

Delight in the Suffering of the Damned

Aquinas's Theology of the Beatific Vision

By David Golding

Due to Thomas Aquinas's status in Catholicism as the preeminent Christian theologian many Reformers took issue with his philosophy. Perhaps the most controversial of Aquinas's teachings that non-Catholics criticized, especially during the Reformation, was his theology of the beatific vision and the sufferings of the damned.¹ In the Supplement to the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas wrote, "Wherefore in order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned."² On the surface, this statement appears to claim a few brazen ideas of the beatific vision: (1) that the blessed in some future moment will be made partakers in the beatific vision and that the vision will include a look at the damned while they suffer the pains of hell; (2) that the blessed rejoice and the plight of the damned in the sense that they take pleasure in watching others suffer hellfire; (3) that the blessed *want* to see the damned suffer before partaking in the beatific vision; (4) that God also delights in the sufferings of the wicked and intends to make this part of the vision an element of heavenly rapture; (5) that perhaps this suffering, if eternal, will be a source of entertainment for the blessed in the eternities. Unfortunately, each of these interpretations of Aquinas's statement has been attached to Catholic theology, though each is nothing more than an assumption of what Aquinas meant.

When examined in context this statement is nothing like a schadenfreude wherein Aquinas gloats over the eventual damnation of the wicked. Rather, Aquinas hearkens to other themes addressed in greater detail in the *Summa Theologiae* and describes some essential characteristics of the beatific vision, namely, the merit of eternal life, the salvation of the saints, the grace and justice of God, and the nature of divine happiness. Historical, contextual, and interpretive misunderstandings have given Aquinas's earlier treatise on the sufferings of the damned a bad reputation and deserves historical, theological, and philosophical attention. The purpose of this paper is to explore the probable direction in which Thomas was headed when he wrote Question 94 of the Supplement and offer a more precise interpretation of his theology of the beatific vision.

Historical Facts Regarding Aquinas's Thoughts on the Beatific Vision

Some historical facts give reason to doubt that Aquinas, if he did once believe that the sufferings of the damned would be a source of entertainment or grotesque pleasure for the saints in the afterlife, maintained this view of the beatific vision as his philosophy matured. The history of the *Summa Theologiae* also reveals why interpreting Aquinas should be based primarily on his later philosophy and why the Supplement is rightfully titled as such—it is a supplement to his greater work, not the final end to his work.

The *Summa Theologiae* was written after 1265 and never finished due to Aquinas's death in 1274.³ Consequently, Thomas began writing the *Summa* around forty years of age. The Supplement, however, was a compilation probably by Fra Rainaldo da Piperno of Thomas's commentary on the Fourth Book of the Sentences of Peter Lombard.⁴ The material dates to the years between 1235 and 1253 meaning that Thomas was no more than thirty years of age when he could have written this statement on the beatific vision. Somewhere between ten and twelve years lapsed between the content of the Supplement and the first treatises of the *Summa*, which years included more intense study as a scholar for Thomas as well as trips to Rome and visits with the pope.⁵ Even a cursory reading of the Supplement reveals changes in Thomas's theology and thinking and, in some aspects, an altogether shift in his philosophical direction. In the one instance, Aquinas was working as a student

through some preliminary philosophical problems, in the other he was articulating the whole of his final philosophical thought. Clearly, his intentions when the Supplement was written were on a different scale than those that motivated the writing of the *Summa*. The framework which rounded out the *Summa* was likely not fully developed during the writing of the supplementary material, and consequently, to interpret the Supplement as the final thought of Aquinas is probably inaccurate.

A more cynical, but historically valid, hypothesis about the implications of interpreting the Supplement includes a criticism of the material itself. How authoritative is the Supplement, given the work of Fra Rainaldo? Before his death Aquinas had already attained a level of popularity among his fellow scholars; after death he was canonized and continues to be held in esteem. Did his contemporaries, out of excitement or adulation for their paragon of theology, insert their imaginations of Thomistic maxims into the Supplement? The probability that Aquinas was misquoted in the Supplement is such that it cannot be entirely ruled out. At least in part, if this view of the sufferings of the damned had become a folk tale in late medieval Catholicism, it very likely could have been misplaced or wrongly attributed to Aquinas by his contemporaries.

Whatever the case, these historical problems regarding the Supplement are enough for further study. Thomas probably did intend to develop his thought through his work which became the Supplement and as a young student he likely formed this explanation of the beatific vision in keeping with the framework that did become the *Summa*. Where the history of the Supplement aids philosophers is in pointing out that he was beginning the task of forming his metaphysics early on and that he revisited many themes in the *Summa*. The end product of his thinking did not begin with the first treatises of the *Summa* but were long at work in his teenage years as evidenced by the Supplement.

The Beatific Vision in Context

When critics contend that Aquinas was a kind of masochist because of his statement on the beatific vision, they typically cite only the *sed contra* of Question 94 of the Supplement. The whole article in context reveals much

more than a simple revelation of the wicked's sufferings to the blessed. Three articles make up Question 94: (1) Whether the blessed in heaven see the suffering of the damned? (2) Whether the blessed pity the unhappiness of the damned? (3) Whether the blessed rejoice in the punishment of the wicked? In short, Aquinas argues that yes, the blessed in heaven will see the suffering of the damned; the blessed will not pity the unhappiness of the damned; and the blessed do rejoice in the punishment of the wicked. He qualifies each of these by answering objections to the contrary.

By virtue of their identity as members of the blessed and partakers of the Divine Nature they must know all the ways of the living, and this must include a knowledge of the suffering of the damned.⁶ Furthermore, the blessed will see these sufferings because God in his perfect knowledge sees all things and knows all; to partake of God, which the saints must do to qualify by definition as such, they must also partake of his knowledge, which will necessarily include seeing hell (though they do not suffer it themselves).⁷ In this, Aquinas does not say anything about their pleasure, he merely points out the fact that to be the blessed, they must see what God has done to the damned.

On whether the saints will pity the damned, Aquinas says no. By this he does not mean that they will not feel compassion, rather they will not change their minds as to whether or not the damned should suffer. In this state of divine rapture the blessed will rejoice in the ordering of God's justice. For justice to be served wayfarers must of necessity be delivered over to the pains of hell in consequence of their wrongdoings. Aquinas asserts that the saints cannot rejoice in God's justice and be ignorant to the fact that his justice has been served. Therefore, the blessed partake in this vision. To pity the damned would be to share in their unhappiness, and because the blessed do not experience unhappiness to any degree in their saved condition, they must not pity the damned. Aquinas leaves room for the possibility that the saints may feel an emotional desire that such torture should end for the wicked, but he rejects the possibility that they could rationally discard the fact of God's justice being delivered because of their state of mind and body.⁸ Charity is to wish for the cessation of another's unhappiness, and since rationally desiring this would be contrary to their absolute knowledge of divine justice, the blessed cannot have such thoughts.⁹ Furthermore, God, being perfectly just, cannot go back on his decree even though he is merciful. God's mercy only extends to

those whom are released from their afflictions in accordance with his justice, not through pity.¹⁰

So far Aquinas is merely stating the fact of the vision of the damned and qualifying the participation of the saints in this vision. But whether or not the saints rejoice in this vision remains to be answered. Were he to leave out Article 3, Aquinas may have left enough room for others to criticize him of bigotry. However, Aquinas directly addresses whether the saints take pleasure in the afflictions of the wicked and offers a justifiable reason for why they necessarily would. There are two ways in which the blessed rejoice, namely direct and indirect rejoicing. Rejoicing in something directly is to take pleasure in the thing itself. For example, one may take pleasure in the attaining of personal wealth. The direct rejoicing would be in the fact of being rich. But rejoicing indirectly in something is to gain joy through reason. Thus, the rich man rejoices indirectly in the others' loss (through exchange) of money because without such he could not be wealthy. The blessed, therefore, will consider their own deliverance from hell and the state of order of divine justice. This act of considering these facts will illicit the recognition of their joy and is therefore an indirect rejoicing of the wicked's sufferings. Direct rejoicing of the saints is confined to the fact of their deliverance and of their knowing the reality of being saved, but the saints do not take pleasure directly from beholding others suffer.¹¹

Aquinas further describes what he means by the rejoicing of the saints by making the distinction between rejoicing in a thing and rejoicing in something annexed to a thing.¹² "To rejoice in another's evil belongs to hatred," he writes. But to rejoice in another's evil by reason of something annexed to it is not evil. God also does not directly rejoice in punishing the wicked, though he does rejoice in the fact that his justice is ordered by so punishing them. The ordering of his justice follows this punishment, therefore God rejoices in an annexation of the punishment not directly in the punishment itself.¹³ Clearly, Aquinas is not describing a form of entertainment or of gluttony when he says that God and the blessed rejoice in God's punishment. He speaks of their recognizing the fact of God's justice, the fact of the fulfillment of his punishments, and the consequential fact that his delivering the righteous from evil is also fulfilled. They rejoice in this recognition and do not directly derive pleasure from watching sinners suffer.

The *Summa Theologiae* and the Beatific Vision

Aquinas's work in the *Summa* amplifies the context of Question 94. In the *Summa* he writes several treatises on the nature of the soul, the nature of happiness, and the nature of merit which give definition to the terms used in Question 94. Moreover, Aquinas also develops a thorough soteriology which contradicts the unfavorable interpretation of the Supplement. More could be said of other treatises in the *Summa* which would also contradict this interpretation—I will illustrate only a few.

First, the saints' recognition of God's deliverance is articulated by Aquinas's work on knowledge and the nature of the soul. The beatific vision of which Aquinas speaks includes a rapture, or an experience of being caught up in the glory of God.¹⁴ Of this rapture, Aquinas later addresses the differences between the glory enjoyed by the saints and that enjoyed by the damned. The saints experience the resurrection in the sense that their bodies are perfectly attuned to their souls' intellectual orientation to God; they are agile and full of the brightness of glory.¹⁵ The damned on the other hand do not experience the same degree of perfection in their bodies and intellectual capabilities. A distance between God and the saved is all the more lengthened by the depravity of the wicked, which depravity is worse than the kind brought about by original sin. We cannot bring about a knowledge of God's essence by ourselves and whatever knowledge we do obtain arises from a divine element within us. The damned, therefore, do not comprehend God at all like the saints do (especially in the hereafter) not because of their sufferings, *per se*, but because of their souls and bodies.¹⁶ The rapture enjoyed by the saints must, therefore, include a knowledge of the difference in bodies, or a knowledge of their resurrection in relation to non-resurrection, and such a knowledge given to them by God must address the distance traveled by the body or the final state in which the body and soul have been placed. Divine knowledge itself encompasses the exaltation of the soul or the rapture of the soul, mainly because Aquinas believes the soul and mind are one and the same. Should the soul experience the rapture without an all-encompassing understanding of the fate of the damned, then (as Aquinas's other arguments suggest) this experience would not be rapturous at all, but rather borderline insanity—the fits of an imperfect mind or the work of the imagination.¹⁷ In

sum, the nature of the soul and body, and the differences between the final end of such for the righteous versus the final end of the wicked, necessarily enlighten the righteous with a comprehensive awareness of the wicked's fate. Therefore, they must comprehend the sufferings of the damned and rejoice indirectly in it—they rejoice directly in their own resurrection and oneness with the Divine Nature.

The nature of happiness is such that the saints, in the beatific vision, must rejoice in God's justice and have charity. Interestingly, Aquinas argued in the Supplement that the saints could not wish for the cessation of God's punishment because it would be contrary to divine justice, which desire he claimed was synonymous with charity.¹⁸ These two facts, on the surface, appear to contradict each other—the saints have charity, but the saints must not have charity to qualify as saints. In fact, Aquinas's development of the theology of charity and happiness in the *Summa* reveals one area in which he improved between his work in the Supplement and his final work in the *Summa*. Perfect happiness, Aquinas later defends, can only be attained through charity.¹⁹ Obviously, if the saints are to enjoy a rapture that includes a perfect degree of happiness, then they must be in a state of charity as well. He clearly negates his previous sentiment that the saints would not have charity as they beheld the beatific vision. Or, better stated, Aquinas changed his definition of charity between the Supplement and the *Summa*. Before, he equated charity with pity whereas in the *Summa* he defines charity more carefully. Charity, for the later Aquinas, is love not pity, and the saints would of necessity have a divine and perfected love by virtue of their oneness with God. Aquinas ties together the concept of the soul and it being one with knowledge and the state of perfect happiness thus: God is the last end of the human mind, and only through charity are we united to God. This union to God is an essential characteristic of being saved; in other words, our happiness rests in perfection through union with God.²⁰

Finally, in his treatise on merit, Aquinas describes the nature of God in such a way that the unfavorable interpretation becomes incompatible with God himself. Question 94 speaks most often of God's *justice* and how punishing the damned is essential to fulfilling the deliverance of the righteous. However, this justice is not the end of God's workings nor is it the entirety of his attributes. His purpose is much broader than the fulfillment of his justice.²¹

In bestowing salvation on the blessed, God does not only reveal the fulfillment of his justice, but makes the saints one with himself. Therefore, their knowledge transcends the viewing of the suffering of the damned and must be considered in concert with the other revelations God gives the saints. They share in the knowledge not only the knowledge of the suffering of the damned but also of Christ's sufferings. In a way, this suffering is greater than that suffered by the damned because the Passion included not only that punishment, but the whole death of the soul.²² Again, the rejoicing of the saints is apparent in the fact that their knowledge of Christ's sufferings gives them joy precisely because it is the Passion which brings them deliverance and perfect happiness.

The possibility that the sufferings of the damned may produce works meritorious of deliverance exists in Aquinas's later works. His doctrine of penance and that affliction can produce merit is spelled out in detail throughout the *Summa*. In short, one suffers the consequences of sin, and inflicts even more on oneself to please God which merits more of God's mercy. Penance for Aquinas is a sacrament that brings the soul into oneness with God if for no other reason than that Christ was afflicted by his own choosing, and by using the volition to bring suffering upon oneself, one voluntarily submits to the same state of being Christ was in during his passion.²³ Could God's punishment of the damned result in penance for the wicked? Aquinas at least allows for this as a possibility, but the damned would have to choose to allow their sufferings to produce contrition and change for such affliction to be meritorious. Regardless, the saints would rejoice in such penance all the same because that would then be the means of reconciliation and of bringing the soul out of damnation, which could only add to the glory of God.

One could continue relating several of Aquinas's other conclusions to further vindicate him of gloating over the wicked's demise. What is apparent is that Aquinas did not intend to purport a collective pleasure in watching others suffer. His only attempt was to understand the beatific vision and the final state of the righteous. The theology he put forth ties together the justice of God and Christ's sufferings, both of which the righteous must unavoidably comprehend through the beatific vision in order to be in a saved and perfectly happy condition. Perhaps the emphasis for Aquinas was not on the vision itself, but the glory of God and that he would one day deliver his people.

Whatever the case, he certainly advanced a soteriology which hinged on Christ's Passion, a theology not far out of touch with all Christians.

¹ Stephen Pfurtner, *Luther and Aquinas on Salvation*, Edward Quinn, trans. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 4.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1948), suppl., q. 94, a. 1, *sed contra*.

³ Philip Schaff, *New Schaff–Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953), 11:423.

⁴ Editor's Note, Aquinas, 3:2573.

⁵ Schaff, 11:423–24.

⁶ *STh*, suppl., q. 94, a. 1, ad. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ad. 2.

⁸ *STh*, suppl., q. 94, a. 2, *sed contra*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ad. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ad. 2.

¹¹ *STh*, suppl., q. 94, a. 3, *sed contra*.

¹² *Ibid.*, ad. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, ad. 2.

¹⁴ Patrick Quinn, "Aquinas's Concept of the Body and Out of Body Situations," *The Heythrop Journal* 34 no. 4 (October 1993), 389.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; *STh*, I-II, q. 4, a. 5–6.

¹⁶ Quinn, 390–91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*; *STh*, II-II, q. 175, a. 1.

¹⁸ *STh.*, suppl., q. 94, a. 2, ad. 1.

¹⁹ James F. Keenan, *Goodness and Rightness in Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 98.

²⁰ Keenan, 98–99; *STh.*, I-II, q. 3, a. 2–7.

²¹ W. Jerome Bracken, "Of What Benefit to Himself Was Christ's Suffering? Merit in Aquinas's Theology of the Passion," *The Thomist* 65 (2001), 386.

²² Bracken, 388.

²³ Eric Lijten, *Sacramental Forgiveness as a Gift of God: Thomas Aquinas on the Sacrament of Penance* (Peeters Leuven, 2003), 65.