

Human Love as Unfulfilling Union According to St. Thomas Aquinas

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1. The Question

It is common experience as well as a long-standing truism that friends desire to keep company with one another. Thomas Aquinas even claims that "this appears to be the most characteristic mark of friendship."¹ He emphasizes this, interestingly, by remarking that "we even take more delight in the company of a friend than in the company of ourselves."² And he explains this by the fact that we are able to know others better than ourselves. But keeping company is only *one* kind of union. A closer analysis of love reveals that it consists in a reciprocal encounter revolving around different kinds of union. The thesis that my paper is to support maintains that the union of love which is the *essence* of love is not the fulfillment of the longing for union with the beloved, but rather the union of longing itself with the beloved. This union is a form of *becoming*, prior to the desire for union.

Now human love is commonly understood as the fulfillment of the desire for union with another person. The classic defender of this position is not, as is often presumed, Plato himself but Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. A human being is accordingly a half looking for its other half and attaining wholeness through the union of love. Perhaps the best known contemporary defender of it is Erich Fromm in his famous book *The Art of Loving*.³ In opposition to this, Thomas Aquinas takes the standpoint that love, rather than consisting in fulfillment, is itself the cause of a desire for union. In his opinion love is the union of longing itself, that is to say, the union of the affect [*unio affectus*]. A good translation for *affectus* is in my opinion *heart*. The translation *affections*, in the plural, seems to me misleading. The differentiated perspective which Aquinas presents should result in some light being shed on the intricate nature of human love.

¹ Hoc videtur esse amicitiae maxime proprium, simul conversari ad amicum. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, IV, cap. 22, n. 2. Cf. also *In III Sent.*, dist. 29, q. 1; *In Ethic.*, IX, lect. 13, n. 12.

² *In III Sent.*, dist. 29, q. 1, a. 5, ad 6. Quia magis potest homo cognoscere quae sunt alterius quam quae propria, ideo magis delectatur in conversando ad amicum quam etiam ad seipsum

³ New York: Harper & Row, 1974; originally published in 1956.

For his part Fromm often speaks of "the experience of union" and describes love itself as an "active penetration of the other person, in which my desire to know is stilled by union."⁴ He defines the essence of love as "the overcoming of human separateness, as the fulfillment of the longing for union."⁵ Knowledge is for him an integral component of love: "I know [...] by experience of union not by any knowledge our thought can give. [...] The only way of full knowledge lies in the act of love: this act transcends thought, it transcends words. It is the daring plunge into the experience of union."⁶ And such fulfilled union with the beloved is commonly considered to be the ideal of happiness.

As Aquinas sees it, what love can achieve is not the realization of this goal but the discovery of the ideal of such a union. Human love is, in other words, more a *revelation* of fulfillment than the fulfillment itself. Its ultimate meaning lies precisely in being an unfulfilling union—unfulfilling because of the vision that it awakens.

2. The Union Which Is Love Is the Union of Longing Itself

Love is located in the affect, where it has the character of a force, initiating a striving. Undoubtedly, the essence of love lies not in praxis, not in doing. (The good Samaritan became the neighbor of the man who fell into the hands of bandits not by helping him; just the opposite: he helped him because he had become his neighbor, having been moved with compassion when he saw him⁷). Helping is not love, but is no more than an *expression* of it. Nor is benevolence, that is to say, the willing of good, the essence

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ II-II, 30, a. 2c: Since pity is grief for another's distress, as stated above (1), from the very fact that a person takes pity on anyone, it follows that another's distress grieves him. And since sorrow or grief is about one's own ills, one grieves or sorrows for another's distress, in so far as one looks upon another's distress as one's own. Now this happens in two ways: first, through union of the affections, which is the effect of love. For, since he who loves another looks upon his friend as another self, he counts his friend's hurt as his own, so that he grieves for his friend's hurt as though he were hurt himself. Hence the Philosopher (*Ethic.* ix, 4) reckons "grieving with one's friend" as being one of the signs of friendship, and the Apostle says (Rm. 12:15): "Rejoice with them that rejoice, weep with them that weep." Secondly, it happens through real union, for instance when another's evil comes near to us, so as to pass to us from him. Hence the Philosopher says (*Rhet.* ii, 8) that men pity such as are akin to them, and the like, because it makes them realize that the same may happen to themselves. This also explains why the old and the wise who consider that they may fall upon evil times, as also feeble and timorous persons, are more inclined to pity: whereas those who deem themselves happy, and so far powerful as to think themselves in no danger of suffering any hurt, are not so inclined to pity. Accordingly a defect is always the reason for taking

of love. Thomas criticizes Aristotle for not advancing deeply enough when he defines love as benevolence, that is to say, as an act of willing the good. According to Aquinas benevolence follows upon love. Like helping, benevolence is no more than a manifestation of love.⁸ The *essential* union is not the union with the desired good, or with the friend for whom it is desired, but rather, as Aquinas perceptively puts it: "Love precedes desire."⁹ "The affective union [...] precedes the movement of desire."¹⁰ Thus, love is a kind of becoming, taking place in the affect, that is to say, in the *heart*.

"Goodwill properly speaking is that act of the will whereby we wish well to another. Now this act of the will differs from actual love, considered not only as being in the sensitive appetite but also as being in the intellective appetite or will. For the love which is in the sensitive appetite is a passion. Now every passion seeks its object with a certain eagerness. And the passion of love is not aroused suddenly, but is born of an earnest consideration of the beloved object; wherefore the Philosopher, showing the difference between goodwill and the love which is a passion, says (*Ethic.* ix, 5) that goodwill does not imply impetuosity or desire, that is to say, has not an eager inclination, because it is by the sole judgment of his reason that one man wishes another well. Again love of this kind arises from previous acquaintance, whereas goodwill sometimes arises suddenly, as happens to us if we look on at a boxing-match, and we wish one of the boxers to win. But that kind of love which is in the intellective appetite also differs from goodwill, because it de-

pity, either because one looks upon another's defect as one's own, through being united to him by love, or on account of the possibility of suffering in the same way.

⁸ "The Philosopher, by thus defining 'to love,'" Thomas explains, "does not describe it fully, but mentions only that part of its definition in which the act of love is chiefly manifested." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 27, a. 2, ad 1. "To love is indeed an act of the will tending to the good, but it adds a certain union with the beloved, which union is not denoted by goodwill." *Ibid.*, ad 2.

⁹ Amor praecedat desiderium. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 25, a. 2c.

¹⁰ Unio affectiva [...] praecedat motum desiderii. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 25, a. 2, ad 2. The union of lover and beloved is twofold. There is real union, consisting in the conjunction of one with the other. This union belongs to joy or pleasure, which follows desire. There is also an affective union, consisting in an aptitude or proportion, in so far as one thing, from the very fact of its having an aptitude for and an inclination to another, partakes of it: and love betokens such a union. This union precedes the movement of desire. duplex est unio amati ad amantem. una quidem realis, secundum scilicet coniunctionem ad rem ipsam. et talis unio pertinet ad gaudium vel delectationem, quae sequitur desiderium. alia autem est unio affectiva, quae est secundum aptitudinem vel proportionem, prout scilicet ex hoc quod aliquid habet aptitudinem ad alterum et inclinationem, iam participat aliquid eius. et sic amor unionem importat. quae quidem unio praecedat motum desiderii.

notes a certain union of the lover's heart with the beloved, in as much as the lover deems the beloved as somehow one with him, or belonging to him, and so tends towards him [*movetur in ipsum*]. On the other hand, goodwill is a simple act of the will, whereby we wish a person well, even without presupposing the aforesaid union of the heart with him."¹¹

Thomas Aquinas clearly differentiates between three—or perhaps four—kinds, or stages, of union involved with love: (1) the union that gives rise to love, (2) the union that love desires and (3) the union of desiring love itself.¹² Thomas explains that the first kind of union consists in *knowledge* of the beloved, who thus becomes attractive for the will. The second kind "is caused by love *effectively*, since it moves the lover to desire and see the presence of the beloved as fitting and pertaining to himself." The third kind, finally, is caused by love "*formally*, since love itself *is* such a union or connection." Thomas then quotes Augustine's remark that "love is a kind of life, joining two, or desiring to join them, that is to say, the lover and the beloved."¹³ Thomas interprets Augustine's statement as meaning that the joining itself pertains precisely to a union of the affect [*unionem affectus*], without which there is no love at all, whereas the union that is desired pertains to the so-called *real* union [*unionem realem*].¹⁴

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 27, a. 2c. The translation I am using is that of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920) with some changes of my own.

¹² Unio tripliciter se habet ad amorem. Quaedam enim unio est (1) causa amoris. Et haec quidem est (a) unio substantialis, quantum ad amorem quo quis amat seipsum, quantum vero ad amorem quo quis amat alia, est (b) unio similitudinis, ut dictum est. Quaedam vero unio est (2) essentialiter ipse amor. Et haec est unio secundum coaptationem affectus. Quae quidem assimilatur unioni substantiali, in quantum amans se habet ad amatum, in amore quidem amicitiae, ut ad seipsum; in amore autem concupiscentiae, ut ad aliquid sui. Quaedam vero unio est (3) effectus amoris. Et haec est unio realis, quam amans quaerit de re amata. Et haec quidem unio est secundum convenientiam amoris, ut enim philosophus refert, II Politic., Aristophanes dixit quod amantes desiderarent ex ambobus fieri unum, sed quia ex hoc accideret aut ambos aut alterum corrumpi, quaerunt unionem quae convenit et decet; ut scilicet simul conversentur, et simul colloquantur, et in aliis huiusmodi coniungantur. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 28, a. 1, ad 2.

¹³ Augustine, *De trinitate*, VIII.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 25, a. 1c. Primam ergo unionem amor facit effective, quia movet ad desiderandum et quaerendum praesentiam amati, quasi sibi convenientis et ad se pertinentis. Secundam autem unionem facit formaliter, quia ipse amor est talis unio vel nexus. Unde Augustinus dicit, in viii De trin., quod amor est quasi vita quaedam duo aliqua copulans, vel copulare appetens, amantem scilicet et quod amatur. Quod enim dicit copulans, refertur ad unionem affectus, sine qua non est amor, quod vero dicit copulare intendens, pertinet ad unionem realem. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 28, a. 1c.

"The union of lover and beloved is twofold. The first is real union; for instance, when the beloved is present with the lover. The second is union of affection: and this union must be considered in relation to the preced-

The union, therefore, which love is in its essence takes place in the affect [*unio affectus* or *unio affectiva*]. There occurs a mutual presence: "The beloved is contained in the lover insofar as he or she is impressed on the lover's heart [*impressum in affectu*] by a kind of complacency [*per quandam complacentiam*]." ¹⁵ ("And, conversely, the lover is also truly contained in the beloved insofar as the lover pursues in a certain manner what is intimate in the beloved."¹⁶)

Now a characteristic of the essence of love between friends, desiring the company of one another, is that this desire remains essentially unfulfilled. This is primarily owing to reflective consciousness. It is reflection that renders love unfulfillable in the present human condition. The more love becomes self-conscious, the greater the cleft between desire and its fulfillment. Observing oneself, even when it means observing oneself being happy, implies a detachment: I as the observer and the observed.

3. Self-Reflection

Self-reflection lies at the core of the problem of human love, for it is on the one hand an indispensable pre-requisite for fulfilling happiness and on the other hand an ineluctable deterrent. It is undamental that for human beings happiness must be conscious, if it is to be happiness at all. There is nothing, it may be presumed, which we value more highly than consciousness. Human love is specifically conscious love. It is precisely I, or *we*, who love. Through self-reflection we are able to view whatever is good *qua*

ing apprehension; since movement of the appetite follows apprehension. Now love being twofold, viz. love of concupiscence and love of friendship; each of these arises from a kind of apprehension of the oneness of the thing loved with the lover. For when we love a thing, by desiring it, we apprehend it as belonging to our well-being. In like manner when a man loves another with the love of friendship, he wills good to him, just as he wills good to himself: wherefore he apprehends him as his other self, in so far, to wit, as he wills good to him as to himself. Hence a friend is called a man's 'other self' (*Ethic.* ix, 4), and Augustine says (*Confess.* iv, 6), 'Well did one say to his friend: Thou half of my soul.'

The first of these unions is caused 'effectively' by love; because love moves man to desire and seek the presence of the beloved, as of something suitable and belonging to him. The second union is caused 'formally' by love; because love itself is this union or bond. In this sense Augustine says (*De Trin.* viii, 10) that 'love is a vital principle uniting, or seeking to unite two together, the lover, to wit, and the beloved.' For in describing it as 'uniting' he refers to the union of affection, without which there is no love: and in saying that 'it seeks to unite,' he refers to real union.'" Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 28, a. 1c.

¹⁵ Amatam continetur in amante, in quantum est impressum in affectu eius per quandam complacentiam. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 28, a. 2, ad 1.

¹⁶ E converso vero amans continetur in amato, in quantum amans sequitur aliquo modo illud quod est intimum amati. Nihil enim prohibet diverso modo esse aliquid continens et contentum, sicut genus continetur in specie et e converso. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 28, a. 2, ad 1.

good.¹⁷ Aquinas teaches, furthermore, that, as opposed to animals, we are able to view sensual beauty *as* beautiful.¹⁸ Whereas, according to Aristotle and Thomas, animals do experience pleasure, humans additionally take pleasure in the beauty of sensible things.¹⁹ As a rule, the spirit enhances the sensual.

The first thing that the desire for good arising from love is directed to is the *existence* of the beloved. (In fact, self-reflection is nothing else but the apprehension of the act of existence.) As Aristotle expressed it: what we desire most in regard to ourselves is the apprehension of our existence. Hence, since the friend is a second self, what we desire most of him is his existence.²⁰

Here the typical irony of the basic human situation comes into play: self-reflection means both self-possession and self-alienation. For conscious living implies observing oneself, which

¹⁷ Quaedam vero inclinantur ad bonum cum cognitione qua cognoscunt ipsam boni rationem; quod est proprium intellectus. et haec perfectissime inclinantur in bonum; non quidem quasi ab alio solummodo directa in bonum, sicut ea quae cognitione carent; neque in bonum particulariter tantum, sicut ea in quibus est sola sensitiva cognitio; sed quasi inclinata in ipsum universale bonum. et haec inclinatio dicitur voluntas. unde cum angeli per intellectum cognoscant ipsam universalem rationem boni, manifestum est quod in eis sit voluntas. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 59, a. 1c. Cf. idem, *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 1c.

¹⁸ Sensus sunt dati homini non solum ad vitae necessaria procuranda, sicut aliis animalibus; sed etiam ad cognoscendum. Unde, cum cetera animalia non delectentur in sensibilibus nisi per ordinem ad cibos et venerea, solus homo delectatur in ipsa pulchritudine sensibilibus secundum seipsam. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 91, a. 3, ad 3.

¹⁹ Delectationes aliorum sensuum aliter se habent in hominibus, et aliter in aliis animalibus. In aliis enim animalibus ex aliis sensibus non causantur delectationes nisi in ordine ad sensibilia tactus, sicut leo delectatur videns cervum vel audiens vocem eius, propter cibum. Homo autem delectatur secundum alios sensus non solum propter hoc, sed etiam propter convenientiam sensibilibus. [...] In quantum autem sensibilia aliorum sensuum sunt delectabilia propter sui convenientiam, sicut cum delectatur homo in sono bene harmonizato, ista delectatio non pertinet ad conservationem naturae. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 141, a. 4, ad 3.

²⁰ Aristotle gives the following explanation: "As then lovers find their greatest delight in seeing those they love, and prefer the gratification of the sense of sight to that of all the other senses, that sense being the chief seat and source of love, so likewise for friends (may we not say?) the society of each other is the most desirable thing there is. For (i) friendship is essentially a partnership. And (ii) a man stands in the same relation to a friend as to himself; but the consciousness of his own existence is a good; so also therefore is the consciousness of his friend's existence; but this consciousness is actualized in intercourse; hence friends naturally desire each other's society. And (iii) whatever pursuit it is that constitutes existence for a man or that makes his life worth living, he desires to share that pursuit with his friends. Hence some friends drink or dice together, others practise athletic sports and hunt, or study philosophy, in each other's company; each sort spending their time together in the occupation that they love best of everything in life; for wishing to live in their friends' society, they pursue and take part with them in these occupations as best they can." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 19, translated by H. Rackham [Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1934]), Book IX, 12 (1171b29–1172a3). Cf. *ibid.*, 9 (1170b10–19).

in turn involves a gap between oneself as subject and as object. Even in the word *I*, which has the appearance of being able to attain complete identity, there is still a dualism of the observer and the observed. *I* thus involves a certain self-alienation, an inner cleft. Living in reality implies an asymptotic hiatus. (This ontological suffering cannot be assuaged by justice.) Human experience remains *per se* conscious experience. A statement like, "I love you," is disappointingly complex in comparison to the union it is trying to express with its three distinct words.

The complete union with the other can be achieved only in a situation in which no cleft exists between what is existing and its act of existence. We conceive of complete happiness as comprising the perfect identity of the apprehension of the presence of the loved-one together with one's consciousness of this. Ecstasy is therefore imagined to imply the extinguishment of self-consciousness, self-forgetfulness and, on the other hand, the total and immediate presence in the other. But the realization of this dream shatters the dream, splits it in two. Complete union with the other with full awareness would indeed overcome the dualism of the experience and the experienced, eliminating the gap between being both one with oneself and one with the other. Truth is nothing else but the conscious presence of an object together with the active awareness of this presence. If a knowing subject were to obtain complete objectivity—that is, an identity of thought and object—then, according to the argument of Thomas Aquinas, there would be no truth at all, seeing that truth always involves two factors, namely, the object and the subject, whereby, for there to be truth, the subject must contribute something of its own [*aliquid proprium*].²¹ Without this duality, there cannot be the phenomenon which we call truth—which is a name for the specific human way of being in reality. Not having the problem of intentionality, an animal can be subsumed into its object uninhibitedly. A dog while eating is one with its eating. Not having intentionality, that is, being completely one with itself, it is devoid of an awareness of distance from its object. Separateness from oneself and separateness from one's object have the same source.

Happiness for us must be true, that is to say, conscious, happiness. I have to be aware that I am happy in order to be really happy. I have to observe myself *being* happy. But, as I have said, this self-observation perforce undermines happiness. Inevitably, we distinguish between *what* is happening and *that* it is happening, in other words, between essence and existence. This dualism is typical of human conscious life. Ecstasy is pure happiness only in our memory or in our hope. As it occurs in actual reality, happiness is accompanied by a dimension of disappointment.

²¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 3c. Otherwise, Aquinas explains, one could not speak of an *adaequatio*, as in the traditional definition of truth.

Hence, the longing effected by love is insatiable—at least in the kind of split existence that we presently enjoy.

4. The Striving for Union with the Beloved Is the Striving for Union with the Beloved *in God*

Human love opens the religious dimension, for God brings the difference between being and its knowability to a union of identity. "Now the aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved," Thomas says, "is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbor is that he may *be in God*."²² In God, essence and existence are identical. "This sublime truth," as Thomas Aquinas calls it,²³ lies at the primal ground of all reality, love being no exception.

There is a logic, then, in Erich Fromm's definition of love and his understanding of God, that is to say, what he calls his non-theism. "The problem of knowing man," he states, "is parallel to the religious problem of knowing God."²⁴ Hence, love of God is analogous to our love of human beings. "The basis for our need to love lies in the experience of separateness and the resulting need to overcome the anxiety of separateness by the experience of union. The religious form of love, that which is called the love of God, is, psychologically speaking, not different. It springs from the need to overcome separateness and to achieve union."²⁵ "To love God [...] would mean, then, to long for the attainment of the full capacity to love, for the realization of that which 'God' stands for in oneself."²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, need make no excessive demands on human nature, since he does not hold God to be just a word that stands for a projected ideal, which has no reality beyond ourselves.

In sum, the union sought by love requires divine being, which alone has the necessary ontological structure to bring about a union in which union and its reflection attain the longed-for fulfillment. Therefore, in the *present* human condition love is opened to a kind of union that can be attained only in the mode of eschatological hope. Love awakens a vision which animates hope. This dimension is necessarily eschatological. Nonetheless, the fact that the experience of love awakens a vision in us which can find no satisfying fulfillment in this life is purposeful. We dream of finding someone who is completely one with us. Neither is the dream fulfilled for the present nor is it in vain.

²² Ratio autem diligendi proximum deus est, hoc enim debemus in proximo diligere, ut in deo sit. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 25, a. 1c.

²³ Hanc autem sublimem veritatem. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, cap. 22. Aquinas considers this to be the divine revelation to Moses.

²⁴ *Loc. cit.*, 26–27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.