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Is Forgiveness Possible? Thomas Aquinas's Response

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Abstract

The contemporary concept of human interpersonal forgiveness presupposed by Catholic believers is challenged, both in academia and in popular culture. The core of the problem is the real possibility and coherence of its gratuitousness: forgiving seems to be always vitiated by the forgiver's self-seeking motives and thus morally impaired. But Thomas Aquinas's thought offers sufficient conceptual elements to dispel the charge. Although he addresses such forgiveness relatively rarely, his later works consider it a spiritual work of mercy, and therefore an act of the virtues of mercy and charity. In order to defend the notion's gratuitousness (from Aquinas's Latin term *gratuitus*—that is, the characteristic of the unselfish and undue gift), it is necessary to have a full understanding of his notion of the love of friendship and how this love shapes mercy and charity. This holds true on both the supernatural and natural levels, even if, following original sin, the natural level requires divine grace to fully escape the charge of lacking true gratuitousness. To resolve this question, this article demonstrates the coherence of gratuitous forgiveness regarding both the intention of the human agent and the essence of forgiveness itself. Its coherence depends on that of gratuitousness and, consequently, of charity. First, this study outlines the core of contemporary skepticism, drawing upon the thought of Jacques Derrida as its primary exemplar. Second, it proposes a solution by reconstructing Aquinas's account, situating it within the love of friendship, mercy, and charity, and demonstrating why its intention and structure are coherently gratuitous. Several of the textual interpretations advanced here remain subject to scholarly debate. Finally, before concluding, this paper addresses a major objection to human gratuitousness: namely, that a gratuitous act, as described by Aquinas, could not be performed by a human person, insofar as human agents are finite and inherently profit from their own morally good actions. To resolve this, a metaphysical argument grounded in analogy is proposed.

Keywords: human interpersonal forgiveness; Thomas Aquinas; gratuitousness; love of friendship; charity; mercy; analogy; Jacques Derrida

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1. Introduction

Can a real act of human interpersonal forgiveness exist that does not, upon close analysis, turn into a merely self-interested action? Can a genuinely gratuitous act exist whose motive does not ultimately reduce to a combination of need and self-interest?

This is the central question addressed in this study. *Human interpersonal forgiveness* generically denotes a conscious, free act whereby a person renounces revenge and hatred toward an offender—not necessarily at the offender's request—and which intrinsically involves reconciliation between the parties. From now on, I will refer to it simply as 'forgiveness'.

Today, the question has considerable force. Human society, history, and individual lives are riddled with wrongdoings, both grave and minor. Because every individual

will inevitably experience offense, the question of forgiveness remains highly relevant. Moreover, Catholic theology defends real forgiveness, and believers are called to practice it. Nevertheless, philosophical skepticism about its practical possibility and/or its very idea is widespread. While this skepticism does not extend to authors adhering to virtue ethics, for many others, forgiveness seems to lack rigorous philosophical and, consequently, theological foundations. In addition, outside academia, many people implicitly share similar doubts. Consequently, forgiveness becomes more difficult to propose within both interpersonal and societal spheres. Furthermore, the question has vast theological and philosophical implications. As this article demonstrates, the internal coherence and consistency of forgiveness fundamentally implicate the coherence and consistency of charity itself.

This article argues that gratuitous forgiveness is coherent and possible on both the natural and supernatural levels. The term 'gratuitous' denotes that which is for the sake of the recipient of the action (the forgiven party)—that is, an action unmarred by self-interest and not strictly owed to the recipient, thereby constituting a true gift. While gratuitous forgiveness is not exclusively restricted to the operation of infused sanctifying grace, divine grace plays an irreplaceable role in realizing its most perfect expressions. The most elevated acts of forgiveness require this divine aid; sanctifying grace is also necessary to completely dispel the charge that forgiveness is always vitiated by one or more self-seeking motives of the forgiver. The elements of this thesis are located in Thomas Aquinas's account of forgiveness (*remittere offendenti*) as an act of the love of friendship (*amor amicitiae*), and thus as a work of mercy (one of the *eleemosynae* or *opera misericordiae*, which are acts of the moral virtue of mercy, *misericordia*) and an act of the theological virtue of charity (*caritas*). Fully comprehending Aquinas's notion of forgiveness requires explaining the precise relationship between mercy, charity, and the love of friendship, and why the love of friendship is coherently and consistently ordered toward the beloved's own sake rather than treating the person as a means to the agent's benefit.

One might argue that Aquinas's moral virtue of mercy can be natural or supernatural. Virtues are good operative habits that perfect human faculties and "by which we live righteously" and "of which no one makes bad use." (*ST* I–II, q. 55, a. 4, co.). They dispose us to act rightly with ease, joy, and consistency. Natural virtues are guided by the rule of reason, pertaining to life in this world, and ordered to human natural happiness (*ST* I–II, qq. 61–62). Infused virtues are founded by sanctifying grace, guided by the divine rule, pertaining to life in this world (but there will be charity also in Heaven), but ordered to our supernatural happiness. Moral virtues are acquired *and* infused (*ST* I–II, q. 63, aa. 3–4). Charity is the "form" and "mother" of the infused virtues, and transforms and elevates acquired virtues. However, when acquired virtues are alone, charity is absent. Infused virtues perfect the corresponding acquired virtues (*ST* I–II, q. 51, a. 4; II–II, q. 47, a. 14, ad 1), and 'mirror' their structure (McKay Knobel 2021). According to Aquinas, only infused theological or moral virtues are virtues in the full sense of the term (*ST* I-II, q. 23, a. 7). Even though Aquinas's infused moral virtues are now widely recognized, their exact relationship with acquired virtues is still debated (McKay Knobel 2021, esp. pp. 81–106).[1] Aquinas examines moral virtues as a unified whole. He does not devote a separate section solely to the natural level of those virtues and another solely to their supernatural level. For instance, he does not first examine infused justice and then acquired justice; rather, he examines the virtue of justice. He does the same for the virtue of mercy and the works of mercy. Therefore, it is justified to examine the virtue of mercy following his steps. My term 'mercy' refers to the infused moral virtue, understood as being accompanied by the corresponding acquired virtue. So, 'mercy' refers to both. When I refer to natural mercy without the corresponding infused virtue and charity, I make that clear.

When referring to Aquinas's ideas, my term 'gratuitous' expresses the concept that he often conveys with the Latin term *gratuitus*: being for the sake of the other, and not per se for the benefit of the agent: the proper feature of the gift (*donum*).[2] 'Gratuitous' does not refer to that which is characterized by divine grace. For Aquinas, divine sanctifying grace is *gratia gratum faciens*, which is a supernatural, permanent, habitual disposition of the soul that is made holy and elevated in respect to human nature (e.g., *SCG* III, q. 156; *ST* I–II, q. 110, a. 3, ad 3, II–II, q. 19, a. 7, co.; III, q. 62, a. 1 and a. 2). I will not refer to that grace when I am employing the terms 'gratuitous' and 'gratuitousness.'

A profound understanding of the order of charity (*ST* II–II, q. 26), the dynamics of grace, human nature, and metaphysical analogy provides the necessary resources to respond to contemporary critiques against the gratuitousness of forgiveness.

First, I will expose the main arguments for a negative answer, drawing on Jacques Derrida's deep ones. Second, I will show how understanding forgiveness in a Thomist manner enables us to simultaneously deepen our grasp of the act and either minimize or dispel these qualms. Third, I will secure conclusions replying to a particular objection to the coherence and consistency of human gratuitousness: a gratuitous act, as described by Aquinas, could not be performed by a human person, because they are limited and inherently profit from their own morally good actions.

2. Arguments for the Incoherence of Forgiveness

Jacques Derrida programmatically inherits and contests the Judeo-Christian tradition of forgiveness, claiming to highlight its power of self-deconstruction. For him, "pure" forgiveness is both at least psychologically implausible and riddled with conceptual contradictions. The matrix of questions inspired by his central theses may be reduced to the primary inquiry of this article.

According to Derrida, forgiveness constitutes the perfection of the gift and thus shares its intrinsic contradictions (e.g., Derrida 2012). Gratuitousness is proper to forgiveness as such, but gratuitousness is demanding. It requires the exclusion of self-seeking motives. Instead, human forgiveness inevitably devolves into an 'economic circle' of exchange, wherein the forgiver seeks or receives a return. So, gratuitous, pure forgiveness is the 'im-possible'—a possibility of the impossible described by a 'hyperbolic ethics.' This framework is considered hyperbolic because it demands an infinite and incalculable level of responsibility. True ethical ideals, such as gratuitousness, function as infinite ideals toward which human beings must strive endlessly without ever fully achieving them. These ideals transcend rational, measurable limits. So, true forgiveness should be so "pure" that, if anything, it could be only divine. The arguments underpinning this position require close evaluation.[3]

First, human forgivers ordinarily impose conditions, such as the repentance of the offender or the receipt of apologies. Consequently, forgiveness operates as a transactional exchange, forfeiting its purity.

Second, pure gratuitousness ultimately requires excluding awareness and remembrance. Otherwise, the act would in some way "return" to the agent and would be marred by intentions. But the human forgiver makes their act known, and remembers it, or at least is aware of it. When an act of forgiveness is known to the forgiver—even if concealed from the offender—this act inherently seeks a return. If known to the forgiven, the act demands gratitude; if not, the same act satisfies a self-seeking motive through the internal gratification of self-love. Derrida labels this *conditionel* or *transactionnel* forgiveness (Derrida 2012, p. 62).

Third, when known to the forgiven, forgiveness imposes a debt on them: e.g., forgiveness appeals for gratitude. This adds a specific nuance to the idea that the forgiver

expects something in return for themselves, since it is not merely a matter of the forgiver's internal disposition; rather, the forgiven party incurs an objective obligation of gratitude. Furthermore, the act of forgiving implicates the recipient in an asymmetric power dynamic, serving as a covert assertion of sovereignty. Forgiveness fixes guilt as guilt, because only the guilty can be forgiven. Thus, the forgiven is explicitly designated as guilty, since only the guilty can be forgiven. Paradoxically, the forgiver would ultimately require forgiveness for the very act of forgiving. To remain purely gratuitous, forgiveness must not structurally indict the recipient.

Consequently, pure forgiveness must not be manifest *qua* forgiveness to either the giver or the receiver.[4] It has to be an uncommunicated event, without past, future, and memory. Forgiveness should not be made known to the person who was forgiven. Otherwise, the forgiven would be held accountable, found guilty, and made aware of their debt of gratitude to the person who forgave them. Forgiveness should not be known to the forgiver, because otherwise the forgiver would never act purely out of gratuitousness; they would always be seeking some benefit for themselves. Therefore, forgiveness could occur only as an event, unknown to both the one who grants it and the one who receives it, and carried out by the forgiver without any awareness.

Such an act is humanly impossible and, therefore, exclusively divine. The possibility of the impossible is what only God can perform.[5] In sum, human forgiveness remains trapped within an unbreakable economic circle of *quid pro quo*. Embedded in and compromised by an economy of exchange, it fails to achieve true gratuitousness, rendering its moral validity self-refuting.

So, both the intentionality of forgiveness and its very structure or essence—the moral object, which is the primary, defining element of a human act[6] or "what" a person chooses to do—are at stake. This critique raises two distinct problems: first, whether an agent can consciously and voluntarily perform a gratuitous act, and second, whether the structural essence of gratuitous forgiveness is internally coherent. In both problems, the core is gratuitousness. Is forgiveness truly performed for the sake of the forgiven or not? Although Derrida did not engage deeply with the Thomistic framework, Aquinas's theology and philosophy offer the precise conceptual tools necessary to address these critiques. Aquinas's forgiveness is particularly interesting in the discussion of the possibility of forgiveness because his forgiveness is linked precisely to the idea of a gift of love, the coherence of which is disputed by Derrida and by many. As demonstrated below, the Thomistic defense of gratuitousness hinges upon the interrelation of the love of friendship, charity, and mercy.

3. A Positive Response Drawing on Aquinas's Account of Forgiveness

Thomistic human interpersonal forgiveness is a work of mercy, as defined in *Summa Theologiae* II–II q. 32 a. 2. As previously mentioned, 'mercy' without further specification is infused moral mercy and acquired mercy. Therefore, even the works of mercy that are mentioned without further specification are supernatural and natural acts. A Thomistic reading of forgiveness permits the conclusion that truly gratuitous forgiveness is a coherent and consistent human act, pertaining to *two* virtues: mercy and charity. Clearly, if acquired mercy is without infused moral mercy, then charity is absent. But, if only in the highest form of natural mercy, there is always the natural love of friendship. Most importantly, forgiveness coherently and consistently is for the sake of the forgiven because to forgive is an act of love of friendship, which for Aquinas can be natural or supernatural, but is *true* love. Furthermore, despite contemporary debates (e.g., Fuchs 2013), the structural coherence of this love remains highly defensible.

This section reconstructs Aquinas's mature account of forgiveness, demonstrating that its highest natural and supernatural expressions are formally defined by the love of

friendship. This requires examining the nature of *amor amicitiae*, its elevation into *caritas*, and its operationalization through works of mercy.

Aquinas's forgiveness is linked to charity through mercy, because works of mercy are acts of charity (*ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 1, co.). So, forgiveness is an act of charity because forgiveness is a work of mercy. And, charity and mercy formally are kinds of love of friendship. This framework does not exclude the natural order or the possibility of natural forgiveness. Charity comprehends the natural dimensions of love of friendship. Moreover, for Aquinas, natural love of friendship may exist independently of charity. Thus, natural mercy may exist in that way as well.

This analysis clarifies the precise meaning and structural vulnerabilities of gratuitousness before demonstrating its coherence and consistency regarding both human intentionality and the architecture of charity.

However, before proceeding further, I must highlight a number of issues. My main reference text obviously is *ST* II–II: it is the greatest synthesis of Aquinas's moral theory.[7] But neither there nor anywhere else did Thomas address forgiveness singularly, nor in the organic and unified manner required by today's theoretical criteria. For instance, he did not address its conditions, especially the psychological ones, in a unified fashion. Moreover, this topic is not extensively covered in the secondary literature (O'Callaghan 2017; Schoot 1996; Stump 2018, esp. pp. 80–100; Wood 2023). So, I will add relevant details that I identified elsewhere, offering them to scholars for further discussion (Savarese Forthcoming).

In addition, Aquinas employs a set of not totally unambiguous terms to denote forgiveness.[8] The richness of vocabulary seems to originate in the one denoting divine forgiveness, especially as Redemption by Christ and penance, i.e., the sacrament that bestows God's forgiveness on the repentant sinner (Luijten 2003, p. 48). Terms denoting (human) forgiveness frequently and primarily refer to God's forgiveness.

In fact, the model of (human) forgiveness is divine forgiveness, especially Christ's forgiveness, which can be considered its *analogatus princeps* (or *primum analogatum*), which refers to the focal point of a concept that has multiple, related meanings.[9] Moreover, there is a primacy of the divine forgiveness theme over the interpersonal one (*Catena super Matt.*, c. 6, d. 11; *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3, ad 2, III, q. 84, a. 10, s.c.; *Super Ioan.*, c. 13, lect. 3; *Super ad Ephesios*, c. 5, lect. 1; *Super Psalmo* 31, n. 1; Luijten 2003, pp. 44, 48; O'Callaghan 2017, pp. 214–19; van Tongeren 1996, p. 70). But, as is well known, Aquinas states that God is relevant to both the supernature and nature. These facts are related to the objection that I will deal with in the last section.

Aquinas's mature account of forgiveness offers a distinct and highly coherent mode.[10] He reflects on human interpersonal forgiveness (i.e., one of the spiritual works of mercy; I reiterate: from now on, 'forgiveness') in his last texts, such as *ST* II–II, *Super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura* and *Collatio in orationem dominicam*; and they show an astonishing consistency. On close analysis, forgiveness seems to be of capital importance in his moral theology. The occurrences of forgiveness are many. Moreover, forgiving one's offenders is a necessary condition for being forgiven by God, being in grace (*gratia gratum faciens*, i.e., sanctifying grace, by which we have charity from God) and being not excluded from eternal salvation or beatitude (*beatitudo*, i.e., the vision and love of God in Paradise: the last end of moral life).[11] So, to understand how to attain the last end, Aquinas must have a clear idea of what forgiveness is. Furthermore, although he does not explicitly write so in *ST* II–II q. 32, forgiveness seems to have an outstanding status among works of mercy, corresponding to the novelty of Christianity. This status is due to the fact that forgiveness is an exceptional act of true love.

Indeed, Aquinas's last notion is very deep. It is developed through great study and solves a number of problems. The approach to all the virtues profoundly changes

from the *Prima Pars* to *Secunda*, and the causes of the human act become four and more nuanced, wholly rejecting the risk of intellectualism (Torrell 2015, pp. 312–15). But the notions of mercy (Cazelle 2020; Keaty 2005, esp. pp. 183–90; Wood 2023, esp. p. 101; Savarese Forthcoming) and charity (Fuchs 2013, p. 203; Sherwin 2007, pp. 195–204) result from a greatly original synthesis. They inherit the Christian theological and philosophical tradition (including medieval theology) and the pagan philosophical one, and synthesize them originally, in order to unite grace and nature, faith and reason. Besides, compared with previous texts, mercy is more and more strictly linked to charity: mercy becomes one of the interior effects of charity, thus acquiring an exceptional status among the virtues. All that implies a deep change in the notion of forgiveness. In fact, the latter is largely indebted to Augustine's, but developed through Aristotle's ethics (Wood 2023).

Crucially, the structural primacy of divine forgiveness does not invalidate the reality of human interpersonal action; rather, it highlights their analogical distinction, a theme addressed in the final section of this paper. Scholars note differences between human and divine forgiveness; and these can be reduced to differences between God, His power, and actions, and human beings, their power, and actions. Moreover, Aquinas's moral theology claims that Jesus Christ is *exemplar* of all human virtues: one must act conforming with God, imitating Christ as a model (*ST* I–II, *prologus* and q. 61, a. 5; III, q. 15, a. 1). So, the primacy of divine forgiveness does not impair the notion of human forgiveness. On the contrary, it confirms that the latter is essential in Christian moral life and the New Law. This affirms the coherent existence of a natural forgiveness rooted in *amor amicitiae*. Because grace perfects rather than destroys nature (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2), an agent lacking theological charity yet possessing acquired natural virtue can execute a genuine act of natural forgiveness. Nonetheless, because charity represents the absolute perfection of the love of friendship, the most elevated supernatural acts of forgiveness can only be performed by an agent in a state of sanctifying grace.

Now, let us see what forgiveness is.

3.1. Aquinas's Forgiveness

As stated in *ST* II–II q. 32 a. 1, works of mercy (*eleemosynae* or *opera misericordiae*)[12]—forgiveness included—are proper exterior acts of the virtue of mercy (*misericordia*). As previously said, as God's forgiveness of sinners pertains to divine mercy, and human forgiveness pertains to the human virtue of mercy. Forgiveness is one of the seven spiritual works of mercy (see Section 3.1.2). While every supernaturally meritorious work of mercy is an act of both mercy and charity, such actions can also occur purely within the natural order. Being a work of mercy, forgiveness is a gift for the sake of the forgiven, and not intentionally for the sake of the forgiver. Aquinas recognizes that an agent might forgive to secure a spiritual benefit but characterizes such an intention as a minor moral imperfection. The act of forgiving always entails spiritual growth for the one who forgives, but this growth is not the direct and proper end of forgiveness. All these features derive from love of friendship. The specific love of friendship proper to forgiveness is specified by the formal features of mercy. Forgiveness constitutes a response to moral evil wherein the victim restores loving bonds, implying that the conceptual coherence of gratuitous forgiveness depends fundamentally upon the coherence of *amor amicitiae*. For Aquinas, such love is gratuitous. So, this is the key to his solution.

Now, I will show that the structure of love of friendship is intrinsic to forgiveness.

3.1.1. The Framework: Love of Friendship, Charity, and Mercy

Love of friendship (*amor amicitiae,* referred to also as *amor benevolentiae*) is the true, highest form of love (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 4, co.; II–II, q. 23, a. 1, co. and a. 3, co.).[13] Aquinas

distinguishes this love from love of concupiscence (*amor concupiscentiae*). These two loves are classified according to their end, i.e., the good loved and the purpose for which it is loved. Perhaps, this is the most important classification of love, as the end is decisive in the moral sphere, and Aquinas classifies virtues according to their object and end (*De virtutibus*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 5). When evaluating love of friendship as a free, deliberate human act, its essential structural properties are entirely transposed onto the act of forgiveness.

Love is fundamentally "something pertaining to the appetite" (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 1, co.) that follows cognitive apprehension, operating as "the principle movement of the will toward the end loved" (ibid.). So, basically, love is the inclination toward a known good. But more specifically, love is "to wish good to someone [*velle alicui bonum*]" (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 4). Love moves human beings toward God and the realization of themselves and is structured according to an "order of love" (*ordo amoris*): love of God, self-love, and love of others. Consequently, love operates as 'the structuring notion of Aquinas's practical philosophy' and, within the wider context of creation and redemption, stands as "the source and summit of the human person" (Flood 2018, p. ix).

First, love must be distinguished by its corresponding appetite. In *ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 3, Aquinas distinguishes between sensitive passion (*amor*), rational or voluntary dilection (*dilectio*), and theological charity (*caritas*). Love as sensitive passion is the "aptitude" of the sensitive appetite to a certain good. 'Dilection' is a deliberate act of the intellectual appetite or will involving free choice. Unlike sensitive passion, the dilection constitutes a free, rational act. Aquinas also speaks of a "natural love." It primarily means the "inclination" of non-sentient beings (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 1, co.). However, because "each single thing has a connaturalness with that which is naturally suitable to it [*connaturalitatem ad id quod est sibi conveniens secundum suam naturam*]" (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 1, ad 3), natural love operates fundamentally within the human soul as well.

Now, love of friendship can be all of these. It is not distinguished according to the type of appetite. However, when referring to forgiveness, which is a human act of virtue, love of friendship always entails the will, and not the sensitive appetite alone. Love of friendship and love of concupiscence can be passions or dilections, while love of friendship can also be the virtue of charity.

In Aquinas's own words, love of friendship is "that love which is together with benevolence, when, to wit, we love someone so as to wish good to him." (*ST* II–II, q. 23, a. 1, co.). So, love of friendship is "towards him to whom he [the lover] wishes good", who "is loved simply and for itself" (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 4, co.). In contrast, love of concupiscence seems like platonic love born of longing: the lover wishes the good that the beloved is for themselves: "we do not wish good to what we love, but wish its good for ourselves" (*ST* II–II, q. 23, a. 1, co.). So, the beloved is loved "for something else" (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 4, co.). This represents a relative love (*secundum quid*) rather than true love, and frequently characterizes disordered or vicious acts.

So, love of concupiscence loves something/someone for the good that they are for the lover, while love of friendship loves the loved one—who can be only a person—for their own sake. For the one who loves, the loved one is neither a means to anything else, nor to satisfy self-love.

The loving person wills good to the loved one for their own sake. So, love of friendship incorporates a certain kind of love of concupiscence (Sherwin 2007, p. 198), i.e., the love of the good or goods that are willed for the loved one: "man has love of concupiscence towards the good that he wishes to another" (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 4, co.). As such, love of friendship unfolds in gratuitous gift, i.e., what is given freely and is impossible to recall back, as *donum* is *datio irredibilis* (*ST* I, q. 38, a. 2; II–II, q. 58, a. 11, obj. 1 and ad 1; q. 80).

Aquinas assesses that the gift does not imply the submission of the recipient (*ST* I, q. 38, a. 1, ad 3). So, the gift is not sovereignty over the other.

Love of friendship intrinsically is 'union of affections' (*unio affectus*), which is love itself and is some sort of apprehension in which the lover perceives the friend as another self (Schwartz 2007, p. 26). This love implies considering one's friend as another self, desiring real union (*unio realis*) with them (*ST* I–II, q. 28, a. 1, co.). This kind of real union is closeness of the two parties, i.e., actual friendship, and derives from the affective union. So, affective union allows the greatest union between two persons. And, love of friendship, if reciprocated, leads to friendship in the strict sense. As I will make clear, this is an important point for forgiveness. But what is the relation between love of friendship and friendship? And what does friendship mean?

Aquinas identifies love and friendship (*amicitia*), and true love and true friendship (*amicitia honesta*)—but there are caveats (Schwartz 2007). Love of friendship is friendship only in a general sense, because it is the same love that a person has for their friend. But the loved one may not love the person who friendship-loves them. So, this love is not necessarily an actual reciprocated friendship in the strict sense (Schwartz 2007). First, friendships are distinguished according to their end: honest friendship, which aims at the honest good and virtue, and loves the friend for their own sake; utility friendship (*amicitia utilis*), which aims at mutual benefit, so loves the friend for the sake of the one who loves; and pleasure friendship (*amicitia delectabilis*), which aims at the enjoyment of the good that the other person is (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 4, arg. 3 and ad 3; II–II, q. 25, a. 7). Most important, for our purposes, honest friendship in a general sense corresponds to love of friendship. Second, friendships are distinguished according to the "communion" on which they are based. Moreover, Aquinas's friendship differs from modern interpersonal friendship, because the former has a wider reach (Schwartz 2007, pp. 1–3). Interpersonal friendship is the actual relation and union between two persons. But there are also other kinds of friendships: between the family, fellow citizens, fellow soldiers, fellow voyagers, human beings as members of the same species, etc., and obviously persons that share sanctifying grace and beatitude. Crucially, while *amor amicitiae* can exist unreciprocated, friendship in the strict sense (*amicitia*) requires objective reciprocity (*ST* II–II, q. 25, a. 4, ad 1–2). Moreover, friendship "is like a habit" (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 3, co.), while love of friendship is not necessarily a habit. This means that friendship is something stable and enduring, and is not a one-time action, while love of friendship can be an action, which is the dilection. However, Aquinas seems to be uncertain as to whether natural friendships are virtues or not (*ST* II–II, q. 23, a. 3, ad 1).

So, love of friendship can be natural, even though natural love suffers from the effects of original sin, which is "an inordinate disposition, arising from the destruction of the harmony which was essential to original justice" (*ST* I–II, q. 82, a. 1, co.). Many scholars consider these effects to be also the reorienting of love, and especially self-love to one's private good (e.g., Sullivan 2021, p. 332). In contrast, the highest and most perfect love of friendship is supernatural: charity.

Charity (*caritas*) is the theological virtue of love of God (*dilectio Dei*) and, secondarily, of neighbor (*dilectio proximi*) for God: charity is supernatural friendship with them.[14] Charity leads one to love as God loves. So, charity is the most perfect form of true love, which is love of friendship. The act of charity is a dilection supernaturally restored, completed and elevated by divine sanctifying grace (*ST* II–II, qq. 23, 27). The formal act of charity is loving God for His own sake; while desiring God as one's ultimate beatitude is legitimate, this desire must be conceptually integrated into the primary love of God for His own inherent goodness, because charity requires one to love God for His own sake. In the highest forms of charity (when a person is no longer a beginner in virtue), this way of loving God is no

longer present in the act of charity. Instead, the desire of God as one's completion is proper to the virtue of hope (*spes*) (*ST* II–II, q. 66, a. 6 ad 2). Moreover, the charitable person loves the neighbor "as oneself." Charity is the "queen" of the virtues and can command their acts, directing them to the end of charity itself. It follows the order of natural human love and perfects this order. Charity includes supernatural and natural self-love (*amor sui*), loving oneself for God and in God; such self-love is opposed to contempt for God in favor of the self and different from the reorienting of self-love to one's private good due to original sin (*ST* I–II, q. 109, a. 3; II-II, q. 25, a. 4). As "the will carries into effect if possible, the things it wills" (*ST* II–II, q. 31, a. 1), charity unfolds in exterior acts that do good to the neighbor (according to the order of charity)—and these acts are gifts (Wadell 2015). There are precepts (*praecepta*) of charity: moral debts (*debitum morale*: see Section 3.1.2) to God that are morally obligatory; otherwise, the agent loses charity and righteousness. When acts of charity exceed strict moral obligation, they fall under the category of counsel (*consilium*). This dynamic intersects with the virtue of justice (*iustitia*), which governs duties owed to another (*ST* II–II, qq. 57–122). The relationship between justice and charity is debated, especially regarding the exterior precepts of charity toward the neighbor (e.g., Floyd 2009). Nonetheless, charity requires, completes, and exceeds justice, without juxtaposition.

In short, loving someone for their own sake and as oneself is the core of Aquinas's idea of gratuitousness (i.e., of the defining feature of gift or *donum*, often named with the adjective *gratuitus*). Indeed, charity is the most gratuitous virtue. But this is a strongly and vastly debated point.[15] A crucial issue is the relation of charity and that of natural love of friendship to self-love, especially because it may seem that friendship-loving someone means merely loving oneself. This issue constitutes the core of the problem and is analyzed below.

The virtue of mercy (*misericordia*) is primarily based on supernatural and/or natural love of friendship, which is for the sake of the loved one. Indeed, mercy succors another in their want for heartfelt sympathy for their distress (*ST* II–II, qq. 30, 32–33; Cazelle 2020; Floyd 2009; Keaty 2005; Miner 2015; O'Callaghan 2015).[16] Mercy and charity are linked because mercy is primarily rooted in love of friendship, and charity is supernatural love of friendship, so that mercy is an interior effect of charity (the third one: joy is the first and peace is the second) (*ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 2 and a. 3, obj. 3; q. 28, pro.). Notably, the structural link between mercy and charity intensifies throughout the *Secunda Secundae*, as mercy is increasingly decoupled from the framework of strict justice.[17] Even if mercy is studied in the *Treatise on Charity* (*ST* II–II, qq. 23–46), and charity is a theological virtue, mercy is a moral virtue: natural and acquired, but also infused and supernatural (*ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 3.; Budziszewski 2017, pp. 159–74).[18] As Aquinas states, mercy is the only moral virtue that is an effect of a theological virtue—that is, charity itself (*ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 3, obj. 3–4 and ad 3–4). Obviously, when natural mercy is without charity, the acquired virtue does not stem from charity. Nevertheless, that is why mercy is exceptional.

So, mercy properly is in relation to another. Better still, exteriorly mercy relieves evils for the sake of the sufferer. So, for Aquinas, mercy is gratuitous.

To understand, let us consider the interior act of mercy.[19] Aquinas's foundations of mercy seem to suggest that there are two kinds of forgiveness, and I will analyze only the most gratuitous one, which is based on love of friendship. Interiorly, mercy is rooted in compassion (*compassio*), which is the aforementioned heartfelt sympathy. Compassion belongs to the sensitive and/or the intellective appetite. Compassion leads to consider the other's evils as one's own, to be intellectively and sensitively displeased by them, and so, to act to alleviate them. Compassion derives from union, which can be real (*unio realis*, which here is the sharing in common of some feature) or affectionate (*unio affectus*, which here is the same union intrinsic to love of friendship stated above). Aquinas states that

there are two foundations of mercy. The higher of the two, and the one most characterized by gratuitousness, is the love of friendship. Real union is the least important and consists in sharing something in common (e.g., human nature) and causes the right fear that the other's evil passes to the agent; as such, it is not very relevant to my question.[20] Instead, 'union of affections' contradistinguishes the highest form of mercy and is a bond of love.[21]

The link between mercy and charity regards exterior acts too. At the natural level, works of mercy can be just acts of natural love of friendship. But, when supernatural, they are exterior acts of charity—not mere commanded acts. Indeed, they properly pertain to beneficence (*beneficentia*, i.e., generically doing good to someone) or to mercy, which does a specific good: relieves an evil. This is why works of mercy are in a way considered a part of beneficence by Aquinas (*ST* II–II, q. 31). Supernatural exterior acts of mercy arise from caritative love of neighbor and ultimately of God, but also from the natural inclination of the human will to the last end and natural loves toward neighbor. Acting so assimilates the agent to divine action (*ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 4, ad 3).

In short, mercy is love of neighbor aimed at relieving them of an evil and lastly directed to God. So, the issues at stake in the gratuitousness of mercy are the same as in supernatural and natural love of friendship. See Aquinas's following words:

> since he who loves another looks upon his friend as another self, he counts his friend's hurt as his own, so that he grieves for his friend's hurt as though he were hurt himself. Hence the Philosopher (Ethic. ix, 4) reckons "grieving with one's friend" as being one of the signs of friendship, and the Apostle says (Rm. 12:15): "Rejoice with them that rejoice, weep with them that weep." (*ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 2).[22]

So, the structure of charity is wholly poured into forgiveness.

3.1.2. Forgiveness as Spiritual Work of Mercy

To confirm all that, let us see the text that defines forgiveness, morally classifying it as a spiritual work of mercy. These characteristics also apply to acquired mercy without charity when not involving charity. The end of works of mercy is formally the same as mercy itself: relieving the needy of the evil suffered.[23] These works are gifts (*ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 5) and are divided into corporal—relieving physical defects—and spiritual—relieving spiritual defects (*ex parte animae*). Spiritual works succor greater evils, and so are superior to the corporal works:

> [S]piritual needs are relieved by spiritual acts in two ways [. . .]; secondly, by giving human assistance, and this in three ways. [. . .] Thirdly, the deficiency may be due to an inordinate act; and this may be the subject of a threefold consideration. [. . .] Secondly, in respect of the person sinned against; and if the sin be committed against ourselves, we apply the remedy by "pardoning the injury," while, if it be committed against God or our neighbor, it is not in our power to pardon, as Jerome observes (Super Matth. xviii, 15). (*ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 2.)

Clearly, the assistance performed by humans indicates *human* forgiveness.[24] The recipient suffering the spiritual defect is the offender, while the merciful agent relieving that defect is the victim. So, here the neighbor is the offender. The victim acts against that aspect of the evil caused by the offender through their wrongdoing, on which only the victim, as victim, can act. The defect is a disorder caused by the disordered offensive act, which is a sin (*peccatum*) (*ST* I–II, q. 71, a. 6; qq. 85–88; q. 114, a. 2; *Super Ps.* 37, n. 4).[25] So, the aim of the loving action is the needy, not the agent. Forgiveness aims at the good of the forgiven, who is relieved for their sake, and does not directly aim at the good of the forgiver. And, when forgiveness is an act of charity, love of the forgiven is part of love of

God. So, one forgives for God's sake. In fact, the more one loves God, the easier it is to forgive (e.g., *De perfectione*, c. 14).

Although the text does not outline the concrete psychological steps of forgiveness, the act fundamentally counters the original offense and its consequences that are contrary to love of friendship. The latter, when reciprocal, becomes reciprocated friendship in the strict sense, which can be or not be interpersonal friendship. Indeed, Aquinas states elsewhere that forgiveness is a gift (*ST* I, q. 21, a. 3, ad 2; I–II, q. 99, a. 5, co. and q. 108, a. 1, co. and ad 2; II-II, q. 31, obj. 3, ad 2 and ad 3) and, as external act, is reconciliation (e.g., *Decem praec.*, a. 2): the restoration of the otherwise lost friendship. There are different types of friendship, but the one to be restored is the true one: honest friendship (*amicitia honesta*), characterized by love of friendship. The concretely restored friendship, which is reciprocated, will be charity friendship, friendship between human beings, friendship between familiars, etc., or interpersonal friendship, depending on the kind of friendship that previously existed. Here, 'friend' has the wide range that Aquinas asserts.

The healing of friendship in the general or strict sense consists in that the victim cancels, or does not hold the offender responsible for, the debt of sin (*debitum culpae*). Here, the latter debt is the moral debt that the offender contracts toward the victim for the evil done to them. This debt of sin is neither the debt to God nor the debt of punishment (*debitum poenae*), that includes legal punishment, nor the legal debt (*debitum iustitiae*) (*ST* I–II, q. 87, a. 6; II–II, q. 80). "The legal due is that which one is bound to render by reason of a legal obligation; and this due is chiefly the concern of justice, which is the principal virtue. On the other hand, the moral due is that to which one is bound in respect of the rectitude of virtue" (*ST* II–II, q. 80, a. un.). The moral debt has varying degrees of binding force (Budziszewski 2017, pp. 251–57). In fact, "Moral duty is twofold: because reason dictates that something must be done, either as being so necessary that without it the order of virtue would be destroyed; or as being useful for the better maintaining of the order of virtue." (*ST* I–II, q, 99, a. 5, co.). The moral debt of sin is incompatible with friendship in the strict sense. The analogy with divine forgiveness of sinners is patent, as is Christ's exemplarity (e.g., *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3, ad 2). So, the victim must condone the debt of sin against them. Obviously, the action of human forgiveness against sin is not as powerful as God's because human forgiveness cannot cleanse the evil from the soul of the offender (i.e., cancel the stain, or *macula*, which refers to the privation of grace) (e.g., *ST* III, q. 86, a. 2, ad 3). The original offense may be against justice, and involve money or not. The victim can forgive without condoning the debt of justice or economic debt, which concern external things and do not contravene friendship (*ST* III, q. 86, a. 3, ad 4). However, condoning also these debts ordinarily is a more virtuous act (e.g., *ST* I–II, q. 108, a. 4; III, q. 46, a. 2, ad 3).

So, forgiveness is an act of love and, formally acting against sin, aims at reconstituting true love (of friendship). The link between forgiveness and charity is very strong.

Forgiveness *qua* reconciliation has requirements. All the morally good acts must comply with due conditions: object, end, and circumstances. Sometimes Aquinas makes these conditions explicit as to exterior forgiveness (e.g., it must not contradict justice, real peace must be possible, etc.) (*ST* I, q. 25, a. 3, ad 3; II-II, q. 11, a. 4, ad 2; III, q. 46, a. 2, ad 3; *Super ad Colossenses*, c. 3, lect. 3; *Super ad Ephesios*, c. 2, lect. 2; *Super ad Romanos*, c. 12, lect. 3). But true reciprocated friendship, love of friendship, and charity have proper requirements. Requiring correspondence, friendship in the strict sense requires a loving attitude and behavior from both parties. The debt of friendship (*debitum amicitiae*) specifically refers to what charity and/or natural friendship owes to the friend (*ST* II–II, q. 106). This debt is a moral debt but not a debt in the strict sense, because gratuitousness and affection prevail. The debt of friendship is owed because of the order of nature, consists primarily of affection, and is closely related to honest friendship. This debt unlimitedly grows as

a spiral: the more the debt is "returned," the more it is owed. It is strictly intertwined with the precept of love of neighbor. Both supernatural and natural love of friendship entail fulfilling the demands of loving and honest behavior. When the forgiven reciprocates this affection, the relationship demands gratitude (*gratitudo*), which is the virtue whereby an agent acknowledges a benefit received (*ST* II–II, q. 106).[26] So, the forgiven "owes" thanksgiving to the forgiver. Here, the debt of friendship is specifically a debt of gratitude. Furthermore, beyond any possible debate, broken and healed friendship requires justice: restitution (*restitutio*, which is an act of 'commutative justice' [*ST* II–II, q. 62]—which is the virtue of particular justice between equals [*ST* II–II, q. 61, a. 1]—and returns what unjustly taken) and satisfaction (*sa-tisfactio*, which is reparation for the evil done [e.g., *ST* III, q. 85]). Aquinas explicitly states that about mercy, and forgiveness of sin (*ST* III, q. 84, a. 5, ad 2). Such duty is partly condonable by the victim. In any case, friendship cannot be preserved unless the benefits received from the friend are reciprocated (*ST* II–II, q. 106, a. 1, obj. 3 and ad 2)[27]. Thus, the enemy turned friend must behave as such, loving the victim for their sake and returning debts of friendship.

Consequently, human forgiveness structurally anticipates the moral transformation of the offender. The forgiven party is called to renounce evil and convert to the good, which in the Thomistic framework requires a return to the love of God. And the highest love of friendship, charity, implies a supernatural loving relationship with God.

However, general friendship—love of friendship—is not necessarily reciprocated by the beloved. In this case, forgiveness restores or preserves the core of love of friendship, which in this case is love of the offender. Here, forgiveness is an instance of love of enemy (*dilectio inimici*) (*ST* II–II, q. 23, a. 1, ad 2; q. 25, aa. 6, 8–9; q. 27, a. 7; q. 34, a. 4; q. 184, a. 2, ad 3; q. 44, a. 7). Here, the enemy is a "friend" in the most general sense, as loved one: "a friend is, properly speaking, one to whom we wish good [*nam ille proprie dicitur amicus, cui aliquod bonum volumus*]" (*ST* I–II, q. 26, a. 4, ad 1). When directed to an individual enemy, this love is a type of charity impossible for but not contradictory to nature. Elicited acts of love of a particular enemy are only supernatural. One loves the enemy out of love for God, to Whom the enemy still belongs and in Whose image he is made (as a human being) and of Whom he is still capable (*ST* II–II, q. 25, a. 8, ad 2). Moreover, hating the offender as a person and wishing them true evil is always sinful. It is not even proper to human nature, which hates the offender as an offender, not as a person.

So, forgiveness implies renunciation of interior and exterior hatred (*odium*) and unfair vengeance, but not of the fair redressing of evils (proper of *vindicatio*, i.e., the virtue of vengeance).[28] The victim's hatred is directed only to the offender's evil attitude and acts against the victim themselves.

Thus, forgiving requires emotional moderation: the diminution and regulation of the passion of anger (*ira*), aroused by the offense suffered, and so, the rejection of the consequent disposition to offend the wrongdoer in turn. Thus, forgiveness is facilitated by meekness (*mansuetudo*, i.e., the virtue which diminishes and regulates anger and leads to condone punishment) (*ST* II–II, q. 157).

All that precisely corresponds to the three different types of forgiveness (*ST* II–II, q. 83, a. 16, ad 3; *Decem praec.*, a. 2; *Orationem Dom.*, a. 5; *Super ad Romanos*, c. 12, lect. 3). They are the same as the types of work of mercy, which are: (1) required by the precept of charity, depending on precise circumstances; (2) of counsel: not morally obligatory but more generous, and performed out of a greater love of God and neighbor; (3) preparation (*praeparatio animi*): interior acts of readiness and disposition to comply with the precept, if circumstances arise (*ST* I–II, q. 108, a. 4; II-II, q. 2, a. 5; q. 32, a. 5; q. 44). As for forgiveness, the precept arises when the repentant offender sincerely asks for forgiveness. The wrongdoer is no longer an enemy but a friend—remember the specifications above.

Coherently, there is no need to perform a particular act of charity toward an individual enemy. All other precepts regarding works of mercy depend on the need of the person relieved. But Aquinas explicitly distinguishes forgiveness from them. Its precept is founded in the offender's becoming a friend (*ST* II–II, q. 83, a. 8). This implies that there is no wrongdoer's right (*suum*, i.e., what is due to someone in justice) to be forgiven (e.g., *ST* II–II, q. 106, a. 2, co.; *De veritate*, q. 28, a. 1, arg. 8 and ad 8). Forgiveness of precept should be due only to God, as all the debts of the precepts are. So, if forgiveness is never owed to the offender, forgiveness should always be a gift. Forgiveness of counsel chiefly consists in offering forgiveness to the still unrepentant offender (also, e.g., the renounce to economic or just reparation is of counsel) (e.g., *ST* III, q. 46, a. 2, ad 3): forgiveness is an act of love of a particular enemy. Preparation to forgive consists in being intentioned to forgive them in practice if they repent and ask for it (*ST* II–II, q. 83, a. 16, ad 3; *Super Matt.*, c. 6, lect. 3).[29] This structural division informs Aquinas's commentary on the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer: precept and preparation entail that forgiveness is a necessary condition for being forgiven by God.

So, the structure of the precept and counsel of forgiveness corresponds to that of love of enemies, which is a specific instance of love of friendship. Preparation for forgiveness is also part of the preparation for the precept of love of enemies (*ST* II–II, q. 25, a. 8). So, forgiveness is strongly connected with the supernatural and the natural love of God, and assimilates the agent to God and divine action. Forgiveness of counsel is the closest to divine action, because this forgiveness aims precisely at the conversion of the offender. So, the fullness of forgiveness is only theological. Indeed, without charity and infused mercy, natural mercy does not fully deserve the name of virtue (*ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 1, ad 1; q. 23, a. 7), so its act is not perfectly good (*perfecte bonum*). But natural mercy allows for the admission of natural forgiveness, linked to natural love of God and fellow human beings. So, forgiveness reflects the complexity of both notions of mercy and charity, and Aquinas's idea that grace heals, completes, and positively surpasses human nature.

In short, Thomistic forgiveness formally is an exterior act involving the offender, with an interior dimension. However, as preparation, forgiveness can be only interior. It is supernatural and natural. It is a loving response to the offender. As such, forgiveness is morally good and diffuses goodness: the good (*bonum*) is *diffusivum sui* (*ST* I, q. 5, a. 5). Indeed, the victim performs what good is possible for them to do against the occurred evil *for the sake of the offender and of God*. And, forgiveness acts against the worst possible evil, which is sin, in order to restore friendship, love of friendship, and charity. All things considered, forgiveness has the aforementioned outstanding status among works of mercy and acts of charity. Clearly, the coherence and consistency of the gratuitousness of forgiveness are hinged on that of charity and its natural counterpart, which is natural love of friendship.

3.2. Going Deeper into the Analysis: Forgiveness Is Coherently and Consistently Gratuitous

Let us admit that the gratuitousness of Aquinas's forgiveness may seem vulnerable to our initial objections.

First of all, precepts are debts. But forgiveness is a gift. Is the gift *due*? There is a conceptual tension questioning gratuitousness, and there are vast discussions. Whether works of mercy are strictly categorized as gifts, and whether, when precepts, they are owed under charity or justice, remains a subject of intense debate (e.g., Floyd 2009, esp. pp. 449–52). This dispute does not compromise the core thesis, as acts of counsel are clearly non-obligatory. And even when an act is required for charity to persist, the required act remains an exercise of true, gratuitous love, representing the formal baseline of the virtue. Consequently, compliance with moral conditions (object, end, and circumstances) does not

invalidate the gratuitous nature of the act. And, anyhow, Thomistic charity requires but surpasses justice, without contradiction. Consequently, whether the precept of forgiveness entails justice and is due to the forgiven seems not to determine the answer. Moreover, as already said, forgiveness seems to be the work of mercy most linked to gift, and seems to not be strictly owed to the forgiven. If that is the case, forgiveness is never owed to the offender, so the problem is solved.

Second, forgiveness entails a debt by the forgiven and benefits for the forgiver. Forgiveness as a precept requires and as a counsel implies (or at least is aimed at) that the offender becomes a grateful, loving friend of the former victim. More importantly, forgiving is required for the victim's obtaining of divine forgiveness. Benefits include personal charity and friendship with God. Counsels and precepts entail the acquisition of a (especially spiritual) good by those fulfilling them (*ST* I–II, q. 99, a. 5). Indeed, the greatest return for the forgiver is in charity and merit (*Decem praec.*, a. 2.).[30] And, as an act of charity, forgiveness must be accomplished for God's sake. Thus, there is another end added to the love of neighbor for their own sake.

So, how can forgiveness be truly gratuitous?

To answer these questions fully, one must consider the coherence and consistency of the agent's intention, and the coherence of the structure of charity and natural love of friendship.

3.2.1. The Agent's Intention

Aquinas studies intention (*intentio*) (ST I–II, q. 12; q. 58, a. 4) and shows its importance for the virtues. Every virtue requires a specific intention.

Indeed, the locus of gratuitousness resides in the agent's intention. Forgiveness is a deliberate human act, and the agent must consciously intend for their forgiving act to be a gift. Far from undermining virtue, this conscious intentionality is precisely what enables true gratuitousness. Furthermore, forgiveness also requires the explicit evaluation of the offense as evil. This is the ultimate prerequisite for forgiveness to be a gift.

Aquinas clearly shows that, with the help of sanctifying grace, a human agent can have a truly gratuitous intention. He explicitly anticipates a major objection to the idea of gratuitous intention: it cannot truly be gratuitous because the act brings about spiritual good for the agent, who desires that good. He addresses the counterargument that corporal works of mercy might seem superior to spiritual ones because the former do not immediately yield an internal spiritual reward for the agent, whereas the latter invariably do. He responds as follows:

> Compensation does not detract from merit and praise if it be not intended, even as human glory, if not intended, does not detract from virtue. Thus Sallust says of Cato (Catilin.), that "the less he sought fame, the more he became famous": and thus it is with spiritual alms.
>
> Nevertheless the intention of gaining spiritual goods does not detract from merit, as the intention of gaining corporal goods. (*ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 3, ad 2).[31]

In accordance with its formal essence (*ratio*), a perfect work of mercy aims strictly at the alleviation of an evil and not to gain personal advantage. Aquinas highlights that the giving (*datio*) of the gift cannot be recalled because such an act does not seek a reward. But not because rewarding this act is impossible (indeed, it is possible) (*Super Sent.* I, d. 18, q. 1, a. 2). The Thomistic moral standard is very high: the greatest merit requires the agent's intention to be real and perfect gratuitousness (that of charity).[32]

The intention to obtain divine forgiveness through interpersonal forgiveness operates *per accidens, per remotionem prohibentis* (accidentally, through the removal of an obstacle) (*ST* II–II, q. 83, a. 9, co., ad 3; *Petite et accipietis*, pars 3). And forgiveness does *not* aim at obtaining the gratitude of the forgiven, but simply requires it as a secondary consequence,

as an inseparable component of the friendship to be restored. Forgiveness does entail benefits for the forgiver, including a debt by the forgiven. But they, duty of gratitude included, are secondary consequences of forgiveness and are not directly aimed at. Indeed, to mercifully perceive another's pain as one's own does not mean that the direct end of the consequent action is to alleviate one's own pain. Instead, this perception reflects such a strong love of the other and desire for their good that their evil comes to be one's own.

So, when one forgives in order to be forgiven by God, one will be able to achieve this end only if one's forgiveness is genuine and truly aims at the good of the offender.

These latter issues relate to the structure of charity, which I will deal with in the next two sections.

Given the realities of fallen human nature (*natura lapsa*, which is impaired by original sin), achieving such purity of intention might appear humanly unattainable. However, as the proper object and thus the end defines the virtues, the formal definition of charity and mercy already expresses Aquinas's idea that achieving this purity is possible. But the real point is that this pure intention is really attainable by a human agent thanks to God's grace and infused virtues, especially charity (e.g., Sullivan 2021, p. 332). Infused virtues perfect the acquired ones. Charity rectifies the will, making it aim to love God as the last end and for His own sake. Charity is the same as God's own love and, in a certain way, even transforms man into Him. So, all those who received grace and infused virtues seem to be capable of action fully ordained to God (*ST* I–II, q. 112, a. 4, co.).[33] So, gratuitous forgiveness is possible, it is *not* intentionally aiming at a good for oneself.

Whether this is achievable by fallen nature independent of sanctifying grace is doubtful according to Aquinas's texts; due to the structural damage of original sin, natural love left to itself tends to curve back toward its private good. As a consequence of original sin, acts lacking sanctifying grace are not automatically sins, but natural love always remains directed to its private good (*ST* I–II, q. 109, a. 3).[34] But this issue involves the structure of charity, so I will dwell on it in the next section.

3.2.2. The Structure of Charity and Love of Friendship

To secure the coherence and consistency of gratuitousness, one must prove the coherence and consistency of the outlined order of the human ends of charity and natural love of friendship. Do these structural ends coherently ensure that the other person is forgiven and loved for their own sake? I will show that the Thomistic logical and moral structure of charity and love of friendship is coherently gratuitous.

Let us first consider charity, which is the most perfect form of the love of friendship and encompasses the natural level of that love. Because the ultimate end of the *ordo caritatis* is not the neighbor but God (*ST* II–II, q. 26, a. 2), the gratuitousness of neighborly love has been questioned. Only God must be loved solely for Himself, while the neighbor must be loved for God's sake. Nevertheless, love of friendship loves the beloved for themselves, aiming at their good. This love regards the friend neither as a resource to be consumed for the lover nor for anyone else. One might ask whether loving the forgiven for their own sake while simultaneously ordering that love toward God compromises gratuitousness. Does the forgiver instrumentalize the offender for a divine end, thereby undermining the essence of the gift? I will show that the answer is no.

The Thomistic resolution requires a precise examination of what it means to love the neighbor for their own sake. It is the same as loving "thy neighbor as thyself [*sicut teipsum*]" (*ST* II–II, q. 44, a. 7). After clarifying that love of friendship of neighbor is the essence (more precisely, the *ratio*) of love "as thyself," *ST* II-II q. 44 a. 7 examines it:

> The reason for loving is indicated in the word "neighbor," because the reason why we ought to love [*diligendi ratio*] others out of charity is because they are nigh to us, both as to the natural image of God, and as to the capacity for glory. [. . .] The mode of love [*dilectionis modus*] is indicated in the words "as thyself." This does not mean that a man must love his neighbor equally as himself, but in like manner as himself, and this in three ways. First, as regards the end, namely, that he should love his neighbor for God's sake [. . .]. Secondly, as regards the rule of love [. . .]. Thirdly, as regards the reason for loving, namely, that a man should love his neighbor, not for his own profit, or pleasure, but in the sense of wishing his neighbor well, even as he wishes himself well, so that his love for his neighbor may be a "true" love: since when a man loves his neighbor for his own profit or pleasure, he does not love his neighbor truly, but loves himself.

The text lists the reasons for loving as oneself, which obviously apply also to love of friendship toward a neighbor.

Charity of the neighbor is grounded in communication with God. Therefore, such charity loves them precisely for God. And that means loving the neighbor for themselves.

Indeed, such love means that one wants the good of the neighbor, offender included. And charity wills the highest possible good for them. It means them being in that loving relationship with God, providentially willed by God Himself, and glorifying Him. So, in heaven, they enjoy eternal beatitude and, during earthly life, they have God as their end.

Furthermore, an agent who loves God desires the fulfillment of God's providential will, which includes the spiritual recovery and salvation of the offender. Thus, ordering the act toward God reinforces the desire for the offender's ultimate beatitude.

Loving the offender for themselves does not mean loving them in the imperfect sense. The beloved is loved for themselves—but for the good that they truly are or should be. So, *not* for the good that they are in themselves *apart from God*. Except for their ontological dignity, this good is only apparent. The offender cannot be fully good *unless being in loving relationship with God* (*ST* II–II, q. 25, a. 1, ad 1). So, love of friendship loves the offender as a person who also morally is (or can and should be) in the likeness of God. Thus, this love respects the offender's human dignity in the highest possible way. Indeed, merciful love imitates God's action and wants to make the beloved good.

Consequently, the two loves (of God for Himself and of one's neighbor for God) are not mutually contradictory: loving the neighbor for God is necessary for authentically loving the neighbor with the love of friendship, without instrumentalizing them. And only thus it is possible to forgive the offender for the motive most appropriate to what forgiveness is. Forgiveness is truly gratuitous precisely because it orders everything to God. This is also God's own absolutely gratuitous love.

Now, let us consider whether human nature is capable of gratuitousness. As previously said, the natural counterpart of charity seems even more questionable than charity. Whether natural love is love of concupiscence or of friendship has been largely debated (e.g., Gallagher 1999). Natural love tends toward God as one's own completion, but loving Him more than oneself, thus for Himself (*ST* II–II, q. 26, a. 3). One loves God—as Creator—as the whole in relation to which one is an individual part, while one loves oneself as part related to the whole (*De perfectione*, c. 13; *ST* II–II, q. 26, a. 3). And, the part does not have its raison d'être in itself but in the whole. So, human beings love God as the common good, thus more than their private good. And, they love God more than themselves, more than everything, and in Himself. They do not love Him for themselves. Consequently, human nature in itself can love gratuitously. However, as a consequence of original sin, natural love aims to one's private good: nature is turned toward itself, and so are acquired virtues. Within the fallen order, this inclination toward the private good can only be fully reordered

by charity; divine grace heals, restores, and ultimately elevates the gratuitous capacity of human love.

In conclusion, forgiveness really is an act of gratuitous love—and forgiveness can be fully so only as an act of charity.

4. One Last Objection: Human Gratuitousness

There is still a structural issue unexplained. When human beings forgive, they always gain something through their love (e.g., obtain a spiritual good and fulfill a condition for salvation), even if not directly intended. God does not. It is impossible that He gains anything from creatures, because He is the Absolute. So, perfect gratuitousness is only in God. Thus, only God may seem to love truly and completely gratuitously, and to perform a perfect gift, while human beings cannot. Is it sufficient to disprove human gratuitousness?

Indeed, Aquinas adopts the Avicennian thesis that only God is maximally liberal (*maxime liberalis*):

> To act from need belongs only to an imperfect agent, which by its nature is both agent and patient. But this does not belong to God, and therefore He alone is the most perfectly liberal giver, because He does not act for His own profit, but only for His own goodness. (*ST* I, q. 44, a. 4, ad 1)

ST I is earlier with respect to *ST* II–II, and Aquinas there uses the term *liberalis* meaning *gratuitus* (*De potentia*, q. 7, a. 10; *SCG* I, c. 93, n. 7).[35] But he defended human gratuitousness already in the *Scriptum*, although referring to the agent's intention (*Super Sent.* II, d. 3, q. 4, a. 1, obj. 3 and ad 3).

Human gratuitousness can be rightly safeguarded, emphasizing that one loves and forgives through God's own love. The gratuitousness of divine love is ultimately grounded in intra-Trinitarian relations, in the way the Father and the Son love each other, and in Gift being a proper name of the Holy Spirit (*ST* I, qq. 20–43). However, that does not secure against the denial of natural gratuitousness and must not lead us to underestimate the difference between creature and Creator.

Significantly, *ST* I q. 44 a. 4 ad 1 belongs to a metaphysical rather than a strictly moral context. The utmost gratuitousness of God's action indicates God's perfection as essentially self-subsisting Being (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*). He does not act out of destitution, unlike creatures, which are imperfect agents. God never has an increase in His perfection, not even at the moral level, precisely because He is Absolute. The point is primarily *metaphysical*.

Ultimately, this problem stems from a failure to account for Aquinas's metaphysical framework and his analogical view of reality. For Aquinas, created reality is conceived analogically with God (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, ad 4; q. 13, a. 5). God as Absolute is perfection itself. But His perfection is participated in by creatures. Transcendentals (the being, one, true, good, etc.: *ens, unum*, *verum*, *bonum*), which are properties that are coextensive with *being* itself (*De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1), are primarily predicated of creatures, and employing the transcendentals as divine proper names implies a leap. The distance between creatures and Creator is always greater than their closeness. That entails a gnoseological point and an ontological point. In speaking of God, human language has limitations and remains human even in theology (that is not mysticism).[36] Consequently, one cannot claim to find the absolute perfection of God in creatures. And, one cannot claim to be able to perfectly describe God's perfection, *then* compare creatures with that perfection, and lastly find them defective. The latter method would reverse the gnoseological order of metaphysical analysis (e.g., *Boethii De Trinitate*, pro.). Indeed, 'gratuitousness' always remains a human notion, conceived by a human intellect from creatures (not from God as a directly known object, which would require the beatific vision). Therefore, human beings cannot act gratuitously in the same way as God, but the gratuitousness that they can perform can be

truly considered 'gratuitousness.' If, in the cognitive order, the notion of gratuitousness could not be first found in creatures, it would not be possible to formulate the notion in order to attribute it (with due caution) to God. Moreover (ontological point), claiming that the term 'gratuitousness' is not applicable to creatures denies the entire Thomistic structure of reality. This claim implies the denial that love is something real and deeply coherent and consistent, which, as such, can only perfect a finite and imperfect agent. Aquinas's being (*ens*) is always "full" of transcendentals; it cannot be reversed into non-being. This is why human gratuitousness and reward are in mutual tension but not contradictory. In this sense, the human forgiver's increase in moral perfection (or any other "gain") implies neither that their forgiveness is not gratuitous nor that such an increase is directly sought by their gratuitous action. Consequently, natural gratuitousness proves to be coherent and consistent. Of course, this does not mean that creaturely gratuitousness is absolute and perfect. Creatures remain creatures. But their gratuitousness is real and true.

These arguments are also relevant to charity, and so to the highest forms of forgiveness. In fact, infused virtues are not the same in human beings as in God: man *participates* of God's love and being, but remains finite (*ST* I–II, q. 62, a. 1).

That solves the remaining question regarding the debt of gratitude and all debts of friendship by the forgiven entailed by forgiveness. These debts are a sign of the metaphysical and analogical depth of being. Being is "full" of transcendentals, so no good act is possible that does not entail consequences. Forgiveness imposes a moral debt because the good act has a moral and ontological depth, which, as such, entails consequences on reality. The good is "self-diffusive" (e.g., *ST* I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 2). One act of virtue necessarily provides the occasion for and the impulse to perform another one. So, these debts are not a form of submission, but an opportunity for the debtor to perform a good act and increase in virtue. Without forgiveness, the opportunity would never have existed. Consequently, forgiveness is offering a good and a gift of love. And at the theological level, forgiveness reflects Trinitarian love.

In conclusion, the impossibility of gratuitous forgiveness presumes an a priori denial of Aquinas's ontology, moral theory, and theology. His idea of the world is coherent. Within Thomas's thought, there is no impossibility for gratuitous forgiveness.

5. Conclusions: Gratuitous Forgiveness Is Coherent

I have addressed the question of the coherence of forgiveness, and more precisely of its gratuitousness. Thomas Aquinas offers a scattered but conceptually rigorous account of gratuitous forgiveness as a spiritual work of mercy, flowing from the virtues of mercy and charity, and situated within the dual love of God and neighbor. What Aquinas's forgiveness is turns out to be ultimately related to what charity and love are. Charity, which is supernatural love of friendship, alongside its natural counterpart, which is natural love of friendship, serves as the structural backbone of forgiveness, sustaining the theoretical validity of its gratuitousness. And Aquinas's notions proved sufficiently sound to dispel initial qualms and avoid contradictions—regarding both the intentionality and moral object of forgiveness.

Regarding human intentionality, conscious apprehension of the act is necessary to preserve its character as a free gift. Forgiveness intends to relieve the offender of an evil for their sake, and for God's sake, *not* to remunerate the agent. So, the intention is coherently gratuitous. Through charity, the gratuitous intention is fully possible to the agent.

The other main point is the coherence of the ontological and moral structure of charity. It is the core of gratuitous forgiveness. Charity is the supernatural love of friendship for God, who is loved for Himself; such a structure is found also in natural love, but in a different and inferior form. This structure is precisely the motive for which charity perfects

the charitable person. To demand that an agent remain entirely unaffected or unperfected by a virtuous action in order for it to qualify as gratuitous is to deny the teleological and ontological depth of human virtue. Furthermore, such a demand inverts the Thomistic gnoseological order by treating the absolute simplicity of divine action as a direct baseline for evaluating finite creaturely operations. Instead, Aquinas is well aware that analogy starts from creatures and not from God. All concepts apt to describe both creatures and God always entail a dissimilarity of creatures to God greater than the similarity. Metaphysically, created reality analogically participates of God's perfection. Consequently, Aquinas finds no problem in attributing the term 'gratuitous' to creatures' love. Securing the reality of the gift is reinforced by the fact that under charity, creaturely love is divinized, but also in that case, there is always human finitude. This analogical framework successfully secures the validity of natural gratuitousness as well as human finite gratuitousness in general.

In conclusion, for Aquinas, only God loves in a perfectly and absolutely gratuitous way. But He is not the only one who loves in a *truly* gratuitous way—especially when charity is involved. Human forgiveness can even be perfectly gratuitous on its own (virtuous) order. Consequently, the internal architecture of Thomistic moral theology resists internal deconstruction. There is no requirement to depart from the core tenets of the Thomistic tradition to defend its contemporary relevance; its metaphysical foundations possess the explicit structural resilience needed to ground the reality of forgiveness as an authentic act of gratuitous love.

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Abbreviations

Boethii De Trinitate	Thomae Aquinatis, Super Boetium De Trinitate, in Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 50, (Roma: Commissio leonina; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1992).
Catena	Thomae Aquinatis, Catena aurea, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 13 April 2026).
Decem praec.	Thomae Aquinatis, Collationes in decem preceptis, in Torrell, Jean-Pierre. Les *Collationes in decem preceptis* de saint Thomas d'Aquin. Édition critique avec introduction et notes. *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 69, no. 1: 5–40.
De perfectione	Thomae Aquinatis, De perfectione spiritualis vitae, in Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t.41, B-C (Romae: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1969).
De potentia	Thomae Aquinatis, Quaestiones disputatae de potentia, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 13 June 2026).
De veritate	Thomae Aquinatis, Quaestiones disputatae de veritate, in Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 22, 3 vols., (Roma: Editori di San Tommaso, 1975, and Ad Sancta Sabinae, 1970–1976).
De virtutibus	Thomae Aquinatis, De virtutibus, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 7 March 2026).

Orationem dom.	Thomae Aquinatis, *Collationes in orationem Dominicam*, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 21 April 2026).
Petite et accipietis	Thomae Aquinatis, Petite et accipietis, in Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 44, vol. 1, Edited by L. J. Bataillon; G. Berceville; M. Borgo; I. Costa; A. Oliva; P. Krupa; M. Millais; J. Ch. de Nadal; Z. Pajda (Commissio Leonina–Les Éditions du Cerf, Roma–Paris, 2014).
SCG	Thomae Aquinatis, Summa Contra Gentiles. Liber de veritate Catholicae fidei contra errores infidelium, in Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 13–15: (Roma: Typis Riccardi Garroni, 1918, 1926, and 1930)
SLE	Thomae Aquinatis, Sententia Libri Ethicorum, in Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 47, 2 vols. (Romae: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1969)
ST	Thomae Aquinatis, Summae theologiae, in Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, Opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 4–12 (Romae: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1888–1906). English translation is from *ST*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros, 1947), https://isidore.co/aquinas/summa/index.html (accessed on 11 May 2026).
Super ad Colossenses	Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Epistolas Pauli Apostoli*, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 9 March 2026).
Super ad Ephesios	Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Epistolas Pauli Apostoli*, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 14 April 2026).
Super ad Hebraeos	Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Epistolas Pauli Apostoli*, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 24 March 2026).
Super ad Romanos	Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Epistolas Pauli Apostoli*, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 25 March 2026).
Super Ioan.	Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Ioannem*, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 27 March 2026).
Super Matt.	Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Matthaeum*, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 16 March 2026).
Super Psalmo	Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Psalmos*, in Enrique Alarcón, ed., *Corpus Thomisticum. S. Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia* (Universidad de Navarra, 2000), https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ (accessed on 12 March 2026).
Super Sent.	Thomae Aquinatis, Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi episcopi Parisiensis, in P. Mandonnet, ed., t. 1. (Parisiis: P. Lethielleux, 1929–1947). English ed.: Trans. Christopher Decaen. AI Text Engine © 2020 Aquinas Institute, Inc. Version: 25.1103.0541. https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Sent.I (accessed on 8 May 2026).

Notes

[1] In addition, whether natural virtues are really virtues is debated. In any case, only infused virtues are virtues in the full sense of the term (*ST* I–II, q. 23, a. 7). The paper does not intend to engage in these debates. "An act of virtue may be taken in two ways: first materially, thus an act of justice is to do what is just; and such an act of virtue can be without the virtue, since many, without having the habit of justice, do what is just, led by the natural light of reason, or through fear, or in the hope of gain. Secondly, we speak of a thing being an act of justice formally, and thus an act of justice is to do what is just, in the same way as a just man, i.e., with readiness and delight, and such an act of virtue cannot be without the virtue. Accordingly, almsgiving can be materially

without charity, but to give alms formally, i.e., for God's sake, with delight and readiness, and altogether as one ought, is not possible without charity." (*ST* II-II, q. 32, a. 1, ad 1).

2 Aquinas's *gratuitus* (i.e., 'gratuitous' in my text) means 'for the sake of the other,' 'given unearned or without recompense,' 'not selfish,' 'characteristic feature of a gift, as opposed to something sought out for personal gain or owed to that other person who receives it' in texts such as the following: "Nam iustitia est circa operationes quae sunt ad alium sub ratione debiti legalis, amicitia autem sub ratione cuiusdam debiti amicabilis et moralis, vel magis sub ratione beneficii gratuiti, ut patet per philosophum, in VIII Ethic." (*ST* II–II, q. 23, a. 3, ad 1). On gift, which is *donum*, see *ST* I, q. 38, a. 2; II-II, q. 58, a. 11, obj. 1 and ad 1; q. 80. Unlike many XIII-century theologians, Aquinas studies the gift in order to attribute the personal proper name *donum* to the Holy Spirit (Rineau 2018, pp. 396–98). In later Aquinas's texts, gratuitous gift pertains only to charity (*caritas*) and not to the virtue of liberality (*liberalitas*), which is reducible to the virtue of justice (*iustitia*). A gratuitous gift is also proper of the virtue of mercy.

3 Barron (2020) addressed a similar question.

4 «Le pardon et le don ont peut-être en commun de ne jamais *se présenter comme tels* à ce qu'on appelle couramment une expérience, une présentation à la conscience ou à l'existence, justement en raison même des apories que nous devrons prendre en compte.» (Derrida 2012, p. 10).

5 While this assertion raises serious questions regarding the internal coherence of Derrida's theology—specifically how or why a divine being would act unconsciously—a comprehensive critique of his concept of God falls outside the scope of this paper.

6 Aquinas's doctrine on human acts as opposed to acts of man is in *ST* I–II, qq. 6–21. There, Aquinas explains the characteristics of the free act, the morally good act, and the virtues.

7 Main texts on forgiveness are: *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3, ad 2, and a. 4; II-II, q. 32, q. 83, a. 16, ad 3; III, q. 86, a. 2, obj. 3 and q. 108, a. 1, co.; *Super Sent.* III, d. 30, q. 1, a. 5, exp. and d. 34, q. 1, a. 6, co.; IV, d. 18, q. 1, a. 2, qcla. 2, co., d. 46 and q. 2, a. 3, qcla. 4, obj. 3. Furthermore: *De perfectione*, c. 14; *Super Ioan.*, c. 13, lect. 3; *Super Matt.*, c. 6, lect. 3 and c. 18, lect. 3; *SCG* III, c. 156, n. 8; *Super ad Hebraeos* and (indirectly) *Super ad Romanos*; (indirectly) *Super Psalmo 50*; *Decem praec.*, a. 2; *Orationem dom.*, a. 5. Jean-P. Torrell offers an overall assessment (Torrell 2015).

8 These are *dimittere* (*debita* or *offensa*, i.e., remission of debts to the offender), *remittere* (synonym of *dimittere*), *parcere* (to forgive), *condonare* (to forgive, but denoting the lifting of debt or punishment), *donare* (to make a gift), *ignoscere* (to forgive; employed especially when quoting others' texts), and corresponding nouns, plus *venia* (forgiveness). Moreover, Aquinas's terms may refer to different types of acts, including: divine forgiveness, i.e., performed by God toward the sinner; legal or political forgiveness of a criminal by the prince for the common good, i.e., pardon; or the act of clemency (*clementia*), i.e., the proper act of the virtue that mitigates legal punishment according to right reason. For divine forgiveness, see, e.g., *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3; III, qq. 84–90; *Super Psalmo 50*. For sovereign forgiveness, see *ST* II–II, q. 67, a. 4 and q. 68, a. 4, ad 2. For clemency, see *ST* II–II, q. 157, aa. 1–2. I will not discuss these types of forgiveness. In fact, strictly speaking, in the terminology I adopt, these latter acts do not fall under the term 'forgiveness,' which I reserve for the human act of the virtue of mercy.

9 This is a strongly debated notion, and I will not summarize the debate here. McInerny wrote a famous study of the subject (McInerny 1996), but the right interpretation of Aquinas's theory of analogy remains debated. Dewan wrote a critical appraisal (Dewan 2006).

10 Aquinas's notion of forgiveness is debated. To some scholars, Aquinas's human forgiveness seems not sufficiently distinct from divine forgiveness, impaired by that, or not sufficiently studied by Thomas himself (Konstan 2010, pp. 144–45). Wood rejects Konstan's idea (Wood 2023, pp. 101, 105–06, 110–11).

11 While studying the prayer Our Father (*Pater noster*), Aquinas analyzes the fifth request, "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*," thus offering sufficient evidence of that necessity (*Super Sent.* III, d. 34, q. 1, a. 6, co.; *Catena super Ioan.*, c. 6, d. 7; *Catena super Matt.*, c. 6, d. 8 and c. 18, d. 4; *Catena super Luc.*, c. 2, d. 1; *Orationem Dom.*, a. 5; *ST* II–II, q. 25, a. 8, obj. 1 and ad 1; q. 83, a. 9, co. and a. 16, ad 3; *Super Matt.* (Reportatio Petri de Andria), c. 6, v. 14; *Super Matt.* (Reportatio Leodegarii Bissuntini), c. 6, lect. 3).

12 *Opera misericordiae*, i.e., works of mercy, is interchangeable with *eleemosynae*, i.e., alms (e.g., *ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 2 ad 1). Current theology only employs the first term, while 'alm' has a more limited meaning. Aquinas inherits their division, number, and notion from tradition, but develops them originally. He frequently employs them as moral examples (*ST* I–II, q. 18, a. 4, obj. 3; a. 6, obj. 2 and a. 7, obj. 1; q. 18, a. 7; q. 20, a. 1 and a. 5, s.c.; q. 39, a. 2, ad 2; q. 84, a. 4, obj. 5; q. 108, a. 3, obj. 4 and ad 4). They are an "actus bonus secundum suam speciem," (*ST* I–II, q. 18, a. 8). Young Aquinas already considered forgiveness a work of mercy (*Super Sent.* IV, d. 15, q. 2, a. 1, qcla. 3 co. and a. 3, qcla. 2, co.).

13 Love belongs to the sensitive or/and the intellective appetite; the highest is proper of the will.

14 For *caritas* and *amor amicitiae*, see *ST* II–II, qq. 23–46, esp. 23–27. The basis of charity is the communication (*communicatio*, i.e., a sharing of life) by God to men of His beatitude (*ST* II–II, q. 23, a. 1). The order of charity (*ordo caritatis*) requires loving God first, oneself second, and then one's neighbor (*ST* II–II, q. 26).

15 The debate is intertwined with that on *eros* and *agape* (e.g., Fuchs 2013, pp. 203–19).

[16] Sometimes philosophers translated *misericordia* as 'pity' or 'compassion', but I think that 'mercy' is more fit, as, e.g., Miner (2015, p. 71, note 1). In human persons, mercy regulates the corresponding passion, called 'mercy' too (*ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 2).

[17] Despite announcements, mercy is not reduced to justice, in contrast with Augustine of Hippo and the medieval theological context (*ST* II–II, q. 58, a. 11, obj. 1 and ad 1; q. 80). Now, the Augustinian preservation of justice by mercy means the direction of mercy by reason (*ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 3, co.). Unlike in early texts, mercy is not reducible to liberality (*liberalitas*, i.e., the virtue that uses well the things of this world that are granted us for our livelihood; it is reducible to justice). Mercy is still broadly annexable to liberality in q. 32, a. 1 ad 4, as its act can be commanded by justice (*ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 1 ad 2); but this is denied in q. 115, a. 5 obj. 3 and ad 3. Works of mercy and gratuitous gifts now pertain to charity.

[18] Whether mercy is only infused or also acquired is debated (e.g., Miner 2015). In my opinion, mercy is coherently moral: its direct object is not God but external acts toward neighbor; mercy regulates a human passion; love of neighbor has a natural dimension; Aquinas relies on Augustine to admit natural mercy (even taking up his favorable interpretation of Cicero (*ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 3, s.c.); its natural character is strongly assessed, in contrast with ancient pagan thought and Aristotle, as Aquinas is aware that for Aristotle mercy is not a virtue (*SLE* III, lect. 1, n. 3 and *ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 3, obj. 4 and ad 4); the idea is congruent with Thomas's theological and philosophical framework: grace heals, completes, and perfects nature, neither destroys nor replaces it (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2).

[19] An 'exterior act' is a material act with an external dimension and proceeds from the interior volition or choice, i.e., the 'interior act' of the same virtue (*ST* I–II, qq. 18–21).

[20] However, such compassion is reducible to the next (Keaty 2005, pp. 190–95).

[21] Notice the precise correspondence between the key feature of the better kind of compassion and love of friendship! This is the distinction that suggests there may be two types of mercy, and so two kinds of forgiveness for Aquinas. Consequently, I think that there may be two kinds of acts of mercy (Savarese Forthcoming). I will not consider the forgiveness that might be based on fear. In any case, the most gratuitous form of interpersonal forgiveness is that which is characterized by the love of friendship (Savarese Forthcoming).

[22] The text confirms that the highest mercy is supernatural and natural love of friendship: pointing to nature through Aristotle, and to grace through Paul the Apostle.

[23] "Motivum autem ad dandum eleemosynas est ut subveniatur necessitatem patienti:" (*ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 1). Aquinas adds a specification to the traditional definition proper to, e.g., Albertus Magnus: "*opus quo datur aliquid indigenti ex compassione propter Deum*."

[24] However, divine help is central to a human's fully virtuous act, including forgiveness. Without charity, mercy is not fully a virtue and one materially but non formally performs its works (*ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 1, ad 1 and q. 23, a. 7). Indeed, "the fountain of interpersonal forgiveness is found eventually in Christ" (Luijten 2003, pp. 46–47). Aquinas associates the fifth request of Our Father with the gift of counsel (*donum consilii*, a gift of the Holy Spirit).

[25] Sin is the greatest misery (e.g., *Super Matt*., c. 5, lect. 2; *Super Ps.* 24, n. 5; *Super Ps*. 40, n. 3; *Super Ps*. 50, n. 1). So, forgiveness verisimilarly is the highest work of mercy: "Nulla est enim maior misericordia quam offendenti ignoscere," (*Decem praec*., a. 2).

[26] Gratitude can return something more than the human donor's affection, but is broadly reducible to justice (*ST* II–II, q. 80, a. un.).

[27] In *ST* II–II, q. 106, a. 1, obj. 3 and ad 2, Aquinas cites Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, 13, 1162bff.; IX, 1, 1163b 32ff.

[28] Inner hatred is the worst sin against neighbor (*ST* I–II, q. 29; II-II, q. 34). Aquinas distinguishes *ira* (*ST* I–II, q. 46) and *iracundia* (II–II, q. 158). Anger causes hatred. The victim ordinarily is in an evil disposition to offend in turn (*ST* II–II, q. 30, a. 2, ad 3). However, anger can be directed by reason toward just punishment and fair vengeance (*ST* II–II, q. 25, a. 8; q. 108). Forgiving the enemy requires more than not hating them (*ST* I–II, q. 113, a. 2, ad 1).

[29] In *ST* II–II, q. 83, a. 16, ad 3, the sinner is asking for God's forgiveness via the Holy Father and obtains it. So, they are sinner not because of not forgiving: they are prepared (*paratus*) to forgive.

[30] Christ intended to highlight both necessity and usefulness as reasons to forgive (*Super Matt.* [Reportatio Petri de Andria], c. 6, v. 14).

[31] Aiming at corporal goods for oneself entails a greater diminution of merit than aiming at spiritual ones. Obviously, the latter purpose is an imperfection, not a moral evil.

[32] The end morally specifies an act as good or bad (*ST* I–II, q. 18, aa. 4–6, a. 7, obj. 2 and ad 2). Virtue always tends toward good (*ST* I–II, q. 55, a. 4, co.).

[33] But the first precept can be perfectly observed only in heaven (*ST* II–II, q. 44, a. 6).

[34] This seems to be why mercy has been so poorly grasped by pagan thought.

[35] The link of God's gratuitous action to liberality suggests that the notions of liberality and charity were not the later ones.

[36] This point should be addressed and explained at length. Bonino writes an overview (Bonino 2016, pp. 487–96).

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