

Aquinas, Sense Pleasure, and the State of Grace

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Abstract

This essay uses Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* to argue that a person living in what the Catholic tradition calls the "state of grace" has a greater capacity to appreciate sense pleasure than one who is not. Aquinas believes sense pleasures conduce to good if reason elevates them and integrates them into a Christian's life. However, heightened appreciation of sense pleasure requires three conditions. First, the Christian must seek licit, reasonable pleasures that both satisfy external criteria and leave the person internally well-ordered. Second, he must attempt continual purification through asceticism, since the sense appetite tends to rebel against the guidance of reason. However, asceticism is not an end in itself, but it rather assists the Christian in integration that ultimately allows for a full, rightly ordered appreciation of sense pleasures. Third, the Christian must not seek sense pleasure as an end in itself but receive it as a gift and pledge of higher joys. Ultimately, the Thomistic approach toward sense pleasure is one of appreciation and integration rather than distrust. While a Christian might experience *quantitatively* less sense pleasure, his more integrated, *qualitative* experience is better.

Keywords

aquinas, reason, sense pleasure, state of grace, *Summa Theologiae*

Some sinners delay conversion because they fear a life devoid of sense pleasure. The thought of Aquinas can help us respond to that concern. Christians living in the state of grace¹ both experience and desire sense pleasures. What should a Christian's attitude toward these sense pleasures be? How should we speak about pleasures to those we encounter

¹ Throughout the essay, I call a person in a "state of grace" or a "Christian" a person who prays, has a regular sacramental life, studiously avoids sin, and is growing in virtue and holiness. On the other hand, "sinner" refers to one who is unbaptized or who, though baptized, is not living in the state of grace.

and invite to conversion? In this paper, I rely on the Thomistic tradition to argue that Christians living in the state of grace have the capacity to experience sense pleasures in a qualitatively better way than sinners do. However, this heightened sense of pleasure requires three conditions: the Christian must seek reasonable pleasures, attempt continual purification, and avoid seeking pleasures as ends in themselves.

I. The goodness of pleasure

Before attending to these conditions, we must consider Aquinas' general evaluation of sense pleasures. They are good. In fact, he asserts, "It comes to the same whether we desire good, or desire delight, which is nothing else than the appetite's rest in good."² The *delectabile* reveals the *bonum*.³ Moreover, Nicholas Lombardo argues that Aquinas' treatment of passions rests on the premise that "the passions carry us toward our *telos* (and therefore happiness) because they were created by a God who is trustworthy. God is the guarantor of desire" in whom "there is a metaphysical basis for welcoming and trusting the passions."⁴ This claim fits well with Aquinas' understanding of the divine economy and overall view of reality as comprehensible. It also squares with the idea that one can sin by both excess in passion and by deficiency.⁵ To those who would claim that temperance's role is to diminish passion, Aquinas might point out that temperance diminishes only *evil* passions.⁶ Fasting only counts as a virtue because it helps a person focus on prayer or curb lust, not because it rejects gustatory pleasure or nutrition as such.⁷ Even Aquinas' responses to unrelated questions demonstrate an appreciation of sense pleasure and the belief that better people have more responsive and refined sensual appetites. For example, when discussing what people consider their Last End, he writes, "that sweet is absolutely the best of all pleasant things, in which he who has the best taste takes most pleasure."⁸ He praises the person with a discerning sweet tooth, intimating that an excellence in judging sense pleasure is analogous to a "taste" for God.

According to Aquinas, the sense appetite should participate in a person's reason without being subsumed into or dominated by it.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Aquinas Institute, 2018) <https://aquinas.cc/56/57/~1, I-II q.2 a.6 ad.>

³ Servais Pinckaers, *Passions and Virtue*, trans. Benedict M. Guevin (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2015), p. 45.

⁴ Nicholas Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2011), p. 43.

⁵ Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, p. 190. See also *ST II-II q.142 a.1.*

⁶ *ST I-II q.68 a.4 ad.*

⁷ *ST II-II q.147 a.1.*

⁸ *ST I-II q.1 a.7.*

For instance, it is better to have an appropriate passion accompany a good act rather than simply to will and do the good. Also, when the passions of the sensitive appetite follow from the judgement of reason (remote or proximate), they perfect and increase the goodness of the action.⁹ Moreover, the sensitive appetite is a proper seat of virtue. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that, being bodily, the sensitive appetite is governed by reason not as a slave but as a free member of a society.¹⁰ Romanus Cessario claims this “realist view” of Aquinas prevents an “anthropological dualism” which would involve a “despotic control by the will over unruly passions” tantamount to a “process of repression.”¹¹ Nicholas Austin adds that when Aquinas describes the passions as having their own “proper motions,” Aquinas is implying that they...have something of their own to contribute; they are not like puppets, as pure instruments of reason, but more like willing partners.¹² Reason practices subsidiarity in regard to the passions. The way God interacts with creation, “operat[ing] in each thing according to its own nature,” colors Aquinas’ whole view of reality.¹³

How may reason guide the sense appetites without coercing them? Aquinas’ consideration of Christ’s Passion, though focused on pain, illustrates how the sensitive appetite and reason are meant to interact. Christ’s suffering was most painful because he did not use his reason to lessen his pain, but rather let his sensitive appetite experience what was proper to it.¹⁴ Aquinas quotes St. John Damascene, who teaches that “it was according to nature that [natural passions] were aroused in [Christ], when He permitted the flesh to suffer what was proper to it,” though “in the Lord the things of nature did not control the will.”¹⁵ Although Christ had an integration that sinful humanity cannot begin to fathom, as exemplar he allowed his passions their proper function in accord with what he willed. Just as God moves voluntary creatures according to their nature, that they may retain their freedom, so also the sense appetites should be moved by the will, that they may retain their proper liberty and spontaneity. We could expand the analogy to say that as God has elevated humankind, making us “participants of the divine nature,”¹⁶ so the reason elevates the sense appetites to participate in rationality. Further, while this passage refers specifically to the Passion,

⁹ *ST I-II* q.24.

¹⁰ *ST I-II* q.17 a.7.

¹¹ Romanus Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), p. 64-5.

¹² Nicholas Austin, *Aquinas on Virtue: A Casual Reading* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2017), p. 141.

¹³ *ST I-I* q.83 a.1 ad.

¹⁴ *ST III* q.46 a.6.

¹⁵ John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, trans. Frederic H. Chase (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), bk. III, chap. XX.

¹⁶ 2 Peter 1:4. All scripture is from the *NRSV*.

would not the same willed sensitivity be present when Christ ate or experienced other sense pleasures?

Certainly, some Christians recoil at that last consideration. Inordinate indulgence in sense pleasure has been a tempting distraction since the Fall. Thus, many Christians have preferred avoiding sense pleasure altogether, domesticating their emotions,¹⁷ or dominating their sense appetites instead of seeking what Servais Pinckaers calls the “spiritual spontaneity and sensibility”¹⁸ possible with a Thomistic, integrated view. For example, ethicist Steven Jensen, though he criticizes repressive attitudes toward emotion,¹⁹ presents an oversimplified view of temperate living. Like Aquinas, he names “peace of soul” as a prize for the soul who has “stilled her errant desires.”²⁰ But what does this look like for Jensen? In an example involving ice cream offered to a dieter, Jensen writes: “How does a moderate person differ from a self-controlled person? He lacks even an internal conflict. Reason says he should not eat the ice cream, and his emotions follow....He does not merely control his actions; he controls the desires themselves.”²¹ On one hand, his explanation follows Aquinas’ portrayal of the emotions following reason quite well. On the other hand, Jensen crafts a worldview in which the passions are a seat of virtue only in name, since his key word is “control.”²² In contrast, Aquinas writes that appetites “obey” (*obediunt*) and are “led by” (*inducuntur*) reason, which “directs” (*imperat*) them.²³ Aquinas presents the passions as having a nobility of their own.

While not directly answering the question of whether those living in the state of grace experience more sense pleasure than sinners, taking this section to affirm the goodness of desire has provided the essential foundation for a more human (and Thomistic) evaluation of

¹⁷ See Paul Gondreau, “The Passions and the Moral Life: Appreciating the Originality of Aquinas,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 71, no. 3 (2007), p. 445. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2007.0014>.

¹⁸ Josef Pieper, “Reappropriating Aquinas’ Account of the Passions,” in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), pp. 281-82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fjgpz5.18>.

¹⁹ Steven Jensen, *Living the Good Life: A Beginner’s Thomistic Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2013), p. 68.

²⁰ Jensen, *Living the Good Life*, p. 85. See also *ST I-II* q.70 a.3.

²¹ Jensen, *Living the Good Life*, p. 80. Jensen frequently juxtaposes the desire for ice cream and the desire to pocket money given above the due refund. He does not qualify the latter as objectively unreasonable and the former as inordinate due to circumstance. Moreover, the vast majority, if not all, of his examples end in the conclusion that the pleasure in question should be avoided. While Jensen aims his guide at “beginners,” who likely need an initial dose of asceticism, and while Jensen closely adheres to the *words* of Aquinas, his overall presentation of passions suggests that they are suspect.

²² While Jensen occasionally uses other words, he frequently uses “control” in reference to the reason’s relationship with the emotions.

²³ *ST I-I* q.81 a.3 resp.

sense pleasure than Jensen or others like him provide. Now we may consider if Jensen's dieter could desire the ice cream without lacking temperance. My consideration of reasonableness in the next section will answer, conditionally, in the affirmative.

II. Reasonable pleasure

We turn now to the first condition of heightened sense pleasure: reasonableness. Since Aquinas' theology is firmly rooted in the conviction that God has written his will into nature itself, reasonableness (or suitability) is the measure of acts. "Just as each thing is naturally attuned and adapted to that which is suitable to it" by virtue of God's design, so "in the animal appetite...love [the foundational passion] is a certain harmony of the appetite with that which is apprehended as suitable."²⁴ In other words, God designed persons to gravitate toward what suit their nature, so much that "desire is said to be inordinate through leaving the order of reason, wherein the good of moral virtue consists."²⁵

The fact that Aquinas measures a desire by its reasonableness is clear and uncontested, but what does it mean for a desire to be reasonable? Romanus Cessario distinguishes between two ways an appetite can be moved unreasonably: "first, by wanting more or less than what right reason dictates serves the person's good," as in eating too much, "and second by wanting something that frustrates the Creator's design for human well-being," as in the case of same-sex attraction.²⁶ The former would be a desire ill-fit to circumstance, while the latter would be a desire ill-fit to human nature. This distinction is essential; in no way can pleasures ill-suited to nature be part of a Christian appreciation of sense pleasure, even if corruption renders objectively evil actions such as cannibalism or bestiality pleasurable to an individual.²⁷ As for natural pleasures, temperance moderates food and drink according to "demands of place and time, and in keeping with those among whom one dwells."²⁸ As long as "health and a sound condition of body" are not harmed, and as long as "requirements of external things, such as riches and station, and more still...the requirements of good conduct"²⁹ are respected, there is a certain freedom for the sensitive appetite to be moved differently in persons. Each specific circumstance that would

²⁴ *ST* I-II q.29 a.1.

²⁵ *ST* II-II q.148 a.1.

²⁶ Romanus Cessario, *The Virtues, or the Examined Life* (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2002), p. 179.

²⁷ *ST* I-II q.31 a.7.

²⁸ *ST* II-II q.141 a.6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

make drinking or eating sinful derives from these.³⁰ Clearly Jensen's dieter would be wrong to eat or *desire* to eat the ice cream, therefore, if it were *directly* harmful to his health or if it violated good conduct. However, there is no clear indication from the situation as imagined or Jensen's presentation of it that the dieter had more than a general intention to "lose ten pounds...by going on a rigorous diet."³¹ Therefore, the ice cream is a good to be desired freely, if by "desire" we mean an inclination of the sense appetite rather than an experience of internal conflict when the reason intervenes and does not consent.

In contrast, sexual pleasure, because of its intensity and the goods involved, presents a different set of questions. The morality of sexual acts and desires is beyond the scope of this study. The more germane question regards intensity: if virtue seeks the mean, should one seek to lessen the overwhelming pleasure attached to the marital act? Aquinas is clear that "the exceeding pleasure attaching to a venereal act directed according to reason, is not opposed to the mean of virtue," which is "not concerned with the amount of pleasure experienced by the external sense, as this depends on the disposition of the body; what matters is how much the interior appetite is affected by that pleasure."³² Moreover, Aquinas believes that Adam and Eve would have experienced *more* sexual pleasure before the Fall, since "sensible delight [would] have been the greater in proportion to the greater purity of nature and the greater sensibility of the body."³³ The difference would be that "concupiscence would not have so inordinately thrown itself into such pleasure...cleaving to it immoderately." He explains that it is not intensity, but "ardor of desire and restlessness of the mind" due to "linger[ing]" in pleasure which constitutes immoderation.³⁴ In sum, the *external* measure of reasonableness in licit desires is conformity to health and society, as we saw with the question of ice cream, while the *internal* measure is not intensity but something like the "center of gravity" of the person. How much does the person throw her or his whole self into the pleasure? If the rational appetite is supposed to govern the sense appetite, then the rational soul should not debase itself by "cleaving" to or "linger[ing]" in pleasure "immoderately."

Before leaving reasonableness, we must return to Jensen's example of the dieter offered ice cream. What happens when sensual desires are licit and good in themselves but conflict with the judgement of higher reason? While it would be wrong, in this case, to obtain the desired pleasure, is the desire wrong? Pieper, summarizing Aquinas, writes, "The primary and essential meaning of *temperare*" is "to dispose

³⁰ See *ST II-II* q.149 a.3; c.f. also q.148 a.4.

³¹ Jensen, *Living the Good Life*, p. 62.

³² *ST II-II* q.153 a.2 ad.

³³ *ST I-I* q.98 a.2 ad.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

various parts into one unified and ordered whole.”³⁵ In other words, temperance ultimately does not aim at the sense pleasures themselves but at ensuring that one’s “center of gravity” stays in one’s properly rational powers. Does this integration mean one should never have conflicting desires? Aquinas addresses an analogous issue when he asks about whether one’s will must be conformed to God’s. He affirms that a person may will conflicting goods under different aspects, such as when a judge wills a person to be condemned to death because of justice, while the person’s spouse wills the person to be saved because death is a natural evil. Both are good desires, though they conflict.³⁶ One could just as well say that the judge himself, if he knew the person or had pity for the person’s spouse, might experience “conflicting” desires for justice and sparing the person’s life, though as a judge his decision is clear. When temperance moderates the sense appetite, it brings integration and allows the person to choose what is best for the whole human being, but that does not mean the lower desire is necessarily wrong. Ice cream is a good food, full of the nutrients the body needs, and worthy of desire. If a dieter decides not to eat it, it does not follow that he should thus experience it as undesirable.

Considering Lombardo’s treatment of Aquinas’ meditation on Christ in the garden will elucidate why a desire can be good even if rejected by reason in a particular circumstance. Lombardo argues that Aquinas’ position that “there was never any conflict between Christ’s appetites, despite the apparent evidence to the contrary in the tension implicit in Christ as he prays in the garden”³⁷ can only be explained if “*The criterion for the rationality of a passion is the passion itself.*”³⁸ By this, he means that if an appetitive movement is in accord with the *telos* designated by God, the passion is rational. At base, Lombardo maintains that “a passion that is evoked by an object that is inappropriate on [the holistic] level might be deeply appropriate on a more basic level, even though this passion should not supplant the judgement of reason in determining what is to be done.”³⁹ Applied to the Passion, Jesus’ desire to maintain His natural life is good, but the best choice on the holistic level is to obey the will of the Father, and Christ does so peacefully. “Christ’s divergent desires did not rupture Christ’s interior harmony” since his sensual desires did not delay or prevent him from carrying out the decision of his will.⁴⁰

³⁵ Josef Pieper, “Temperance: The Fourth Cardinal Virtue”, in *Fortitude and Temperance*, Daniel F. Coogan, trans. (New York: Pantheon, 1954), p. 48.

³⁶ *ST* I-II q.19 a.10.

³⁷ See *ST* III q.46-49.

³⁸ Lombardo, *Logic of Desire*, p. 213. Emphasis in original.

³⁹ Lombardo, *Logic of Desire*, p. 214.

⁴⁰ Lombardo, *Logic of Desire*, p. 215. See also *ST* III q.18 a.6.

In sum, the desire for sense pleasure can be reasonable and good even when higher reason proposes a better course of action than to satisfy it. The difference between this situation and the situation in which errant desires leads to sin is twofold. First, good desires maintain an ordered interrelation of the powers of the soul. Peace, the fruit of the Holy Spirit by which “we [are] not disturbed by external things, and that our desires rest altogether in one object”⁴¹ epitomizes the way in which the powers should interact with one another, serving the highest good of the soul. Second, one must distinguish between desires which if indulged would *certainly* lead to an unreasonable effect and those that would do so only *conditionally*. Thus, if we return to Jensen’s example of the dieter offered ice cream, the reasonableness of the desire should not depend solely on the fact that the person had previously decided his diet precluded ice cream, but also, as Lombardo suggests, on the reasonableness of the passion itself. All other circumstances being favorable to the eating of ice cream, at the heart of the matter would be two considerations: 1) does desiring the ice cream but choosing not to eat it cause disorder or unrest in the soul, and 2) would eating the ice cream directly harm the dieter, or only generally in conjunction with other choices? Jensen clarifies in his example that the dieter experiences unrest, but never presents the possibility of a conditionally unreasonable desire which would not produce unrest. He even pairs this example with the desire to retain twenty dollars a bank teller has given in excess of the proper return; he calls it a “similar battle.”⁴² However, the inclination to ice cream is not really “similar” to the desire to retain another’s money, which is certainly, not conditionally, unreasonable. If we take Aquinas’ words about reasonable desires too literally, the Christian is tempted to permanently shut her or his eyes to the world in the hopes of never seeing the good and desirable things there, lest she or he wrongfully desire something that in any number of ways might be ill-suited to the moment.

III. Asceticism

Of course, the wise person regularly closes his eyes. No Christian account of pleasure could discount the need for continual purification, which calls for asceticism and caution. If the sense appetite can behave like a free citizen, it can also rebel “by desiring what reason forbids.”⁴³ Although Catholic theology has always taught that justification heals humanity’s corrupt nature, “in the present life this healing

⁴¹ *ST I-II* q.70 a.3.

⁴² Jensen, *Living the Good Life*, p. 64.

⁴³ *ST I-I* q.83 a.1 ad; see also *II-II* q.141 a.3.

is wrought in the mind – the carnal appetite being not yet restored.”⁴⁴ The Christian in grace can abstain from mortal sin, but not *every* venial sin “on account of the corruption of his lower appetite of sensuality.”⁴⁵ Moreover, the sense pleasures, based primarily on touch,⁴⁶ forcefully tempt the Christian away from integrity. These pleasures are “diffused throughout the entire body, and when one or another of the senses is stimulated, the whole organism vibrates.”⁴⁷ To some extent, every Christian can say with St. Paul, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”⁴⁸ For all these reasons, the Christian tradition has always included a call to mortification of the senses. As St. John of the Cross explains, “even as the children of Israel, solely because they retained one single affection [the fleshpots]...could not relish...the manna...even so the spirit cannot succeed in enjoying the delights of the spirit of liberty, if it still be affectioned to any desire.”⁴⁹ Again, it is not the pleasures themselves that are the problem, but that the will has debased itself and become a slave to the passions instead of their wise ruler. Thus fasting, abstinence, chastity, periodic continence for the married, and other bodily mortifications have aims such as growth in prayer and liberation from disordered and disquieting desires.⁵⁰ Aquinas uses the example of Daniel, who “abstained thus from pleasures, not through any horror of pleasure as though it were evil in itself [like the insensible person], but...to adapt himself to the heights of contemplation.”⁵¹ Note that abstinence from sense pleasure is not good in itself but only insofar as it serves a higher purpose.

Fortunately for the Christian, the state of grace presupposes the action of the Holy Spirit, who orders a person’s mind and provides the requisite integration for a person to desire reasonably.⁵² Asceticism provides a natural complement to the work of the Holy Spirit in building a virtuous foundation in the soul. Despite real difficulties, “the more virtuous a person becomes, the more he can trust his emotional reactions to persons and events around him, and the less he will struggle with his lower, animal-like impulses.”⁵³ Humanity is meant for wholeness. Pieper insists that even before conversion, “man is not really a battlefield of conflicting forces and

⁴⁴ *ST* I-II q.109 a.8; see also q.109 a.9.

⁴⁵ *ST* I-II q.109 a.8 resp.

⁴⁶ *ST* I-II q.31 a.6.

⁴⁷ Jordan Aumann. *Spiritual Theology* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1980), p. 166.

⁴⁸ Rm. 7:19.

⁴⁹ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Radford, VA: Wilder, 2008), chap. XI, 77.

⁵⁰ *ST* II-II q.142 a.1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *ST* I-II q.70 a.3.

⁵³ Gondreau, “Passions and the Moral Life,” p. 450.

impulses which conquer one another; and if we say that the sensuality ‘in us’ gets the better of our reason, this is only a vague and metaphorical way of speaking...it is always the decisive center of the whole, indivisible person by which the inner order is upheld or upset.”⁵⁴ Unlike Jensen, who does present a conflict of control between the reason and senses,⁵⁵ Pieper follows Aquinas in seeing the person as a coordinated whole. If sensuality prevails over reason, Aquinas sees a failure in the reason to apply universal principles to a particular action.⁵⁶ In other words, it is more that the “decisive center” has failed to do its job of ordering things aright than that sensuality has won a battle. In addition, there is what moral theologian, Paul Gondreau, calls an “intimate synergy and interpenetrability”⁵⁷ between the powers, such that Aquinas compares the higher intellect to a court which pronounces judgement on the decision of the lower court to either accept or reject delectation.⁵⁸ While this passage pertains to consent to sin, we need not suppose a person’s powers interact differently when judging licit pleasure. Thus, if a person approves the pleasure of a spoonful of ice cream, the request for approval must go, as up a chain, to the highest powers of the soul. The entire person consents to and delights in the pleasure. In contrast to the sinner, whose powers are disordered because she or he frequently takes pleasure in things that higher reason judges (or should judge) unreasonable, the person living the life of grace gains, through the repetition of virtuous actions and the Gifts and Fruits of the Holy Spirit, the ability to align her or his entire being to sense pleasures conducive to her or his overall good. The person living the life of grace may even experience the overflow from higher powers into her or his sense appetite, such as when the joy of a just act “overflow[s] into the sensitive appetite.”⁵⁹

We must conclude that those living in the state of grace are the only ones who fully appreciate sense pleasure, since only they are habitually aligned so that their whole beings approve of delights. The virtuous person also has a finer taste, so that “[a]bstemious persons appreciate food more than the overeater, even if they take less of it; and, in a certain sense, they make it the servant of their spiritual hunger.”⁶⁰ This claim is supported by our previous considerations about integration, but is further clarified by Pieper’s commentary on Aquinas’ treatment of temperance and chastity. In his question on temperance, Aquinas

⁵⁴ Pieper, “Temperance,” p. 50. See also Pinckaers, “Reappropriating Aquinas’ Account,” p. 278.

⁵⁵ Jensen, *Living the Good Life*, p. 64.

⁵⁶ *ST I-II* q.77 a.2.

⁵⁷ Gondreau, “Passions and the Moral Life,” p. 425.

⁵⁸ *ST I-II* q.74 a.7.

⁵⁹ *ST I-II* q.59 a.5 resp.

⁶⁰ Pinckaers, *Passions and Virtue*, p. 46-47.

states that “the lion is pleased to see the stag, or to hear its voice, in relation to his food. On the other hand man derives pleasure from the other senses, not only for this reason [the pleasures of touch], but also on account of the becomingness of the sensible object.”⁶¹ In other words, the ability to take pleasure in “useless” beauty is the mark of a human being, not a beast. Pieper argues that in this passage Aquinas implies that only through temperance can a person truly enjoy sensual pleasures. Unlike the animals, instinctually obsessed with food and sex, the temperate person can enjoy what appeals to sight and sound without referring everything to self.⁶² In fact, Pieper characterizes the unchaste person as ultimately selfish, with a “constantly strained will-to-pleasure [that] prevents him from confronting reality with that selfless detachment which alone makes genuine knowledge possible.”⁶³ In contrast, the temperate person, in proportion to her or his integration, is able to experience the full range of sense pleasure. With a sense appetite unfettered by unruly attachments, she or he can take pleasure in beauty without destroying it by consumption.

IV. Pleasure is not our End

In order for a Christian to claim heightened sense pleasure, there is one criterion beyond reasonableness and purification: the sense pleasure must not be sought in itself but enjoyed as a gift and sign of higher joys. At the end of *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis characterizes Joy, “the old stab, the old bittersweet” pleasure he took in nature, as a signpost. He writes, “When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter... But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare... ‘We would be at Jerusalem.’”⁶⁴ Sense pleasures are what lead us to our *telos* but are not the *telos*.⁶⁵ In the light of intellectual joys, of grace, of Heaven, these goods are “quite a trifle.”⁶⁶ Of course, for one to try to serve two masters⁶⁷ by letting the belly or the sexual appetite be “master of his affections”⁶⁸ or to seek one’s last end in the flesh and not the good of the soul⁶⁹ is unreasonable. However, even when they are not sought as a *last* end, the more one seeks sense pleasures, the less they can

⁶¹ *ST I-II* q.59 a.5 resp.

⁶² Pieper, “Temperance,” pp. 71-72.

⁶³ Pieper, “Temperance,” p. 64.

⁶⁴ C. S. Lewis. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955) p. 238.

⁶⁵ Lombardo, *Logic of Desire*, p. 43.

⁶⁶ *ST I-II* q.2 a.6.

⁶⁷ See Mt. 6:24.

⁶⁸ *ST I-II* q.1 a.5.

⁶⁹ *ST II-II* q.55 a.1-2.

bear the weight of expectation. As Aquinas points out, for all temporal goods, “when we already possess them, we despise them, and seek others: which is the sense of Our Lord’s words (John 4:13): *Whosoever drinketh of this water*, by which temporal goods are signified, *shall thirst again*.”⁷⁰ This is not to say a Christian should not take delight in what is legitimately pleasant. Aquinas writes that just as a person prefers tasty medicine to nasty medicine though both lead to health, so a person should delight in virtuous deeds “for the sake of their inherent goodness” though she or he values them in reference to God as his last end.⁷¹ For the person in grace, the “signposts” of pleasure are neither meaningless markers nor loitering-places. Nor is it necessary that a person maintain constant attention to God as the end goal any more than a person on the journey must “be thinking of the end at every step.”⁷² The Holy Spirit generously guides the person who truly desires integration and right relationship with sense pleasures, and, alongside Piety and the other Gifts, Knowledge “teaches [him] how to judge rightly concerning created things in relation to God...it realizes the emptiness of created things and sees through them the God who made them.”⁷³ In the life of grace, “all things,” even pleasures, “work together for good for those who love God.”⁷⁴

V. Conclusion

Ultimately, the liberty of the Gospel should characterize the attitude of Christians toward sense pleasure. That is not to say Aquinas is a libertine. He recognizes the sometimes-overwhelming temptations of the flesh, the disordered heritage of the Fall, and the tendency of people to cling to pleasures instead of seeking their true End. Yet for all this, his vision of the possibilities for the human experience of life in this world should console Christians and lead them away from a dualist distrust of their bodies. While a Christian can never wholly dispense with asceticism, he should not cling to ascetical practices as if they were good in themselves. Nor should fear of pleasure be the motive; fear of the Lord, of offending God – yes – but not fear of pleasure or desire in themselves.

⁷⁰ *ST I-II* q.2 a.1 ad.

⁷¹ *ST I-II* q.70 a.1 ad.

⁷² *ST I-II* q.1 a.6 ad. See also Pinckaers, “Temperance,” p. 59. Pinckaers criticizes how “The proposition that ‘the essential and proper good of man is existence in accord with reason’ could be read to mean: ‘Constant spiritual awareness is what distinguishes the specifically human condition; everything that clouds this awareness is unspiritual, consequently unworthy of the human condition, and therefore evil.’” He concludes that constant attention is neither called for nor desirable.

⁷³ Aumann. *Spiritual Theology*, p. 254.

⁷⁴ *Rm.* 8:28.

Just as “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [Christ’s] sake will find it,”⁷⁵ so those who live in the state of grace and do not habitually seek out pleasures can truly enjoy them. While they experience *quantitatively* less sense pleasure than sinners because of their asceticism, they are free to relish them in a *qualitatively* better way precisely because they are integrated and free from attachment. With their “center of gravity” firmly fixed in their higher powers seeking God, their desires freely participate in the rule of reason, and their reason does not debase itself by clinging to sense pleasure. The Christian has an answer for jaded sinners filled up on pleasures that do not satisfy. Her evangelization will never begin nor end with pleasure. However, along the way, she can assure seekers that the life of grace is more pleasant than sin.

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⁷⁵ Mt. 16:25.