

QUESTION 179

The Division of Lives into the Active and the Contemplative

Next we have to consider the active life and the contemplative life (questions 179-182). Here there will be a fourfold consideration: first, the division of lives into the active and the contemplative (question 179); second, the contemplative life (question 180); third, the active life (question 181); and, fourth, a comparison of the active life to the contemplative life (question 182).

On the first topic there are two questions: (1) Are lives appropriately divided into the active and the contemplative? (2) Is this division sufficient?

Article 1

Are lives appropriately divided into the active and the contemplative?

It seems that lives are not appropriately divided into the active and the contemplative:

Objection 1: The soul is a principle of life by its essence; for in *De Anima* 2 the Philosopher says, “In the case of living things, to live (*vivere*) is to exist (*esse*).” But the soul is through its powers a principle of *both* action and contemplation. Therefore, it seems that lives are not appropriately divided into the active and the contemplative.

Objection 2: It is inappropriate for what is prior to be divided by posterior differences. But as is clear from *De Anima* 3, the active and the contemplative, i.e., the practical and the theoretical, are differences that belong to the intellect. Now *living* (*vivere*) is prior to *understanding* (*intelligere*), since, as is clear from the Philosopher in *De Anima* 2, *living* is in living things primarily because of the vegetative soul. Therefore, it is inappropriate to divide *life* into the active and the contemplative.

Objection 3: As is clear from Dionysius in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 6, the name ‘life’ implies movement. But contemplation exists more in rest—this according to Wisdom 8:16 (“When I enter into my house, I shall repose with [wisdom]”). Therefore, it seems that lives are not appropriately divided into the active and the contemplative.

But contrary to this: In *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “There are two sorts of life in which almighty God instructs us by His sacred word, viz., the active life and the contemplative life.”

I respond: The things that are properly said to be living are those that move or operate on their own (*ex seipsis*). Now what is proper to an individual, along with what it is inclined toward most of all, belongs to it in its own right (*secundum ipsum*) to the greatest degree. And so each living thing is thought of as living by the operation which is most proper to it and toward which it is most of all inclined—in the way that the life of plants is said to consist in their being nourished and in generating, whereas the life of animals consists in their sensing and moving around, and the life of men consists in their understanding and in their acting in accord with reason. Hence, in the case of men, the life of each man seems to be what he especially delights in and tends toward most of all, and it is in this sort of life that every man wants especially “to live in company with his friend,” as *Ethics* 9 points out.

Therefore, since some men mainly tend toward the contemplation of truth and some mainly tend toward exterior actions, it follows that the lives of men are appropriately divided into the active and the contemplative.

Reply to objection 1: Each thing’s proper form, which makes it exist in actuality, is the principle of its proper operation. And so to live (*vivere*) is called the *esse* of living things because it is by the fact that living things have *esse* through their own form that they operate in such-and-such a way.

Reply to objection 2: It is not *life* taken *in general* that is divided into *active* and *contemplative*; instead, it is *life of a man*, which receives its species from the fact that a man has an intellect. And so the division of *intellect* is the same as the division of *human life*.

Reply to objection 3: Contemplation does, to be sure, involve rest from exterior movements, but

contemplating is nonetheless a certain movement on the part of the intellect in the sense in which any operation is called a movement; accordingly, in *De Anima* 3 the Philosopher claims that sensing and understanding are certain movements in the sense in which the act of something complete (*actus perfecti*) is called a movement. And it is in this sense that in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius posits three movements of a soul that is contemplating, viz., “the straight,” “the circular,” and “the oblique.”

Article 2

Are lives divided sufficiently into the active and the contemplative?

It seems that lives are not divided sufficiently into the active and the contemplative:

Objection 1: In *Ethics* 1 the Philosopher says that there are three sorts of lives that stand out most of all, viz., the *life of pleasure*, the *civil life*, which seems to be the same as the *active life*, and the *contemplative life*. Therefore, lives are not divided sufficiently into the active and the contemplative.

Objection 2: In *De Civitate Dei* 19 Augustine posits three sort of lives, viz. the *leisurely life*, which pertains to contemplation; the *busy life*, which pertains to the active life; and he adds a third that is composed of these two. Therefore, it seems that lives are not divided sufficiently into the active and the contemplative.

Objection 3: The lives of men are diversified insofar as men are taken up with diverse actions. But there are more than two sorts of applications for human actions. Therefore, it seems that lives should be divided into more types than the active and the contemplative.

But contrary to this: As Gregory points out in *Moralia* 6, the two sorts of lives in question are signified (a) by the two wives of Jacob, viz., the active life by Leah and the contemplative life by Rachel (Genesis 29), and (b) by the two women who received our Lord with their hospitality, viz., the contemplative life by Mary and the active life by Martha (Luke 10). But this sort of signification would not make sense if there were more than two sorts of lives. Therefore, lives are sufficiently divided into the active and the contemplative.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1, ad 2), the division in question is made with respect to *human lives*, which have to do with the intellect. Now the intellective is divided into the active and the contemplative, since the end of intellective cognition is either (a) the cognition itself of truth, which pertains to the contemplative intellect, or (b) some exterior action, which pertains to the practical, i.e., the action-oriented (*activum*), intellect. And so human lives are likewise sufficiently divided into the active and the contemplative.

Reply to objection 1: The life of pleasure posits its end in corporeal pleasure, which is common to us and non-rational animals. Hence, as the Philosopher says in the same place, the life of pleasure is a “bestial life.” Because of this, it is not included within the present division, since it is *human life* that is being divided into the active and the contemplative.

Reply to objection 2: The middle is configured by the endpoints, and so it is virtually contained within them, in the way that the lukewarm is contained within the hot and the cold, and the gray within the white and the black. Similarly, what is composed of the active and the contemplative is contained within them. And yet, just as one of the simple ingredients is dominant in any mixture, so, too, in the case of the middle types of life, sometimes the contemplative abounds and sometimes the active.

Reply to objection 3: All the exertions involved in human actions are such that if they are ordered toward the necessities of the present life in accord with right reason, they belong to the active life, which attends to the necessities of the present life through ordered actions. On the other hand, if they have to do with some sort of desire for pleasure (*si deserviant concupiscentiae cuicumque*), then they belong to the pleasurable life, which is not contained under the active life. On the other hand, human exertions that are ordered toward the consideration of truth belong to the contemplative life.