

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-02954-4 - Summa Theologiae: Volume 46 - Action and Contemplation,
(2a2ae. 179-182)

Jordan Aumann O.P.

Excerpt

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SUMMA THEOLOGICÆ, 2a2æ. 179, I

Consequenter considerandum est de vita activa et contemplativa, ubi quadruplex consideratio occurrit,

- quarum prima est de divisione vitæ per activam et contemplativam;
- secunda, de vita contemplativa;
- tertia, de vita activa;
- quarta, de comparatione vitæ activæ ad contemplativam.

Quæstio 179. de divisione vitæ per activam et contemplativam

Circa primum quærentur duo:

1. utrum vita convenienter dividatur per activam et contemplativam;
2. utrum divisio* sit sufficiens.

articulus 1. utrum vita convenienter dividatur per activam et contemplativam

AD PRIMUM sic proceditur:¹ I. Videtur quod vita non convenienter dividatur per activam et contemplativam. Anima enim est principium vitæ per suam essentiam; dicit enim Philosophus in II *De Anima* quod *vivere viventibus est esse*.² Actionis autem et contemplationis principium est anima per suas potentias. Ergo videtur quod vita non convenienter dividatur per activam et contemplativam.

2. Præterea, inconvenienter dividitur prius per differentias posterioris. Activum autem et contemplativum, sive *speculativum et practicum*, sunt differentię intellectus, ut patet in *De Anima*.³ Vivere autem est prius quam

*Parma: hæc divisio, this division

¹III Sent. 35, 1, 1; *In Ethic.* 1, lect. 5

²Aristotle, *De Anima* II, 4. 415b13. For the medievals 'the Philosopher' was Aristotle

³ibid III, 10. 433a14

⁴In addition to those matters which apply to all Christians in general, there are some which apply only to particular members of the mystical body (cf 2a2æ. Prologue). Following the teaching of St Paul, who speaks of the varieties of gifts, operations and ministries (I *Corinthians* 12, 4–6), the *Summa* treats of gratuitous graces or charisms (2a2æ, 171–8), the types of life or human operations (2a2æ, 179–82), and the states of life or ministries (2a2æ, 183–9). The discussion of the types of life does not refer to any type of life in general, nor even to specifically human life as regards its natural powers, which belongs to psychology, but to human life precisely as operative through the intellect and supernaturalized by grace, the infused virtues

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ACTIVE AND CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

Next to be considered is the active life and the contemplative life,^a and this consideration is fourfold:

- first, the division of life into active and contemplative;
- secondly, the contemplative life;
- thirdly, the active life;
- fourthly, the comparison of the two.

Question 179. division of life into active and contemplative

Under the first heading there are two points of inquiry:^b

1. whether the division of life into active and contemplative is acceptable;
2. whether it is adequate.

article 1. whether the division of life into active and contemplative is acceptable

THE FIRST POINT:¹ 1. It seems that the division of life into active and contemplative is not acceptable. The principle of life is the soul in its very essence, for Aristotle says that *for living things to live is to be*.^{2c} Yet the principle of action and contemplation is the soul through its powers. Therefore it seems that the division of life into active and contemplative is not acceptable.^d

2. Further, that which comes first should not be divided by reference to differences in that which comes afterwards. Now active and contemplative, or *practical* and *speculative*, are differences of the intellect, as Aristotle says;³

and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. The present treatise is therefore intimately related to moral theology and contains some of the principles which are basic to the theology of the mystical life.

^bThis division is not to be understood in an exclusive sense, to the extent that an individual would be occupied solely in either contemplation or action, but that one or another direction will predominate. See Appendix 1.

^cThis refers to life taken in a substantial sense and means that the very being or essence of living things is life itself (cf 1a. 18, 1 & 2). Cajetan understands it causally, that is, in living things life is caused by existence.

^dLife can be studied under three distinct aspects: as regards the soul or substantial form of living things; as regards the various faculties or powers by which living things can perform vital operations; and as regards the vital operations themselves. This treatise is concerned with the vital operations proper to human beings in the supernatural order.

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intelligere, nam vivere inest viventibus primo secundum animam vegetabilem, ut patet per Philosophum in *De Anima*.⁴ Ergo inconvenienter dividitur vita per activam et contemplativam.

3. Præterea, nomen vitæ importat motum, ut patet per Dionysium *De div. nom.*⁵ Sed contemplatio consistit magis in quiete, secundum illud *Sap., Intrans in domum meam, conquiescam cum illa.*⁶ Ergo videtur quod vita non convenienter dividatur per activam et contemplativam.

SED CONTRA est quod Gregorius dicit *Super Ez., Duæ sunt vitæ in quibus nos omnipotens Deus per sacrum eloquium erudit, activa videlicet et contemplativa.*⁷

RESPONSIO: Dicendum quod illa proprie dicuntur viventia quae ex seipsis moventur seu operantur. Illud autem maxime convenit alicui secundum seipsum* quod est proprium ei et ad quod maxime inclinatur. Et ideo unumquodque vivens ostenditur vivere ex operatione sibi maxime propria, ad quam maxime inclinatur, sicut plantarum vita dicitur in hoc consistere quod nutriuntur et generant,† animalium vero in hoc quod sentiunt et moventur, hominum vero in hoc quod intelligunt et secundum rationem agunt.

Unde etiam in hominibus, vita uniuscujusque hominis videtur esse id in quo maxime delectatur et cui maxime intendit et in quo‡ præcipue vult quilibet *convivere amico*, ut dicitur in IX *Ethic.*⁸

Quia ergo quidam homines præcipue intendunt contemplationi veritatis, quidam vero intendunt principaliter exterioribus actionibus, inde est quod vita hominis convenienter dividitur per activam et contemplativam.

1. Ad primum ergo dicendum quod propria forma uniuscujusque faciens ipsum esse in actu est principium operationis propriæ ipsius. Et ideo vivere dicitur esse viventium ex eo quod viventia, per hoc quod habent esse per suam formam, tali modo operantur.

*Parma: *per seipsum*, through itself

†Piana: *et generantur*, are generated

‡Leonine: *et in hoc præcipue*, and in this chiefly

⁴Aristotle, *De Anima*, II, 4. 415a24

⁵*De divinis nominibus* 6. PG 3, 705. In the Middle Ages Dionysius (Denis) the Areopagite, now referred to as Pseudo-Denis, probably a fifth-century Syrian monk, was taken to be the Dionysius of *Acts* 17, 34. His writings, Platonist in character, were therefore of great authority

⁶*Wisdom* 8, 16

⁷*Homil. In Ezech.* II, hom. 2. PL 76, 952. St Gregory the Great (†604) is the authority most frequently cited in questions 179–82. By reason of the ‘method of authority’ prevailing in the Middle Ages, in which the canonized texts of some author ruled the approach to given problems (cf Chenu, M.-D., *Towards Understanding St Thomas*, tr. Albert M. Landry & Dominic Hughes. Chicago, 1964. pp. 126–49),

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but living comes before knowing, because, as he also says, living things first receive life through the vegetative soul.^{4e} Therefore the division of life into active and contemplative is not acceptable.

3. Further, the word 'life' denotes movement, according to Dionysius.⁵ Now contemplation consists rather in rest, as we read in *Wisdom*, *When I go into my house, I shall repose myself with her*.⁶ It would seem, therefore, that the division into active and contemplative living is not acceptable.

ON THE OTHER HAND, Gregory states, *In his holy word almighty God instructs us concerning two types of life, namely the active and the contemplative*.⁷

REPLY: Those are properly said to be living things which move or operate from within themselves. Now that which is proper to anything and to which it especially inclines is eminently suited to that thing in its own right. Hence every living thing is recognized as such by that operation which is most proper to it and upon which it is most bent. Thus the life of plants is said to consist in nutrition and reproduction, the life of animals in sensation and movement, and the life of men in intellectual knowledge and action in accord with reason.

Moreover, human life would seem to consist in that in which each man most delights, that for which he especially strives, and that which he particularly wishes *to share with his friends*, as we read in the *Ethics*.⁸

Since some men especially dedicate themselves to the contemplation of truth while others are primarily occupied with external activities, it follows that human living is correctly divided into the active and the contemplative.¹

Hence: 1. The proper form through which a thing actually exists is also the principle of its characteristic activity. Hence life is said to be the existence of living things because they act as they do by reason of having their existence through their form.

St Gregory's works set the terminology of these questions. For his *Homilies on Ezekiel* and his *Moralia* were the Latin patristic classics on the spiritual life, and especially on the primacy of the contemplative life

⁸*Ethics* IX, 12. 1172a5

^eA reference to the theory of the succession of souls in the human embryo, beginning with a purely vegetative soul, then the evolving to an animal soul, and finally the receiving by infusion from God the spiritual soul of a rational being. Another possibility is the direct infusion of the soul by God at the moment of conception: cf Ia. 118, 2 & ad 2; 77, 3.

^fcf III *Sent.* 35, 1, where it is shown that an ordered human life requires intellectual operations, and since these are operations either of the intellect as such or of the lower faculties directed by the intellect, it follows that man's life is either contemplative or active.

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SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, 2a2ae. 179, 2

2. Ad secundum dicendum quod vita universaliter sumpta non dividitur per activam et contemplativam, sed vita hominis, qui speciem sortitur ex hoc quod habet intellectum. Et ideo eadem est divisio intellectus et vitæ humanæ.

3. Ad tertium dicendum quod contemplatio habet quidem quietem ab exterioribus motibus; nihilominus tamen ipsum contemplari est quidam motus intellectus, prout quælibet operatio dicitur motus, secundum quod dicit Philosophus in *De Anima*⁹ quod sentire et intelligere sunt motus quidam, prout motus dicitur *actus perfecti*. Et hoc modo Dionysius *De div. nom.* ponit tres motus animæ contemplantis, scilicet *rectum*, *circularem* et *obliquum*.¹⁰

articulus 2. utrum vita sufficienter dividatur per activam et contemplativam

AD SECUNDUM sic proceditur:¹ I. Videtur quod vita non sufficienter dividatur per activam et contemplativam. Philosophus enim, in I *Ethic.*,² dicit quod tres sunt vitæ maxime excellentes, scilicet *voluptuosa*, *civilis* (quæ videtur esse eadem activæ) et *contemplativa*. Insufficienter ergo dividitur* vita per activam et contemplativam.

2. Præterea, Augustinus XIX *De civ. Dei* ponit tria vitæ genera, scilicet *otiosum*, quod pertinet ad contemplationem; *actuosum*, quod pertinet ad vitam activam; et addit tertium *ex utroque compositum*.³ Ergo videtur quod insufficienter dividatur vita per activam et contemplativam.

3. Præterea, vita hominis diversificatur secundum quod homines diversis actionibus student. Sed plura quam duo sunt humanarum actionum studia. Ergo videtur quod vita debeat in plura membra dividi quam in activum et contemplativum.

SED CONTRA est quod istæ duæ vitæ significantur per duas uxores Jacob, activa quidem per Liam, contemplativa vero per Rachelem; et per duas mulieres quæ Dominum hospitio receperunt, contemplativa quidem per Mariam, activa vero per Martham, ut Gregorius dicit in VI *Moral.*⁴ Non

*Parma: *videtur dividi*, seems to be divided

⁹*De Anima* III, 7. 431a4

¹⁰*De divinis nominibus* 4. PG 3, 704

¹III *Sent.* 35, 1, 1; In *Ethic.* I, 5

²*Ethics* I, 5. 1095b17

³*De civitate Dei* XIX, 1, 2, 3, 19. PL 41, 624, 627, 647

⁴*Moralia* VI, 37. PL 75, 764

*See Appendix 3

^b'Motus', which can be translated 'movement' or 'motion', in its proper sense denotes a process of development, from a state or condition imperfect in regard to a further completion; it is the process undergone by an imperfect being, thus a passage

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2. The division into active and contemplative does not apply to life in general, but to the life of man, who is the kind of thing he is through having an intellect. For that reason the division of human life and of intellect is the same.

3. Contemplation does indeed enjoy rest from external movements. Nevertheless, to contemplate is itself a certain movement of mind, so far as every operation is called a movement.⁸ Accordingly, Aristotle states⁹ that sensation and understanding are a kind of movement in the sense that movement is the *act of a perfect thing*.¹⁰ In like manner, Dionysius distinguishes three movements in the soul while contemplating, namely *straight, circular and spiral*.¹⁰¹

article 2. whether the division of life into active and contemplative is complete

THE SECOND POINT:¹ I. It seems that the division of living into active and contemplative is not complete, because Aristotle states² that the outstanding types of life are three in number, namely the *life of pleasure, civil life* (which would be the same as the active life) and *contemplative life*. Therefore the division into active and contemplative living is incomplete.

2. Further, Augustine names three types of life, the life of *leisure*, which is associated with contemplation, the life of *action*, associated with the active life, and a third type which is a *blending of the two*.³ It seems, therefore, that the division of life into active and contemplative is not adequate.

3. Further, human life is diversified according to the various occupations in which men are engaged. Now men are engaged in more than two types of occupation. Therefore it seems that life should be divided into more types than active and contemplative.

ON THE OTHER HAND, these two modes of life are exemplified by the two wives of Jacob—the active life by Leah and the contemplative by Rachel—and by the two women who received Christ as a guest—the contemplative life by Mary and the active life by Martha, as Gregory teaches.⁴ These

from potentiality to actuality. But because knowing and loving are thought of as processes going on, '*motus*' is applied to them in a transferred sense. So used it signifies 'the act of a perfect thing', i.e. the expression of the vital resources of the knower or lover, not a process from potentiality to actuality, but the exercise of the endowments of a high degree of actuality.

¹From 180, 6 & ad 2 below, and *In De div. nom. iv, 7* it is clear that 'spiral' is the most satisfying translation for 'obliquum'. The various flights of the mind towards God are frequently compared to those of birds, straight up, swooping ascents, or circular hoverings high in the sky. The sense of the spiral is that the Godhead remains the centre round which thought revolves, but by ascending and descending as its gaze sees other truths in their reflection of divinity.

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autem esset hæc congrua significatio si essent plures quam duæ vitæ. Ergo sufficienter dividitur vita per activam et contemplativam.

RESPONSIO: Dicendum quod, sicut dictum est,⁵ divisio ista datur de vita humana, quæ quidem attenditur secundum intellectum. Intellectus autem dividitur per activum et contemplativum, quia finis intellectivæ cognitionis vel est ipsa cognitio veritatis, quod pertinet ad intellectum contemplativum, vel est aliqua exterior actio, quod pertinet ad intellectum practicum sive activum. Et ideo vita etiam sufficienter dividitur per activam et contemplativam.

1. Ad primum ergo dicendum quod vita voluptuosa ponit finem in delectatione corporali, quæ communis est nobis et brutis. Unde, sicut Philosophus ibidem dicit,⁶ est vita *bestialis*. Propter quod non comprehenditur sub præsentī divisione prout vita humana dividitur in activam et contemplativam.

2. Ad secundum dicendum quod media conficiuntur ex extremis, et ideo virtute continentur in eis, sicut tepidum in calido et frigido, et pallidum in albo et nigro. Et similiter sub activo et contemplativo comprehenditur id quod est ex utroque compositum. Et tamen, sicut in quolibet mixto prædominatur aliquod simplex,* ita etiam in medio genere vitæ superabundat quandoque quidem contemplativum, quandoque vero activum.

3. Ad tertium dicendum est quod omnia studia humanarum actionum, si ordinentur ad necessitatem præsentis vitæ secundum rationem rectam, pertinent ad vitam activam, quæ per ordinatas actiones consulit necessitati vitæ præsentis. Si autem deserviant concupiscentiæ cuicumque, pertinent

*Leonine: *simplicium*, of the elements

⁵art. 1 ad 2

⁶*Ethics* 1, 5. 1095b20

^aIntellect as contemplative and as active implies not two powers but two functions of the one. The contemplative or speculative intellect refers to the intellectual operation as such, namely knowing the truth for its own sake. This is the proper object of mind. The practical or active intellect refers to the executive or directive function of mind, when in conjunction with the will it controls the operations of other faculties with respect to their proper objects or ends: cf 1a. 79, 11.

^bThis is a real division, not merely one of logic because the active life and the contemplative life are engaged with really distinct occupations. In this life both are necessary elements of the complete Christian life, though in heaven only the contemplative life will predominate (cf below 181, 4). The division is *analogous* and not univocal because the material objects and formal objects of the two lives are related analogously, as are the operations of the human intellect. The division is essential and not incidental because it is based on the very nature of human life and not on extraneous conditions. The division is *adequate* because there is no other way of proper human living that is not covered by these two.

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symbols would not match the case were there more than two kinds of life. Therefore the division into active and contemplative life is complete.

REPLY: As stated above,⁵ this division refers to human living, which is judged as it reflects intelligence. Now the intellect is divided into active and contemplative, because the goal of intellectual knowledge is either the knowledge of truth as such, which concerns the intellect as contemplative, or some external action, which engages intellect as practical or active.^a Therefore the division of living into active and contemplative is likewise complete.^b

Hence: 1. The life of pleasure places its goal in bodily pleasure, which is common to us and to animals.^c For that reason it is, as Aristotle says,⁶ the life of a *beast*. Hence it is not included in the present division of human life into the active and the contemplative.^d

2. The mean is a combination of two extremes and is therefore virtually contained in them, as tepid in hot and cold or grey in white and black. Similarly, 'active and contemplative' comprise what is composed of the two. As in any mixture, however, one element predominates, so also in this middle type of life, at one time the contemplative element prevails, at another time the active.

3. If directed to the needs of the present life in accordance with right reason, all endeavours of human action belong to the active life, which looks to the necessities of the present through well-ordered activities. But

^aNote that the life of pleasure is understood by both Aristotle and St Thomas as a life of sense pleasure (*voluptas*) which is not exclusive to human life. The pleasure related to the active or the contemplative life is a consequence of the life in question but does not constitute a third type of life. cf 180, 7 below on the delight concomitant with contemplation. In his view of the whole moral life, St Thomas agrees with Aristotle that pleasure is a consequence of fitting action which calls for no ethical apologia; cf 1a2ae. 31-4, where the whole range and morality of pleasure in man's life are discussed; cf also his discussion of the psychology of the Augustinian *fruitio*, the rest or enjoyment that is the term of the human act, 1a2ae. 11. In the Christian life, the joy or pleasure of charity's vitality is called *gaudium* and is given prominence in 2a2ae. 28.

^dIn the place cited, Aristotle is talking about purely ethical modes of life in order to determine what happiness is. His active life is life in society, the pursuit of civil excellence and renown; his contemplative life would be the cultivation of learning. He mentions also the life of pleasure, pursued by the many and the low, as well as the life of wealth seeking. St Gregory's categories refer to the Christian life and are modes of living the life of supernatural charity. St Thomas is content to answer the objection here by seeing in Aristotle a confirmation that only a life of noble direction, not a life of pleasure, is truly a human mode of living.

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ad vitam voluptuosam, quæ non continetur sub vita activa. Humana vero studia quæ ordinantur ad considerationem veritatis pertinent ad vitam contemplativam.

‘excessive craving’ for ‘concupiscentia’ since this term here has its pejorative meaning. For ‘concupiscentia’ simply as the emotion of desire, cf 1a2æ. 30; for the

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if they minister to any excessive craving^e whatever, they belong to the life of pleasure, which is not contained in the active life. Human strivings that are directed to the consideration of truth belong to the contemplative life.

same term as signifying the root of sin, cf 1a2a. 77, 5 and especially 82, 3 and Volume 26 of this series, Appendices 8 & 9.