which our neighbor also has from Him, we are made similar to our neighbor. And because of similitude we ought to love God more than our neighbor.

ad 3: ...God, considered according to his substance, is equally in whatever he may be in because he is not diminished by the fact that he is in something. But nevertheless a neighbor does not have the goodness of God just as God has it: for God has it essentially; the neighbor only by participation.

Why is one’s similitude to God prior to and a cause of one’s similitude to one’s neighbor? The answer in *ad 2* above is that the property in respect of which one is similar to one’s neighbor is the property of having some particular similitude to God. So it seems that specifying one’s similitude to one’s neighbor requires specifying one’s similitude to God, but not *vice versa*.⁵⁰

On the other hand, the feature in virtue of which one has some similitude to God is some positive feature of oneself which is specifiable without reference to God. One is similar to God in virtue of having certain potentialities for certain activities, e.g., knowing and willing. These, however can be specified by a description of what knowledge and willing in general are, and how any mind carries out those operations. But it is just these features which are the respects in which one is similar to one’s neighbor. So this similitude, it seems, can be specified without first specifying each one’s similitude to God.

Certainly this similitude could not hold unless God had first given them the properties in virtue of which they are similar, but the similarity itself seems to rest simply on their having positive features which are different tokens of a single type of potentiality which seems capable of being specified without mention of God. Aquinas seems to be relying on a certain view about the best way to specify potentialities. He says that,

Since the species of an act is taken from [its] object according to its formal *ratio*, it is necessary that an act be the same in species which is drawn to the *ratio* of the object, and which is drawn to the object under that *ratio*...the *ratio* of loving a neighbor is God, for we ought to love this in our neighbor, that he may be in God.⁵¹

The relevant potentiality, which is simply our rational nature,⁵² is specified by its potentiality to attain God. That is what would constitute its complete actualization: being a godly person. What is of primary value for the individual is not promoting some overall state of affairs, nor is it obeying certain objective duties, but it is being a certain sort of person, i.e., a person who is as God-like as possible.

The capacity is specified by the sort of person which would result if the capacity were fully actualized, that is why our goodness must be specified by reference to God.⁵³ This is also why charity loves a person *ratione Dei*, since “the neighbor is loved only because of God, and so, speaking formally, both are one object of love although materially they are two.”⁵⁴ It does not confuse God with people other than oneself, but the reason it has for taking God as its object is the same reason it has to make other people its objects, since they are all one object, formally speaking. Finally, because the formal properties in virtue of which we are “one object” with God are essential to us (we are essentially rational creatures), charity can love a human *ratione Dei* and also *ratione sui ipsius*.

Section 5: *Conclusion*

So we have just answered the question left at the end of section 3. God is the formal cause of charity, and understood correctly, with a proper view of the human essence, this entails that a human can also be a formal cause of charity, and so with charity I can love you *ratione Dei* and also *ratione sui ipsius*. I can love you “because of God” and also “because of yourself”; I can love God as *the* ultimate end and I can love you as *an* ultimate end. Your essential (rational) nature is something divine. With charity I see in you something divine, and so I love it because of itself; but that divine part of you is nothing other than your essential (rational) nature, and so I love you because of yourself.

So in the end I think that my friend’s position on “loving Jesus with her whole heart” was correct: she was never given an adequate explanation of how “loving Jesus with her whole heart” could be compatible with genuinely loving her mother. The answer she should have been given is that “loving Jesus with her whole heart” will cause her to see even more clearly just how God-like, and hence just how lovable her mother truly is, and that should strengthen and not undermine that love. Aquinas does succeed in showing how with charity we can love God *and* our neighbor.

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NOTES

1. [*Caritas amicitia quaedam est hominis ad Deum. Summa Theologiae, hereafter ST, IIaIIae q.23 a.1.*]

2. [*Caritas*] *se extendit ad peccatores, quos ex caritate diligimus propter Deum.* *ST IIaIIae q.23 a.1 ad 3.*

3. [*In dilectione proximi includitur dilectio Dei sicut finis in eo quod est ad finem, et e converso,* *ST IIaIIae q.44 a.2 ad 4.*

4. *ST IaIIae q.26 a.4 sed contra.*

5. An anonymous referee for *Faith and Philosophy* pointed out to me that complete devotion to God is compatible with genuine friendship for our fellow human beings because loving God “above all else” is compatible with loving your neighbor “as yourself.” This is correct, but what I am interested in might be put by saying that I wonder how it is even possible for us to love ourselves *with charity*. If charity is defined as “friendship of a person for God,” then “charity for oneself” or “charity for your neighbor as yourself” seem to be impossible *by definition*.

6. *ST IaIIae q.26 a.4 sed contra.*

7. Aquinas doesn’t make the point quite this explicit, but it does clearly seem to be the intent of the passage, and it is explicit in the Aristotelian text which Aquinas is quoting. See *Topics* ii.3, 111a1-8.

8. *ST IIaIIae q.25 a.1 ad 3.*

9. *ST IIaIIae q.26 a.2 c.* See also a.1 and *Quaestiones Disputatae De Caritate*, hereafter *DC*, a.7 *ad 12*.

10. These are my terms, not Aquinas’.

11. *ST IIaIIae q.23 a.5 c.* See also q.26 a.3 c and a.8 c where he adds the association of fellow soldiers.

12. See *ST IIaIIae q.26 a.8 c* and *DC a.7 c*.

13. See *ST q.26 a.8*.

14. *Ibid.*, objection 2.

15. *ST IIaIIae q.23 a.5 c.* See also *DC a.7 sed contra* and *ad 9*; *ST IIaIIae q.25 a.3 c*; q.23 a.1 c and *ad 1*; q.24 a.2 c; q.25 a.2 *ad 2*, a.6 c, a.11 *ad 1*, a.12 c and *ad 3*.

16. *ST IIaIIae q.25 a.3 c.* On the necessity of rationality for beatitude see *ST IaIIae q.3*.

17. *DC a.7 sed contra.*

18. On loving the angels see *DC a.7 ob. 9* and *ad 9*.

19. To be absolutely precise, there is one condition on being an object of charity: you must have a rational nature. The point of nevertheless calling this love “unconditional” is to say that every naturally rational being is lovable for what she is, regardless of what she does or how she conducts herself.

20. See Terence Irwin, *Aristotle’s First Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 389ff, pp. 613-14 n.4.

21. I do not intend to give an account of Aquinas’ or Aristotle’s theory of the four causes. I simply want to take what Aquinas says about them and see if they entail that human beings are not loved *per se* with charity.

22. *ST IIaIIae q.27 a.3 c.*

23. *ST IIaIIae q.27 a.3 c*, cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles* iv, 21, 1.

24. Alternatively, Aquinas could hold that the efficient cause, like the material cause, tells us only how the love is initiated, not why it is maintained.

25. *DC* q.8 *ad* 16.
26. *ST* IIaIIae q.3 a.1 c.
27. *DC* a.5 *ad* 2 and a.4 *ad* 1.
28. *DC* a.4 c.
29. *ST* IIaIIae q.25 a.1 *ad* 2 (cf. q.26 a.1 *ad* 2).
30. See sections 4.1b, 4.1c and 4.1d below.
31. See section 3.2 above and 4.1b below.
32. *ST* IIaIIae q.25 a.4 c. It should be noted that in this context, Aquinas seems to use “*pertineo*” and “*attineo*” interchangeably, cf. q.23 a.1 *ad* 3, q.25 a.8 c, and *DC* a.4 c, a.8 c.
33. *DC* a.8 *ad* 11 and *ad* 12, emphasis added.
34. *ST* IIaIIae q.26 a.6 c, cf. q.26 a.13 c and *DC* a.9 *ad* 12.
35. *ST* IIaIIae q.26 a.6 *ad* 2.
36. *DC* a.7 c. See also *ST* IIaIIae q.25 a.6 c, cf. *DC* a.2 c, a.4 *ad* 2, *ad* 11.
37. *ST* IIaIIae q.25 a.6 c. See also *ST* IIaIIae q.23 a.1 c, q.24 a.2 c, q.25 a.6 c, a.10 c, a.12 c, a.12 *ad* 3, q.26 a.2 c, a.5 c.
38. *ST* IIaIIae q.23 a.1 c; see also q.23 a.5 *ad* 1, a.6 c, q.24 a.2 c, a.8 c, q.26 a.7 c; *DC* a.2 *ob* 16 and *ad* 16, a.2 *ad* 13, a.3 *ad* 17, a.8 c.
39. *DC* a.1 c, see also *DC* a.11 *ad* 2.
40. *DC* a.11 *ad* 2.
41. *DC* a.5 *ad* 2.
42. *ST* IIaIIae q.23 a.6 c, q.24 a.9 c, *ad* 3, q.26 a.13 *ad* 1, *DC* a.9 c.
43. *ST* IIaIIae q.26 a.2 *ad* 1, q.27 a.4 c, and *DC* a.4 *ad* 3, a.9 *ad* 6.
44. *ST* IIaIIae q.26 a.13.
45. *ST* IIaIIae q.24 a.11 c, cf. *DC* a.12 c, a.10 *ad* 5.
46. *DC* a.4 c, cf. a.9 *ad* 4.
47. *DC* a.1 *ad* 8.
48. *DC* a.9 *ad* 5.
49. *ST* IIaIIae q.25 a.1 *ad* 1, cf. *DC* a.8 *ad* 8 and a.8 *ad* 12.
50. Part of the point in *ad* 2 above is that the basis of my love for my neighbor are those respects in which we are similar. The fact that the basis of our friendship, i.e., our similarity, consists in the respects in which we are both similar to God makes our friendship *amor caritatis* and not merely *amor amicitiae*.
51. *ST* IIaIIae q.25 a.1 c.
52. *ST* IIaIIae q.25 a.3 c and *DC* a.7 *sed contra* and *ad* 9.
53. *ST* IIaIIae q.23 a.2 *ad* 1, q.26 a.4 c, q.27 a.1 *ad* 2, *DC* a.4 *ad* 4, a.7 *ad* 3.
54. *DC* a.4 *ad* 1, a.5 *ad* 2, a.7 c.