Caritas and Consciousness: Aristotle and Aquinas on Love of Neighbor

In Book IX, chapter 7 of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle raises a conundrum with regard to benefactors and beneficiaries. In resolving the problem he clarifies his concept of the benefactor and provides a fascinating account of the benefactor’s motivating psychology. I would suggest that his analysis provides an excellent entry into the topic of the theological virtue of love. In this paper, therefore, I propose to unpack Aristotle’s analysis of the benefactor in order to compare and contrast his work with Thomas Aquinas’ treatment of caritas or Christian love. I find that the two analyses overlap significantly in that both point to a desire to participate constructively in what I’ll call the “full community of being.” However, Aristotle and Aquinas differ in their understanding of the origins of this desire.

Book IX, Chapter 7

The first sentence of IX, 7 reads: “Benefactors seem to love their beneficiaries more than the beneficiaries love them [in return], and this is discussed as though it were an unreasonable thing to happen.”¹ Let’s start thinking about this comment through the vocabulary. “Love” translates the Greek verb philein, which, of course, in its substantive form, philia, is usually translated as friendship. Therefore, the verb connects the discussion in this chapter to Aristotle’s extended analysis of friendship in Book VIII and in chapters 4, 8 and 9 of Book IX. “Benefactor” and “beneficiary” translate active and passive participle forms of the same verb, euergetein, meaning to act well or do something good. So, literally, a benefactor is one who performs or produces a good and a beneficiary is one to whom good has been done or who has received some good. Later in the chapter Aristotle makes use of the idea of that the good is something that one produces and that, therefore, we can think of the benefactor’s action as resulting in a product, a product that reflects who the benefactor is. The good that comes to the beneficiary is the good that the benefactor has produced, and, to take the point a step further, to
the extent to which the beneficiary is changed for the better by the action of the benefactor, the beneficiary himself is to that degree the product of the benefactor and a reflection of the benefactor’s own excellence.

Now we can consider how this sentence functions in Aristotle’s argument. It is quite clear that Aristotle is introducing his topic by pointing out a paradox. He is suggesting that common experience is contrary to what one might expect. Thinking about it in the abstract, one might anticipate that the beneficiary would have the greater love since it is the beneficiary who is rightfully grateful for what the benefactor has done. Yet, according Aristotle, experience proves that the reverse is true, and while this may go against one’s expectations, Aristotle thinks that once one has a deeper understanding of the benefactor’s conscious motivation this makes sense. So in order to understand why the benefactor loves the beneficiary more than the beneficiary loves the benefactor a new and more straightforward problem comes to the fore. What motivates the benefactor to help the beneficiary? It is Aristotle’s answer to this question that I find noteworthy and what I want to focus on before moving on to Thomas Aquinas’ treatment of caritas.

However, I ask that you first allow me a small digression. I’d like to point out the larger relevance of this question. At St. Mary’s, my home institution, I teach ethics every semester. My current course design calls for us to study first Thomas Hobbes and then John Stuart Mill. This sequence highlights an interesting problem. While Hobbes has the much weaker concept of moral responsibility, he has the clearer psychology. With Hobbes, one’s motivation is quite simple. It is one’s own self-interest in survival and the pursuit of power. So Hobbes becomes the advocate of a social contract wherein one’s moral responsibility is minimal—merely to refrain from violating the rights of other individuals. In other words, he does not find that we possess any obligation to act as a benefactor for anyone else. Any such obligation would recede beyond the horizon of one’s self-interest.
With John Stuart Mill, the situation is quite different. Mill proposes that we ought to act in any given situation so as to produce the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. As commendable as this may be, Mill has a hard time explaining why we ought to do this. Mill makes it clear that Utilitarianism is a kind of hedonism. He asserts early in his *Utilitarianism* that “pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends.”\(^2\) Perhaps this makes the psychological conflict obvious. If one’s only concern is with pleasure and freedom from pain, it would seem unlikely that one would be interested in giving up some measure of pleasure or incurring some measure of pain in an effort to act for the benefit of others. The moral obligation of Utilitarianism seems at odds with its hedonism. Yet Mill wants to hang on to both. He wants us to abide by the Utilitarian rule, but also wants us to recognize that pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain are our motivations in everything we do. Yet even if helping others brings us some modicum of pleasure, who can deny that in reality helping others requires a sacrifice of time, resources and may in some cases even cost us our lives? Why then should one want to be a benefactor? I don’t think Mill can give us an adequate answer, and yet the question seems crucial given that the nature of our relationships to others is central to the study of ethics.

In IX, 7 Aristotle proposes his answer to this question. His first step is to make it clear that a true benefactor is not motivated by calculated self-interest. In other words, a benefactor is not like a creditor whose interest after lending someone money lies only in being repaid. To the contrary, “Benefactors love and like their beneficiaries even if they are of no present or future use to them.”\(^3\) A true benefactor is not motivated by repayment or reciprocation. In Book VIII, Aristotle worked out his concept of friendships of utility and explained that such friendships are the most limited and limiting forms of friendship since they are founded directly on an agreed to *quid pro quo*. Here he is making it clear that no such arrangement enters into the motivating drive of the true benefactor. What then is the benefactor’s motive?
Aristotle’s Explanation

Aristotle explains the “cause” of the benefactor in a series of five short and interrelated statements. They read something like a syllogism with key terms linking each statement to the next. The first premise reads, “Being is choice worthy and lovable for all.”\(^4\) In IX, 4 Aristotle asserted that those who possess self-friendship love their own being and desire to live and be, while those who lack self-friendship do not. This comment in chapter 7 seems to echo the earlier point. The benefactor possesses self-love and loves her or his own existence. Yet there is also an intriguing ambiguity in the comment in as much as “being” may be thought of in the more metaphysical sense of the totality of what is. The benefactor loves being in the sense that whatever is, is choice worthy and good in itself. I find this ambiguity of a second possible interpretation helpful, and we’ll return to it in a moment.

The second premise reads: “We are in so far as we are actualized, since we are in so far as we live and act.”\(^5\) This amplifies the first statement. We know from Aristotle’s metaphysics, that one exists as potency, form and act. In loving one’s existence one values one’s form, that is, one’s virtue and good character, over one’s mere potency, and one values one’s actions over one’s good character. The highest human fulfillment or eudaimonia lies in action itself, in doing with arête or excellence. Now a good action produces a good, a product, and so Aristotle’s third premise is: “The product is, in a way, the producer in his actualization.”\(^6\) This premise connects the previous premise with the conclusion to follow. Euergetein, good action, yields a product, and this product manifests the actualization of the benefactor. Potency never becomes actualized except through an action, and the action itself becomes manifest in the good that it produces. This means that there is an intimate relationship between the benefactor and the good that the benefactor produces. Hence, the conclusion follows. It reads: “Hence the producer is fond of the product, because he loves his own being. This is natural, since what he is potentially is what the product indicates in actualization.”\(^7\) The benefactor’s love of the beneficiary
derives naturally from her love of her own being since what she is becomes real and actual only because she produces a good, something choice worthy and admirable (kalon).

Now let’s take a moment to think about this sequence of propositions in a larger context. Hobbes predicates his ethical and social theory on his concept of self-interest, and for Hobbes self-interest manifests itself in nothing more than the desire to survive and to acquire power. Aristotle predicates his concept of the benefactor on his concept of self-love, the love of one’s own being. However, for Aristotle self-love does not reduce to the mere desire for power but to the natural desire to bring good into being, for this achievement reflects one’s own excellence in being, one’s actualization. This is why Aristotle’s approach links the agent, the actor, with the community to which his action contributes. As he writes, in chapter 8:

Those who are unusually eager to do fine actions are welcomed and praised by everyone. And when everyone competes to achieve what is fine and strains to do the finest actions, everything that is right will be done for the common good, and each person individually will receive the greatest of goods, since that is the character of virtue. Hence the good person must be a self-lover, since he will both help himself and benefit others by doing fine actions.

This comment takes us back to the first premise of Aristotle’s explanation of the benefactor. Recall that it states simply that “Being is choice worthy and lovable for all.” Recall too that I suggested that the most plausible reading of the statement is to interpret it in light of Aristotle’s comment in IX, 4 that self-love entails, among other things, love of one’s own existence. However, the larger point seems to be that love of one’s own being develops naturally not into a will to power over being but into a desire to participate in the being of the totality, to enter effectively and excellently into the full community of being. Hence, if Aristotle’s explanation of the benefactor begins narrowly with the love of one’s own being, it ends broadly with one’s love of the fullness of being.

Aquinas on Caritas
Let’s turn now to Thomas Aquinas, the great thirteenth-century theologian and Aristotelian scholar. As was the tradition in his time, Aquinas routinely refers to Aristotle as “The Philosopher.” The honorific was clearly high praise, but it was also distancing. Aristotle may have gone far in perfecting the science of philosophy, but he was not a Christian theologian. This, of course, implies that Aristotle would have little or nothing to contribute to important scripture based topics like the Trinity and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity (or caritas).

Thomas divided his magnum opus, the Summa Theologiae, into three parts, with the second dedicated to the study of the human person as an ethical being, that is, as “an intelligent being endowed with free-will and self-motion.” Moreover, he further divided the second part in two, with the first part dedicated to philosophical ethics and the second dedicated to theological or Christian ethics. One would rightly expect that the Nicomachean Ethics strongly influences the first of these two parts (called the Prima Secundae) and that scripture and Christian scholarship would feature widely in the second (the Secunda Secundae).

Consistent with these parameters, Aquinas’ discussion of caritas is found in the Secunda Secundae, concentrated primarily in Questions 23-27. What one finds surprising, however, is his continued reliance on the Nicomachean Ethics in these questions. His use of Aristotle becomes evident in the very first article. In Question 23, article 1, Aquinas begins by defining caritas, and his definition serves as a touchstone to which he will return time and again in subsequent articles. The definition itself is quite simple—“Charity is the friendship of man for God.” He infers this from scripture. He quotes the Gospel of John and First Corinthians as his sources, but when he turns to what friendship is he draws heavily on Book VIII of the Nicomachean Ethics. In fact, each of the three objections he offers up in critique of his own position appeal to Aristotle’s Book VIII.

We learn in Book VIII that true or complete friendship arises when two people wish well to each other for each other’s own sake. True friendship transcends the calculus of self-interest so that one
comes simply to care for and wish well to one’s friend. It is in this sense that caritas is friendship. However, Aristotle also pointed out that certain conditions are required in order for such a friendship to form. As the first objection in Aquinas’ article notes, true friends must live together (or in close daily contact), and as the second notes true friendship is reciprocated. We can pass over the third objection, but as Aquinas acknowledges in the body of the article, Aristotle also insists that true friendship requires communication since each friend must know of the other’s good will. Now while Aristotle gives no indication that he intends to apply his analysis to anything beyond what the word friendship normally implies—relationships between two human beings—Aquinas accepts that these conditions also apply in the case of caritas with the consequence that they serve as the basis for objections to his claim that caritas is friendship with God.

Objection one points out that friends dwell together, but we do not dwell with God who is in heaven. Objection two points out that Jesus teaches us that caritas compels us to love even our enemies, but enemies by definition are not our friends. Therefore, caritas cannot be friendship. Finally, there is the matter of communication. How does God communicate his good will to us in pursuit of this friendship? The depth of insight behind Aquinas’ definition becomes manifest as he works through each of these problems.

Actually, the first and third problems are more or less the same. We do not dwell with God, and for this reason we may not be aware of God’s good will. So in his reply to objection 1, Aquinas concedes that caritas is “imperfect.” He bases this claim on Philippians 3 and the Revelation 22. Caritas cannot fully form and implant itself in us as a virtue “in this present state of life.” So our friendship with God remains tenuous, but there is nonetheless a basis for its beginning. The seed can be planted because “God communicates His happiness to us” (nobis suam beatitudinem communicat).

Three Problems
Now in order to understand what Aquinas is up to here we need to consider three things. First, we need to understand what he means by communication. How does God communicate with us? Second, we need to understand what it is that God communicates to us. “Beatitudinem” can be translated literally as beatitude or more loosely as happiness—personally, I like beatific delight—but regardless of the translation, the message seems, well, brief. Shouldn’t God give us more do go on? And third, we need to understand why in receiving this communication the virtue of Christian love begins to form in us. After all, one supposes that caritas concerns love for one’s neighbor, and one’s neighbor has been left out of both Aquinas’ definition of caritas and his formulation of what God communicates to us. This seems to be a strange omission.

The First Problem

Aquinas tackles the problem of the how God communicates with us in his reply to the first objection. The reply begins with the observation that “man’s life is twofold.” He goes on to explain that “There is his outward life in respect of his sensitive and corporeal nature,” and later adds that “The other is man’s spiritual life in respect of his mind.”

Our first life is “outward” or extroverted, if you will, because we engage the world with our bodies and our senses. As physical beings we engage with a physical reality. Yet we are also spiritual beings, and so we can also engage the world from the very different locus of mind and spirit. Now the distinction Aquinas is offering here may seem to be drawn from the familiar territory of Greek philosophy where Plato and Aristotle drew a rather sharp line between sensing and understanding. However, Aquinas’ citations in this reply, as I previously noted, come from Philippians and Revelation. So while the Greek perspective is not irrelevant here, neither is it Aquinas’ central concern. He is pointing not to the arduous journey of the Greek philosopher, but to the Judeo-Christian experience of revelation. Accordingly, he bluntly states that in the first of these two lives “there is no communication or fellowship between us and God or the angels”\(^\text{10}\); while in the second “there is fellowship between us
and both God and the angels.” So *caritas* is friendship with God because God communicates his beatific delight to us, and this communication is possible only insofar as we are spiritual beings who can experience God without seeing or hearing him. We can be conscious of God in our spiritual lives without beholding God in our outward lives. We can now turn to the question of what God communicates to us.

**The Second Problem**

God, Aquinas tells us, knows and loves himself.¹¹ This is what he means by God’s beatitude. Now to be self-conscious is to exist in relation with one’s self. This, for example, is why Aristotle devoted Book IX, chapter 4 to the possibility of self-friendship. Working out of his own scriptural tradition, Aquinas thinks through God’s self-relationship in terms of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three persons of the Trinity. Aquinas believes that the Son is the Word of God and the Holy Spirit is God as love. Now out of an earnest desire to avoid delving too deeply into the mystery of the Trinity, let me hasten to my main point about this. The three persons of the Trinity concern, first, God’s relationship to himself and, second, his relationship to his works, his creation.

We can gather this from the prologue of John’s Gospel where he affirms that Jesus is the Word. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”¹² John’s words begin to clarify what it means to think of Jesus as the Word. First, he makes clear that the Word exists with God eternally. Jesus is co-eternal with the Father. Moreover, the Word is God. More to the point, however, he also associates the Word with creation. Jesus is the Word through whom all things come to be. John brings Jesus into the very act of creation for it is through Jesus that God creates. John seems to have done this because he found the evidence of the Word already existing in the first chapter of *Genesis*. *Genesis* opens, of course, with: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The chapter also makes clear how God creates. He creates by
speaking his “let there be,” his *fiat*, and this “let there be” is the Word; it is Jesus. So through the Word, God knows himself and creates and knows all his works.\textsuperscript{13}

Moreover, *Genesis* 1 also tells us how God responds to what he has created. We are told “and he saw that it was good,” and this is the Holy Spirit responding with love to His creation. The Holy Spirit is God’s beatitude first with respect to himself and second with respect to his works.\textsuperscript{14} This brings us to my point (and past the need for any further reflection on the Trinity). God’s beatitude does not seem to be something separate and apart from the world. God is a creating God, and God’s beatitude is his delight in being what He is and what He does. Just as Jesus was in the beginning, so too was God’s beatific delight in all his works present from the beginning. John tells us that “apart from Him (Jesus, the Word) nothing came into being.” From this we can infer what God communicates to us when he communicates his beatific delight to us. In short, God communicates his love for all the world to us. In *caritas* we become friends with God through learning of God’s love for himself and all that is.

Perhaps you’re thinking by now that Aquinas’ understanding of *caritas* has very little to do with Aristotle’s benefactor. *Caritas* seems to be about the Trinity and *Genesis* and God’s love for the world, topics that Aristotle never dreamed of. Yet you may have noticed two parallels. First, just as Aristotle was preoccupied in his discussion of the benefactor with the benefactor’s self-relationship, so Aquinas in his discussion of *caritas* seems focused on God’s self-relationship. Second, both arguments seem headed in the same direction. Aristotle found that the benefactor desires to participate in the full community of being because being itself is choice worthy and lovable. Similarly, Aquinas defines *caritas* in a way that involves us in God’s self-love which is a love that moves outward to become the love for all that is. In discussing the last of our three problems, the question of one’s neighbor, this point will become paramount.

*The Third Problem*
We have noted that Aquinas’ definition of *caritas* omits any mention of neighbors. However, when the issue does arise, we find that Aquinas takes a decisive position. We have been discussing ST.II-II.23.1, and the second objection in this article reasons that *caritas* cannot be friendship because we are taught to love even our enemies. Notice how the objection denies something that Aquinas has not affirmed. For Aquinas, *caritas* is friendship with God, while the objection denies that *caritas* is friendship with one’s neighbors. Still, the objection gives Aquinas the opportunity to explain how one’s neighbors are drawn into our friendship with God. We do not love our neighbors because they are our friends; rather we love them because God does. He explains this by way of analogy, asking us to consider a situation in which one is friends with a person who has a family. If we love our friend, then we must love her or his family as well, and this holds true even if someone in the family wrongs us. We must, in other words, remain mindful of how dear our friend’s loved ones are to him or her. Similarly, we must always remain mindful of God’s love for others.

It is often pointed out that friendship is selective. We become friends with people whom we admire and with whom we share things in common. In all honesty, we must admit that there are people with whom we simply would not want to be friends. What Aquinas’ approach makes clear is that out of *caritas* we love such people. I would argue, then, that Aquinas has omitted “love of neighbor” from his definition of *caritas* not out of neglect, but due to his understanding of the depth and breadth of the obligation that friendship with God entails.

This interpretation is reinforced by two additional passages where the question of love of neighbor arises. In ST.II-II.23.5, the question is whether *caritas* is one virtue or two. The first objection clarifies the meaning of the question. *Caritas* as love has two objects, God and neighbor, but since it has two objects it must be two virtues. Presumably, then, one can possess one of these virtues without the other. Aquinas’ reply is admittedly not linguistically inspiring, but it is firm. *Caritas*, he replies is one virtue because we love our neighbor for God’s sake. While this is the extent of his reply, one may also
infer that since it is one virtue, anyone who possesses caritas will be good at both loving God and one’s neighbors.

Aquinas sees fit to return to the problem a third time. ST.II-II.25.1 asks “Whether the Love of Charity Stops at God or Extends to Our Neighbor.” By now we can easily anticipate Aquinas’ answer, yet his wording is significant. He concludes his argument with this sentence: “It is specifically the same act whereby we love God and whereby we love our neighbor.” So Aquinas addresses the relationship between love of God and love of neighbor three times. In his first pass, he tells that love of God entails love of one’s neighbor. We love our neighbor because we love God. In his second pass, he strengthens the relationship by insisting that love of God and love of neighbor are one virtue, meaning that one cannot love one without also loving the other. Finally, in his third pass, he hits his mark. Not only are the two one virtue, they are the same act. They are not separate events or moments in time, but one event and one moment in time. In loving our neighbor we love God, and in loving God we love our neighbor. The two cannot be separated.

Now one might object here that certainly friendship with God implies more than loving one’s neighbor. In God’s creation there are many neighbors; there is the ecology of the earth and the breadth of the universe. There is too the full sweep of history. The mind staggering in thinking that all this is implied in friendship with God. Still, I am struck by Aquinas’ simple assertion that love of God and neighbor are one act. Perhaps we can take him to mean that friendship with God requires us to attempt the impossible—to be in love with everyone and everything.15

Conclusion

In this paper we have juxtaposed Aristotle’s benefactor and Aquinas’ virtue of caritas. We have seen that Aristotle finds the benefactor to be driven by a person’s natural desire to exist in his or her own actualization, and that this requires one to achieve excellence and eudaimonia through the performance of good deeds. Moreover, good deeds are nothing other than deeds that bring some good
into being, and the good brought into being cannot exist in isolation but must contribute something within the larger context of the community. Therefore, becoming a benefactor requires one’s participation in this larger context, and, since contexts always fit into even larger contexts, Aristotle’s analysis relates the benefactor to the full community of being. One cannot excel as a person without contributing somehow to the broadening horizons of one’s reality.

Aquinas explains the genesis of *caritas* very differently. The natural desire for one’s own actualization is supplanted by God’s communication of his beatific delight. Nonetheless, the virtue of *caritas* resembles Aristotle’s benefactor in that both the benefactor and the person who possess *caritas* aim to be of service to others and to a project larger than themselves. Indeed, by rooting *caritas* in God’s beatitude Aquinas implies that *caritas* draws one into God’s own project, the project of the totality of being.

I’d like to make one final point of comparison. It is a bit uncanny to realize, but Aquinas’ beneficent God seems to a degree to resemble Aristotle’s benefactor. It was Aquinas’ view that human knowledge of God requires thinking by way of analogy. God’s transcendent, infinite being can be compared to the mundane, finite being of our experience only by way of analogy, and God’s qualities such as self-knowledge and self-love can only be understood by analogy with those same qualities in human existence. So just as the benefactor’s actions can be attributed at their root to one’s love for his own existence which naturally broadens into a love for the common good, so too by analogy does God’s self-love broaden into his love for his comprehensive creative act.

Now the limitation inherent in this method of speculation is that one’s insight into the divine is only as good as one’s insight into human consciousness. Could Aristotle in working out the nature of the consciousness of the human benefactor have laid the groundwork for Aquinas’ insight into the divine reality? Aquinas first studied Aristotle’s *Ethics* in his twenties, and in his major works quotes the *Ethics*
more often than any other book of Aristotle’s. However, Aquinas was the consummate scholar, and he drew on many sources besides Aristotle, so I do not think we can draw any definite conclusion here. But, putting aside the question of Aristotle’s influence, it remains notable that Aquinas’ God resembles Aristotle’s benefactor writ large in the unencumbered infinity of transcendence. Moreover, in exploring the sources of Aquinas’ achievement there is a more important issue than Aristotle’s contribution. We must also wonder to what extent Aquinas was appropriating his own experience. After all, one tends to suppose that Aquinas too experienced God’s beatific delight.
End Notes

3. Ibid., 145 (1167b32).
4. Ibid., 145 (1168a6).
5. Ibid., 145 (1168a7).
6. Ibid., 145 (1168a8).
7. Ibid., 145 (1168a9-10).
9. ST II-II.23.1.
10. ST II-II.23.1 reply 1. See also ST I.12.3: “It is impossible for God to be seen by the sense of sight, or by any other sense, or faculty of the sensitive power.”
11. See ST I, 37, 2. Here Aquinas argues that God’s love can be legitimately understood in two ways—with regard to God’s essence or substance and with regard to the triune relations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. See also the reply to objection 3: “The Father loves not only the Son, but also Himself and us, by the Holy Ghost... So He loves himself and every creature by the Holy Ghost, inasmuch as the Holy Ghost proceeds as the love of the primal goodness whereby the Father loves Himself and every creature.”
13. ST I.34.3.
14. “The Father loves not only the Son, but also himself and us, by the Holy Ghost... So He loves himself and every creature by the Holy Ghost.” ST I.37.2 reply 3.
15. “For contemplative felicity God has the most perfect and everlasting consideration of Himself and other things. For active felicity He has the government, not of the life of one man, or of a household, a city, or a kingdom, but of the whole universe.” Taken from *Summa Contra Gentiles* (vol. 1) tr. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), I.102.
17. “A Christian reader of the Ethics can only respond to it in the end by showing how the Aristotelian pedagogy is absorbed into the higher pedagogy of grace. The second part of the *Summa* deserves to be described as Thomas’s full reading of the Ethics precisely because it transforms the pedagogy of the Ethics into an even more encompassing pattern for Christian teaching.” Ibid., 244-45.