Face to face

The Beatific Vision according to
Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to retrieve the doctrine of the beatific vision from the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas, hence the research question is: What are the respective understandings of the beatific vision in the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas? The method used in this dissertation is descriptive content analysis and it is written in the theory or tradition of *Theologies of Retrieval*. One of the main results is Gregory's and Thomas' respective solution to the Biblical paradox of the eschatological promise to see God face to face and the impossibility to see God, where Gregory suggests that the beatific vision is of God's energies rather than God's infinite essence and Thomas suggests that the beatific vision is the ontological union with God, in the noetic identity. Although Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas come to different conclusions on some points on the doctrine, both proficiently combine anthropology, philosophy and theology in their elaborate suggestions of what the beatific vision might infer.

Keywords: anthropology, beatific vision, epistemology, eschatology, Gregory of Nyssa, teleology, theology, Thomas Aquinas.

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1. Introduction

What is the hope in our time? It seems that there are few answers to this question and a question few dare to ask, but maybe one has to start with an even more fundamental question: what is hope? The author of Hebrews suggests that hope corresponds to the question of faith: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."[1] And Paul suggests that hope is closely related to the question of salvation: "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees?"[2] Alongside its close relation to faith and salvation, it seems that both authors relate the question of hope to what is not yet seen, whether it be invisible God or the eschatological fulfillment of faith and salvation. While hope is the consideration of what lies ahead, it is also an assessment of the present, an acknowledgement of the hardships and pains of ordinary life, and ultimately the hope of release thereof. And in this, who dares to answer the question of hope? Who dares to believe that another world is possible when the outlook for a future world can seem so bleak? Who dares to honestly face all the hardships of being human without losing faith, altogether?

Historically speaking, the Christian faith has given an answer to the question of hope: in the belief that there is a divine power, unfazed by the tests of time, acting for the good of human beings; in the belief that death is not the meaningless end to the struggles of life but a necessary part of the new life of the resurrection; and not least in the belief in the eternal life with God, where there will be no mourning, crying or pain, for the old will pass and a new life without death will appear.[3] Theologically speaking, hope can be drawn from many places, but from the perspectives just mentioned, Christian hope is often a question of eschatology. Eschatology is the teaching of the last things, on death, resurrection, judgment, heaven and hell, where the hope is in the eternal beatitude of heaven. But what is the particular hope of heaven? Speaking with the author of Hebrews, what is Christian faith an assurance of? Of what is Christian faith a conviction? While there are many aspects to the hope of heaven, one prominent aspect is the promise to see God face to face—the beatific vision. The promise to see God face to face is present in Scripture,[4] and Christian theology has often interpreted the beatific vision as the fulfillment of hope and faith, as the ultimate goal for humanity.[5]

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[1] Hebrews 11:1, *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, (Washington, D.C: Friendship Press Incorporated, 2021). Hereafter are all biblical quotes taken from NRSVue.

[2] Romans 8:24

[3] Cf. Rev 21:3-5

[4] See, for instance, 1 Cor 13:12 and 1 John 3:2.

[5] Cf. Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: the beatific vision in the Christian tradition*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 10-11.

But both eschatology and the beatific vision have lost prominence in theology by the twists and turns of history, and through these changes eschatology has lost its place as the obvious source for hope. For instance, following the Enlightenment, there was a growing sense of historical progressivism in the 19th century. In this progressivism there was a suggestion that humanity can finally reach utopia by itself, since it is no longer bound by the constraints of religion. The sense of newfound freedom and the expectation that everything is inevitably getting better, whether by the force of history or nature, made religious eschatology superfluous and it was no longer needed for human beings to summon hope; in historical progressivism, hope is in the hands of humanity.[6]

But due to the First and Second World Wars historical progressivism took a giant blow in the early 20th century. By this turn of events several theologians pointed out the insufficiency of historical progressivism and its immanent eschatology as source of hope for humanity.[7] But while it was denounced by some of the early 20th century intellectuals, one could argue that certain aspects of historical progressivism lived on during the second half of the 20th century. These were decades of relative economic growth, democratic advancements—for instance, in the forming of the UN and the decolonization of the world—and technological developments in Western society. These advancements prolonged the sense that humanity can solve its own crises, not least due to the faith in technology. But the faith in technology and historical progressivism has taken yet another blow in the last decade. Climate change, a global pandemic and, not the least, a war in Europe, have shown that technological developments does not necessarily solve all problems and that historical progressivism is inadequate, not just as a replacement to eschatology, but as an overall view on history and source for human hope.

The question of hope remains, and I think theology can provide an answer, not least in its eschatology. The aim of this dissertation is to make a contribution to the retrieval of eschatology and to examine what the Christian hope might be. Since much of Western society is still so embedded in modernity, I have decided to turn to two of the great Christian thinkers in the pre-modern era, Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas. So, what do Gregory and Thomas have to say about eschatology? What do they have to say about the eschatological hope? And more specifically, what do they have to say about the eschatological goal of Christian faith—to see God face to face in the beatific vision?

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[6] Jerry L. Walls, "Introduction" in *The Oxford handbook of eschatology*, Jerry L. Walls (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7-8.

[7] See, for instance, Karl Barth's *The epistle to the Romans*, first published in 1921, and Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of hope*, first published in 1964.

1.2 Research questions

The main question for this dissertation is: What are the respective understandings of the beatific vision in the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas? And the secondary question is: How do Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas compare in their respective understandings of the beatific vision?

1.3 Delimitations

As with every study there are certain delimitations to this dissertation. First, the aim of this dissertation is to analyze the doctrine of the beatific vision according to Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas. This means that this dissertation is not an analysis of the biblical passages implying the doctrine or on the historical evolution or the reception history of the doctrine. But rather the question is: what did Gregory and Thomas say about the beatific vision?

Secondly, the beatific vision is an eschatological doctrine, and as such it is dependent on and interplays with the doctrines within a broader eschatological perspective, the doctrines on death, resurrection, judgment, heaven and hell. While the beatific vision is usually thought of as occurring in heaven, a possible entry into the subject could be the question 'who will attain the beatific vision?' With that entry the dissertation would revolve around judgment and the question of who will go to heaven. While this is an engaging question it is peripheral to this study, as the aim of this dissertation is to investigate what the beatific vision is, rather than who will attain it.

Thirdly, since this is a study on what Gregory and Thomas have to say about the beatific vision, it will not be a study of the popular or pastoral understandings and applications of the doctrine. While it would be interesting to analyze sermons to see how the beatific vision is preached, or to conduct interviews with members in different Christian congregations to form a picture on what everyday Christians think about the doctrine, it would not be fitting for the purposes of this dissertation. I think it is safe to say that neither sermons nor everyday Christians can provide the same depth on the beatific vision as Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas, for two reasons: first, due to its speculative nature, the doctrine of the beatific vision requires a fair amount of theological and philosophical reasoning and advanced metaphysical language that one cannot expect to find in sermons or in interviews with every day Christians. Secondly, the concept of heaven—where the beatific vision is supposed to take place—can easily become a Feuerbachian projection surface for one's personal hopes and dreams rather

than the object of critical reasoning,[8] and as such it would not be very helpful in order to get an understanding of the beatific vision. Instead, I have chosen to study the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas, who both treat the beatific vision in a conscious and explicit manner.

1.4 Method

1.4.1 Text analysis

This dissertation is exclusively a textual study, hence the method of *text analysis* will be employed. Text analysis is a very broad term and could imply the analysis of all kinds of texts.[9] As a method with such variety of implications some distinctions are required to make it meaningful for the purposes of this dissertation.

First, there is a distinction between content analysis, functional analysis and discourse analysis within text analysis. Content analysis asks for the meaning of the text, of what arguments or ideas the author might have wanted to mediate in writing the text. Functional analysis asks why the text is written the way it is, and seeks causal explanations, for instance, whether the text has a historical, psychological, or psychosocial cause. Discourse analysis asks for what effects the text has, on how it is received and what influence it has on the reader of the text.[10] In this dissertation I have employed content analysis. Secondly, content analysis can be distinguished in two ways. On the one hand, one might just want to describe the ideas of the text as transparently as possible and use a descriptive method. On the other hand, one might want to approach the text from a specific perspective, for instance, from a post-modernist, or feminist, or Lutheran, or Thomistic perspective, to extract certain aspects of a text. When interpreting a text from a specific perspective, one puts theory alongside method. Now, there are pros and cons to both a purely descriptive method and to a method with a consciously applied theory. One of the main benefits of a descriptive method is the openness to the text. With the descriptive method one is not really interested in extracting certain aspects of a text but wants to describe the ideas of the text, and in this openness there is a chance for the author's own point to come across. The main challenge for the descriptive method is for the analyzer to be aware of any preconceived ideas when he or she analyzes the

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[8] Jerry L. Walls, "Heaven" in *The Oxford handbook of eschatology*, Jerry L. Walls (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 400.

[9] See, for instance, the vast variety of texts that can be analyzed in a vast variety of ways in Carl Anders Säfström & Leif Östman (ed.) *Textanalys*, (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1999).

[10] Carl-Henric Grenholm, *Att förstå religion: metoder för teologisk forskning*, (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2006), 213-215; Göran Bergström & Kristina Boréus (ed.), *Textens mening och makt: Metodbok i samhällsvetenskaplig text- och diskursanalys*, (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2012), 410.

text, so that the text is not analyzed from these ideas but speaks for itself. Conversely, the pros and cons are the opposite if one consciously applies a theory to one's analysis; one is conscious of the ideas by which the text is analyzed but runs the risk of interpreting one's own ideas into the text and so runs the risk of missing the point intended by the author.[11] In this dissertation I have tried to use a descriptive method, without the application of any specific theory. Consequently, the method for this dissertation is text analysis, more specifically, descriptive content analysis.

1.5 Theory

1.5.1 Theologies of Retrieval

The most fitting theory for the purposes of this dissertation seems to be *Theologies of Retrieval*. As the name suggests, *Theologies of Retrieval* is not a unanimous, distinct theoretical theological school with clear scientific criteria, but an umbrella term including theologies that generally share the following four assumptions: a critique of the modernist way to conduct theology; a shared view on the Bible as a medium for God's self-communication; a view on Christian tradition, especially the ecumenical councils, as authoritative; and finally, a shared view on the self-sufficiency of theology.

The critique of modern theology has to do with an often-shared genealogy of modernity, that is, a shared narrative on that theology has become subordinate to modernity, and in turn, that theology has lost its self-sufficiency and suffers from insecurity and alienation from its own subject matter, God. The narrative of theological decay has different historical starting points. Some claim that it began with the introduction of the critical sciences based on naturalist criteria and the eighteenth-century Cartesianism and its subjectification of reality and internalization of God, where "God is contingent upon the *cogito* of whose continuity he acts as guarantor."[12] Others claim that it started even earlier, with the introduction of Nominalism and its relativization of the Christian metaphysics, which led to a domestication of God's transcendence, a separation of the natural and supernatural, and a relegation of God to the supernatural.[13] Those who claim that the modernist decay of theology began with

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[11] Cf. Grenholm, *Att förstå religion*, 221; 223-225; 248-249.

[12] John Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval" in *The Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, Iain Torrance (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 585, 587.

[13] Cf. Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: how a religious revolution secularized society*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2012), 36-38: The claim is that the nominalists began the theological decay in two steps. First, John Duns Scotus claimed that although God and creation is different, they exist in the same manner. Second, in taking Scotus' argument further, William of Ockham claimed that if God exists in the same way as creation then 'God' has to denote a 'thing' among other things, and as a 'thing' God must be somewhere, hence God was dispatched to the supernatural. Further, the

Nominalism often view the Protestant Reformation as the continuation of that decay, that the Protestant Reformation is a deformation rather than a correction of theology because it preserved the majority of the nominalist assumptions.[14] Regardless of whether theology became subordinate to modernity in the thirteenth- or eighteenth-century, those who engage in *Theologies of Retrieval* consider "modernity, however understood, to be a contingent, not an absolute, phenomenon, and suggest that whatever misdirections have occurred can be corrected by skilful deployment of the intellectual and spiritual capital of Christianity,"[15] and in turn, that "Theologies of retrieval 'decentre' […] this sort of critical [modernist] judgement by trying to stand with the Christian past which, precisely because it is foreign to contemporary conventions, can function as an instrument for the enlargement of vision."[16] In other words, the *Theologies of Retrieval* offer a way beyond modernity and all its consequences for theology.

A second common assumption among the *Theologies of Retrieval* is the view of Scripture as authoritative in the formulation of theology. Rather than seeing the Bible merely as a document for critical-historical studies, and rather than seeing biblical scholarship and systematic theology as two isolated disciplines, the *Theologies of Retrieval* treat the disciplines as converging and "treat the Bible as scripture, that is, as more than a set of clues to the history of antique religious culture, and so as a text which may legitimately direct theological reason because in some manner it affords access to God's self-communication."[17] In the willingness to treat the Bible as scripture, the *Theologies of Retrieval* often seek the same openness to the different ways to read the Bible that the Church Fathers had, to be able to read the Bible in a literal, allegorical or anagogical way, without pitting the different ways of reading against each other.

Similarly to the assumption on the Bible, a third common assumption is the authority of the Christian tradition, and that *Theologies of Retrieval* often works from the norm that the "Classical sources outweigh modern norms" and that "Christian tradition is cumulative, and its theology does not start *de novo* but with 'classics'."[18] For instance, the *Ressourcement*-movement—a French theological movement in the mid-1900s that fit the general characteristics common to *Theologies of Retrieval*—was deeply inspired by the inseparability

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claim is that these two seemingly small steps deprives God of transcendence and infinity, separates God from the natural world and ultimately breaks the boundary between Creator and creation.

[14] Cf. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 41; Webster, *Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, 588
[15] Webster, *Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, 589
[16] Webster, *Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, 590
[17] Webster, *Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, 591.
[18] Webster, *Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, 590, (author's emphasis).

of theology, exegesis and spirituality they found in the patristic theology and aimed to resume that tradition. Others found similarities between more modern theologians like Calvin and Barth and the Nicene theology and so came to the conclusion that tradition somehow transcends cultural changes, and especially modernity.[19]

The gaze beyond modernity, and the authoritative view on both the Bible and tradition, leads to a fourth common assumption and attitude among the *Theologies of Retrieval*: theology is irreducible and self-sufficient. The irreducibility of theology would mean, for instance, that theology cannot be the Kantian reduction of theology into ethics,[20] or that theology cannot be reduced into a conversation partner in the existential conversation of a "common human experience."[21] Theology cannot even be reduced to tradition, however Christian that tradition might be, because mere tradition could mean traditionalism. Although traditionalism could agree on all the assumptions of *Theologies of Retrieval*—the emphasis on the critique of modernity, the authority of Scripture and tradition, and the irreducibility and self-sufficiency of theology—traditionalism generally has a nostalgic quality to it, which is not necessarily present in the *Theologies of Retrieval*. David Bentley Hart suggests that it is this nostalgic quality transforms reverence for tradition into traditionalism and Christian faith into 'ecclesial fetishism,' as traditionalists emphasize the preservation of tradition, as it was in some point in history, rather than as the lived theology of the Church.[22]

Finally, *Theologies of Retrieval* share a sense of the self-sufficiency of theology, which implies two things: first, theology does not need to seek validation in other academic disciplines. The claim is that when seeking validation, theology becomes a science conducted on the premises of other sciences, and ultimately resulting in a theology that engages more in its *raison d'être* than its subject matter. Consequently, if theology seeks validation in other sciences, it runs the risk of losing its integrity and its subject matter.[23] Secondly, while theology should not seek validation in other sciences, a common claim among the *Theologies of Retrieval* is that theology cannot be properly understood by other sciences. Rather, as the irreducible discipline it is, theology is best understood in and by itself.[24]

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[19] Webster, *Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, 591.

[20] Christine Helmer, *Theology and the end of doctrine*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 33-34: Helmer suggests that the combination of the Kantian definition on religion as the orientation to the 'highest good,' and Albrecht Ritschl's willingness to reconcile Christianity and modernity led to a reduction of theology into ethics in the 1800s.

[21] Cf. Webster, *Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, 593.

[22] David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and apocalypse: an essay on the future of Christian belief*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2022), 14-16.

[23] Webster, *Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, 586.

[24] Webster, *Oxford handbook of systematic theology*, 593-594.

Although it is not a distinct, unanimous scientific theory, it seems that *Theologies of Retrieval* is the most fitting theory or mode of theology for the purposes of this dissertation, since both Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas were active during a pre-modern era; the doctrine of the beatific vision is right at the point of intersection between philosophy, theology, spirituality and Scripture; due to its speculative character, the doctrine of the beatific vision cannot really be validated or understood via other sciences, but is best understood within its theological framework. In other words, the subject matter of this dissertation is generally aligned with many of the common threads among the diverse *Theologies of Retrieval*.

1.6 Earlier research

In 2018 Hans Boersma published *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), which is a historical overview of the doctrine of the beatific vision. Boersma engages in the thoughts of theologians from different times and different traditions within the Christian church, and it seems this book has kindled a debate on the subject. The main question of debate is the question of Christology, where Boersma suggests that Thomas Aquinas suffers a general Christological deficiency in his treatment of the beatific vision, and more specifically, that the role of Christ is overlooked if the beatific vision is defined as the immediate vision of God's essence, which is the Thomistic take on the beatific vision.[25] Christology also plays a central part in Boersma's analysis of Gregory of Nyssa, but in contrast to Thomas Aquinas' apparent overlooking of Christ, Boersma suggests that Christ is at the center of Gregory's treatment of the beatific vision and that the beatific vision is only possible through the medium of Christ. It seems that Christology is one of the central themes in Boersma's analysis of both Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas. While the focus on Christology gives him certain perspectives, I think he reads too much into the Christology in Gregory's treatment of the beatific vision and that he actually misses one of the main points of Thomas' take on the beatific vision—the immediacy of the vision of God. While the question of Christology is always an important question in Christian theology, I am not convinced how fruitful it is as a starting point of analysis of the beatific vision. Therefore,

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[25] In different articles a defense for Thomas Aquinas has been posed, for instance in Simon Francis Gaine's *"Thomas Aquinas, the beatific vision and the role of Christ: a reply to Hans Boersma"* and *"The beatific vision and the heavenly mediation of Christ"* (TheoLogica, 2018), and Gavin Ortlund's *"Will we see God's essence? A defence of a Thomistic account of the beatific vision"* (Scottish Journal of Theology, 2021). Boersma's *Seeing God* also seems to have inspired further inquiry to the beatific vision, e.g., Neil Ormerod's article *"And we shall see him face to face: a Trinitarian analysis of the beatific vision"* (Theological Studies, 2021).

unlike Boersma, my analysis of the beatific vision in the works of Gregory and Thomas will not be from the perspective of Christology, but the perspectives of teleology, metaphysics and epistemology.

Regarding the eschatology of Gregory of Nyssa, I found Morwenna Ludlow's *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford University Press, 2000) helpful. Ludlow's treatment of Gregory of Nyssa is not explicitly on the beatific vision, but rather a treatment of the notion of universal salvation and restoration—*apokatastasis*. While the question of universal salvation is peripheral for the purposes of this dissertation, the notion of restoration is helpful in analyzing Gregory's teleology. Ludlow's treatment of *apokatastasis* results in a rather communal perspective on eschatology—the whole of humanity is created in the image of God, and the whole of humanity will be restored to that original image. While the communal perspective seems adequate in Gregory's treatment of *apokatastasis*, I do not think it is an obvious perspective in his treatment of the beatific vision. Rather, the mystical character of Gregory's writings and his notion of perpetual progression into God, *epektasis*, point to spiritual processes in the individual. I do not have any intentions to actively distance myself from Ludlow's communal perspective of Gregory's eschatology, but the mysticism of the doctrine of the beatific vision in the works of Gregory of Nyssa leads me into a more individualistic perspective.

Another helpful piece of writing on Gregory of Nyssa's eschatology is Martin Laird's *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (Oxford University Press, 2004). One of Laird's main points is that faith is the guiding principle in the mystical vision of God. That is, since God is infinite and ultimately beyond comprehension, Laird argues that only faith can guide human beings in the beatific vision. As we will see, this is a quite accurate but one-sided assumption, since Gregory's treatment of the beatific vision clearly involves the notion of participation through virtue, as well. So, while faith is one of the guiding principles in the incomprehensibility of God, I will treat it as complementary to virtue.

Regarding the beatific vision in the works of Thomas Aquinas, I found two recently written books quite helpful: first, Reinhard Hütter's *Bound for Beatitude: A Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), which is the twelfth volume in the 'Thomistic Ressourcement Series' and treats the doctrine of the beatific vision in the tradition of *Theologies of Retrieval*. One of the explicit intentions with Hütter's

book is the recovery of "the theocentricity of Christian faith, life and theology."[26] While the act of the beatific vision is quite theocentric for Thomas Aquinas, I would argue that his teleology leading to the beatific vision is rather anthropocentric; the *telos* of human beings is to attain ultimate happiness, which, in turn, is found in the beatific vision of God. In other words, one could argue that the human *telos* has a rather anthropocentric starting point for Thomas. In analyzing the beatific vision in Thomas Aquinas, I think the theocentric and anthropocentric perspectives are mutually dependent, and I have intended to include both perspectives in this dissertation. Secondly, Katja Krause's *Thomas Aquinas on Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in his Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences IV.49.2* (Marquette University Press, 2020), which is mainly a new translation on Thomas' treatment of the beatific vision in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Senctences*. Krause's introductory chapters are helpful to understand the context in which Thomas was active, and her introductions to each article are good introductions to the underlying philosophical and metaphysical notions in Thomas' argumentations.

Regarding a more general rendering of the development of the doctrine of the beatific vision Vladimir Lossky published *La Vision de Dieu* in 1961, first translated into English in 1963. Lossky's *The Vision of God* (American Orthodox Press, 1963) is an overview on the evolution of the doctrine of the beatific vision in the Eastern Christian tradition, from the early Church Fathers, through the likes of the Cappadocian Fathers and Dionysius the Areopagite to what he calls the Palamite synthesis. This historical overview is helpful in order to get an understanding of Gregory's contribution to the development the doctrine of the beatific vision, the bringing together of platonic philosophical concepts and Christian theology.

Regarding research about eschatology in a wider perspective, Brian E. Daley's *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) has provided a general overview of patristic eschatology, and Joseph Ratzinger's *Eschatology: Death and Eternal life* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988) has provided a general overview on eschatology, as such. Although neither Daley's nor Ratzinger's books are explicit treatments on the beatific vision, they are helpful in order to understand the context of the doctrine.

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[26] Reinhard Hütter, *Bound for beatitude: a Thomistic study in eschatology and ethics*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 388.

1.7 Source material

As this dissertation is a study on what Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas have to say about the beatific vision, my main source material is the respective works of the two. Now, the collected works of Gregory and Thomas are quite the body of text, hence it would not be helpful to process the collected works of the two, but only the parts that treat the beatific vision.

Due to the rigid scholastic forms in the works of Thomas, it is quite easy to find where he treats the beatific vision: in his *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences* IV.49.2, in *Summa Theologiae* I.12, and in *Summa Theologiae* Suppl. 92. The beatific vision is also sometimes implied in other places, for instance in *Summa Theologiae* I-II.1-5, where Thomas discusses the human last end and the attainment thereof.

Gregory's writings do not have the same rigid forms as Thomas', which makes it harder to quickly discern where he treats the beatific vision. But by the help of secondary literature, I found that Gregory's main treatments of the beatific vision are to be found in the following three works: The sixth homily in *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, *Homilies on the Song of Songs,* and *The life of Moses*. As we will see, one important aspect of Gregory's eschatology is the notion of restoration. The emphasis on the notion of restoration makes it important to understand Gregory's anthropology and theology of creation, which are explicitly treated in *On the Making of Man*.

2. Analysis

2.1 Background

Before we begin the analysis of the beatific vision according to Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas, a brief introduction of each theologian seems fitting.

Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-ca. 394) was active in the Eastern, Greek speaking part of the Church. Along with his older brother Basil of Caesaraea and their friend Gregory Nazianzus, he was one of the Cappadocian Fathers and part of the first generation of Christian intellectuals that had a rigorous training in both Christian theology and non-Christian philosophy.[27] Theologically, Gregory of Nyssa stood in an Origenist tradition with great inheritance from Origen of Alexandria, not the least regarding eschatology and the notion of *apokatastasis*.[28] Hans Boersma argues that it was first by the second half of the fourth century, in Gregory's generation, that Christian intellectuals were able to engage in Hellenistic philosophy without risking the accusation of heresy. In the conversation with philosophy there was a newfound possibility for further deepening of Christian theology, as Gregory of Nyssa combined Origenist eschatology, Hellenistic philosophy and Christian theology and could make considerations about the beatific vision that had never been done before.[29] Vladimir Lossky suggests that while Basil of Caesaraea focused on formulating dogmatic notions as clearly as possible and Gregory of Nazianzus contemplated the Trinitarian relations within God, Gregory of Nyssa focused beyond discursive intellect to explore the mystical communion with God.[30] And in this, Gregory was able to use platonic concepts while keeping the integrity of Christian theology, which is one of Gregory's greatest contributions to the conversation on the beatific vision, according to Lossky.[31]

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was in many ways situated in a different time and space compared to Gregory. Historically and culturally, he was in the Western, Latin speaking part of the Church, in the thirteenth century and the Church had gone through many changes, for instance, the division of the Church in the Great Schism in 1054. Thomas Aquinas was a Dominican and stood in a Scholastic tradition, where the beatific vision had been a topic of

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[27] Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On death and eternal life: translation and introduction by Brian E. Daley*, (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press), ix.

[28] Brian E. Daley, *The hope of the early church: a handbook of patristic eschatology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 85f.

[29] Boersma, *Seeing God*, 47.

[30] Vladimir Lossky, *The vision of God*, (Clayton, WI: American Orthodox Press, 1963), 70-71.

[31] Lossky, *Vision of God*, 74.

discussion some decades before Thomas took part.[32] As we will see in the analysis, there is a great reliance on Aristotle's metaphysics and question of ultimate happiness in Thomas' treatment on the beatific vision, which led to "innovative ways to explain how the blessed will see God through His essence."[33] One of Thomas' main contributions to the conversation on the beatific vision was that he made a plausible case on how the beatific vision, as a vision of God's essence, could be possible. A clear indication of this contribution is that before Thomas there was a big debate on whether or not the beatific vision could be of God's essence,[34] but some decades after the contributions of Thomas—and his contemporaries Albert the Great and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio—Pope Benedict XII issued the papal bull *Benedictus Deus* (1336),[35] which was clearly influenced by Thomas as it states that the beatific vision is the immediate vision of God's essence. This papal bull was in many ways the conclusive post in the debate on the object of the beatific vision in the Western part of the Church, which indicates the importance of Thomas' contribution.

2.2 The beatific vision according to Gregory of Nyssa

While the doctrine of the beatific vision is in many ways central to the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa and can be approached from many different perspectives, this analysis will approach Gregory's teachings from three perspectives: first, from an anthropological perspective where the beatific vision is the *telos* of humanity, secondly, from the perspective of participation where participation is the way to the beatific vision, and thirdly, from a theological perspective where God's infinity sets the boundaries for the beatific vision. While treated separately, it will be evident that these perspectives cannot be treated wholly distinct from each other, but that they interplay to a fairly large extent. After these perspectives have been examined the state of the perfected humanity will be considered briefly. Let us begin with the anthropological perspective and the *telos* of humanity.

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[32] Cf. Katja Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God: the beatific vision in his commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences IV.49.2, translated and introduced by Katja Krause*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2020), 23ff.

[33] Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 63-69.

[34] Cf. Katja Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 13-29: Krause suggests that a Latin translation of John Chrysostom's *Homily XV on the Gospel of St. John* (1173) along with the introduction of the Dionysian apophatic theology challenged the optimistic Augustinian view on the beatific vision predominant in the Latin Church. The following debate was essentially on the possibilities to see God's essence, whether siding with the optimism of Augustine or the pessimism of Dionysius the Areopagite.

[35] Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus: on the beatific vision of God*, (The Holy See, January 29, 1336), https://www.papalencyclicals.net/ben12/b12bdeus.htm

2.2.1 The human *telos*

When considering the *telos* of humanity, Gregory identifies two main areas of inquiry: the inherent *telos* of humanity and how human beings will appear when its *telos* is actualized, that is, the goal for human beings and the process leading there. Gregory treats these aspects in *Homilies on the Song of Songs*:

> In the case of the first creation, then, the final state appeared simultaneously with the beginning, and the race took the starting point of its existence in its perfection; […] For when it was first created, since evil did not exist, there was nothing to prevent the race's perfection from going hand in hand with its birth, but in the process of restoration, lapses of time necessarily attend those who are retracing their way toward the original good.[36]

In this quote we can see that the human *telos* is its final perfection, and that it is not an isolated idea but the goal of an overarching anthropological idea. Furthermore, we can see that Gregory argues that the final state, the *telos* of humanity, appeared simultaneously with creation. This means that one can trace humanity's eschatological end to its very creation, one can get a hint of humanity's future perfection in the perfection in creation. Therefore, let us look towards Gregory's take on creation.

On the one hand, it seems that there is nothing startling with Gregory's theology of creation, as it relies on the boundary of the Creator/creature distinction.[37] On the other hand, Gregory seems to imply that creation was twofold. In the quote above, Gregory referred to 'the first creation,' which is to be understood specifically in the light of the creation of humanity. To Gregory, there is a tension in the notion that humanity is created in the image of God. For on the one hand, humanity is created in the image of the infinite, immutable, incorruptible God, but on the other hand, humanity is finite, mutable and corruptible. Gregory's solution to this tension is a twofold creation of humanity:

> We must, then, examine the words carefully: for we find, if we do so, that that which was made 'in the image' is one thing, and that which is now manifested in wretchedness is another. 'God created man,' it says; 'in the image of God created He him.' There is an end of the creation of that which

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[36] Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of songs: translated with an introduction and notes by Richard A. Norris Jr.*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 487.

[37] Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses: translation, introduction and notes by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 63: In an argument against inadequacies assessment of God in pagan philosophies Gregory argues "It says there is a God, but thinks of him as material. It acknowledges him as Creator, but that he needed matter for creation. It affirms that he is both good and powerful, but that in all things he submits to the necessity of fate." Gregory's critique of the pagan philosophies is that they blur the Creator/creature distinction.

was made 'in the image': then it makes a resumption of the account of creation, and says, 'male and female created He them.'[38]

And further:

> I presume that every one knows that this is a departure from the Prototype: for 'in Christ Jesus,' as the apostle says, 'there is neither male nor female.' Yet the phrase declares that man is thus divided. Thus the creation of our nature is in a sense twofold: one made like to God, one divided according to this distinction: for something like this the passage darkly conveys by its arrangement, where it first says, 'God created man, in the image of God created He him,' and then, adding to what has been said, 'male and female created He them,' a thing which is alien from our conceptions of God.[39]

As these quotes suggest, Gregory's line of argumentation is: (1) humanity is created in the image of God; (2) there is a problematic tension between the image of the infinite and incorruptible and the finite and corruptible reality of humanity; (3) the difference of the sexes is a departure from the Prototype, Christ Jesus, wherein there is neither male or female; (4) consequently, the interpretation of a twofold creation of humanity is reasonable—first as created in the image of God, secondly as in what departs from the likeness of God, wherein the differentiation of the sexes is one of many departures.[40]

Interpreting the act of creation in this way may seem alarming considering the lengthy conflicts between the Church Fathers and the Gnostic tradition;[41] Gregory is close to a gnostic denial of the material world, where the first act of creation would be the creation of human beings as immaterial souls in the image of God, and the second creation gave human beings bodies, and in turn, all the suffering associated with being human. Theologian Morwenna Ludlow argues this is not the case, but that Gregory has a different reason for this twofold creation. First, Ludlow suggests that the first creation is not a creation of an incorporeal original state for humanity. Rather, since Gregory stresses the importance of the bodily resurrection, "one must assume that embodiment *per se* does not obscure the image of God in

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[38] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the making of man.* Vol. II/V, in *A select library of Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian church*, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), trans. by William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1892), 16.7, (*NPNF* 2/5:404). On June 9, 2023, John Behr published a new translation of *De Hominis Opificio*. It would be preferable to engage with the latest translation but unfortunately it was published after the examination of this dissertation, hence I was not able to use it. See John Behr, *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[39] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the making of man*, 16.7-8, (*NPNF* 2/5:404).

[40] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the making of man*, 16.7-8, (*NPNF* 2/5:404).

[41] Cf. Daley, *The hope of the early church*, 28-32.

humans," [42] and hence the first creation would include human bodiliness. Secondly, the differentiation between the sexes—as well as the natural bodily passions of eating, drinking, sleeping, and so on—was not a result of the Fall, but rather God foreseeing the Fall and hence giving the soon-to-be mortal humanity a possibility to procreate in the same manner as irrational animals. And while sharing the manner of procreation with the irrational animals, human beings also came to share the natural bodily passions of the same. [43]

There is much more to be said about Gregory's notion of the twofold creation, but for the purposes of this dissertation Ludlow provides five eschatological implications in Gregory's theology of creation. First, human beings will be restored to the original state of an unadulterated image of God, that is, to the state of the first creation. Secondly, since there was no distinction among humanity in the first creation but humanity was perfectly created as a whole, it suggests that the whole of humanity will be restored to its original perfection. Thirdly, since passions were introduced in the second creation, it seems that there will be no 'animal passions' in the eschatologically perfected human being, only the characteristics of the original human nature of the first creation. Fourth, Ludlow suggests that the twofold creation should not be seen as two temporally successive events, but rather "that the first creation is ideal and the second actual. […] the first creation almost as an idea or plan in God's mind."[44] And finally, Ludlow suggests that the twofold creation implies that the whole of humanity, every human being, was in some sense created in the first creation. The line of argumentation is that: (1) God alone is infinite and indefinite, (2) God does not create anything indefinite, and in this case, God did not create Adam and Eve as the beginning of an indefinite series of human beings. (3) In order to create something definite God must have created all of humanity in the first creation, not as pre-incarnate, immaterial souls awaiting their bodies, but rather as existing in the foreknowledge of God.[45] According to Ludlow, out

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[42] Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal salvation: eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 47.

[43] Ludlow, *Universal salvation*, 47; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the making of man*, 18.1, (NPNF 2/5:406): "…for it is not allowable to ascribe the first beginnings of our constitutional liability to passion to that human nature which was fashioned in the Divine likeness; but as brute life first entered into the world, and man, for the reason already mentioned, took something of their nature (I mean the mode of generation), he accordingly took at the same time a share of the other attributes contemplated in that nature . . ."

[44] Ludlow, *Universal salvation*, 48-49.

[45] Ludlow, *Universal salvation*, 48-49; Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the making of man*, 16.16, (*NPNF* 2/5:405): "What is it then which we understand concerning these matters? In saying that 'God created man' the text indicates, by the indefinite character of the term, all mankind; for was not Adam here named together with the creation, as the history tells us in what follows? yet the name given to the man created is not the particular, but the general name: thus we are led by the employment of the general name of our nature to some such view as this—that in the Divine foreknowledge and power all humanity is included in the first creation; for it is fitting for God not to regard any of the things made by Him as indeterminate, but that each existing thing should have some limit and measure prescribed by the wisdom of its Maker."

of all these implications the main eschatological implication of the twofold creation is that humanity's *telos* is present already in creation.[46] This means that the *telos*, the perfection of human nature, is already present in God's foreknowledge, in the God-self.

Teleology is a prominent aspect in Gregory's anthropology, and as mentioned, Gregory argues that humanity was created to perfection and has the *telos* to restore that perfection.[47] The restoration of humanity's original perfection means that humanity will be an unadulterated image of God, with neither animal passions nor sexual differentiations, with a purified soul detached from all material concerns and perfectly mirroring God.[48] Now, if a soul is purified, it implies that it has gone through some kind of purification, which is a matter of participation in God for Gregory. The notion of participation will be discussed in the following section.

2.2.2 Participation

The *telos* of humanity is the restoration of the original state of the first creation, a restoration of the image of God making humanity a perfect mirror of God. Theologian Hans Boersma argues that Gregory's take on this *telos* is something of a process, an ongoing ascension into God that begins on earth and continues in heaven.[49] This is a process of participation in God, and in order to understand the notion of participation, it is fitting to begin with an overview of Gregory's philosophical influences. Generally speaking, Gregory took great influence from the platonic and neo-platonic traditions, not the least from the Neo-Platonist Plotinus. The influences relevant for the purposes of this dissertation are twofold: the neo-platonic *exitus-reditus* schema and Plotinus' notion of participation.[50]

Plotinus' *exitus-reditus* schema serves as a metaphysical framework, overarching everything. The main idea of the schema is that everything that exists is ultimately emanated from an absolute transcendent and divine entity, called *the One* or *the Monad*. The One is beyond all distinction and division and is often identified with the concept 'Good' and the

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[46] Ludlow, *Universal salvation,* 49: "Because creation exists from the very beginning by the divine power, the end of each created being is linked with its beginning."

[47] Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 487: "In the case of the first creation, then, the final state appeared simultaneously with the beginning, and the race took the starting point of its existence in its perfection; […] For when it was first created, since evil did not exist, there was nothing to prevent the race's perfection from going hand in hand with its birth, but in the process of restoration, lapses of time necessarily attend those who are retracing their way toward the original good."

[48] Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 113-115.

[49] Boersma, *Seeing God*, 77. Boersma also published the chapter on Gregory of Nyssa and the beatific vision as an article in 2015, see Hans Boersma "Becoming human in the face of God: Gregory of Nyssa's unending search for the beatific vision." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (John Wiley & Sons Ltd) 17, no. 2 (February 2015): 131-151.

[50] Boersma, *Seeing God*, 84.

principle of 'Beauty'. The emanations from the One do not diminish the One in any way, but are of necessity and in four stages: The first emanation is the Divine Mind, Logos or Reason, called *Nous*; this is the Ideal World, where the ideal forms reside. From *Nous* emanates the World Soul, the formative and regulative principles of lower beings and the inherent connection between all created entities. From the World Soul emanates the human souls, and then finally the emanation of matter, the least perfected level of the cosmos. By the way of emanation, the four-step descent from the One to matter, Plotinus argues that everything is ultimately of divine nature, since everything ultimately derives from the One. Furthermore, in the *exitus-reditus* schema, the four-step descent of emanation is followed by a mirroring ascension, a return to the One. For material human beings this ascension is possible through human participation in the higher realms of reality, in *Nous* and the One, where the ultimate goal is the total unification with the One. The *exitus-reditus* schema turns one's attention to the practical question of participation—how does one participate in the higher realms of reality?

Plotinus suggests that participation is performed through the act of contemplation, by turning one's attention away from matter towards the higher realms of reality—to the soul, the World Soul, the *Nous,* and ultimately to the One. The act of turning one's attention away from material concerns to the higher realms of reality is thought of as an act of virtue, and contemplation of the higher realms means the participation in them.[51] Furthermore, Boersma suggests that the act of participation is an act of becoming and that "*Seeing* beauty is identical, for Plotinus—as it typically also within later Christian Platonism—with the process of *becoming* beautiful."[52]

The *exitus-reditus* schema and the notion of participation implies a deep connection between virtue, contemplation and participation; turning away from material concerns is an act of virtue, contemplation of the higher realms is participation in them, and participation in the higher realms is becoming like them. After this brief excursion to the thoughts of Plotinus it will be quite easy to discern the influence he had on Gregory, not least in Gregory's notion of participation.

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[51] Cf. 'Neoplatonism' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 16, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1972), 217-218; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western esoteric traditions: a historical introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20-25.

[52] Boersma, *Seeing God*, 70, (author's emphasis).

Participation in God's energies

The similarities between Gregory and Plotinus in the act of participation will be discussed more thoroughly further on. But first it is fitting to examine the question what one is supposed to participate in; if the neo-platonic participation is ultimately in the One, what is the ultimate object for participation for Gregory?

In his sixth homily on the Beatitudes, which is dedicated to the verse "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God,"[53] Gregory suggests that the ultimate object for participation is God, but what does he mean, exactly? Gregory clarifies by identifying an area of tension, a biblical paradox on the vision of God: the faithful are promised to see God, on the one hand, but no one has seen God and it is impossible to see God, on the other hand.[54] Gregory's solution to this paradox is in his definition of what it means to see God: the clean of heart will see God, but in his energies and not in his essence. This means that God will be seen in the things that derives from him, i.e., in his energies, but God's essence remains unseen.[55] Now, one could argue that Gregory's decision to make God's energies rather than God's essence the object of the beatific vision is a big step away from Scripture,[56] but in order to keep God's infinity intact and to make human participation in God possible, Gregory argues that it is a necessary step. Further, the participation in God's energies, rather than his essence, should not be seen as an impairment to the beatific vision, rather, Gregory argues, just as artists can make impressions through their art, God is able to make impressions on human beings through his energies:

> …when we look at the order of creation, we form in our mind an image not of the essence, but of the wisdom of Him who has made all things wisely. And if we consider the cause of our life, what He came to create man not from necessity, but from the free decision of His Goodness, we say that we have contemplated God by this way, that we have apprehended His Goodness—though again not His Essence, but His Goodness. It is the same with all other things that raise the mind to

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[53] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's prayer / The Beatitudes: translated and annotated by Hilda C. Graef,* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1954), 143.

[54] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 143-144; Boersma, *Seeing God*, 78-79

[55] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 147.

[56] Consider, for instance, 1 Cor 13:12 and 1 John 3:2 which are often read as passages on seeing God's essence in Western Christianity. Cf. Augustine, *The city of God*. Vol. I/II, in *A select library of Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian church*, Philip Schaff (ed.), trans. by Marcus Dods, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1886), 29.22, (*NPNF* 1/2:507): "The Lord Jesus also said, 'See that ye despise not one of these little ones: for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always see the face of my Father which is in heaven.' As, then, they see, so shall we also see; but not yet do we thus see. Wherefore the apostle uses the words cited a little ago, 'Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.' This vision is reserved as the reward of our faith; and of it the Apostle John also says, 'When He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' By 'the face' of God we are to understand His manifestation, and not a part of the body similar to that which in our bodies we call by that name."

transcendent Goodness, all these we can term apprehensions of God, since each one of these sublime meditations places God within our sight. For power, purity, constancy, freedom from contrariety—all these engrave on the soul the impress of a Divine and transcendent Mind. […] He is invisible by nature, but becomes visible in His energies, for He may be contemplated in the things that are referred to Him.[57]

Here we see that the contemplation of God's energies is the apprehension of them and participation in them. While it is possible to see God in his energies, Gregory also recognizes that only knowing God by analogy of God's operations does not make the Christian faith any different to the pagan philosophies, so Gregory turns towards a specific outlet of God's energies where the participation does not merely imply a general outward apprehension of God, but a particular closeness, deep in human desire, revealed after extensive participation, that is, the participation in God through the human image of God:

Bodily health is one of the desirable things in human life; but it is blessed not only to know the principle of health, but to be healthy […] The Lord does not say it is blessed to know something about God, but to have God present within oneself. *Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God*. I do not think that if the eye of one's soul has been purified, he is promised a direct vision of God; but perhaps this marvelous saying may suggest what the Word expresses more clearly when He says to others, *The Kingdom of God is within you*. By this we should learn that if a man's heart has been purified from every creature and all unruly affections, he will see the Image of Divine Nature in his own beauty. I think that in this short saying the Word expresses some such counsel as this: There is in you, human beings, a desire to contemplate the true good.[58]

In this quote Gregory says three things about this particular Christian participation in God's energies: first, God is best contemplated in the "Image of Divine Nature" endowed in humanity as humanity was created in the likeness of God. Secondly, human beings are in need of a certain purification for the image of God to become visible. Thirdly, there is a deep-set human desire for the "true good," i.e., God. To better understand the human participation in the divine—and ultimately the beatific vision—the image of God as vehicle for participation, the process of purification and the deep-set desire for God requires further explanation. Let us begin with the consideration of Gregory's distinction between passions and desire.

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[57] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 147.
[58] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 148.

Passions and desire

As we saw, to attain the beatific vision Gregory argues that one must be "purified from every creature and all unruly affections" so that the inherent image of God can fully mirror God, but human beings also have a natural "desire to contemplate the true good." At first glance, this seems quite contradictory; human beings have to be purified from their affections but not their desire, two usually interchangeable concepts. So the question comes naturally: what needs to be purified for a human being to attain the beatific vision? Ludlow suggests that Gregory makes a difference between passions and desire. Passions, on the one hand, are a result of the second creation, and can be understood on two levels: first, as natural passions as eating, drinking, sleeping, procreating, et cetera. These passions are necessary for humanity in its fallen state, and hence not intrinsically evil. Secondly, these natural passions could evolve into sinful extravagances, in gluttony, sloth, sexual excess, violence, et cetera.[59] Ludlow contrasts these natural passions with human desire, which is seen as even deeper and more natural to human beings than the passions. Ludlow suggests that to Gregory human beings have a natural desire for the good, but this does not mean that desire is necessarily set in the right direction, but rather, desire can be directed both rightly and wrongly. Furthermore, a common problem is that human beings often mistake what is actually good and sometimes perceive earthly passions as the good and so aligns their desire towards their passions rather than to the actual good.[60]

What separates passions and desire is that passions are endowed to humanity in the second creation and only necessary for the survival of humanity in its fallen state, and that desire is endowed in the original perfection of the first creation.[61] Hence, the purification needed to attain the beatific vision concerns the bodily passions, the desire does not need purification but needs to be directed towards the truly good.

As the beatific vision is deeply embedded in human beings as their *telos* and the surface for participation is the inherent image of God, the next question is: what is the proper act of the beatific vision? How does the beatific vision occur? Both the act of participation and of the beatific vision is regulated by God's infinity. Let us therefore examine the implications of God's infinity on the beatific vision, according to Gregory of Nyssa.

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[59] Ludlow, *Universal salvation*, 56-57.
[60] Ludlow, *Universal salvation*, 58-59.
[61] Cf. Ludlow, *Universal salvation*, 64.

2.2.3 God's infinity

As mentioned above, Gregory's teaching about the beatific vision is that it is a process beginning on earth and continuing in heaven.[62] This poses a number of questions: if the process begins on earth, does it mean that not just desire, virtue and purification are possible on earth, but the beatific vision as well? If so, to what extent is one able to see God in this life? Will it be any different to the beatific vision in the hereafter? For Gregory these issues are regulated by another important aspect of the beatific vision, God's infinity. If the beatific vision serves as the *telos* from an anthropological perspective, and participation as the vehicle in a soteriological perspective, God's infinity provides a theological framework for the beatific vision, it is God's infinity that defines the object and the act of the beatific vision, on earth and in heaven.

Theophanies and the perpetual participation in God's infinity

When considering the question of the possibilities for the beatific vision on earth, Gregory acknowledges the biblical witness for the impossibility to see God and strengthens that position from a philosophical argument about God's infinity; it is simply impossible for finite beings, like human beings, to grasp something infinite, like God. But at the same time, Gregory is very open to the participation in God's energies—both in a more general sense, such as grasping the goodness of God through contemplation of creation, and in a more particular participation through the human image of God. To answer the question on how the more particular act of participation in God is conducted Gregory points to the theophanies in Scripture. Gregory comments on the theophanies of Paul and John in passing,[63] but gives the theophanies of Moses a thorough analysis in his work *The Life of Moses*. Boersma argues that one can discern three stages of the beatific vision in Gregory's work on Moses: first, in the theophany of the burning bush; secondly, in Moses' ascent into the darkness of God on Mount Sinai; and thirdly, when Moses saw the back of God from the cleft in the rock.[64] So, what implications do these theophanies have on the beatific vision? Let us begin with the theophany of the burning bush.

> It is upon us who continue in this quiet and peaceful course of life that the truth will shine, illuminating the eyes of our soul with its own rays. This truth, which was then manifested by the ineffable and mysterious illumination which came to Moses, is God. And if the flame by which the

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[62] Boersma, *Seeing God*, 77.
[63] Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 143-145.
[64] Boersma, *Seeing God*, 85.

soul of the prophet was illuminated was kindled from a thorny bush, even this fact will not be useless for our inquiry. For if truth is God and truth is light—the Gospel testifies by these sublime and divine names to the God who made himself visible to us in the flesh—such guidance of virtue leads us to know that light which has reached down even to human nature. Lest one think that the radiance did not come from a material substance, this light did not shine from some luminary among the stars but came from an earthly bush surpassed the heavenly luminaries in brilliance.[65]

There seems to be three important aspects to the theophany of the burning bush. First, Gregory underlines the importance of contemplation in theophanies. Just like Moses lived a peaceful life before the theophany of the burning bush, Gregory seems to suggest that it is those who live peaceful lives in contemplation of God who are able to be illuminated by divine light. Secondly, Gregory's interpretation of the theophany seems to come from the perspective of neo-platonic metaphysics. In likeness to Plotinus' notion that everything is essentially divine through its derivation from the One, Gregory seems to suggest that everything participates in the divine light, in God's energies, and that the illumination of Moses is the recognition of God's energies in everything; the light is not an external light but rather an inherent light "which has reached down even to human nature" and "came from an earthly bush [that] surpassed the heavenly luminaries in brilliance."[66] The illumination of the burning bush was a participation in the true Being. Thirdly, when approaching the burning bush, Moses is told to remove the sandals from his feet. Gregory interprets this removal of sandals as the virtue and purification needed to see the divine light.[67] Similar to Plotinus, participation in the higher realms of reality requires virtue of purification and the contemplation of the higher realms of reality. In other words, the beatific vision, virtue and purification go hand in hand.

The contemplation of the higher realms of reality and the vision of God's energies in creation is the first step in the ascension into God. For Gregory, Moses' ascension into the darkness of God on Mount Sinai signifies a second stage of the beatific vision and an even

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[65] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 59

[66] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 60: On participation in the true Being, "It seems to me that at the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists. For even if the understanding looks upon any other existing things, reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without participating in true Being."

[67] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 59-60: "Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul. When we do this, the knowledge of the truth will result and manifest itself. The full knowledge of being comes about by purifying our opinion concerning nonbeing."

fuller contemplation in the "ineffable knowledge of God."[68] Vladimir Lossky argues that this is where Gregory parts from his platonic inheritance. In platonic thought, the soul's celestial journey reaches its summit in the contemplation of the *κόσμος νοητός*—the Ideal World, which is part of the divine realm. In contrast to the platonic writings, Gregory's step into divine darkness is one step further, and Gregory's departure from the platonic writings is twofold: first, he has a clear distinction between God and creation, where not even the *κόσμος νοητός* shares God's uncreatedness, and secondly, the ascent into divine darkness is an ascent beyond all ideas, a contemplation of the highest realm of reality, of Being itself. The ascent into divine darkness is the beatific vision of God.[69]

Although Gregory argues that the contemplation of God is possible, he is careful to point out that the contemplation of the "ineffable knowledge of God" is completely beyond comprehension, beyond "any of the customary perceptions of the mind"[70] and in order to ascend into God one "must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions."[71] Although both the senses and the intellect are deeply human to Gregory—the intellect to the extent that it is uniquely human and what constitute the image of God in human beings[72]—there seems to be a need for purification in order to see God. The need for purification and the inability to contemplate God is partly because of the human preoccupation with the material, but mainly because of God's infinity and the otherness that God's infinity entails.[73] Because of God's infinity and otherness, it seems that the senses and the intellect are not only of no help in the contemplation of God, but also obstruct and mislead the contemplation of God. Hence, the contemplation of God requires a detachment from sense perception and discursive intellect.[74]

Detached from sense perception and discursive intellect and purified from all material concern, human beings are able to see God more clearly, just as Moses was able to climb Mount Sinai and ascend into the darkness of God, but Gregory asks:

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[68] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 91.
[69] Lossky, *The vision of God*, 72.
[70] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 93.
[71] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 93.
[72] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the making of man*, 8.4; 11.4, (*NPNF* 2/5:392; 397).
[73] If God is infinite and human beings are of finite nature, and God and human beings are on different sides of the Creator/creature boundary, it follows that God and humanity are utterly different and that God is different from everything human beings usually perceive through senses and intellect.
[74] Cf, Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 95; Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 195.

> What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany [of the burning bush], for then the Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness. Let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence of things we have contemplated spiritually. […] But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is uncontemplated. For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks is sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God.[75]

What was seen in the light of the burning bush is now seen even clearer in the darkness of Mount Sinai. For Gregory, the darkness signifies the unknown and unseen, which transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility, i.e., God.[76] But entering divine darkness does not seem to be the final end, rather, further progression into God seems possible. Gregory's wordings in the quote above, of "an ever greater and more perfect diligence" that "approaches more nearly," "sees more clearly" and "keeps on penetrating deeper," driven by the "intelligence's yearning," points towards a perpetual progress into the darkness of God, to the notion of *epektasis*. *Epektasis* is process at the point of intersection of desire, virtue, purification and beatific vision, and can be schematized as follows: (1) human beings have a *desire* to God, (2) who in that desire wants to participate in God through *virtue*, (3) the participation means *purification* of the human soul, (4) from its purification it reaches its twofold *telos*, the restoration of the inherent image of God and beatific vision where it "sees more clearly what of the divine nature is uncontemplated."

Now, the process of *epektasis* should not be seen as a linear progress from desire to beatific vision, rather, Gregory argues that:

> …for those who are in process of ascent, the outer limit of what has been discovered becomes the starting point of a search after more exalted things. […] For the desire of the soul that is ascending never rests content with what has been known. In turn mounting upwards by way of one greater desire toward another that surpasses it, that soul is always journeying toward the infinite by way of higher things.[77]

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[75] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 94-95.
[76] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 95-97.
[77] Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 261.

That is, when one attains the beatific vision, the knowledge acquired in that vision becomes the new starting point for the progress. Instead of a linear progress, one can picture *epektasis* as an ever-growing spiral of progress in God, where the vision of God kindles the soul's desire for further knowledge of God and so repeating the pattern of desire to participation to purification to restoration and beatific vision, but from always new starting points further into the darkness of God. And since God is infinite, this pattern will repeat infinitely, resulting in a perpetual progress into God, of an ever-clearer vision of God, *epektasis*.

Faith and desire—guiding principles in the divine darkness

Now, *epektasis* is the perpetual progression into the divine darkness, and Gregory calls it an ascent into 'darkness' because God is "being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness."[78] Since sense perception and the intellect obstruct the contemplation of God, one must purify oneself from the ordinary operations of the mind in order to approach God. But if God is darkness and the ordinary principles of understanding are of no use, it seems that one could easily get lost in the divine darkness, and this poses a question: by what principles does one orient and proceed in the divine darkness? It seems Gregory has two principles guiding in the dark: faith and desire.

Towards the end of *The life of Moses*, Gregory summarizes his symbolic interpretation of Moses' life and says: "in the impenetrable darkness [you] draw near to God by your faith, and there are taught the mysteries of the tabernacle and the dignity of the priesthood."[79] And similarly when he paraphrases the Bride in the Song of Songs:

> So she says, 'No sooner had I passed them by, having departed from the whole created order and passed by every thing in the creation that is intelligible and left behind every conceptual approach, than I found the Beloved by faith, and holding on by faith's grasp to the one I have found, I will not let go until he is within my *chamber*. Now the *chamber* is surely the heart, which at that moment became receptive of his divine indwelling […]'.[80]

In both quotes Gregory suggests that faith becomes a guiding principle when proceeding in the darkness of God, but faith seems to have different implications between the quotes. In *The life of Moses* Gregory seems to suggest that faith has an epistemological function as it informs about "the mysteries of the tabernacle and the dignity of the priesthood" and in *Homilies on*

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[78] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 95.
[79] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 135.
[80] Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 195, (translator's emphasis).

the Song of Songs Gregory seems to suggest that faith is the beginning of divine indwelling in human beings, that faith is the beginning of a union between God and human beings.[81]

The other guiding principle is desire. Gregory makes an example of this by suggesting that it is out of desire that Moses prompts God to let him see God face to face, right after they spoke face to face on Mount Sinai. On the one hand, Gregory seems quite amazed that Moses demands to see God again—would not Moses' desire for God be sated after such an intense experience of God? Would not Moses have fulfilled his *telos* when speaking with God face to face?[82] But on the other hand, Moses' demand to see God seems reasonable from two perspectives. First, Gregory argues that the soul has an insatiable desire for God, and when there is nothing obstructing the soul—material concern, passions, sense perception and discursive intellect—desire will put the soul on "its way upward without ceasing."[83] Secondly, the beatific vision kindles rather than sates the desire for God. Consequently, the soul is neither sated nor tired by the ascension into and the vision of God, rather, the soul is renewed and increases its activity after the vision of God. In other words, desire is why Moses demands to see God face to face right after they met on Mount Sinai.[84]

The guiding principles in the divine darkness are faith and desire, which leads human beings to the beatific vision and to a mystical union with God. The soul is never sated in this journey, but the contrary, the vision of God and the union with God kindles the soul's desire and faith's search for God. And since God is infinite it seems that the journey through divine darkness is a never-ending journey into God, with an ever-increasing desire for God and an ever-clearer vision of God. From Gregory's fundamental notion of God's infinity, it seems that the beatific vision is the perpetual fulfillment of the human *telos*, the perpetual participation in God and hence the perpetual virtue and purification of the soul, the perpetual increase of desire for God and the ever-clearer vision of God. For Gregory, it seems that the beatific vision is not a static existence in the heavens, but a rather intense and dynamic experience of perpetual increase.

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[81] Cf. Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the grasp of faith: union, knowledge, and divine presence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 101-103.

[82] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 111-112

[83] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 113.

[84] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 115: "[God] would not have shown himself to his servant if the sight were such as to bring the desire of the beholder to an end, since the true sight of God consists in this, that the one who looks up to God never ceases in that desire."

2.2.4 The state of the fulfilled human being

Now that three important aspects of Gregory's view on the beatific vision have been examined, the beatific vision as the *telos* of humanity, participation in God as the way to the beatific vision, and God's infinity as the framework for the beatific vision, there is one more aspect to examine: the state of human beings in the beatific vision.

As mentioned above, the *telos* of humanity is twofold, the beatific vision and the restoration to its original state, and the participation in God takes humanity to this twofold *telos* simultaneously. Although God's infinity generates a rather dynamic beatific vision of perpetual increase, there must be a state when a human being has attained a certain fulfillment of the soul, a certain restoration of the original state, a certain extent of the beatific vision, that this state must be considered different to the state of human beings on earth. If so, what are the characteristics of this state? Gregory has three metaphors for the characteristics of the perfected human being.

As already mentioned, Gregory suggests that human beings will be fully purified and hence perfect mirrors of God in the beatific vision. Gregory likens this purification of human beings to the recasting of rusty iron:

> When he has scraped off the rustlike dirt which dank decay has caused to appear on his form, he will once more recover the likeness of the archetype and be good. For what is like to the Good is certainly itself good. Hence, if a man who is pure of heart sees himself, he sees in himself what he desires; and thus he becomes blessed, because when he looks at his own purity, he sees the archetype in the image.[85]

When purified, the human being "recover the likeness of the archetype and be good." In other words, it seems there is a process of restoration of humanity to the original, perfect mirroring of God. Gregory continues and explains the fully restored human being with the metaphor of a mirror:

> Though men who see the sun in a mirror do not gaze at the sky itself, yet they see the sun in the reflexion of the mirror no less than those who look at its very orb. So, He says, it is also with you. Even though you are too weak to perceive the Light Itself, yet, if you return to the grace of the Image with which you were informed from the beginning, you will have all you seek in

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[85] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 149.

yourselves. […] But what is this vision? It is purity, sanctity, simplicity, and other such luminous reflections of the Divine Nature, in which God is contemplated.[86]

In this perfected state humanity seems to be in the perfect likeness to God, the inherent image of God so perfectly purified that it becomes the perfect mirror of God. That is, seeing God in the human image of God will be just as perceiving the orb of the sun perfectly in a mirror. Furthermore, the state of humanity in the beatific vision is not merely a purified humanity reflecting God; it is also a transformed humanity. In his *Homilies on the Song of Songs* Gregory suggest that:

> ...the Word rightly says to the Bride in her new glory, '[…] in drawing near to the archetypal Beauty, you too have become beautiful, informed like a mirror by my appearance.' For in that it is transformed in accordance with the reflections of its choices, the human person is rightly likened to a mirror. If it looks upon gold, gold it appears, and by way of reflection it gives off the beams of that substance; […] the soul purified by the Word has taken the sun's orb within itself and has been gleaming in company with the light that appears within it, and therefore the Word says to her: 'You have already become beautiful by coming close to my light, making a participation in the beautiful your own by this drawing near.' *Behold*, he says, *you are beautiful, my close one*.[87]

The Bride's participation in the beauty of the Bridegroom does not merely make the Bride reflect the Bridegroom, but the Bride share the Bridegroom's beauty, the Bride herself becomes beautiful.

These three metaphors provide three different aspects of the perfected human being. First, as purified and freed from everything that hinders the vision of God, secondly, as perfectly mirroring God with one's own being, thirdly, as actually becoming what one beholds—in the vision of God, one actually becomes like God.

2.3 The beatific vision according to Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas engaged in the question of the beatific vision more or less throughout his academic life. In one of his earlier works, *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences*, 1252–1256, he made a post in an intricate debate that had been held in the Latin Church over the prior centuries. The debate was on whether one would see God's essence or his energies in the beatific vision, on whether staying loyal to the optimistic Augustinian view that the vision

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[86] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 149-150.
[87] Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 115.

of God's essence is possible or siding with the pessimistic view of Dionysius the Aeropagite.[88] One of the causes of the debate was the difference of emphasis in the biblical paradox mentioned above, where some emphasized the promise of seeing God face to face and others the impossibility to see infinite God. While he recognized this paradox, Thomas sided with Augustine and explained the possibility to see God's essence with the help of Aristotelian metaphysics.[89]

As Thomas is situated in another time and place than Gregory of Nyssa, he also approaches the beatific vision with different perspectives than Gregory. Thomas approaches the beatific vision form the following three perspectives, an anthropological perspective where the beatific vision is the *telos* for humanity, a biblical perspective where the beatific vision is promised as the final eschatological end, and an epistemological perspective where the very act of the beatific vision is sought to be understood. While Thomas treats the anthropological and epistemological perspectives more explicitly, I think it is safe to assume that the biblical perspective serves as an underlying foundation for the considerations of the other perspectives. And as will be evident, these three perspectives interplay a fair bit and are all present whenever Thomas discusses the beatific vision.

2.3.1 Scholastic metaphysics—a brief excursion

There is a general sense of teleology in the works of Thomas Aquinas, and teleology is specifically important in his treatment of the beatific vision. Thomas' teleology relies heavily on a framework of scholastic metaphysics, and to get as good an understanding of Thomas' treatment of the beatific vision as possible, it is necessary to make a brief digression into scholastic metaphysics, more particularly to the act-potency distinction and the question of causation.

Act and potency

In scholastic metaphysics it is said that everything is composed of act and potency. This means that all things bear some kind of potency waiting to be actualized, that everything has some kind of potential to fulfill. Let us take the basketball as an example. When we buy a new basketball it is an object composed of act and potency, an object somewhere on the scale between pure act and pure potency. The basketball is probably already actualized in some

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[88] For renderings of the general historical tension between the Latin and Greek views on the beatific vision, see: Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 9-22; Hütter, *Bound for beatitude*, 392-397.

[89] Cf. Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God,* 81-95.

ways, for instance, it is orange and has a rubbery feel to it, and hence actualized to the orange-ness and the rubbery-ness of a basketball. But in other ways it is probably not yet actualized, for instance, a basketball is supposed to be round and bouncy, but if the basketball is not yet inflated it is anything but round and bouncy, and therefore it only carries the potential for round-ness and bouncy-ness. It is first when the basketball is inflated its potency for round-ness and bouncy-ness is actualized.[90] The example of the basketball illustrates two things: first, that created objects are on a spectrum between act and potency, that objects are neither pure act nor pure potency, and secondly, that the act-potency distinction implies a certain movement from potency to actualization, which in turn implies the teleological nature of things—that everything is meant to become fully actualized.

The four causes

Teleology is also a matter of causation in scholastic metaphysics. The question of causation is a big and intricate question, but to get a grip of Thomas' general teleology it will suffice to describe how the Scholastics determined why an object is the way it is. From its Aristotelian inheritance the Scholastics teach that there are four causes to why an object is the way it is, often referred to as 'the four causes.' Let us continue with the example of the basketball, and ask: why is a basketball the way it is? The first cause to why a basketball is the way it is, is because someone made it, and this person is the *efficient cause* of the basketball. The second cause to why a basketball is the way it is, is because of the material it is made from. The basketball receives its rubbery-ness from its rubbery material, it is orange because it is colored with orange paint, and so on. The second cause has to do with the material it is made from, and is hence called the *material cause*. The third cause to why a basketball is the way it is, is because the manufacturer had an idea of what the basketball was supposed to be like. The manufacturer did not randomly blend rubber and orange paint in the hope of it spontaneously becoming a basketball, but had an idea for the construction of the ball. The idea of the basketball is also called its form; hence the third cause is called the *formal cause*. And finally, the fourth cause to why a basketball is the way it is, is the end or reason of the basketball—what is a basketball for? The meaning of the basketball is of course to be played with; it needs to have a rubbery surface for the player to easily control the ball, it needs to be bouncy for the players to be able to move about on the pitch, it needs to be round to bounce

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[90] Cf. Edward Feser, *Scholastic metaphysics: a contemporary introduction*, (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 160-161.

predictably, and so on. Ultimately, the basketball is the way it is because what it is for, and this is called the *final cause*.[91]

Now, one could argue that the causes stand on different sides of the act-potency distinction. On the one hand, the material cause which consists of potency that awaits actualization and the efficient cause that is the agent of actualization, and on the other hand, the formal cause that gives the object a form of perfection for the efficient cause to aspire to and asks whether the basketball has achieved full basketball-ness, and the final cause that gives a purpose to the object and asks whether it reached its end, whether it actualized its potential. The formal cause and the final cause points towards the teleological side of the act-potency distinction, and make it clear that the *telos* of all things is for potency to be fully actualized.[92]

2.3.2 Anthropological perspective on the beatific vision

From the teleological framework constituted by the act-potency distinction, the question about the human *telos* comes naturally. Let us return to Thomas and his treatment of the human *telos* and the beatific vision.

Final cause

As we have seen, for a thing to reach its final cause it has to actualize its formal cause, for instance, to be able to play with a basketball (which is its final cause) the ball has to have become a basketball (which is its particular formal cause). Similarly, to understand the human final cause one has to examine the human formal cause, the question 'what is a human being?' Thomas suggests that humans are rational animals, that a human being "differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions. Wherefore those actions alone are properly called human, of which man is master. Now man is master of his actions through his reason and will; […] Therefore those actions are properly called human which proceed from a deliberate will."[93] In other words, the distinguishing characteristic of a human being is its rationality, the ability to make deliberate actions. Further, Thomas distinguishes human rationality into two powers of the soul, Intellect and Will. Intellect is the seat of cognition that has the ability to abstract, understand, and as we will see, become one with the very essences

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[91] Cf. Feser, *Scholastic metaphysics*, 98.
[92] Feser, *Scholastic metaphysics*, 91-92.
[93] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, *ST*, I-II, q. 1, a. 1, in vol. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), 583.

of things.[94] Will is the 'intellectual appetite' with a natural inclination towards the universally good, a natural desire to its ultimate happiness, and in this desire the Will ultimately directs the whole human being to actualization.[95] Thomas likens the way of the Will with a governor who wants the common good for a city: to achieve the common good for the city the governor has to direct all city departments and particular ends to the common good, likewise, in order to achieve full actualization the Will directs all particularities in a person to the universal good, God.[96] Consequently, the actualization of the human being is in perfecting its rationality, i.e., the perfection of the Intellect and the Will's attainment of the highest good.

So far it has been clear that, according to Thomas there is an inherent *telos* in human beings, a human final cause, which is to be fully actualized in its human-ness, the perfection of the rationality. In other words, the final cause is the actualization of the formal cause, which perfects the Intellect and sates the desire of the Will. While it is clear that there is an inherent *telos* for human beings, nothing has been said on how the human *telos* is actualized and what the actualization actually consists of. The 'how' and the 'what' of the actualization will be considered in the following section.

Happiness—the highest good

When discussing what constitutes the human *telos*, Thomas concludes by stating: "…happiness means the acquisition of the last end."[97] This is a statement that works in both directions—if happiness means the acquisition of the last end, it must also imply that the last end is the acquisition of happiness. And once he established that the human *telos* is happiness, Thomas asks himself what it is that constitutes the human happiness and comes to the conclusion that:

> It is impossible for any created good to constitute man's happiness. For happiness is the perfect good, which lulls the appetite altogether; else it would not be the last end, if something yet remained to be desired. […] naught can lull man's will, save the universal good. This is to be found, not in any creature, but in God alone; because every creature has goodness by participation.[98]

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[94] *ST*, I, q. 79, a. 3.
[95] *ST*, I, q. 82, a. 5.
[96] *ST*, I-II, q. 1, a. 2.
[97] *ST*, I-II, q. 1, a. 8.
[98] *ST*, I-II, q. 2, a. 8.

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In other words, nothing created can be the end that constitutes perfect happiness, because none of the created things are perfectly good, hence, only God can constitute perfect happiness, because only God is the Supreme Good.

Furthermore, the suggestion that only God constitutes the perfect happiness has a twofold line of argumentation. First, as just mentioned, Thomas keeps in line with the Aristotelian heritage when he suggests that humans are only satisfied when they know God, because God is the Supreme Good, in which every created goodness participates and derives from. In other words, God is the First Cause. This means that it is not the effects of goodness, but Goodness itself, that satisfies human beings. Secondly, Thomas argues that if human beings are to attain perfect happiness, it is necessary for the intellect to see God's essence, which is the perfection of the intellect:

> For as the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect; if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God; which is opposed to faith.[99]

Here Thomas makes something of a 'theologizing turn.' It is nothing strange that the theologian Thomas refers to faith when conducting theology, but it is slightly remarkable in this context; for instance, when determining the metaphysics of act and potency and the human *telos* in the perfect Good situated in the First Cause, that Thomas relies on a highly philosophical argumentation. But when determining what actualizes the intellect, hence giving humans ultimate happiness, he argues that it must be the intellectual vision of God, otherwise it is something besides God that brings perfect happiness, "which is opposed to faith."[100] To refer to faith as a criterion amidst an otherwise highly philosophical line of argumentation may seem a little odd, but at the same time, the Aristotelian notion of the First Cause was often interpreted as God by the Scholastics,[101] and maybe Thomas' 'theologizing turn' is a witness of a time when theology and philosophy went hand in hand.

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[99] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 1.
[100] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 1.
[101] See, for instance: *ST*, I, q. 44, a. 1, where Thomas makes the argument of God as the First Cause and clearly acknowledges his Aristotelian heritage: "…all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation. Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly. […] Aristotle said (Metaph. ii, text 4) that whatever is greatest in being and greatest in truth, is the cause of every being and of every truth; just as whatever is the greatest in heat is the cause of all heat."; and further, in *ST*, I, q. 44, a. 3, Thomas explicitly interprets God as the First Cause: "God is the first exemplar cause of all things."

Thomas' anthropological perspective on the beatific vision can be concluded in that the beatific vision is the ultimate *telos* for human beings, based on the following line of argumentation: (1) every human being is composed of act and potency and has the *telos* to fully actualize one's potency—the final cause is to perfect the formal cause. (2) The full actualization of a human being is the perfection of the characteristically human, and since Thomas defines human beings as rational animals it means the perfection of the rationality. (3) Human rationality consists of two faculties, the rational appetite i.e., Will, that inclines humans to the universal good,[102] and the rational cognition, i.e., Intellect, which can see and grasp the very essences of things and becomes like them through the act of abstraction— which will be discussed more thoroughly below.[103] (4) The Will is not fully satisfied by anything save the Supreme Good, and the Intellect cannot be perfected by anything other than the vision of God. (5) Therefore, the beatific vision is the final cause for human beings, and this *telos* is present in its formal cause, in the very idea of a human being.

Evidently, Thomas' anthropological perspective on the beatific vision is highly philosophical but draws a fair bit on theological and epistemological reasoning as well. Both the epistemological and theological perspectives require further examination; let us turn to Thomas' epistemological perspective on the beatific vision.

2.3.3 Epistemological perspective on the beatific vision

When considering the beatific vision, Thomas identifies the same biblical paradox as Gregory identified, the paradox of the promise to see God "face to face" and "as he is"[104] and the impossibility to see God.[105] In trying to resolve any paradox one could easily reject one side in favor of the other; in this case it would mean that Thomas would either reject the biblical promise of the beatific vision or the biblical assumptions about the nature of God. Given Thomas' overall optimistic Augustinian view on the possibility to see God's essence, one could assume that Thomas would favor the promise at the expense of the assumptions about God's nature. But this is not the case. Rather, Thomas tries to resolve the paradox while keeping the integrity of both the biblical promise and the assumptions about God's nature. For Thomas, the solution is a question of epistemology.

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[102] Cf. *ST*, I, q. 82, a. 4.
[103] Cf. *ST*, I, q. 79, a. 4.
[104] 1 Cor 13:12; 1 John 3:2.
[105] See, for instance, Ex 33:20 and John 1:18; Thomas' recognition of this paradox can be found in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences* IV.49.2, a. 1, trans. Katja Krause, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2020), 95-102; and in *ST*, Suppl, q. 92, a. 1.

God's essence and the essences of natural things

With a generally optimistic view on the beatific vision, it seems that Thomas got strong arguments for that optimism: first, there is the doctrine of bodily resurrection where the bodily eyes will be renewed and possibly enable humans to see God with sense perception; secondly, there is the aforementioned promise to see God face to face which could imply a full vision of God; thirdly, there are the theophanies of Moses,[106] John[107] and Paul[108] that seem to prove that the vision of God is possible for human beings, both on earth and in heaven. While these arguments seem to favor Thomas' optimism, he does not accept any of them uncritically. Rather, he interprets the arguments in order to clarify that the beatific vision is simultaneously possible and impossible for human beings, depending on how one defines the object and the act of the beatific vision.

As it was shown above, the object of the beatific vision has to be God—otherwise the ultimate beatitude would "consist in something else beside God; which is opposed to faith."[109] In turn, Thomas argues that the object of the beatific vision cannot be God's effects or likeness, not even in theophanies, because that would be something besides God. Rather, the object of the beatific vision must be the very essence of God. But as a vision of God's essence the beatific vision is beyond human ability. Thomas argues for this by proving that one cannot attain the knowledge of God's essence in the same way as with the essences of natural things.

According to Thomistic epistemology, the cognition of an object—a stone, for instance—begins with the sense perception of the stone. The perception of the stone is not of its essence, but rather of accidental representations of the stone. While the senses are not able to perceive the stone's essence, it feeds the intellect with the perceived sensations from which the intellect makes an abstraction of the stone, and through this abstraction the intellect comes to the vision and understanding of the stone's essence.[110] In this abstraction the intellect attains a certain intellectual union with the stone's essence, as the form of the stone—the stone's essence—becomes the form of the intellect, this union is called noetic identity or

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[106] Cf. Ex 3 and Ex 24:9-11.
[107] Cf. Rev 1:9-20.
[108] Cf. Acts 9:1-9; 2 Cor 12:1-10.
[109] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 1.
[110] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 2: "Two things are required both for sensible and for intellectual vision—viz. power of sight, and union of the thing seen with the sight. For vision is made actual only when the thing seen is in a certain way in the seer. Now in corporeal things it is clear that the thing seen cannot be by its essence in the seer, but only by its likeness; as the similitude of a stone is in the eye, whereby the vision is made actual; whereas the substance of the stone is not there. But if the principle of the visual power and the thing seen were one and the same thing, it would necessarily follow that the seer would receive both the visual power and the form whereby it sees, from that one same thing."

formal union.[111] In other words, this is a kind of *bottom-up* cognition where human beings see and understand of the essences of natural things in the following way: (1) the senses perceive the likeness of an object, (2) the intellect make an abstraction of the information perceived by the senses, (3) and through this abstraction a human being can come to the comprehension of the very essence of an object.[112] So, will human beings cognize God's essence in the same way?

In heaven, where the beatific vision suppose to occur, Thomas argues that human beings will be glorified to body and soul and reside in a renewed creation, where creation has passed from a state of corruption to incorruptibility.[113] In this state one might argue that it would be natural for blessed humanity to see God's essence with corporeal eyes, since both the bodily eyes and the intellect have attained incorruptibility, but Thomas argues that it will be just as impossible to see God with bodily eyes in heaven as it is on earth, because the human inability to perceive incorporeal things will remain even in heaven.[114]

So human beings are not able to see God's essence by bottom-up cognition, either in heaven or on earth, because God differs from natural things in three ways: first, God is incorporeal, and the essence of an incorporeal thing cannot be known by the bottom-up cognition. Secondly, God is pure actuality and hence not composed of form and matter, as natural things are. As pure actuality, God is separated from all created things, in turn, no created thing can have the likeness of God's essence, and hence humans cannot see God's essence in natural things. Thirdly, whereas all created things participate in vice, virtue or being itself, and can be determined by their participation, God is completely self-subsistent and hence cannot be understood by the participation in anything else. With the contrasts between God and everything else, Thomas comes to the conclusion that God "cannot be seen by any created similitude representing the divine essence itself as it really is" but the essence of God must be seen immediately.[115]

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[111] On 'noetic identiy' in Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 82; On 'formal union' in Hütter, *Bound for beatitude*, 397-399.

[112] Cf. *Sentences*, IV.92.2, a. 1: "When our intellect separates off the form understood from the forms of the imagination, the understood quiddity remains which is one and the same for different people who understand it. And the quiddity of a separate substance is of this kind. And for this reason, when our intellect attains the highest grade of abstraction of any quiddity of an intelligible it understands the separate substance by this <abstracted> quiddity which is similar to it."

[113] *ST*, Suppl, q. 91, aa. 1 & 5

[114] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 4; *ST*, Suppl, q. 92, a. 2: "God can nowise be seen with the eyes of the body, or perceived by any of the senses, as that which is seen directly, neither here, nor in heaven […] Since then sight and sense will be specifically the same in the glorified body, as in a non-glorified body, it will be impossible for it to see the Divine essence as an object of direct vision;"

[115] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 2.

The act and the object of the beatific vision

The assumption that God's essence must be the object of the beatific vision is discussed most thoroughly in *Sentences*, where Thomas conjoins this assumption with the question of how the act of the beatific vision is possible and conducted. For Thomas, there are three reasons to why the vision of God's essence is possible, the noetic identity, on the one hand, the ontology of God and the 'light of glory,' on the other. The noetic identity was only touched on briefly in the previous section and requires further inquiry.

As mentioned above, one aspect of Thomas' epistemology is that the intellect has the ability to abstract the idea or form of a corporeal thing, so that it comes to know the universal form of a thing, for instance, it comes to know the form of dog, i.e., dog-ness. When one has come to know the form 'dog,' one is able to think and talk about dogs, not necessarily about any particular dog, but dogs in general, and one is able to instantly recognize any dog and instantly distinguish dogs from other furry, four-legged animals, such as cats and foxes. In this, Thomas argues that the form of the abstracted object *becomes the form of the intellect*, that a certain unity occurs as the knower and the known become one. In other words, when the intellect cognizes a dog, the universal form of dog-ness becomes the form of the intellect, and consequently, the dog and the intellect become one, and this is called the noetic identity.[116] "However," Katja Krause argues in her introduction to the first article of Thomas' *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences* IV.49.2, "in Aquinas's eyes, no form generated by the human intellect, nor infused into the human intellect by God, could lead to its cognizing the uncreated divine essence, since both forms constituted effects of God, albeit in different ways."[117] There is, in Thomas' view, a crucial difference between God's essence and the essences of creatures, namely, the creatureliness. If God's essence is uncreated, it follows that it can neither occur as a form in the intellect by the way of abstraction nor by God's spiritual impression on the soul, since both the abstraction and the impression would not be God's essence, but derivations of God.[118] Rather God's essence has to become the form of the intellect, immediately.

So, for the beatific vision to be a vision of God, it must be the immediate vision of God's essence, and this happens when God's essence, the form of God, is united to the intellect as its form, "so as to be both that which is understood, and that whereby it is

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[116] Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 81-86.
[117] Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 86.
[118] *ST*, Suppl, q. 92, a. 1.

understood."[119] But if God's essence cannot be mediated in any way, how does the noetic identity with God occur? For Thomas, two things are considered in order to make the noetic identity with God's essence possible, the ontology of God and the eschatological endowment of the 'light of glory,' which will be treated separately further on.

Thomas contrasts the ontology of God to the ontology of all natural things and argues that while the form of a natural thing is restricted to specific matter, God's essence—which is both incorporeal and of pure actuality—is not restricted to any matter. And while not restricted to any specific matter, God's essence can become the form of multiple matters, and hence can become the immediate form of the human intellect.[120] While Thomas uses the form-matter distinction when speaking on the proportion between God and humans in the beatific vision, he is careful to clarify that the noetic identity should not be understood univocally—as if God's essence actually becomes the form of the intellect—but analogously to the proportion between form and matter in a natural thing. More specifically, it should be understood analogously to the relation between form and matter that holds the proportion of act and potency—the form perfects the matter and actualizes its *telos*—and consequently, God's essence will be to the intellect what form is to matter, its perfection and actualization.[121]

To keep the integrity of both the biblical promise of the beatific vision and the integrity of God's nature, we have seen that Thomas concludes that God's essence is the object of the beatific vision, by the way of ontological, theological and epistemological arguments. But a problem remains. Thomas states that by the power of its own principle, the intellect can only know things within its own genus. This means that the natural intellect can only know the forms of natural things; while God can make himself the form of the intellect, there is an insufficiency on part of the human intellect in that it cannot see supernatural things, and consequently, cannot see God.[122] Thomas solves this problem in three steps. First, the beatific vision must be eschatological. As long as one lives an earthly life, one has to live with one's sense perception and intellectual cognition—this is the way human beings come to knowledge and one cannot disregard it. But when a human being dies, body and soul are separated; the bodily senses do not perceive anything and the intellectual cognition does not receive any information to cognize, consequently, in the disembodied soul the natural principles of cognition are put out of play. When the senses do not perceive and the intellect does not

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[119] *ST*, Suppl, q. 92, a. 1; Cf. *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 5.
[120] *ST*, Suppl, q. 92, a. 1.
[121] *ST*, Suppl, q. 92, a. 1.
[122] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 4.

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cognize, there is nothing occupying the intellect, hence it is possible for God's essence to become the immediate form of the intellect.[123]

Secondly, although the sense perception and cognition are set out of play in the disembodied state, Thomas argues that the intellect cannot attain God's essence as its form since it is of a different genus. In order to enable the intellect to attain God's essence as its form, Thomas suggests that God infuses the soul with the 'light of glory' which disposes the intellect in such a way that it becomes receptive to God's essence.[124] Thirdly, Thomas argues that it is not human beings that achieve the attainment of God's essence as the form of the intellect, but the contrary, God makes his essence the form of the human intellect.[125]

Light of Glory

So far it has been clear that, on the one hand, God's is beyond human knowledge, and on the other hand, for the beatific vision to be a vision of God, God's essence must be the object of that vision. There is a great deal of tension between these premises, and Thomas resolves this tension by introducing the notion of the supernatural 'light of glory,' that is endowed by God and that strengthens the human intellect and enables it to see God's essence. Reinhard Hütter suggests that one should understand the light of glory analogously to the intellectual light in the cognition of natural things; in the cognition of natural things the intellectual light disposes the intellect so that the form of a natural object can become the form of the intellect, whereby the object is properly understood and the noetic identity between object and intellect can occur. Analogously, the supernatural light of glory disposes the intellect in such a way that God's essence can become the form of the intellect, whereby God is properly understood and the noetic identity between God and humans can occur.[126]

Further, Hütter stresses the importance of Aquinas' careful wording about the light of glory, that it is not 'through which' (*quo*) or 'in which' (*in quo*), but rather it is 'whereby' or 'by which' (*sub quo*) God's essence is seen. This is important because, on the one hand, 'through which' and 'in which' would imply that the light of glory is a created medium or similitude through which or in which God is seen. This would remove the immediacy of the beatific vision and ultimately make something beside God the object of the beatific vision. On the other hand, 'by which' would imply the light of glory as strengthening the intellect so that

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[123] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 11.
[124] *ST*, I, q. 12, aa. 2 & 5.
[125] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 4.
[126] Hütter, *Bound for beatitude*, 402; Cf. *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 2.

the intellect can see God's essence, and hence the immediacy of the beatific vision is maintained.[127]

Furthermore, Thomas suggests that the light of glory makes human beings 'deiform,'[128] which seems to suggest that humans have to change or transform in order to attain the beatific vision. But Krause suggests that the light of glory should not be understood as transforming the soul's nature, but rather that the soul will remain unchanged in the beatific vision but will acquire a new disposition by which it will see God as the form of the intellect. That is, rather than transforming the intellect, the intellect receives a new intellectual faculty, a new qualitative accident to the soul, that can attain God's essence as its form.[129]

The light of glory is necessary for the beatific vision as it endows the soul with a new disposition, by which it is enabled to attain the noetic identity with God and to see God's essence immediately, while the soul's natural faculties endowed in the creation *ex nihilo* remain unchanged.

Restricting factors: the resurrected body and God's incomprehensibility

This far Thomas' arguments for the possibility of seeing God's essence have been reviewed, but there are two important restrictions to the beatific vision, the impossibility to see God's essence with bodily eyes and God's ultimate incomprehensibility. To get a fuller understanding of Thomas' treatment of the beatific vision, let us briefly examine these restrictions.

First, the bodily resurrection is of necessity for Thomas, partly on account of arguments from the biblical witness,[130] and partly on account the *telos* of human happiness. Although the final cause of humanity is the perfect happiness through the intellectual vision of God, which is possible even in the soul's disembodied state,[131] the soul relates to the body as form to matter and is not fully content until it is reunited with its body. Hence the bodily resurrection is necessary on account of the ultimate human happiness.[132] Although Thomas argues for the

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[127] Hütter, *Bound for beatitude*, 403; Cf. *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 5, ad. 2.

[128] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 5.

[129] Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 180; Furthermore, the new disposition could be understood by the substance-accidence distinction where the substance, the soul, receives a new real accident, a faculty that enables the soul to receive God's essence as its form. Regarding the definition of a 'qualitative accident' or 'real accident,' Robert Pasnau writes: "What does define a real accident is its being a genuine, irreducible entity, existing in its own right even while inhering in a subject." Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical themes 1274–1671* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 191.

[130] Cf. *ST*, Suppl, q. 72, a. 1.

[131] Cf. Hütter, *Bound for beatitude*, 426-427.

[132] *ST*, Suppl, q. 72, a. 1; Hütter, *Bound for beatitude*, 428: "The resurrection body perfects beatitude, not intensively, by contributing to the depth or intensity of beatitude, but rather extensively, contributing to

necessity of the bodily resurrection, one can hardly deny that Thomas' view on the beatific vision is highly intellectualist. This brings some tension, and raises the question: what is the point of having a body in the beatific vision? For Thomas, it seems that the glorified body will have the same senses as the non-glorified body, except maybe taste,[133] and that sense perception will be the same.[134] And since the senses will remain the same and cannot perceive God's essence, they will not be of any particular use in the beatific vision. Now, although the body is not of any use in the beatific vision, it is not simply the object of the soul's ontological desire either. Rather, Thomas suggests that the bodily senses will perceive God indirectly in two ways: on the one hand, one will see God's glory in the glorified human bodies and in the body of Christ, that is, one will see God's glory with one's ordinary senses, as they will function in the same way as they do on earth. On the other hand, when God's essence is the form of the intellect, the intellect will see God so clearly that it prompts the senses to instantly identify God in everything; God will be perceived as being 'all in all.'[135] Krause suggests that this instant identification of God is 'God sensed by accident,' and explains 'God sensed by accident' as analogous to how one instantly identifies a person as living just by hearing her voice; instead of a bottom-up cognition it is a top-down cognition, where the form is informing the senses so that perception instantly becomes cognition, skipping the step of abstraction. That is, if one knows that a person must be alive to speak, one will instantly understand a person as living just by hearing her voice.[136] And just as a person is instantly cognized as living by the act of speech, God is instantly identified "in sensing all physical creatures because of His presence in the intellect in the beatific vision."[137] Although the body will not and cannot attain the direct vision of God's essence, it will participate in the beatific vision, in that it perceives God in everything, albeit indirectly.

Secondly, for Thomas, God is ultimately incomprehensible, and the reasons are twofold: due to the proportion between God and human as known and knower and due to God's infinity. As to the proportion between God and humans, God is perfectly knowable

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beatitude's extension into the resurrection life of the *comprehensor* and thereby expanding beatitude to the embodied mode of existence and bringing about well-being (*bene esse*) […] the resurrection body becomes, so to speak, the 'sounding board' for the soul's beatitude 'carrying over,' expanding, or extending the soul's beatitude into the resurrection body." And further in Hütter, *Bound for beatitude*, 435: Hütter argues that the soul's desire for the resurrected body is to be understood as "'ontological desire' that characterizes the separated soul that is still configured ontologically to inform a body in contrast with an elicited actual desire of the will of the *comprehensor*'s soul."

[133] *ST*, Suppl, q. 82, a. 4.
[134] *ST*, Suppl, q. 92, a. 2.
[135] *Sentences* IV.24.2, a. 2.
[136] Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 124.
[137] Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 125.

since God is pure actuality. As pure actuality, there is nothing restricting God from becoming the form of the intellect, hence nothing restricting the immediate knowledge of God, as mentioned above.[138] But on the other hand, Thomas argues "that 'to comprehend' means 'to seize immediately,' as it were, namely, 'to enclose.' […] Yet something that is enclosed is properly confined by the one confining it. And for this reason, what is comprehended must be confined by the one comprehending it."[139] In other words, comprehension implies the full confinement of the object comprehended, which would imply the full confinement of God in the beatific vision, which is not possible since "the Truth of the divine essence exceeds the light of any created intellect."[140] That is, although God's essence will become the form of the intellect, the ontological asymmetry between known and the knower, between God and humans, will remain even in the beatific vision.[141]

As to the incomprehensibility due to God's infinity, we have seen that the top-down cognition makes it possible for the human eye to see God's glory in all of creation, as the senses are primed by the intellect to see God. And in the context of top-down cognition Thomas asks: when seeing God in the beatific vision, will one see all things God sees? While it would seem reasonable, Thomas' answer is ultimately 'no,' and the reasons are twofold: first, while humans can see things only in their actuality, God can see them in their potency as well. This implies that while humans will have God's essence as the form of the intellect, and hence will be able to see all things that actually were, is, and is to come, God can see all possible worlds that never were actualized but remained in potency, which makes God truly omniscient. This implies Thomas' second point, the boundary between God's infinity and finite creatures; although humans will have God's essence as the form of the intellect in the beatific vision, the boundary between the creaturely finitude and God's infinity will remain, as the finite cannot confine the infinite.[142]

2.4 Comparison

Now that both Gregory's and Thomas' treatments of the beatific vision have been examined, I have decided to make a comparison between the two, to make respective takes on the beatific vision even clearer. The comparison is made from four aspects that are important for both Gregory's and Thomas' respective treatments of the beatific vision: teleology, the

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[138] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 1.
[139] *Sentences* IV.24.2, a. 3.
[140] *Sentences* IV.24.2, a. 3.
[141] Krause, *Thomas Aquinas on seeing God*, 138-139.
[142] *Sentences* IV.24.2, a. 5.

requirements for the beatific vision to occur, the act of the beatific vision, and the doctrines of God indicating the object of the beatific vision.

2.4.1 Teleological direction

Both Gregory and Thomas are highly teleological in their takes on the beatific vision, and although the question of their teleological directions may seem tautological—as teleology is always directed to its end—it is a relevant question, as the two express themselves quite differently. First, Thomas' teleology is pretty straightforward: (1) the human *telos* is the ultimate happiness, (2) which is the full actualization of the human form, the human rationality, (3) which is fully actualized when it attains its highest form, God's essence. (4) Although the final cause is ontologically and chronologically present as potency in the creation of a human being, it is to be actualized in the eschatological; it is first in the eschatological it is possible for God's essence to become the form of the human intellect. As Thomas works within the framework of the act-potency distinction, his teleological direction is quite linear, from the potency in creation to the actualization in heaven.

In comparison to Thomas, the direction of Gregory's teleology seems a little less clear. Gregory depicts a twofold human *telos*, the restoration of the original humanity of the first creation, on the one hand, and the mystical ascension and union with God, on the other. If seen chronologically, it seems that these aspects point in opposite directions, the aspect of restoration pointing backwards to the time of the first creation, and the aspect of ascension and union with God forward into the eschatological. But if seen ontologically, against its neo-platonic backdrop, Gregory's teleology appears more cohesive, for three reasons.

First, as mentioned above, Ludlow suggests that the twofold creation should not be seen as two temporally successive events, but in the categories of ideal and actual creation. In this interpretation, a restoration of the original humanity does not necessarily imply a return to the first creation, as in a rewinding of history, but rather as an implication of the eschatological realization of the ideal humanity of the first creation, as pointing forward and realizing the perfection that has been present since the beginning.

Secondly, the underlying neo-platonic *exitus-reditus* schema points forward as well. While it implies everything's return to the One, there is also an aspect of realization in the *exitus-reditus* schema; it is not a simple withdrawal or reversal of the emanations of the One, rather, it is an active return through participation, resulting in the reunification with the One. In other words, the movements of return and realization in the *exitus-reditus* schema go hand in hand. Consequently, for Gregory the restoration of the original humanity and the ascension

into God does not seem to be a simple withdrawal from material and earthly concerns, but the active participation in God that simultaneously purifies and restores the soul and enables it to see God. For Gregory the movements of restoration and realization go hand in hand.

Thirdly, the combination of the neo-platonic notion of return through participation and Gregory's emphasis on God's infinity results in the notion of *epektasis*, the perpetual spiral of ever-increasing desire, virtue, purification, and vision of God, which also points forward. If *epektasis* was pointing backwards it would imply an infinite regression into a pre-creation state, and in turn, since actual human beings did not exist before the creation *ex nihilo*, the neglect of the body and the dissolution of the entire human being in God, would also be implied. While the dissolution of the human being in the One is the goal for Neo-Platonism, it is incompatible with the general Christian view on the body and the Creator/creature distinction,[143] therefore *epektasis* must be directed towards the eschatological, where the movement into God can proceed perpetually and the Creator/creature distinction remain.

Although Thomas and Gregory work within different metaphysical frameworks that give them different approaches to the human *telos*, it seems that they share the same teleological pattern: on the one hand, that the human *telos* is inherently present in human beings—for Thomas as potency to be actualized, for Gregory as an original state to restore—and on the other hand, that the *telos* is realized in the eschatological, where Thomas suggests that humans has been fully actualized and Gregory suggests that *epektasis* can proceed infinitely.

2.4.2 Requirements for the beatific vision

Now that it has been clear that there is an inherent *telos* for all humanity pointing to its fulfillment in the beatific vision, the next point of comparison is the requirements to attain this *telos*, the requirements for the beatific vision to occur.

As have been shown above, the 'how' of the beatific vision is mostly a question of epistemology for Thomas: the beatific vision is the vision of God's essence, which is incorporeal and therefore unattainable for bottom-up cognition, and since God is of a different genus God's essence is not directly intelligible for the intellect and top-down cognition either—God is simply beyond human cognition, and the human inability to see God will remain even in heaven. So, in order for human beings to see God's essence, Thomas suggests that human beings must receive a new intellectual disposition—the light of glory—by which

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[143] Cf. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 70-74.

one is able to see God's essence directly, for when one has received the light of glory, God's essence can become the form of the intellect. Now, neither the light of glory nor God's essence becoming the form of the intellect, are merita of any human achievement but rather the effects of God's grace.[144] Consequently, the only thing necessary to make the beatific vision possible for human beings is God's grace, in the light of glory and in God making his essence the form of the human intellect. Now, one should mention that, according to Thomas, the amount of light of glory endowed, hence the clarity of the beatific vision, can vary between individuals as it corresponds to the amount of charity carried out by each individual. This means that the earthly life can have a certain influence on the quality or clarity of the beatific vision, but God's grace is the ultimate requirement for whether the beatific vision will occur at all.[145]

For Gregory the vision of God's essence will remain out of reach even in heaven, instead the beatific vision consists of the vision of God's energies. As a vision of God's energies, the beatific vision is in some sense naturally attainable for human beings and lies within the human nature itself, as the human nature is made in the image of God and as such can mirror God. While attainable and natural to human beings, the beatific vision does not occur spontaneously; rather, a purification of the heart is required for the beatific vision.[146] In his sixth homily on the Beatitudes, where an explicit connection between purity and the vision of God is made, Gregory suggests that the process of purification is carried out from two perspectives: human virtuous living, on the one hand, Christ's instructions, on the other.[147] Rather than seeing human virtue and Christ's instructions as two equally active principles, Gregory seems to suggest that Christ's instructions are the active principle in the process of purification and virtue is simply the act of participating with the instructions.[148]

Similarly, in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Gregory likens God's relation to the human soul to a goldsmith that purifies gold, as "he restores her to her original loveliness by releasing it, recasting the one who had been darkened by vice so that she becomes undefiled,"[149] and the human soul to a mirror that "does not become beautiful until it has

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[144] Cf. *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 6.
[145] *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 6.
[146] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 147-148.
[147] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 151-153.
[148] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 152-153: The activeness of the Word contra the receptiveness of the virtuous life: "And, in general, you will find that by means of each of these commandments the Word digs up the evil roots from the depths of our hearts as if by a plough, and so through them we are purged from bringing forth thorns. […] the Divine character itself is impressed on the virtuous life."
[149] Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 113.

drawn close to the Beautiful and been formed by the image of the divine Beauty."[150] Finally, when commenting on Song of Songs 5:7,[151] Gregory interprets the beatings and the wounds as coming of God's "divine rod and comforting staff," and as the purifying works of the Holy Spirit.[152] For Gregory, the minimum requirement for the beatific vision is a pure heart, and the process of purification is the work of God, with the consent by the virtuous participation of human beings.

As we have seen, Thomas and Gregory have rather different perspectives on the object of the beatific vision, God's essence contra God's energies; on when the beatific vision can occur, exclusively in heaven contra in the gradual process of purification; on how the beatific vision occurs, instantaneously in the noetic identity contra gradually in becoming an ever-clearer mirror of God. These differing perspectives result in different assumptions of what is required by whom in order for the beatific vision to occur: for Gregory both God's purifying grace and human virtue are required and for Thomas only God's grace is required. But when considering the beatific vision, Thomas and Gregory seem to work within different time spans; while Thomas treats the beatific vision exclusively as the eschatological end of everything,[153] Gregory seems to treat the beatific vision as the result of the process of purification that can begin before the resurrection and even before death.[154] The differing time spans seem to determine the respective requirements for the beatific vision to occur. For instance, if one were to apply Gregory's time span on Thomas' treatment of the beatific vision, I think it would be reasonable to discern a teleological process similar to that of Gregory's, that a certain participation in the divine is possible and encouraged, and this participation would precede the beatific vision and begin the human journey towards its *telos*, while not being the beatific vision itself.[155] Somehow, it seems that the difference in the

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[150] Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 163.

[151] Song of Songs 5:7: "Making their rounds in the city the sentinels found me; they beat me; they wounded me; they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls."

[152] Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 385.

[153] See, for instance, the following sectioning of the last part of the Supplements in the *Summa Theologiae*, QQ 69-99: "Preceding the Resurrection"; "Accompanying the Resurrection"; "Judgment Following the Resurrection"; "Following the Judgment". Structurally Thomas' treatment of the beatific vision, as subject in and of itself, is placed in the last section: "Following the Judgment", indicating that the beatific vision is at the end of everything. Further, when treating Thomas' view on the beatific vision, in the works of other theologians as well as in this dissertation, one usually consults *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 12, which is in the very beginning of the *Summa*. But *ST* I, q. 12 does not treat the beatific vision as a subject in and of itself, but considers on the epistemological question on "How God is known by us". Hence, *ST* I, q. 12 gives no chronological implications to the doctrine of the beatific vision, but converges with the doctrine since the beatific vision is much of an epistemological question for Thomas.

[154] Boersma, *Seeing God*, 77.

[155] See, for instance, *ST*, I-II q. 110, a. 4: "For as man in his intellective powers participates in the Divine knowledge through the virtue of faith, and in his power of will participates in the Divine love through the virtue

requirements to attain the beatific vision is a question of sectioning their respective theologies, whether one includes the whole process leading up to the beatific vision, as Gregory, or whether one treat the knowledge and vision of God in and of itself, as Thomas.

2.4.3 The act of the beatific vision

Now that the way to and the requirements for the beatific vision have been compared, a comparison of the act of the beatific vision is fitting.

As has been evident, Gregory depicts the beatific vision as a process into the divine. When seen as a process it is not self-evident when the beatific vision actually occurs, theoretically it could begin gradually without the human being really noticing it. But considering that Gregory's perpetual process of virtue, purification and contemplation requires a fair extent of human participation, the beatific vision probably would not pass by unnoticed. So, what is the noticeable act of the beatific vision, according to Gregory? Gregory suggests that the act of the beatific vision is the union with God, and explains this union with two metaphors, the perfect mirroring of God in the human likeness of God and the human being becoming a wellspring, flowing of Living Water. The metaphor of mirroring God stems from platonic epistemology in which you become what you contemplate. In this metaphor the act of the beatific vision is the contemplation of God, which makes human beings into perfect mirrors of God, and this is from the restoration of the original state, of what is most inherently human, the image of God. [156] The metaphor of becoming a wellspring flowing of Living Water comes from a similar metaphysical assumption, but instead of becoming one with an object through contemplation, human beings and God become one through virtuous participation. In reference to John 7, the Living Water signifies Christ, and when a certain degree of union has been achieved it is not one's own, but Christ's virtue flowing from within. The act of the beatific vision is the union with God, which is the result of the contemplation of and participation in God, and since it is a process of perpetual increase, it seems rather dynamic.

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of charity, so also in the nature of the soul does he participate in the Divine Nature, after the manner of a likeness, through a certain regeneration or re-creation."

[156] Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 115: "Since, then, our choice is so constituted that we are disposed to take on the shape of whatever we want, the Word rightly says to the Bride in her new glory, 'You have drawn near to me as you have rejected the fellowship of evil, and in drawing near to the archetypal Beauty, you too have become beautiful, informed like a mirror by my appearance.' For in that it is transformed in accordance with the reflections of its choices, the human person is rightly likened to a mirror. If it looks upon gold, gold it appears, and by way of reflection it gives off the beams of that substance."

For Thomas, the beatific vision is more of a distinct act than the result of a process. Thomas explains that the act of the beatific vision will only be made possible in heaven when humans are endowed with light of glory and God's essence has become the form of the intellect. The distinct change between earthly life and the hereafter seems to make the act instantaneous and rather static; when the soul attained God's essence as the form of its intellect and the noetic identity has been established, it seems that the soul is happy, the intellect perfected and the will satisfied. In other words, when the soul contemplates God the human *telos* is fulfilled. The proper act of the beatific vision is the contemplation of God's essence, which is dependent on the noetic identity with God.

The union with God seems to be at the center of the act of the beatific vision for both Gregory and Thomas, but they seem to have quite different implications of this union. For Gregory the union with God seems to imply two things, on the one hand, a certain instrumentalization of the human being, and on the other hand, a certain oneness with God. First, in the union with God, human beings become perfect mirrors of God and wellsprings flowing of Living Water. This implies that when human beings are properly purified there is nothing that obstructs God's energies from flowing through a human being, hence human beings become perfect vehicles of God's energies. Now, the term instrumentalization may have some negative connotations, as if human beings would be diminished in the union with God. But becoming a perfect mirror of God or a wellspring flowing of Living Water is the end of purification, perfection and restoration, for Gregory. Hence, the union with God is not a diminution of humanness, but the perfection thereof. Secondly, the instrumentalization in the union with God makes a certain oneness between God and human beings; while living, the human being does not live autonomously but God is the very life of the human being, similar to Paul's assertion in Gal 2:20: "...and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."[157]

While Gregory suggests that the act of the beatific vision, the union with God, implies a certain instrumentalization of the human being that makes her a perfect vehicle for God's energies, Thomas argues in a more ontological language and suggests that the union of the noetic identity should be understood analogously to the unity between form and matter, as the form actualizing the potency of the matter. The implications of Thomas' union seem quite intellectual: with a perfected intellect and God's essence as the form of the intellect, it follows that human beings will cognize God's glory in everything from a top-down perspective.

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[157] Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of songs*, 387.

While guarding the Creator/creature distinction, it seems that Thomas does not make any further ontological implications from the union with God in the beatific vision; the union does not change the human being, but the union in the noetic identiy is a new ontological relationship between God and humanity that enables human beings to attain their *telos*, the beatific vision.

2.4.4 Doctrines of God

One major difference between Gregory and Thomas is the object for the beatific vision, God's energies contra God's essence. Not only do they come to different conclusions on the matter, they also mutually rule out the other's conclusion. This might seem rather peculiar, but there are some deciding factors in their respective doctrines of God that lead them in different directions.

For Gregory, the sole deciding factor regarding the object of the beatific vision is God's infinity. As we have seen, God's infinity is essential to Gregory's take on the beatific vision. For instance, the infinite distance between infinite God and finite human beings is the foundation for the perpetual journey of *epektasis*. Similarly, the infinite distance between God and human beings makes it impossible to see and comprehend God, hence God's infinity makes it impossible for God's essence to be the object of the beatific vision. Consequently, the object must be something other than God's essence, and since God can be known by his works in the same way as an artist through his art, Gregory comes to the conclusion that God's energies must be the object of the beatific vision.

For Thomas the deciding factors for the object of the beatific vision are threefold, in descending order: the Creator/creature distinction, God's incorporeality, and God's infinity. The Creator/creature distinction seems to be the most important factor for Thomas to suggest that God's essence is the object of the beatific vision, the line of argument has been stated above: (1) there is an absolute distinction between God and creation, where everything that is not created is God; (2) everything derivative of God is in some sense created by God, as effects of the First Cause; (3) if the beatific vision is a vision of God it cannot be the vision of the effects of God but must be of the divine essence itself, otherwise it would be of something besides God. This strict interpretation of the Creator/creature distinction distinguishes between God's essence and everything else analogously to the distinction between everything as being effects of the First Cause. The second deciding factor is God's incorporeality, which makes the noetic identity with God's essence necessary: (1) if the beatific vision is a vision of God and God is incorporeal, then (2) the beatific vision is unattainable for human cognition,

since human beings cannot perceive incorporeal things. (3) Therefore, the beatific vision must be the immediate vision of God's essence in the noetic identity. The third deciding factor is God's infinity, and the argumentation is twofold: on the one hand he argues in the same way as Gregory, God is infinite and beyond comprehension. On the other hand, the vision of God's essence does not require the full comprehension of God, rather, the vision of God is possible without full comprehension and the extent of the vision is decided by the ability of the intellect, that is, by the amount of light of glory endowed by God. This makes God's infinity a restricting factor, rather than deciding factor, regarding the object of the beatific vision; the beatific vision is the vision of God's essence, but not wholly since the intellect can only see but not comprehend God's infinite essence.

The just mentioned deciding factors are present in both Gregory's and Thomas' respective take on the beatific vision—the Creator/creature distinction and God's incorporeality is important to Gregory as well[158]—but the different conclusions seem to come from the different emphasis in their respective doctrines of God. For instance, the notion of God's infinity is present and means the same thing to both Gregory and Thomas, that God is beyond comprehension, but they place God's infinity in different places in their theological argumentation. Gregory begins his doctrine of God with God's infinity, and so every following notion about God is assessed in the light of God's infinity, hence God's incomprehensibility is quite naturally at the center of Gregory's doctrine of God. Conversely, Thomas places God's infinity a bit further back in his doctrine of God, instead it seems that the Creator/creature distinction is the first notion, which in turn puts the boundaries of God and creation at the very center of Thomas' doctrine of God. This means that God's infinity is assessed in the light of Creator/creature distinction and gives the distinction another aspect and makes it even clearer—the relation between God and creation is not just that of the uncreated Creator and contingent creation where Creator and creature are wholly distinct, it is also that of infinite God and finite creatureliness in which the finite cannot confine the infinite.

While God's infinity seems to be the defining notion in Gregory's doctrine of God, and in turn the deciding factor for the object of the beatific vision, it seems that the same notion is a complementary notion in Thomas' doctrine of God and a restricting, rather than defining, factor for the object of the beatific vision.

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[158] Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, 63.

3. Conclusion

This dissertation began with the question of hope. To discern what kind of hope there might be in Christian theology I turned to the eschatologies of Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas, and sought to answer the question of hope by asking: What are the respective understandings of the beatific vision in the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas? I found that there are four prominent features to the doctrine of the beatific vision according to Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas Aquinas: teleology, the union with God, doctrines of God determining the object of the beatific vision, and the implications on the heavenly life.

Teleology

Teleology is central to the respective treatments of the beatific vision, on the one hand, as the beatific vision is the *telos* for human beings, and on the other hand, as this *telos* is inherent to the very constitution of a human being. For Gregory this inherent *telos* is most aptly explained by the metaphor of human beings as mirrors of God: (1) humanity was originally created in the image of God, perfectly mirroring God; (2) in the Fall this image was tainted, and the mirroring of God ceased; (3) if the image of God is purified it will mirror God once again. In other words, humanity was created in the perfect image of God, and the *telos* is to restore that perfection, which leads to the perfect vision of God, the beatific vision. Thomas' teleology is most aptly described in the ontological categories of act and potency: (1) as created beings, humanity is composed of act and potency and has the *telos* to be fully actualized; (2) to be fully actualized, the formal cause has to reach its final cause, human beings have to fulfill their human-ness, their rationality; (3) human rationality is divided into Intellect and Will and are actualized when the Intellect reached its highest function and the Will attained the Supreme Good—God in the beatific vision.

The beatific vision as union with God

The beatific vision implies a union with God, for both Gregory and Thomas. For Gregory this union is best understood by the metaphor of human beings as wellsprings flowing of Living Water: in the union with God, God becomes the very life of the human being. For Thomas the union with God is more of an ontological and epistemological character, and best understood by the concept of noetic identity, where God's essence becomes the form of the intellect.

Doctrines of God and the object of the beatific vision

Gregory and Thomas have opposite views on the object of the beatific vision, God's energies contra God's essence, and this due to their doctrines of God. For Gregory the most prominent doctrine is God's infinity, and as something finite cannot confine something infinite, humans cannot comprehend God, hence the beatific vision cannot be of God's essence but must be of God's energies. Conversely, for Thomas the most prominent doctrine is the Creator/creature distinction, from which Thomas suggests that God's essence must be the object of the beatific vision, otherwise it would be of something derivative of God, hence something besides God.

The heavenly life

Since God is infinite, the heavenly life is characterized by the concept of 'beyond' for Gregory: as God is beyond comprehension, the final union is in the incomprehensibility of God, in divine darkness. God's infinity suggests an infinite distance between God and humans, but also makes *epektasis* possible. *Epektasis* suggests that the heavenly life will be a perpetual discovery of God, the ever-growing desire for God and the perpetual unfolding of God's energies. Furthermore, restored human beings will be freed from all things that distinguish them from each other and from Christ. This implies a union among humanity alongside humanity's union with God. For Gregory the heavenly life seems to be the complete union and harmony with God and humanity, and the infinite desire for and ever-clearer vision of God. For Thomas the heavenly life is best understood by the noetic identity between God and humans, which implies that human beings will: (1) see God's essence; (2) perceive God's glory in everything and God as being "all in all;"[159] (3) be fully actualized. For Thomas the heavenly life is the complete union with God, the renewal of creation, the perception of God in everything and the full actualization of human beings.

Hope

Speaking with the author of Hebrews, hope is closely tied to the question of faith.[160] This means that Gregory's and Thomas' considerations on the heavenly hope in the beatific vision do not necessarily apply to everyone as adequate sources for hope. But for those within the Christian faith and those engaged in theological discussion, Gregory and Thomas certainly gives two elaborate suggestions on what the heavenly hope might be.

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[159] 1 Cor 15:28
[160] Cf. Hebrews 11:1.

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