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# Thomas Aquinas and Contemplative Acts\*

## Akty kontemplacji w ujęciu Tomasza z Akwinu

**ABSTRACT:** That contemplation is an important concept in philosophy and theology seems hard to deny. There have been many debates concerning the nature and place of the contemplative life, for example. But not enough attention has been paid to the precise question of what contemplation is in the first place. It is clearly some sort of mental act, but what makes a mental act contemplative? Does it have a special type of object? This article discusses the views of Thomas Aquinas on the nature of contemplation, in part through engagement with the important recent work of Rik Van Nieuwenhove. First, the article locates contemplation in the context of the foundational contrast between reasoning (*ratio*), on the one hand, and the grasp of truth by the intellect (*intellectus*), on the other. Second, the article asks whether Aquinas understands contemplation to be a special kind of act over and above the classic “three acts” of simple apprehension, judgement, and reasoning, or whether he includes it somewhere within that classic trio while distinguishing it in some other way. Third, after considering and rejecting the idea that what specifies contemplation is that its object is higher truth or highest truth, the article proposes a *relational* understanding of what makes a mental act contemplative: an act is contemplative or not depending on how it is related to other mental acts. Fourth, the article asks how contemplation can be simple. It then concludes with brief discussion of practical applications.

**KEYWORDS:** Thomas Aquinas, contemplation, intellect, *intellectus*, reason, *ratio*, acts of the mind

**ABSTRAKT:** Kontemplacja jest niewątpliwie istotnym pojęciem w filozofii i teologii. Naturze i umiejscowieniu życia kontemplacyjnego poświęcono już wiele debat, jednak kwestia doprecyzowania, czym w ogóle jest kontemplacja, wymaga jeszcze uwagi.

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Kontemplacja jest oczywiście pewnego rodzaju aktem umysłowym, ale co sprawia, że akt umysłowy jest kontemplacyjny? Czy przedmiot tego aktu jest szczególnego rodzaju? W niniejszym artykule omówiono poglądy Tomasza z Akwinu na temat natury kontemplacji, częściowo w oparciu o niedawno opublikowaną merytoryczną pracę Rika Van Nieuwenhowe. W pierwszej części artykułu kontemplacja rozważana jest w kontekście fundamentalnego kontrastu między rozumowaniem (*ratio*) a pojmowaniem prawdy przez intelekt (*intellectus*). Część druga poświęcona jest zagadnieniu, czy Akwinata rozumie kontemplację jako szczególny rodzaj aktu wykraczający poza klasyczne „trzy akty” prostego pojmowania, osądu i rozumowania, czy też umieszcza ją w ramach tego klasycznego trio, uzupełniając o elementy różnicujące. W trzeciej części, po rozważeniu i odrzuceniu poglądu, że przedmiotem kontemplacji jest wyższa lub najwyższa prawda, autor proponuje podejście do uznania aktu umysłowego jako kontemplacyjnego: akt jest kontemplacyjny lub nie w zależności od tego, jak odnosi się do innych aktów umysłowych. W części czwartej postawione zostało pytanie, w jaki sposób kontemplacja może być prosta. Artykuł kończy się krótką dyskusją na temat zastosowań praktycznych.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Tomasz z Akwinu, kontemplacja, intelekt, *intellectus*, rozum, *ratio*, akty umysłu

## Introduction

Thomas Aquinas undoubtedly values contemplation. But what is it that he so values? One way to answer that question is to say that for Aquinas, it is higher or better to engage in reasoning to grasp truth for its own sake than to engage in reasoning for the sake of some action.<sup>1</sup> But it is worth asking whether something else might be at stake as well. Perhaps speaking about what is and is not “contemplative” is not only a way of demarcating one very general class of mental operations from another, but also a way of singling out a particular kind of activity. Is there a specific act that we can properly call “contemplation”?

<sup>1</sup> See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 182, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/iopera.html> (hereafter: *ST*), which gives priority to the contemplative life while making important qualifications. For a few studies of Aquinas that focus on this question, see Anthony J. Celano, “The Concept of Worldly Beatitude in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987): 215–26, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.1987.0025>; David M. Gallagher, “Moral Virtue and Contemplation: A Note on the Unity of the Moral Life,” *Sapientia* 51 (1996): 385–92; Mary Catherine Sommers, “Contemplation and Action in Aristotle and Aquinas,” in *Aristotle in Aquinas’s Theology*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167–85.



Aquinas deploys the term in question, *contemplatio*, in a variety of ways.<sup>2</sup> Even so, there appears to be a core meaning according to which, among the activities that are theoretical rather than practical, only some count as “contemplation.” In this paper, I propose an understanding of this core in dialogue with recent work by Rik Van Nieuwenhove.

## *Intellectus Rather than Ratio*

The analysis that Van Nieuwenhove offers focuses, with good reason, on an interesting phrase that Aquinas uses to talk about contemplation, namely, *simplex intuitus* or *simplex intuitus veritatis*—a simple gazing upon the truth. The phrase appears in the Thomistic corpus infrequently, and its provenance is not clear; it might even be Aquinas’s own coinage.<sup>3</sup> In any case, this is our first clue to the nature of contemplation: it is a *simplex intuitus veritatis*.

But what is that? Following Van Nieuwenhove, I will begin by stressing that this simple gazing upon is a matter of *intellectus* rather than *ratio*. Sometimes, Aquinas uses these two words to mark a distinction between kinds of mind or mental capacity. Unlike angels, human beings must usually pass from one thought to another in order to arrive at truth. For example, we probably know that dogs are warm-blooded by having reasoned from the propositions *all dogs are mammals* and *all mammals are warm-blooded*. To mark the fact that we must often engage in reasoning or ratiocination, Aquinas says that the type of mind we have, and the type of thinking capacity we have, is *ratio*. Angels, by contrast, have *intellectus*.

The same two words, however, can indicate not only kinds of mind or kinds of mental power, but also kinds of operations that minds can perform. Although it is indeed a special characteristic of the human mind that it reasons from one thought to another, human thought is not always in motion. Sometimes we pause and hold a thought: either in simple apprehension, as when we grasp what it is to be a triangle or a dog, or in judgment, as when we judge that all dogs are mammals, or that all triangles have internal angles that add up to two right angles. Because these are acts that remain still and take hold of truth,

<sup>2</sup> See the wide-ranging discussion of the term’s “broad semantic spectrum” in Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2–11. See also Sommers, “Contemplation and Action in Aristotle and Aquinas.”

<sup>3</sup> Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 35–37.



rather than acts of moving from one thought to another, Aquinas treats them as *intellectual* acts, acts of *intellectus*, even when performed by humans.<sup>4</sup>

With this distinction in hand, let us return to the point that contemplation is a matter of *intellectus* rather than a matter of *ratio*. There are at least two reasons to attribute this association to Aquinas. First, there is an explicit textual connection. For example, in *ST I*, q. 59, art. 1, ad 1, Aquinas says, “Intellect knows by simple intuition, but reason [*ratio*] by running from one thing to another.”<sup>5</sup>

Here we see the expression *simplex intuitus* clearly linked to the term *intellectus*. In this context, Aquinas is distinguishing between angels and humans, so it might be thought that the text implies that only angels can engage in simple intuition, and therefore perhaps that only angels can engage in contemplation. As noted already, however, Aquinas thinks that even humans can perform acts of *intellectus*—the capacity to do so is not distinctively human, but that does not mean that humans cannot perform such acts, nor does it mean that they are unimportant for us.

Beyond this textual link, the association makes excellent sense on Thomistic principles. The verb corresponding to *intellectus* is *intelligere*, ‘to understand,’ and Aquinas says that *intelligere . . . est simpliciter veritatem intelligibilem apprehendere*, “to understand is simply to grasp intelligible truth.”<sup>6</sup> What acts of intellect do, then, is grasp truth. Contemplation is intuition, but intuition of truth, and truth is grasped through intellectual operations rather than through ratiocination. Reasoning brings us to where we can grasp truth, but to reason is not of itself to grasp it. This grasping is done instead by either of two acts: by judgement primarily (the “second act of the mind”), or else by simple apprehension (the “first act”).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8; see also St. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* q. 15, a. 1, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/iopera.html> (hereafter: *De veritate*).

<sup>5</sup> “[I]ntellectus cognoscit simplici intuitu, ratio vero discurrendo de uno in aliud.”

<sup>6</sup> *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8; see also *De veritate* q. 15, a. 1: “Intellectus enim simplicem et absolutam cognitionem designare videtur; ex hoc enim aliquis intelligere dicitur quod intus in ipsa rei essentia veritatem quodammodo legit.”

<sup>7</sup> For the idea that truth is grasped primarily through judgment, and only secondarily through simple apprehension, see *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 3; see also *ST I*, q. 16, a. 2. For more on the relationship between contemplation, *ratio*, and *intellectus*, see Gerald P. Boersma, “Divine Contemplation as ‘Inchoate Beatitude’ in Aquinas,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 86, no. 3 (2022): 461–69, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2022.0028>.



## A Fourth Act of the Mind?

All this suggests that contemplation is a matter of grasping truth, of *intellectus*, especially in judgement, and that is indeed what I will claim, albeit with an important qualification that will become clear below. But first we must consider a possible contrasting view, suggested (with due caution) by Van Nieuwenhove, who says that “strictly speaking, contemplation does not extend to all intellectual dimensions of the operations of the intellect but only to the simple grasp of truth in which these observations come to fulfillment.”<sup>8</sup> Going beyond the standard idea that there are three acts of the mind—the two intellectual acts of simple apprehension and judgement, and reasoning—the proposal here is that contemplation may perhaps count as a fourth act of the mind.<sup>9</sup>

The first thing he says in support of this suggestion comes from combining two texts from Aquinas.<sup>10</sup> One is from the prologue to Aquinas’s commentary on Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*, where Aquinas insists that the first act of the mind, simple apprehension, is ordered to the second act of the mind, judgment, and that judgment is ordered to the third act of the mind, reasoning. The other is a passage from *De veritate* q. 14, art. 9, where Aquinas uses the word *intuitus* to claim that the gaze of understanding (*intuitus intellectus*) can be fixed on those things that are present to the understanding.

It seems to me, however, that Van Nieuwenhove over-reads these texts. When Aquinas proposes, in the *De Interpretatione* commentary, that the first act is “ordered to” the second, he explains this by saying that the second cannot happen without the first. When Aquinas asserts that the second act is ordered to the third, he explains this by saying that we need to engage in the third act, reasoning, in order to move from things known to things unknown. But he gives us no reason to think that what the third act leads to is a new (fourth) kind of act. It is perfectly consistent with the text to suppose that the third act, the reasoning process, leads to a new instance of a second act, i.e., a new

<sup>8</sup> Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Van Nieuwenhove, 35–40. Bernhard Blankenhorn expresses skepticism about this proposal in his review of Rik Van Nieuwenhove’s book: Bernhard Blankenhorn, review of *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation* by Rik van Nieuwenhove, *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 87, no. 1 (2023): 153–57, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2023.0004>. Paul O’Grady, by contrast, seems more sympathetic to Van Nieuwenhove’s approach; see Paul O’Grady, “Aquinas on Wisdom,” *New Blackfriars* 104, no. 1114 (2023): 737.

<sup>10</sup> Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 37.



judgment that would serve as the conclusion of the reasoning process.<sup>11</sup> Further, Aquinas's overall goal in making these remarks is to clarify how the various logical works of Aristotle are related to one another, so as to put in proper context what he, Aquinas, is doing in his commentary on this particular work, the *De Interpretatione*. This does not seem like the kind of discussion where Aquinas would introduce a fourth act of the mind.

As for the text from the *De veritate*, Aquinas's concern in that passage is not contemplation at all, but instead the question of faith and reason, or faith and science. Picking up on a saying of Augustine, Aquinas states that belief concerns things that are not present either to the senses or to the mind and explains "present to the mind" by saying that things are present to the mind if they do not exceed its capacity, which is what makes it possible for the mind to fix its gaze upon them.<sup>12</sup> In context, the point of talking about "fixing of the gaze"

<sup>11</sup> "Sicut dicit philosophus in III de anima, duplex est operatio intellectus: una quidem, quae dicitur indivisibilium intelligentia, per quam scilicet intellectus apprehendit essentiam uniuscuiusque rei in seipsa; alia est operatio intellectus scilicet componentis et dividensis. Additur autem et tertia operatio, scilicet ratiocinandi, secundum quod ratio procedit a notis ad inquisitionem ignotorum. Harum autem operationum prima ordinatur ad secundam: quia non potest esse compositio et divisio, nisi simplicium apprehensorum. Secunda vero ordinatur ad tertiam: quia videlicet oportet quod ex aliquo vero cognito, cui intellectus assentiat, procedatur ad certitudinem accipiendam de aliquibus ignotis. Cum autem logica dicatur rationalis scientia, necesse est quod eius consideratio versetur circa ea quae pertinent ad tres praedictas operationes rationis. De his igitur quae pertinent ad primam operationem intellectus, idest de his quae simplici intellectu concipiuntur, determinat Aristoteles in libro praedicamentorum. De his vero, quae pertinent ad secundam operationem, scilicet de enunciatione affirmativa et negativa, determinat philosophus in libro perihermeneias. De his vero quae pertinent ad tertiam operationem determinat in libro priorum et in consequentibus, in quibus agitur de syllogismo simpliciter et de diversis syllogismorum et argumentationum speciebus, quibus ratio de uno procedit ad aliud. Et ideo secundum praedictum ordinem trium operationum, liber praedicamentorum ordinatur ad librum perihermeneias, qui ordinatur ad librum priorum et sequentes."

<sup>12</sup> "Illa tamen praesto esse dicuntur intellectui quae capacitatem eius non excedunt, ut intuitus intellectus in eis figatur: talibus enim aliquis assentit non propter testimonium alienum, sed propter testimonium proprii intellectus. Illa vero quae facultatem intellectus excedunt, absentia esse dicuntur a sensibus animi, unde intellectus in eis figi non potest; unde eis non possumus assentire propter proprium testimonium, sed propter testimonium alienum: et haec proprie credita esse dicuntur." See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Isaiam* cap. 1 l. 1, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html>: "Et quia omnis nostra cognitio est a sensibus, inter quos visus potior est et subtilitate et universalitate, quia plures rerum differentias nobis ostendit; ideo transfertur nomen visionis ad alias interiores cognitiones. Circa tertium sciendum, quod non quaelibet visio intellectualis est visio prophetalis: est enim quaedam visio ad quam sufficit lumen naturale intellectus, sicut est contemplatio invisibilium per principia rationis: et in hac contemplatione ponebant



is simply to focus our attention on what is within the capacity of the human mind. There is no reason to think that this passage is pointing us beyond the standard three acts.

Van Nieuwenhove's second reason for speculating that contemplation may be a special, fourth act of the mind involves *ST* II–II, q. 180, where Aquinas is discussing the contemplative life. Van Nieuwenhove points us to art. 6, which he takes to be teaching that “the understanding that arises from the operations of the intellect constitutes the culminating act of contemplation,” an act which “fulfills and crowns the other operations.” He also points us to art. 3, where Aquinas affirms that contemplation is the *ultimus . . . completivus actus*, which phrase Van Nieuwenhove translates as “the last and crowning act.”<sup>13</sup> And he points to art. 4, where Aquinas distinguishes contemplative operations from others which merely precede and support them. With regard to this last, Van Nieuwenhove puts the point as follows, beginning with a quotation from art. 4 itself:

“Accordingly, it is clear from what has been said [articles 2–4] that four things pertain, in a certain order, to the contemplative life; first the moral virtues [discussed in article 2]; second, other acts exclusive of contemplation (*alii actus praeter contemplationem*) [discussed in article 3]; third, contemplation of the divine effects [discussed in article 4]; the fourth contemplative factor is the contemplation of the divine truth itself.” Here Aquinas calls the crowning act of contemplation “a fourth” factor, which seems to strengthen further the claim that he is keen to distinguish the contemplative act from the other acts of the intellect.<sup>14</sup>

So contemplation in a narrower sense would concern divine truth, and in a broader sense it would concern divine effects, but in any case it should be contrasted with the acts discussed in earlier articles of q. 180.

I believe that Van Nieuwenhove is pointing us to important passages, but also that it would go too far to see them as indicating a fourth act of the mind. It is true that in art. 6, Aquinas says that discoursing must cease in order for the soul's powers to be fixed in the gaze of contemplation, and obviously this excludes the third act, reasoning, but it gives no reason to think that the

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philosophi summam felicitatem hominis. Est iterum quaedam contemplatio ad quam elevatur homo per lumen fidei sufficienter, sicut sanctorum in via.”

<sup>13</sup> Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Van Nieuwenhove, 39. Van Nieuwenhove here uses a modification of the Laurence Shapcote translation; the glosses in square brackets are Van Nieuwenhove's own.



first and second are also excluded.<sup>15</sup> What “arises from the operations of the intellect” might, for all this text tells us, simply be further instances of first or second operations.

As for art. 3, Aquinas there asks whether the contemplative life involves many acts or one, and his answer is that it primarily consists in the act that gives it unity, namely, contemplation, but that it also involves other acts leading up to this. Such acts are, we might say, pre-contemplative rather than contemplative. But does art. 3 shed any light on whether the distinction between pre-contemplative and contemplative acts corresponds to a distinction between, on the one hand, the traditional first, second, and third acts and, on the other hand, some fourth kind of act? I do not see how. Van Nieuwenhove points out that Aquinas contrasts the crowning contemplative act with *acceptatio principiorum* and *deductio principiorum*, i.e., with reception of principles that thought begins from, and with deduction of the truth that is sought. Deduction, of course, is a third act, and any such act will have to be pre-contemplative, for the reason given in the preceding paragraph. *Acceptatio principiorum*, it seems, will take the form of first or second acts, yet from this it follows only that *some* first or second acts are pre-contemplative. This leaves open the possibility that the crowning contemplative acts are themselves first or second acts of the mind.<sup>16</sup> This would require us to ground the pre-contemplative / contemplative distinction in something other than type of mental act (first, second, etc.).

As for art. 4, there are, as Van Nieuwenhove points out, discrepancies between the Leonine text and other readings.<sup>17</sup> To my mind, however, the key point is simply that while Aquinas there does mean to distinguish contemplation from activities that are not themselves contemplative, but instead are in support of contemplation, this does not mean—one way or the other—that an act of contemplation is neither an act of simple apprehension nor an act of judgment, but instead some fourth kind of act. Many acts are indeed *praeter contemplationem*, including many first and second acts of the mind, but this does not mean that all first and second acts are *praeter contemplationem*. The text thus leaves space for the possibility that contemplative acts are first or second acts. Aquinas does indeed—on one manuscript reading, at any rate—refer to a “fourth contemplative factor” [*quartum . . . contemplativum*], beyond pre-contemplative intellectual acts, and this does indeed, as Van Nieuwenhove says, encourage the

<sup>15</sup> See *ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 6: “Cessante discursu, figatur eius intuitus in contemplation unius simplicis veritatis.”

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Van Nieuwenhove himself points to factors that support this proposal: Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 38.

<sup>17</sup> See Van Nieuwenhove, 39, n. 63.



thought that Aquinas “is keen to distinguish the contemplative act from the other acts of the intellect.”<sup>18</sup> But this sheds no light on where contemplation falls vis-à-vis the traditional three acts, and leaves open the possibility that what distinguishes the contemplative from the pre-contemplative is something else.

In closing this section, I wish to add an important point. Although we have not yet seen what makes contemplative acts contemplative, we have seen that they can arise from complex processes of abstraction, judgement, and reasoning. But this does not mean that they must do so. As Van Nieuwenhove shows in detail, Aquinas has plenty of space for thinking that human beings, including non-philosophers and non-theologians, can enjoy contemplative acts that are infused by the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

## A Relational Account of What Makes an Act Contemplative

Having learned from, but also to some extent demurred from, Van Nieuwenhove’s analyses, I now wish to turn to my own proposal about what the act of contemplation is for Aquinas. I wish to say that, in a sense, *any* grasping of a truth *can* be a case of contemplation. But it sounds strange to claim that we are engaged in contemplation every single time we grasp truth. Some acts stand out as contemplative rather than non-contemplative; but how do they do so?

One thought is this: perhaps contemplation is an intellectual act of gazing on the *highest* truth, or anyway *higher* truths. This proposal is not unattractive. If someone were thinking about the fact that he had just missed the bus, it would sound strange to insist that he was engaged in contemplation; if we did say that, almost surely it would be because he was thinking about his failure to catch the bus in the light of some higher truths: the fragility of happiness, perhaps, or the nature of time.

<sup>18</sup> Van Nieuwenhove, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Van Nieuwenhove, 147–81. For an argument that non-philosophers and non-theologians can enjoy a kind of contemplation even on the natural level, see Daniel Gutschke, “Is the Individual Subordinate to the City? A Response through a Consideration of Contemplation,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (2025): 76–77. And for discussion of how supernatural gifts improve on even intellectually sophisticated natural contemplation, see Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, chs. 5–7; Adriano Oliva, “La Contemplation des philosophes selon Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 96, no. 4 (2012): 585–662.



There are passages where Aquinas speaks in ways that seem to line up with this, at least to some extent. For example, in his commentary on the third book of Lombard's *Sentences*, d. 35, q. 1, art. 2, qa. 3, Aquinas introduces a distinction between *contemplatio*, by which God is contemplated in himself, and *speculatio*, whereby God is seen in creatures.<sup>20</sup> Again, in *ST II–II*, q. 9, a. 4, ad 3, he says that the happiness of contemplation comes not from science but from understanding and wisdom, and that these latter concern divine things.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Aquinas does not seem to have a strict policy of using the word “contemplation” only for acts that are aimed solely at God, or even only for acts that are aimed primarily or ultimately at God. For example, in *ST I–II*, q. 35, art. 5, Aquinas explores the connection between sadness and contemplation, and in that discussion he speaks of how contemplating worthless things can impede the contemplation of better things.<sup>22</sup> There, at least, he is willing

<sup>20</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis* lib. 3, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 3, co., accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/iopera.html> (hereafter: *Super Sent.*): “Nihilominus tamen et contemplativus considerat alia, in quantum ad Dei contemplationem ordinantur sicut ad finem, puta creaturas, in quibus admiratur divinam maiestatem et sapientiam et beneficia Dei, ex quibus inardescit in ejus amorem; et peccata propria, ex quorum ablutione mundatur cor, ut Deum videre possit. Unde et nomen contemplationis significat illum actum principalem, quo quis Deum in seipso contempletur; sed speculatio magis nominat illum actum quo quis divina in rebus creatis quasi in speculo inspicit. Et similiter etiam felicitas contemplativa, de qua philosophi tractaverunt, in contemplatione Dei consistit: quia, secundum philosophum, consistit in actu altissimae potentiae quae in nobis est, scilicet intellectus, et in habitu nobilissimo, scilicet sapientia, et etiam objecto dignissimo, quod Deus est.” See also *De veritate* q. 18, a. 2, where Aquinas, in the context of discussing Adam’s pre-fall knowledge, uses the word “contemplation” as if it applied only to direct knowledge of God, i.e., knowledge that does not involve creatures, as if knowledge via creatures (which pre-fall Adam also had) was not contemplation in the true sense.

<sup>21</sup> *ST II–II*, q. 9, a. 4, ad 3: “Sed aliquantulum beatitudo hominis consistit in debito usu creaturarum et ordinata affectione circa ipsas, et hoc dico quantum ad beatitudinem viae. Et ideo scientiae non attribuitur aliqua beatitudo pertinet ad contemplationem; sed intellectui et sapientiae, quae sunt circa divina.”

<sup>22</sup> *ST I–II*, q. 35, a. 5, ad 3: “Ad tertium dicendum quod contemplatio, secundum se, nunquam habet rationem mali, cum contemplatio nihil aliud sit quam consideratio veri, quod est bonum intellectus, sed per accidens tantum, in quantum scilicet contemplatio vilioris impedit contemplationem melioris; vel ex parte rei contemplatae, ad quam inordinatae appetitus afficitur.” For another example, in *ST II–II*, q. 180, a. 4, Aquinas allows that contemplating the divine effects, if ordered to contemplation of God, belongs to the contemplative life; setting aside the question of what belongs to the contemplative life, here he does clearly think of the act of contemplation as being applicable to lower things. See also *De veritate*, q. 15, a. 2, co. “Secundum enim quod ad superiores naturas respicit, sive ut earum veritatem et naturam absolute contemplans, sive ut ab eis rationem et quasi



to allow for “contemplation” of lower things, which would mean that having higher things as one’s object is not required for contemplation.<sup>23</sup>

If what makes an act contemplative is not its object, does that mean we should embrace the view that I earlier called “strange,” namely, the view that every act of grasping truth counts as contemplative? No, because there is another way of distinguishing contemplative from non-contemplative acts. Here it is helpful to consider something Aquinas says when commenting on Book X of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Scrutiny into the truth is of two sorts: one consists in seeking after the truth, while the other consists in contemplating truth that is already discovered and known. And this latter is more complete, because it is the end-point and goal of seeking. For this reason, there is more delight in considering truth already known than in seeking for it.<sup>24</sup>

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exemplar operandi accipiens; superior ratio nominatur. Secundum vero quod ad inferiora convertitur vel conspicienda per contemplationem, vel per actionem disponenda, inferior ratio nominatur. Utraque autem natura, scilicet et superior et inferior, secundum communem rationem intelligibilis ab anima humana apprehenduntur; superior quidem prout est immaterialis in seipsa, inferior autem prout a materia per actum animae denudatur.” See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* III, c. 37, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html>, where he talks about contemplation as if it could concern many things, although the best one is God. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Psalmo* 54, n. 5, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html> (hereafter: *Super Psalmo*), where Aquinas compares various acts of contemplation to the many ways birds fly.

<sup>23</sup> As so often, Aquinas is more terminologically flexible than we may be inclined to think. For two other examples of this flexibility, see *Super Sent.*, lib. 3, d. 34, q. 1 a. 2, co., where Aquinas seems to use *contemplatio* merely as a synonym for theoretical reasoning, and *Super Sent.*, lib. 4, d. 15, q. 4, a. 1, qc. 2 ad 1, where he distinguishes a stricter and a wider meaning of “contemplation,” in such a way that the wider meaning can include not only the intellectual act of meditating on divine things, but also reading and prayer.

<sup>24</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum* lib. 10, l. 10, n. 13, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html>: “Speculatio veritatis est duplex: una quidem quae consistit in inquisitione veritatis; alia vero quae consistit in contemplatione veritatis iam inventae et cognitae. Et hoc perfectius est, cum sit terminus et finis inquisitionis. Unde et maior est delectatio in consideratione veritatis iam cognitae, quam in inquisitione eius.” (At risk of pedantry, I wish to point out that Litzinger’s translation of the start of this passage is misleading, at least for our purposes: “Contemplation of truth is twofold: one consists in the investigation of truth, the other in the reflection on the truth already discovered and known”; see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, 2 vols. [Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964]). Here are two similar texts: “Cum vero intellectus iam ad formam veritatis pertingit, non cogitat, sed perfecte veritatem contemplatur. Unde Anselmus improprie accipit



It is always worth asking whether something Aquinas says in a commentary is his own view, or merely his view of what the text is saying, but I find it very plausible that Aquinas is not merely reporting here, but endorsing. And what I want to put the focus on is this: Aquinas associates contemplation not with truth that is yet to be discovered, but with truth that is already discovered and known (*iam inventae et cognitae*). There is the seeking of truth, and then, after truth has been found, there is the contemplation of it.<sup>25</sup> This sets contemplation apart not in terms of the kind of act it is intrinsically (e.g., simple apprehension or judgment), and not in terms of its object (e.g., buses, God), but in terms of its relation to other mental acts.

So now I can present my interpretation of Aquinas on the act of contemplation, which goes beyond anything I have seen him say explicitly and in detail, but which seems to fit the texts: Contemplation is an act of grasping a truth, but an act of grasping that is rested in, rather than serving as part of a ratiocinative process that leads onward towards some further truth.<sup>26</sup> We are already familiar, in the context of distinguishing theoretical from practical reason, with the idea that sometimes knowledge is sought for its own sake, and sometimes for the sake of something other than itself. But it now appears that even within the theoretical realm, we find a distinction analogous to the theoretical/practical distinction. To be sure, knowing something not for the sake of action is already a kind of theoretical knowledge, but I still might want to know it not really for *its* own sake, but only for the sake of discovering some *other* truth. Only when I know it for its own sake, with no further truth sought by means of it, is knowing it a case of contemplation in the full sense.

On the proposed interpretation, then, a contemplative act is not a distinct cognitive or psychological type, except relationally. What makes an act contemplative is how it is related to other intellectual acts, and above all perhaps how

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cogitationem pro contemplatione” (*ST I*, q. 34, a. 1, ad 2); “Et inde est quod in anima nostra est cogitatio, per quam significatur ipse discursus inquisitionis, et verbum, quod est iam formatum secundum perfectam contemplationem veritatis” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioannem* 1, lect. 1, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/iopera.html>).

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps this is the text that Christopher Brown has in mind when he says, “Thomas thinks that, whereas an act of scientific inquiry aims at *discovering* a truth not already known, an act of contemplation aims at *enjoying* a truth already known.” See Christopher Brown, “Thomas Aquinas,” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed July 15, 2025, [iep.utm.edu/aquinas](http://iep.utm.edu/aquinas). Kevin White mentions a somewhat similar passage, *ST I-II*, q. 32, art. 2, resp., in his discussion of Aquinas on sources of pleasure; see Kevin White, “Pleasure, a Supervenient End,” in *Aquinas and the Nichomachean Ethics*, ed. Kevin White and Tobias Hoffmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 232.

<sup>26</sup> See also: *Super Sent.*, lib. 3, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 2.



it is *not* related to other intellectual acts. Focusing on judgment and demonstration will help to make this clear. If one takes the proposition *all men are mortal*, one can fit it into a syllogism, such as *all mortals are composite, all men are mortal, therefore all men are composite*. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, but it involves thinking the thought *all men are mortal* only as part of, and in the service of, some larger discursive process oriented towards some other truth. If, by contrast, one were to grasp the truth *all men are mortal*, hold it, and gaze upon it, resting in that judgement, then one would be engaging in contemplation. What makes the thinking of this thought contemplative, then, is not the nature of the thought as a first act, second act, or some possible fourth act, but instead the fact that this act is not used as a stepping stone for some further act, but instead treated as a resting place. Perhaps it would help to use not the noun “contemplation” so much as the adverb “contemplatively,” and to speak of engaging in intellectual operations contemplatively or non-contemplatively. This would bring out the idea that contemplation is not a distinct type of intellectual operation but instead a distinct way of engaging in an intellectual operation.

And now it may help to return to something we looked at earlier, the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio*. Aquinas says that *ratio* is a kind of motion, while *intellectus* is the rest to which that motion tends. He uses this point to argue that *intellectus* and *ratio* are not different powers, because it makes no sense for the motion of one power to tend to the rest of some other power.<sup>27</sup> For our purposes, the point is that *intellectus* is a kind of rest. As contrasted with *ratio*, it is an act that one stays with and rests in, rather than moving on from.

It is worth asking how the notion of contemplative rest fits together with Aquinas’s invocation of Pseudo-Dionysius’s three-way distinction between circular, straight, and oblique movements of intellect. Contemplation, in the sense we are concerned with here, is the circular one. But is not circular movement a kind of movement? And are not movement and rest opposed?<sup>28</sup>

To some extent, one could reply simply by saying that this talk of movement is metaphorical, and the trio of circular/straight/oblique is one of those traditional ideas that Aquinas feels obliged to make sense of. If one is committed in advance to using the language of motion to speak of intellectual operations, then *circular* will clearly be the best option for contemplation. Circular motion does not go anywhere; it remains where it is, rather than moving on. For this reason, one might say, Aquinas uses it as a metaphor for rest.

<sup>27</sup> *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8; *De veritate* q. 15, a. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 6 and *Super Psalmo* 26, n. 6.



But more can be said. As Van Nieuwenhove points out, contemplative insight can lead to further discursive reason that leads back to the original insight, but now in a deeper and fuller way.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this would, strictly speaking, count as a departure from contemplation: one leaves off contemplating for a while to engage in a more discursive form of thought. But if this is done precisely for the purpose of deepening one's understanding of the object of contemplation, it would seem to belong to contemplation itself in a stronger way than discursive thought usually does. Perhaps this is what Aquinas has in mind in *ST* II-II, q. 180, art. 6, ad 3, commenting on a remark of Richard of St. Victor, when he says that thinking about the accidents that surround a thing counts as a kind of rectilinear or oblique motion, but one that is nonetheless "circuitous"; Aquinas clearly means this to be distinct from "circular," but the similarity, at least on the verbal level, is striking.<sup>30</sup> At any rate, one should expect that for rational animals, in this life, contemplative rest can never be fully complete and final: "rest," for us, will inevitably involve repeated return.<sup>31</sup>

To round out the account, it is important to add that for Aquinas, contemplative grasping of truth is related to joy. It is not just that grasping truth is intrinsically enjoyable, although that is certainly the case for Aquinas. It is also because

contemplation is made delightful on account of its object, inasmuch as someone contemplates something that he loves, as happens in the case of corporeal sight, which is delightful not only on account of the fact that seeing is delightful, but on account of the fact that one sees a person that one loves.<sup>32</sup>

So contemplation is not merely holding on to truth but holding on to beloved truth, and delighting in it.

<sup>29</sup> See Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> "[I]llae diversitates motuum quae accipiuntur secundum differentiam eius quod est sursum et deorsum, dextrorsum et sinistrorsum, ante et retro, et secundum diversos circuitus, omnes continentur sub motu recto vel obliquo.... Si vero sit secundum accidentia quae circumstant rem, propinqua vel remota, erit circuitus.... Solum autem immobilitas quam point, pertinent ad motum circularem."

<sup>31</sup> See *ST* I-II, q. 3, art. 2, ad 4. See also, importantly, Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, 12–16.

<sup>32</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 7: "Alio modo contemplatio redditur delectabilis ex parte obiecti, inquantum scilicet aliquis rem amatam contemplatur, sicut etiam accidit in visione corporali quod delectabilis redditur non solum ex eo quod ipsum videre est delectabile, sed ex eo etiam quod videt quis personam amatam." See also: *Super Sent.*, lib. 3, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 3, co.



## How Is Contemplation Simple?

But how is contemplation *simple*? If contemplation means not just apprehension of truth, but *simple* apprehension of truth, then one might object as follows: judgment, in virtue of its subject-predicate structure, is clearly not simple. Perhaps contemplation must be restricted to acts of simple apprehension.<sup>33</sup>

A reason for thinking otherwise can be found in *ST I*, q. 85, art. 4. Aquinas asks whether we can understand more than one thing at a time. His answer, as so often, is “yes and no.” We can only think one thought at a time, but more than one thing can be brought together under that one thought. Taken together with art. 5 of the same question, which talks about composition and division, we can say that for Aquinas, it is possible to understand many things at once, as long as they are held together in the mind as parts of one logical whole. We cannot, say, have two simple apprehensions at once, one of “horse” and one of “warm-bloodedness,” but we can have one thought of the form “horses are warm-blooded.” This is a kind of simplicity, to the extent that simplicity can be had by complex creatures like us.<sup>34</sup>

This leads to a further consideration. When we think of an act of contemplation, we might first think of some kind of large, all-encompassing vision. Just resting in one small-scale judgment might not seem worthy of being called “contemplation.” Now judgments do, in fact, come in various sizes. We can think merely that Socrates is rational, or we can think that all humans are rational, or that all humans are rational animals, or that all humans are created rational animals. We can think that all humans are rational while all angels are intellectual; or we can think that creatures are arranged in a hierarchy from non-living at the bottom, upwards through plants, animals, humans, and angels. We can, that is, think all of that as one thought. These examples are meant to illustrate that although grasping a truth means grasping *a* truth,

<sup>33</sup> That contemplation is to be contrasted with judgement appears to be the suggestion of Marie-Dominique Chenu in his doctoral thesis; see Carmello Giuseppe Conticello, “De Contemplatione’ (Angelicum, 1920): La thèse inédite de doctorat du P. M.-D. Chenu,” *Revue de Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 75, no. 3 (1991): 393. On the other hand, it may be that Chenu here means only to distinguish the act of contemplating from the act of *forming* a judgment, and does not mean that the content of contemplation must be utterly simple.

<sup>34</sup> The following remark by Gerald P. Boersma is on-target: “In accumulating a body of knowledge we proceed discursively, in *modus rationis*; this is a distinctly human mode of proceeding. However, once such knowledge is actually possessed, it is possessed as a whole: indivisible, simple, and one”; see Boersma, “Divine Contemplation as ‘Inchoate Beatitude’ in Aquinas,” 463.



grasping *one* truth, still, that one truth can be a whole encompassing *many* parts. Perhaps this way of understanding contemplation allows for the sort of wide vision that we might be tempted to associate with the word. But such a wide vision is not necessary for contemplation. One can simply contemplate the Pythagorean theorem.

## Final Thoughts

I have proposed that to grasp a truth contemplatively is to grasp it and hold fast, rather than using it as a handhold to be released in favor of reaching for some further truth. To contemplate is not to look and move on, but to gaze in love. (“I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go.”) I have also proposed ways of thinking about how such a gaze might be simple. I now conclude with two brief applications.

The first has to do with teaching. In *De veritate* q. 11, a. 4, Aquinas asks whether teaching belongs more to the active life or to the contemplative life. He says in the *corpus* that the act of teaching belongs to the active life—the reason seems to be that its intrinsic goal is helping one’s neighbor. However, he also says, in the reply to the third objection, that the source of teaching—the *principium doctrinae*—is the teacher’s vision, the *visio docentis*.<sup>35</sup> Although teaching is not contemplating, teaching is still derived from contemplating. What Aquinas does not say, but which I would now like to add, is this: whenever we are asked to teach something, that gives us the opportunity to revive and refresh our vision. If teaching itself is not contemplation, it can nonetheless be the occasion of contemplation. Reviewing lecture notes can be a contemplative moment. Remembering that might make someone a better teacher, but even if it does not, it helps the teacher keep contemplation in his life, which is not always easy to do.

Second, it is worth asking about the role of contemplation in the life of the academic researcher. The academic research industry pushes us to always be looking for new topics to think about, lecture about, write about. This is not bad in and of itself. But it is worth wondering whether it does not, from time to time, tend to drive out that simple intuition of truth that Aquinas

<sup>35</sup> “Ad tertium dicendum, quod visio docentis est principium doctrinae; sed ipsa doctrina magis consistit in transfusione scientiae rerum visarum quam in earum visione: unde visio docentis magis pertinet ad contemplationem quam ad actionem.”



mentions. It is good not only to find more truths and publish them. It is also good to stop and gaze upon them.

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