

QUESTION 181

The Active Life

Next we have to consider the active life. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Does every act of the moral virtues belong to the active life? (2) Does prudence belong to the active life? (3) Does teaching (*doctrina*) belong to the active life? (4) Does the active life remain after the present life?

Article 1

Does every act of the moral virtues belong to the active life?

It seems that not every act of the moral virtues belongs to the active life:

Objection 1: The active life seems to consist only in those acts that are ordered toward others; for instance, in *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “The active life is to give bread to the hungry.” And, at the end, after having enumerated many things that pertain to others, he adds, “and to dispense to each and every individual whatever he needs.” But it is not through *all* the acts of the moral virtues that we are ordered toward others, but, as is clear from what was said above (q. 58, aa. 2-8 and *ST* 1-2, q. 60, aa. 2-3), *only* through justice and its parts. Therefore, it is not the case that the acts of all the moral virtues belong to the active life.

Objection 2: In *Super Ezechiel* Gregory claims that Leah (Genesis 29), who was weak-eyed and fertile, signifies the active life, which, “when occupied with work, sees less, but when it now by word and now by example inspires its neighbors to imitation, it generates many children in good works.” But this seems to involve charity, through which we love our neighbor, rather than the moral virtues. Therefore, it seems not to be the case that the acts of the moral virtues belong to the active life.

Objection 3: As was explained above (q. 180, a. 2), the moral virtues dispose one toward the contemplative life. But the disposition and the completion belong to the same thing. Therefore, it seems that the moral virtues do not belong to the active life.

But contrary to this: In *De Summo Bono* Isidore says, “In the active life all the vices have to be first extirpated through the exercise of good works, in order that in the contemplative life one might arrive at contemplating God with an already purified mind’s eye.” But all the vices are extirpated only through the acts of the moral virtues. Therefore, the acts of the moral virtues belong to the active life.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 179, a. 1), the active and the contemplative are distinguished by the different pursuits of men who are tending toward different ends; one of these ends is *the consideration of truth*, which is the end of the contemplative life, whereas the other is *exterior action*, toward which the active life is ordered.

Now it is clear that what is being sought in the case of the moral virtues is not mainly the contemplation of truth; instead, they are ordered toward acting, and this is why in *Ethics 2* the Philosopher says, “Knowledge counts for little or nothing in the case of [moral] virtue.” Hence, it is clear that the moral virtues belong essentially to the active life (*pertinent essentialiter ad vitam activam*). That is why in *Ethics 10* the Philosopher orders the moral virtues toward active happiness (*ad felicitatem activam*).

Reply to objection 1: The most important of the moral virtues is justice, by which, as the Philosopher proves in *Ethics 5*, one is ordered toward others. Hence, the active life is described by means of those things that are ordered toward others not because it consists *solely* in these things, but because it consists *mainly* in these things.

Reply to objection 2: Through the acts of all the moral virtues an individual can direct his neighbors toward the good by his example, and in the same place Gregory attributes this to the active life.

Reply to objection 3: Just as a virtue that is ordered toward the end of another virtue passes in a certain sense into the species of that other virtue, so, too, when an individual uses the things that belong to the active life *solely* insofar as they dispose him toward contemplation, then they are included under the contemplative life.

On the other hand, in the case of those individuals who intend the works of the moral virtues as goods in their own right (*secundum se bonis*) and not as things that dispose them toward the contemplative life, the moral virtues belong to the active life—though one could go so far as to claim that the active life is itself a disposition for the contemplative life (*etiam dici possit quod vita activa dispositio sit ad contemplativam*).

Article 2

Does prudence belong to the active life?

It seems that prudence does not belong to the active life:

Objection 1: Just as the contemplative life belongs to the cognitive power, so the active life belongs to the appetitive power. But prudence belongs to the cognitive power rather than to the appetitive power. Therefore, prudence does not belong to the active life.

Objection 2: In *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says that the active life, “when occupied with work, sees less,” and that is why it is signified by Leah, who has bleary eyes. But prudence requires clear eyes in order for a man to judge rightly about what is to be done. Therefore, it seems that prudence does not belong to the active life.

Objection 3: Prudence lies in the middle between the moral virtues and the intellectual virtues. But in the same way that, as has been explained (a. 1), the moral virtues belong to the active life, so the intellectual virtues belong to the contemplative life. Therefore, it seems that prudence belongs neither to the active life nor to the contemplative life, but instead belongs to the intermediate kind of life that Augustine posits in *De Civitate Dei* 19.

But contrary to this: In *Ethics* 10 the Philosopher says that prudence belongs to active happiness, which involves the moral virtues.

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1 and *ST* 1-2, q. 18, a. 6), that which is ordered toward something else as an end, especially in moral matters, is drawn into the species of that toward which it is ordered; for instance, as the Philosopher notes in *Ethics* 5, “he who commits adultery in order to steal is called a thief more than an adulterer.” Now it is clear that the cognition which belongs to prudence is ordered toward the operations of the moral virtues as its end, given that prudence, as *Ethics* 6 says, is “right reasoning about things to be done.” Hence, as the Philosopher says in the same place, the ends of the moral virtues are “the principles of prudence.”

Therefore, just as it was explained above (a. 1) that in an individual who orders the moral virtues toward the quiet of contemplation, they belong to the contemplative life, so the cognition that belongs to prudence, which is in its own right ordered toward the operations of the moral virtues, belongs directly to the active life—as long as prudence is being taken *in the proper sense* in which the Philosopher is talking about it.

However, if prudence were being understood *more generally*, viz., insofar as it includes *every* sort of human cognition, then as regards a certain part of it, prudence would belong to the contemplative life—this according to what Tully says in *De Officio* 1: “If an individual is able to grasp the truth and to explain his reasoning very clearly and very quickly, then he is rightly wont to be considered most prudent and most wise.”

Reply to objection 1: As was established above (*ST* 1-2, q. 18, a. 4-6), moral operations are specified by their end. And so the cognition that belongs to the contemplative life is that which has its

end in the very cognition of the truth, whereas the cognition involved in prudence, which has its end in an act of the appetitive power, belongs to the active life.

Reply to objection 2: An exterior occupation makes a man see less of intelligible things, which are separated from the sensible things among which the operations of the active life reside. Nonetheless, an exterior occupation that belongs to the active life makes a man see more clearly in the judgment about things to be done that prudence involves—and this both (a) because of the man’s experience and (b) because of the mind’s attention, since, as Sallust puts it, “Genius prevails when you are paying attention.”

Reply to objection 3: The respect in which prudence is said to lie between the intellectual virtues and the moral virtues is that it agrees with the intellectual virtues in the *subject* [in which it inheres] (*in subiecto*), whereas it agrees totally with the moral virtues in its *subject matter* (*in materia*).

Now that third kind of life lies in the middle between the active life and the contemplative life as regards the things with which it is occupied, since it is sometimes occupied with the contemplation of truth and sometimes occupied with exterior things.

Article 3

Is teaching an act that belongs to the active life?

It seems that teaching (*docere*) is an act that belongs not to the active life, but to the contemplative life:

Objection 1: In *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “Perfect men make known to their brothers the heavenly goods that they have been able to contemplate, and they inflame their souls with a love for inner clarity.” But this involves teaching. Therefore, teaching is an act that belongs to the contemplative life.

Objection 2: The act and the habit seem to be traced back to the same kind of life. But to teach is an act of wisdom; for at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* the Philosopher says, “The sign of one who knows is that he is able to teach.” Therefore, since wisdom and knowledge belong to the contemplative life, it seems that teaching likewise belongs to the contemplative life.

Objection 3: Just as contemplation is an act of the contemplative life, so, too, is prayer. But a prayer by which one prays for another still belongs to the contemplative life. Therefore, an individual’s bringing to the knowledge of others a truth that he has meditated upon seems to belong to the contemplative life.

But contrary to this: In *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “The active life is giving bread to the hungry and teaching the ignorant with the word of wisdom.”

I respond: The act of teaching (*actus doctrinae*) has two objects, since teaching is done by speaking, whereas speech is an audible sign of an interior conception (*locutio est signum audibile interioris conceptus*):

Thus, the *first object* of teaching is the *subject matter or object of the interior conception*. And as regards this object, teaching belongs sometimes to the active life and sometimes to the contemplative life. It belongs to the active life when a man interiorly conceives of a truth in order to be directed by it in his exterior action, whereas it belongs to the contemplative life when a man interiorly conceives of an intelligible truth which is such that he takes delight in considering it and loving it. Hence, in *De Verbis Domini* [Sermon 104] Augustine says, “Let them choose for themselves the better part,” viz., the contemplative life, “Let them take time for the word, let them gaze with eagerness upon the sweetness of the doctrine, let them occupy themselves with salutary knowledge”—where he is clearly saying that teaching belongs to the contemplative life.

By contrast, the *second object* of teaching lies on the side of the audible discourse (*ex parte sermonis audibilis*). And on this score the object of the teaching is *the listener himself*. As regards this

object, every instance of teaching pertains to the active life, which exterior actions belong to.

Reply to objection 1: This passage is speaking expressly of teaching as regards its *subject matter*, insofar as it has to do with the consideration of, and love for, the truth.

Reply to objection 2: The habit and the act share an object. And so this objection clearly proceeds on the part of the *subject matter* of the interior conception. For the ability to teach belongs to the one who is wise, or who knows, only to the extent that he is able to express the interior conception in spoken words in order to be able to lead another to an understanding of the truth.

Reply to objection 3: An individual who prays for another does not do anything to the one for whom he is praying, but instead acts only with respect to God, who is intelligible truth. By contrast, an individual who teaches others does something to them by means of his exterior act. Hence, the line of reasoning is not parallel in the two cases.

Article 4

Does the active life remain after the present life?

It seems that the active life remains after the present life (*vita activa maneat post hanc vitam*):

Objection 1: As has been explained (a. 1), the acts of the moral virtues belong to the active life. But as Augustine explains in *De Trinitate* 14, the moral virtues remain after the present life. Therefore, the active life remains after the present life.

Objection 2: As has been explained (a. 3), teaching others belongs to the active life. But in the future life, in which we will be like the angels, teaching will be able to exist in just the way that it seems to exist among the angels, where “one illumines, cleanses, and perfects another”—which, according to Dionysius in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 7, has to do with “the reception of knowledge” (*ad scientiae assumptionem*). Therefore, it seems that the active life remains after the present life.

Objection 3: That which is in its own right more durable seems better able to remain after the present life. But the active life seems to be more durable in its own right; for in *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “We are able to remain fixed in the active life, whereas we are in no way able to remain in an intense mental state (*intenta mente*) in the contemplative life.” Therefore, the active life is much more able to remain after the present life than is the contemplative life.

But contrary to this: In *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “The active life is taken away with the present age, whereas the contemplative life is begun here in order to be brought to completion in our heavenly homeland.”

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), the active life has its end in exterior actions, and if these exterior actions are traced back to the quiet of contemplation, they even now belong to the contemplative life. Now in the future life of the blessed the occupation with exterior acts will cease, and if there are any exterior acts, they will be traced back to a contemplative end. For as Augustine says at the end of *De Civitate Dei*, “There we will have free time (*vacabimus*) and we will see; we will see and we will love; we will love and we will praise.” And earlier in the same book he says that God “will be seen there without end, will be loved without boredom, will be praised without weariness. This will be the function (*munus*), the affection (*affectus*), the activity (*actus*) for everyone.”

Reply to objection 1: As was explained above (q. 136, a. 1), the moral virtues will remain not with respect to the acts that they have regarding the means to an end, but with respect to the acts that they have regarding the end. Now acts of this sort exist insofar as they constitute the rest or quiet (*quies*) that belongs to contemplation. This is what Augustine means by ‘free time’ (*vacatio*) in the passage quoted above, which is to be understood not just as freedom from exterior tumult, but freedom even from the interior disturbance that belongs to the passions.

Reply to objection 2: As was explained above (q. 180, a. 4), the contemplative life consists principally in *the contemplation of God*. And on this score, it is not the case that one angel teaches another, since, as Matthew 18:10 says of “the angels of these little ones,” who belong to the lower orders [of angels], that they “always see the face of the Father.” So, too, in the future life no individual among men will be teaching other men; instead, as 1 John 3:2 puts it, all of us “will see Him as He is.” Again, this is what Jeremiah 31:34 says: “No man will any longer be teaching his neighbor and saying, ‘Learn about the Lord’; for everyone will know Me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

Now as regards those things that pertain to *the arrangement of divine ministries*, one angel teaches another by cleansing, illuminating, and perfecting. And on this score, by the fact that they are intent on ministering to lower creatures, the angels have something like the active life for as long as the world lasts. This is signified by the fact that Jacob (Genesis 28:12) sees angels *ascending* the ladder, which pertains to contemplation, and *descending* the ladder, which pertains to action. Still, as Gregory says in *Moralia* 2, “They do not go forth from the divine vision in such a way as to be deprived of the joys of inward contemplation.” And so in these ministries the active life is not distinct from the contemplative life, as it is with us, who are impeded from contemplation by our active works. Nor are we promised similarity to the angels when it comes to ministering to lower creatures, since this will belong to us not in accord with the order of our nature, as it does in the case of the angels, but instead in accord with the vision of God.

Reply to objection 3: The fact that in our present state the durability of the active life exceeds the durability of the contemplative life stems not from any property of the two sorts of lives considered in their own right, but from our defectiveness, which is such that we are drawn back from the heights of contemplation by the weight of our body. Hence, in the same place Gregory adds, “By its very weakness the mind falls back upon itself and away from the immensity of such a height.”