

LIFE AS AN ANALOGICAL CONCEPT: Earthly and Eternal

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“you spare all, since all is yours,
Lord, lover of life!” Wisdom 11:26

PRELUDE: THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF WORLDLY APPEARANCE

In our everyday experience life appears as fragile and ephemeral, threatened by oblivion and death. It seems to last for no more than a fleeting instant as compared to the steady existence of objects in the realm of the inanimate world: rocks and oceans, stars and atomic particles. Heaven and earth evoke an idea of eternity far more readily than a centuries-old tree or even the longest lived animal. On a first approach life and eternity seem two incompatible notions. While no life can escape the disintegration inflicted by death, what does not live might exist ceaselessly without end. Or is there still a sense in which the fleeting and the ephemeral is more lasting than the most enduring lump of matter? Is the earth or the cosmos in a way more transient than the most evanescent phenomena of life? The twentieth-century Hungarian poet, Sándor Weöres (1913-1989) forcefully captures the experience of what one may dub “the paradoxical nature of worldly appearance,” in other words, the paradoxical relationship between steadily persisting existence and the contingent occurrences of life. His poem “Eternity”

(1980) suggests that, contrary to common wisdom or traditional cosmological views, everything on earth and in heaven that to age-old reflection has appeared unquestionably eternal, on a closer look proves to be transient for some mysterious reason:

The Earth that creates all that lives,
the tomb that swallows what it gives,
the plains, the seas, the mountain-pass
appear eternal—but will pass.

The cosmos and the firmament
gyrating, celestial cement,
legion of fire-balls' hot mass
appear eternal—but will pass.¹

Conversely, the most accidental of movements and activities connected to life, no matter how swift and briefly passing they are, will somehow remain for eternity:

What's buried by forgetfulness
the lizard's leap, bird-wings' caress,
tremors which trickled long ago
appear to pass—but never go.

The reason for this, according to the poem, has to do with the nature of the happenings of life which occur once and for all. The last stanza gives the following laconic explanation:

For some things that had taken place
no order can change or erase—

¹ Weöres, "Eternity", 925. Miklós Vajda characterizes Weöres as a poet who is primarily interested in "existence-expression" rather than self-expression, and whose poetry, raiding the metaphysical depths, displays unparalleled "imagination and power to make things manifest." Weöres is "able to see man and cosmos, life and death, microcosm and macrocosm, the material and the spiritual as an integral whole, making this magnificent vision shine forth with the serene harmony of real poetry, this greatest of human accomplishments." Miklós Vajda, "Foreword", 19.

neither God nor the Ancient Foe:
they seem to pass—but never go.

Reading the poem from our perspective – namely the issue of the relationship between earthly and eternal life – what comes to the fore is the curious fact that, ultimately, freedom, surprise, contingency and the undetermined seem more compatible with eternity than the calculable solidity of perennial laws or the steadiness of existence. Life is tied to the eternal in a mysterious fashion; the dynamism of autonomous and ever-changing movement issues in happenings which ineffaceably form the texture of a lasting meta-history. Obviously, the poem is not primarily concerned with the issue of life as such, its main concern being rather the poetic rendering of a strong idea of eternity which looks behind the surface of conventionally conceived appearances. Nonetheless the two, eternity and life, as we shall see, interrelate at many points. Moreover, what one has here is not yet the truly Christian idea of the relationship between earthly life and eternity. One could say that Weöres's notion of eternity claims both more and less than its theological counterpart. On the one hand, it claims more by setting eternal events over against God's omnipotence (in the emphasis on the unalterable nature of worldly occurrences even by God), while on the other hand it claims less by ignoring the question of the rootedness of eternity in God (the cosmos and God appear here as simply juxtaposed, and God and the devil enter the poem only as half-playful motifs intended to give more weight to the final conclusion).

This suggestive poem, however, teaches one at least two important lessons. First, that the issue of the relationship of life and eternity holds immense complexity and presents one with something of a paradox. As Herbert Vorgrimler notes, a proper Christian idea of eternal life cannot be simply reduced to the commonly held view that the fruits of one's life somehow transcend one's earthly existence, remaining as lasting achievements forever.² Eternal life is not simply the overcoming of decay and death or a lasting memory of events in the cosmos; it is not so much life beyond death than the opening up of a new reality and a new quality as the fullness of life. What would then be an adequate Christian idea of the relationship between eternity and life, between what is

² Vorgrimler, "Örök élet" [Eternal Life], 488.

fleeting and God's immutable being, between earthly and eternal existence? It remains for Christian theology to formulate a reasonable answer. And here one comes upon the second lesson, which is a curious convergence between modern poetic wisdom and classical theology. Despite the obvious differences of perspectives, one might discern in the intuition of this poem a distant echo of Thomas Aquinas's insight that duration as a constitutive element of eternity does not primarily have to do with the permanence of existence but must rather be associated with the perpetuity of the operation of life. As Aquinas explains – in response to the objection that life ought not to enter a good definition of eternity (an objection made by some against Boethius's well-known formulation of eternity as “the simultaneously-whole and perfect possession of interminable life”) – life is essential for a proper understanding of the eternal since “[w]hat is truly eternal, is not only being, but also living; and life extends to operation, which is not true of being. Now the protraction of duration seems to belong to operation rather than to being.”³ All this leads us to a philosophical/theological idea of the relationship between eternity and life. However, before proceeding to some key formulations in the theological tradition concerning this matter, we must consider briefly the first-order reflection of biblical thought.

SOME ASPECTS OF THE BIBLICAL IDEA OF LIFE AND ETERNITY

A fully fledged theological idea of life appears already at the level of biblical reflection both in the Old and the New Testaments.⁴ Physiologically (in Herbert Haag's term, though physiology here is obviously seen through a philosophical/theological filter), biblical life belongs first and foremost to animals and humans, suggesting an idea of movement in the first place, and interestingly, almost entirely lacking any reference to plants. Essentially, life is vitality, a creative power; this is why – in an abstract sense – God's word is conceived as⁵ “living” because it has the power to create. In a concrete sense life denotes an ability to hope, act and enjoy; in other words, life means participation in activities

³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 10. a. 1.

⁴ I base my account on the dictionary entries “Life”, “Life after death”, “Eternity”, “Heaven”, “The kingdom of God/The kingdom of heaven” in Haag, *Bibliai lexikon* [*Biblisches Wörterbuch*] and on the entries “Life”, “Paradise”, “Beatitude”, “Heaven” in Léon-Dufour (ed.), *Biblikus Teológiai Szótár* [*Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*].

⁵ Job 9: 25.

and the enjoyment of the riches of the world. Furthermore, life also stands for happiness, encompassing a wide variety of meanings from “health”, “joy”, “strength” to the idea of “fruitful activity”. Life is also a gift to be treasured and cherished because it is constantly threatened by disease, suffering and scarcity. Old age brings a diminishment of life and no one is able to make his life longer. Life is short: it is “swifter than a weaver’s shuttle”⁶ or “swifter than a runner”, it passes quickly like the “evening shadow” and “withers away like grass”.⁷ It is much like “mist that appears for a while and then vanishes”⁸, nothing more than a cloud that “vanishes and is gone”⁹, as brief as a short “breath”.¹⁰ What comes to the fore from this short survey of the biblical physiology of life – and here we read the evidence presented by biblical scholarship from our systematic-theoretical perspective – is the obvious fact that life in the Bible is a value-charged notion on every level of reflection, from the simplest observation to the most sophisticated account. Biblical life is never simply neutral existence such as is described just by physiology or biology: what one finds here are accounts of the worth and meaning of life far beyond mere subsistence.

No wonder then that what is termed the theological notion of biblical reflection is in clear continuity with the physiological one. God is called living and life is God’s most important attribute. God truly lives and acts on behalf of creation and human beings; it is in this sense that God is unlike idols which are unable to do anything and therefore are without life. Life belongs to God in a preeminent sense, it is God’s possession: God’s life has no beginning or end, God alone is immortal. This is why biblical authors unanimously claim that the gift/breath of life comes from God and that God freely gives life to all forms of earthly life. In the creation account God breathes his own *nefes*, the breath of life, into the nostrils of human beings, enlivening them by imparting to them a share of the divine vitality, as it were. In this manner, created life is fully dependent on God who is the “fountain of life” and who gives vitality to all and keeps all alive as part of the divine providential care.¹¹ Interestingly, in the synoptic gospels the word *zoē* (life) is not used frequently and in most occurrences it refers to a reality

⁶ Job 7: 6.

⁷ Ps 102: 12.

⁸ James 4: 14.

⁹ Job 7: 9.

¹⁰ Job 7: 7.

¹¹ Ps 36: 10.

that is other than just ordinary earthly life. New Testament *zōē* is life *par excellence*, life lived under the impact of the grace-filled reality of the kingdom of God and the eschatological promise of the future life to come.

The expression 'eternal life' stresses the same idea of otherness: it is life that is not identical with actually lived earthly life. Nevertheless, despite the title "the author of life" attributed to Christ on one occasion, the deeper relationship between life and Christ is not explored in further detail by the synoptics.¹² It is Pauline literature that goes one step further and shifts the emphasis towards a clearly Christological focus: the life to come is explicitly interpreted as the fruitful outcome of Jesus's death and resurrection. The Johannine literature makes this thought a governing idea of its understanding of life. The Incarnation of the eternal Word has but one ultimate goal: to bring eternal life – already in the present – to those who believe in Jesus Christ. Eternal life is famously associated here with "light" and "knowledge", it is like light which enables one to know the only true God: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent".¹³

In what sense is God conceived to be eternal in biblical thought? Herbert Haag makes the notable remark that given the fact that the people of Israel has no abstract or philosophically elaborate notion of eternity, it should not be in the least surprising if the Old Testament lacked any ideas corresponding to our notion of eternity, or if it contained only a very vague intimation of the eternal.¹⁴ However, contrary to such expectations, there is in the Bible clear indication of the fact that biblical authors have a well-defined understanding of the nature of God's everlasting existence, and although their vocabulary has no specific term for this notion, nonetheless they ably express it in terms of interminable time. For biblical authors God is one who has existed from time immemorial (even before the creation of the world) and who continues living well into the most distant future. In other words, God's life has no beginning or end, "the number of his years is past finding out"¹⁵ and he is the 'Ancient of Days'.¹⁶ God everlasting is

¹² Acts 3: 15.

¹³ John 17: 3.

¹⁴ Haag, "Örökkévalóság" [Eternity], 1370-1371.

¹⁵ Job 36: 26.

¹⁶ Dan 7: 9.

like a solid rock, the “Rock eternal”.¹⁷ The image of the rock suggests both constancy and immutability: “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary”.¹⁸ As Haag observes, one can detect a development in Old Testament thought concerning God’s eternity which gradually becomes God’s distinguishing attribute and distinctive name (e.g. ‘the Eternal God’).¹⁹ New Testament authors retain the notion without major changes or amendment and it is perfectly in line with Old Testament thinking that the first letter to Timothy calls God “King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God”.²⁰ As a result of such an understanding of eternity, there is a tendency in New Testament texts to contrast the eternal (the divine and the spiritual) with the passing and the earthly. Eternal life is thus contrasted to earthly life in such a context.

Having briefly surveyed biblical evidence, one might wonder what eventually makes life in the bible life and what makes it eternal? It seems that life is never conceived simply physiologically but is portrayed with deep reverence as meaningful and active existence in the created world: movement and activity, joyful creativity and competent action, self-fulfillment and judicious dominion over the earth. It is valuable, fragile and sacred²¹; it is not just simple subsistence but a precious existential experience of happiness, productivity and hope. Life’s vitality is creative, it enables one to enjoy the fascinating richness of the world. And although life is fragile, fleeting and threatened by illness, scarcity and death, it nonetheless receives stability and constancy from God whose everlasting love and care is paradoxically more precious than earthly life. As the psalmist puts it: “your love is better than life”.²² Therefore, as commentators on the notion of eternal life often note, the biblical idea is not simply a continuation of earthly life, but is life seen from God’s perspective: participation in the supreme quality and fully realized potential of divine vitality. And this can be so because, according to the biblical vision, earthly life is itself essentially rooted in God and is maintained

¹⁷ Isaiah 26: 4.

¹⁸ Isaiah 40: 28.

¹⁹ Baruch 4: 10, 20.

²⁰ 1 Tim 1: 17.

²¹ See Léon-Dufour, “Life”, 271-273. The authors of the article divide their discussion of life into four main sections, the second of which is entitled “The value of life” and is subdivided as 1) “Life is valuable”; 2) “Life is fragile”; 3) “Life is sacred”.

²² Ps 63: 4.

by a living relationship with the Creator. Therefore, all the rest, the necessary worldly resources, are no more than of secondary importance in this respect.²³ Ultimately one may wonder whether biblical thought favors continuity rather than discontinuity when speaking about fragile but valuable earthly existence over against everlasting and stably eternal divine life? One has the impression that God's life differs from human life in quality rather than in kind. After all, does not the image of God breathing his own *nefes* into the nostrils of the human being suggest continuity rather than discontinuity? Is not the metaphor "fountain of life" suggestive of a deep-seated correspondence between created and uncreated life?

WHERE DOES LIFE ENTER THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION? – GOD AND LIFE IN AQUINAS

If first-order biblical reflection views life as essentially dependent on the truly living God, the source, lover and giver of life, what will be the points at which the theme of life may enter the second-order theoretical reflection of theological thought? As a representative test case, Thomas Aquinas's theological edifice may provide one with a thought-provoking example in this respect. Our question is this: does life figure with much weight in his doctrine of God, Trinitarian theology and the eschatology of eternal beatitude? Let us examine his definition of life first. In the definition Aquinas relies on Aristotle, characterizing life as movement with an immanent origin as opposed to movement communicated from an outside source; in other words, for Aquinas as for Aristotle to live means to be capable of self-motion.²⁴ As Aquinas explains: "those things are properly called living that move themselves by some kind of movement [...] Accordingly all things are said to be alive that determine themselves to movement or operation of any kind: whereas those things that cannot by their nature do so, cannot be called living, unless by a similitude."²⁵ Such capacity of self-movement belongs to a hierarchical scale of various beings: plants, animals, humans, angels and even to God. Life is thus an analogical concept which can be predicated

²³ Léon-Dufour, "Life", 274.

²⁴ I rely here on Mondin, "Vita (in generale)"; "Vita (in Dio)"; "Vita eterna" in Mondin, *Dizionario*, 729-733; 735-737; 735.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 18. a. 1.

neither univocally nor equivocally but analogously of both bodily and incorporeal creatures (e.g. angels) and also of God because – despite their obvious differences – there is a common element in the comparison which is not a third term, but which is a referential cross-relation between creatures and God.²⁶ In other words, creaturely life at once differs from and is similar to the divine life. The similarity lies in the fact that both have the capability to move of themselves and the difference being that material creatures move in their bodies in time and space, while God's self-movement is immaterial, timeless and without space.

What then constitutes movement for God? Aquinas imagines life according to an ascending scale of self-movement where the lowest and least perfect mode belongs to plants which display simple vital and local movement “according to their inherent nature” and executing only growth and decay.²⁷ Although plants move of themselves, their movement is restricted to the execution of a predetermined program, as it were, and to this program they do not themselves add anything new. Life manifestly belongs to animals because their movement is not “a naturally implanted form” but one “received through sense” which allows them to move according to the ‘findings’ of their own sense perception. The more perfect their sense perception, the more complex the movement they are able to carry out and the higher degree their mode of life is. Nevertheless, animals cannot set themselves the end of their movement because it is implanted in them by nature in the form of instincts which determine their activities as it were from outside. It is only human beings who, through the creative use of their intellect, are capable of setting proper ends for their movement and who can also find the right means for reaching the established goals. Human life is superior to animal life because in the human person the power of self-movement is more

²⁶ In Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, Chapter 34 Aquinas writes: “the names of God and creatures are predicated neither univocally nor equivocally but analogically, that is, according to an order of reference to something one.” Then he explains that analogical comparison can be done in two ways, out of which the second type can be applied to God when “the order of reference of two things is not to something else but to one of them. Thus, being is said of substance and accident according as an accident has reference to a substance, and not according as substance and accident are referred to a third thing.” The first mode of analogy is when “many things have reference to something one”: for example, an animal, medicine, food, urine are all said to be healthy from different perspectives (animal as its subject, medicine as its cause, food as its preserver, urine as its sign). In the comparison between creatures and the Creator, however, there can be no referential third thing.

²⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 18. a. 3.

perfect: the intellectual faculty has control over all the lower powers and so the operations of human life are governed by the highest possible principle, namely, the intellect. However, even this high form of self-movement has certain limits. The human intellect must willy-nilly accept the fact that the first principles of its operation are pre-given and that the last end is likewise beyond its control.

At this point the stage is set for Aquinas to make a decisive move and specify the nature of life in God. God has life in the most perfect degree because God's intellect is most perfect: it is perfectly immanent in every respect, it needs no outside source, first principles or a last end since there can be nothing outside of God. Now, movement in God is nothing else but understanding: God as a most perfect divine mind understands itself and so moves itself in a perfect fashion, with the result that God has life to the fullest degree. In God life and understanding are the same: "[i]n God to live is to understand."²⁸ As Aquinas explains, all things are life in God because "[i]n God intellect, the thing understood, and the act of understanding, are one and the same. Hence whatever is in God as understood is the very living or life of God."²⁹ One could say that Aquinas's definition of life hinges on two principal notions: movement and intelligence. The more movement is governed by intelligence, the fuller the degree of the life, so much so that the two (movement and intelligence) ultimately entirely coincide in the divine mind and so God has life in a preeminent manner. As Battista Mondin notes, Aquinas's approach to the theme of life is fundamentally philosophical and one may add that such a formal philosophical notion not only governs his doctrine of God but is also present in his Trinitarian theology and the eschatology of eternal beatitude, shaping the Thomistic idea of eternal life in a significantly restrictive manner.³⁰

How do life and eternity come together in Aquinas's doctrine of God? What one notices is a telling development in Aquinas's treatment of eternity and, consequently, of the divine life. In the first book of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* – an experimental work which Aquinas wrote relatively early in his career – eternity and life are treated practically apart. While God's eternity is dealt with at the beginning of the book as part of a discussion of God's attributes, a treatment of

²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 18. a. 4.

²⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 18. a. 4.

³⁰ Mondin, *Dizionario*, 730.

God's life comes at the end of the first book as a final conclusion based on the fact that God displays the operations of a perfect mind by understanding all things and Himself perfectly and by willing Himself and other things through a perfect divine act.³¹ Since the operations of understanding and willing belong only to a living being, therefore God is living – Aquinas concludes. Interestingly, Aquinas's description of God's eternity lacks in the first book of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* any explicit reference to life. God is said to be eternal for the classical reasons of being immutable, having no beginning or end and lacking succession, being the necessary first being and the first moving substance. The section ends with two quotations from Psalm 101 which stress God's unchangeable everlastingness: "But You, Lord, endure forever";³² "But You art always the selfsame: and Your years shall not fail".³³ And although these verses envisage God as ever-living, Aquinas does not exploit here the clear biblical allusion to life. In the following section of the book, then, come treatments of God's knowledge and God's will, which eventually lead to the discussion of God as living. The last question treated under the rubric 'God's will' concerns the possibility of God hating something, the obvious reply being that God hates nothing since God wills good to all things by loving all He has created. Aquinas quotes a verse from the Book of Wisdom to this effect: "For You lovest all the things that are, and hatest none of the things which You hast made"³⁴ and he probably has the next verse – "Lord, lover of life"³⁵ – in mind when he makes an immediate transition to the issue of God's life in the next chapters which contain all the key elements of his understanding of the divine life: life as manifested by the operations of understanding and willing, life as essentially self-movement, the idea that God is His own act of living and His own life (implying that God does not receive life through participation from another source), and the idea that the life of God is everlasting since life cannot be separated from the eternally existing God. Such a life of God is then said to be most blessed on the grounds that blessedness is the proper good of every intellectual nature and since God is the highest intellect, God's blessedness is the most perfect. As to the content of such

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I. c. 15. treats of God's eternity and chapters 97-102 discuss God as living and God's blessedness.

³² Ps 101: 13.

³³ Ps 101: 28.

³⁴ Wis 11: 25.

³⁵ Wis 11: 26.

perfect blessedness, Aquinas relies on Boethius's definition of felicity as pleasure, riches, power, honor and fame. According to Aquinas, God's blessedness can be described in these five Boethian terms: "God enjoys a most excelling delight in Himself, as well as a universal joy in all things, without the admixture of any contrary. For wealth, He has the all-abundant sufficiency of all good things within Himself [...] For power, he has His infinite strength. For honor, He has the primacy and rule over all beings. For fame, He has the admiration of every intellect that knows Him however little."³⁶

While in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* eternity and life are associated quite late in the discussion, in the mature synthesis of the *Summa Theologiae* life is made one of the key elements in the definition of eternity that can be found at the beginning of the first part. As Eleonore Stump stresses, "Aquinas's understanding of God as eternal is foundational for very many of his theological views," and one can find his most mature treatment of the issue in the *Summa Theologiae*³⁷ where he explicitly adopts the Boethian formula that eternity is "the simultaneously-whole and perfect possession of interminable life."³⁸ Stump points out that the formula, which is rooted in the Greek philosophical tradition, has four key elements: life, illimitability, duration, and the idea expressed in the phrase "the complete possession all at once." Thus, in Boethius's definition, what is eternal, necessarily has life. What one may surmise from Stump's learned exposition of Aquinas's complex notion of eternity is the remarkable fact that the first key element, life, might not furnish the principal governing idea for Aquinas's thought on God's eternity. One's impression is confirmed also by the fact that the index of Stump's impressive study has no such item as life. Although, as we have seen, Aquinas stresses the difference between true eternity and merely durable existence in terms of life ("What is truly eternal, is not only being, but also living; and life extends to operation, which is not true of being"³⁹), he is not primarily interested in the life-aspect of eternity, but is much more concerned with the temporal

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I. c. 102.

³⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. q. 10

³⁸ Stump, *Aquinas*, 131. Stump holds that the Boethian formula is the basis of Aquinas's other treatments of eternity (for example in the *Compendium Theologiae* cc. 5-8) and that the heart of the formula can be recognised also in the chapter on God's eternity in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* where the atemporal everlastingness of God is stressed. Stump, *Aquinas*, 134. What is important for the point I want to make, however, is the fact that the key concept 'life' does not explicitly enter the picture in this early treatment.

³⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 10. a. 1.

aspect in seeking an answer to the question of the relationship between the successive duration of time and the enduring simultaneity of eternity. While life is regarded here as a practically unproblematic notion with well-definable characteristics and a certain continuity with earthly phenomena, the other three key elements of Boethius's formula (illimitability, duration and complete possession all at once) prove to be less easily reconcilable with one another and one's earthly experience of time.⁴⁰ Therefore, what Aquinas investigates is not so much the idea of life as such, as the idea of "all at once," in other words, atemporal and in this manner eternal life. As Stump observes, Aquinas attributes life to eternal God on the basis of the doctrine that God is a most perfect mind and the real challenge for him is to spell out the difference between a temporal human and an atemporal divine mind. The issue at stake is whether one can conceive of the divine mental activities of understanding and willing as requiring neither a temporal interval nor a temporal viewpoint and Aquinas succeeds in demonstrating (throughout the first part of the *Summa*) the ultimate plausibility of such an account.

The picture does not change much when, further in the *Summa*, the discussion focuses on the life of God.⁴¹ The issue of God's life is set here within the wider framework of God's operations: God's knowledge, will and power – the immediate context for a treatment of life being God's knowledge since knowing as operation is for Aquinas a mode of living. Question 18 starts with a phenomenological analysis of what occurs to one's perception as living, followed by an attempt at a more abstract definition. Then comes a treatment of the way life can be attributed to God and lastly the issue of the correspondence of life and all things in God is considered. The overall structure of the *Summa Theologiae*, however, differs from that of *Contra Gentiles* in that, unlike in Aquinas's earlier work, here the themes of eternity, the operations of understanding and willing in the divine mind, God's life and the divine beatitude are introduced relatively early in the discussion which proceeds then to Trinitarian theology still in the first part.⁴²

⁴⁰ Stump's treatment of Aquinas's notion of eternity likewise revolves mainly around the problematic of time. See Stump, *Aquinas*, 131-158.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 18. a. 1-4.

⁴² In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Trinitarian processions are discussed in the fourth, last book.

So how exactly does Aquinas see the relationship between God, life and eternity? As Carlo Leget points out, life for Aquinas is one name of the divine essence, referring therefore to the common divine nature shared by the three Persons.⁴³ It is also linked to the doctrine of divine immutability: because God is immutable, God is eternal and the idea of eternity necessarily involves (in Boethius's wake) the idea of life, that is, ceaseless operation unimpeded by any external hindrance and unrestricted by the succession of time. So what makes God ultimately living in this framework? Leget suggests that Aquinas applies the definition "self-movement" to God in an analogical sense, shifting the common earthly understanding of what life is on two counts. First, God is a "self" in a pre-eminent manner: God's self-determination is infinitely free, not being bound by any outside source. Second, movement in God is to be understood by way of similitude as the divine intellectual operations of understanding and willing.⁴⁴ Here both divine self and divine movement prove ultimately incomprehensible for human understanding, pointing towards the key doctrine of the incomprehensibility of the divine essence. Now, as Leget argues, Aquinas sees all manifestations of life from the perspective of God's life inasmuch as creaturely life pre-exists eminently in God. God is not only the source of all forms of life, but also represents life in a pre-eminent sense since life is attributed primarily to God and created beings receive life by way of participation. Moreover, God's mode of life is essentially intellectual and therefore what truly deserves the name life in humans is bound up with the operations of the intellect.

Does Aquinas's understanding of the immanent life of the Trinity complement what one might call a rather formal and theologically thin notion of life in his doctrine of God? Trinitarian life is certainly enriched by the notion of the two kinds of processions: generation and spiration, both of which are conceived in terms of an analogy between earthly and divine life. The first procession, the generation of the Son, is understood here as the giving birth, by way of similitude, by a living being to another living one and the Father is seen as generating the Son in this manner.⁴⁵ The difference between earthly generation

⁴³ See Leget, *Living with God*, 52.

⁴⁴ Leget, *Living with God*, 45.

⁴⁵ Aquinas explains that generation has a twofold meaning: (1) change from non-existence to existence (in this sense it can belong also to inanimate things), and (2) generation characterises

and the divine procession, however, is crucial since, as Aquinas argues “what is generated in God receives its existence from the generator, not as though that existence were received into matter or into a subject [...]; but when we speak of His existence as received, we mean that He who proceeds receives divine existence from another; not, however, as if He were other from the divine nature.”⁴⁶ In other words, divine generation happens in the intellectual mode and without matter and so the Son does not differ as an independent subject from the divine essence. The second type of procession, the spiration of the Spirit, is less easily definable. It differs from generation – that is, the intellectual begetting of an Other in one’s own likeness – by the mode it brings about an “offspring”, which is not by way of similitude but by way of “impulse and movement towards an object.” Spiration happens in the mode of the will as a procession of love: “So what proceeds by way of love, does not proceed as begotten, or as son, but proceeds rather as spirit; which name expresses a certain vital movement and impulse.”⁴⁷ In what way can the procession of the Spirit be associated with life? I would say that here the connection is more mysterious but can nonetheless be inferred. As Aquinas notes, “the procession which is not generation has remained without a special name” and one may call it spiration only on the grounds that it refers to the Spirit.⁴⁸ On the one hand, Trinitarian spiration as vital movement is clearly associated with life and, on the other hand, the underlying biblical idea of *ruah* also suggests an analogy with vitality and life.

At this point one may wonder whether life is truly a key concept in Aquinas’s theology? Leget is convinced that by gathering all the threads associated with life and rephrasing (in Leget’s term) “Aquinas’s entire theology from the perspective of the concept ‘life’”⁴⁹, one is able to show the centrality of the key-word life. However, Leget’s book is, in my view, telling proof of the fact that such an attempt is partly a success and partly a failure. Undoubtedly, Leget succeeds in

living things in so much as there is birth, which is “the origin of a living being from a conjoined living principle [...] by way of similitude.” Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 27. a. 2.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 27. a. 2. ad 3.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 27. a. 4.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 27. a. 4. ad 3.

⁴⁹ Leget, *Living with God*, 2. As Leget explains, the secondary literature on the theme of life in Aquinas is very limited: the last (and only) comprehensive treatment of the subject dates from 1922 (*M. Grabmann, Die Idee des Lebens in der Theologie des Heiligen Thomas von Aquin*, Paderborn) and the remaining studies tackle the issue from limited perspectives.

demonstrating how a vast network of significations runs across Aquinas's entire theology associated with the idea of life (natural life, life of grace, eternal life, Christ's mediating hypostatic life, sacramental life, God's eternal life etc.). It also convincingly highlights underlying connections between these issues (e.g. the Christological mediation of the life of grace which connects natural earthly life and eternal life, the relationship between eternal life and earthly life or the biblical roots of Aquinas's understanding of God as life in the Gospel of John). Nonetheless, it is less persuasive on the issue of the centrality of the concept in Aquinas's thought. In my view, it may well be a key-word, yet by no means does it figure as a central organizing idea of Thomistic thought. The notion of life is subordinated to other concepts, such as divine immutability and eternity, and in eschatology the beatific vision. One sometimes has the impression that the biblical vision of an ever-living and therefore eternal God is reversed and the idea of eternity is given precedence over the idea of life, making life just a function of a proper understanding of everlasting existence. Moreover, Leget at certain points in his discussion seems to be reading back into Aquinas a modern personalistic understanding of eternal life in terms of communion and relationship with God, a perspective which Aquinas himself would not readily adopt. That the concept of life may not organize Thomas's thought in the first place is also indicated by the fact what eventually Leget does is indeed to "rephrase" Thomistic theology in terms of life, yet one might wonder whether such rephrasing is still true to Aquinas's original intention.⁵⁰

All this has important consequences for Aquinas's eschatology of eternal beatitude which is famously considered as intellectual and static, lacking somehow in vitality and convincing reference to the earthly experience of the fullness of life. One may say that the governing concept here is not so much life as vision: the ceaselessly beatific intellectual contemplation of the divine life of mind and the blissful participation in God's eternal intellectual activity (which,

⁵⁰ Leget himself is aware of a danger that threatens his endeavour when he states: "The limits of this study are due to the fact that 'life' is a key-word in Aquinas's theology. For this reason it was clear from the outset that selections had to be made, lest this study would end in recovering and rephrasing Aquinas' entire theology from the perspective of the concept 'life'." Leget, *Living with God*, 2. However, one may wonder whether this danger has been successfully avoided after all.

however is truly life in Aquinas's understanding).⁵¹ As Battista Mondin remarks, Aquinas's account of the beatific vision is a direct consequence of his anthropology where the intellect has primacy over the will.⁵² No wonder, then, that Aquinas conceives of eternal beatitude in terms of knowledge, as the direct personal and blissfully satisfying knowledge of God. And one may add that such an intellectual approach to the beatific vision is primarily a consequence not so much of Aquinas's anthropology as his doctrine of God where – we remember – God's eternal blessedness is seen to consist in the perfect operation of the divine intellect from which issue in turn contemplative felicity and delight.⁵³

As Herbert Vorgrimler points out, the issue of eternal life has been approached in two fundamentally different ways in the theological tradition: first, from the perspective of one's ultimate desire for happiness (consequently this approach is shaped by a discourse on the fulfillment of desire and affectivity) and, second, from the perspective of theoretical reflection where eternal life is interpreted on the basis of God's immutability in which the human being receives participation.⁵⁴ To this second approach belongs Thomas Aquinas, in whose theology eternal life is a static notion conceived as eternal rest and contemplation. Vorgrimler thinks that such a theology of eternal rest in terms of intellectual contemplation has been unable to encourage truly bright hope because the rich biblical symbolism of blessedness has not been adequately incorporated into second-order theological thought.⁵⁵ And here lie the roots of a too one-sided eschatology of the beatific vision which was eventually challenged by twentieth-century theology. Several twentieth-century accounts embody a sustained attempt at the retrieval of a more dynamic approach to eternal life.

⁵¹ See for example the Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. IIIa q. 92. a. 1-3, also Ia-IIae q. 3. a. 8. on the beatific vision as perfect happiness for the human being, and Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III. c. 51. Aquinas's approach in the fourth book of the *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* is also telling in this respect. In this early work Aquinas is concerned to show that beatitude is eternal life and not vice versa. See Aquinas, *Sentences*, lib. 4 d. 49 q. 1 a. 2 qc. 3 co. For a short treatment of beatitude, eternity and life in this passage see Leget, *Living with God*, 217-220.

⁵² Mondin, "Paradiso", in Mondin, *Dizionario*, 486.

⁵³ See for example Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I. cc. 100-102.

⁵⁴ Vorgrimler, "Örök élet" [Eternal Life], in Vorgrimler, *Új teológiai szótár*, 488.

⁵⁵ Vorgrimler, "Menny" [Heaven], in Vorgrimler, *Új teológiai szótár*, 431-432.

ETERNAL LIFE – A PROBLEMATIC ESCHATOLOGICAL CONCEPT?

One such attempt has been made by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who, in response to what he saw as the inadequacy of accounts in the Thomistic tradition, devoted an entire volume of his trilogy to the renewal of the traditional eschatological vision.⁵⁶ More important, however, his eschatology does not shy away from the difficult job of the portrayal of one's ultimate goal, eternal beatitude as a participation in the life of the Triune God. Unlike several other studies on eschatology – which are apparently more at ease in discussing problematic issues such as death and the mode of resurrection, intermediate time, purgatory and the possibility of eternal damnation, and so run out of intuition when it comes to a proper treatment of the final beatitude – Balthasar's account is framed in such a manner that the reality of eternal life informs it through and through, on every level from the beginning to the very end.⁵⁷ Therefore, I think that the concept of eternal life is the central key to his entire eschatology which receives coherence and credibility from a theologically rich understanding of what eternity and life are.⁵⁸

In order to work out a renewed understanding of these two pivotal concepts, Balthasar must pull together several traditionally separate strands of thought into one unified vision conceived along the lines of the classical Thomistic *exitus–reditus* scheme. In other words, first, on the basis of a theology of creation, he must emphasize the origin and rootedness of the world in the Triune God and he must likewise demonstrate the theological coherence of the idea that the world, and the human being as part of it, has an eschatological and eternal space within the Trinitarian life. Such a Trinitarian conception of creation allows him

⁵⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V.

⁵⁷ For example, Anton Ziegenaus's eschatological study devotes much less space to the discussion of what he terms "heaven: communion with the Lord" than to problems of death, resurrection, purgatory and damnation. See Ziegenaus, *Die Zukunft*.

⁵⁸ In my opinion, Nicholas J. Healy overlooks the importance of the centrality of eternal life in Balthasar's eschatology. While he gives an accurate account of Balthasar's understanding of one's final participation in the divine life, on the theoretical level of reflection he does not recognise the pivotal role of the metaphor of life as a governing principle which shapes Balthasar's discourse on traditional themes of eschatology. This is also indicated by the fact that in the index of his study "life" or "eternal life" do not figure as items; what one finds instead is "beatific vision" – a concept Balthasar criticizes as one-sided and therefore insufficient. See Healy, *Eschatology*.

to anchor every moment of world history in the eternity of the Triune Creator who equally encompasses the beginning, the present and the final fulfillment. Balthasar thus inserts the discussion of classical eschatological themes, in his words, “Aspects of the Final Act” (such as, death, judgment, resurrection, purgatory, hell) in between a consideration of the *exitus* “The World is From God” and the *reditus* “The World is In God”. And because eternal life is viewed here as descending from God and incorporating one into God, the reality of heaven – which Balthasar obviously prefers to call eternal life rather than beatific vision – is discussed in the final part, the *reditus*, where the world returns to God, although, in an important sense, it has never left God.

The second strand of thought comes from Christology because there is no final fulfillment without a Christological mediation. Balthasar stresses the crucial importance of the fact that from our worldly perspective “wherever and whenever eternal life is given, it comes from the Son who was sent into the world and from his self-sacrifice.”⁵⁹ He relies on the Johannine vision of eternal life where life is identified with Jesus Christ: Christ is life for those who believe in Him and in the Father who has sent him. The idea of such Christological mediation enables one to conceive of eternal life as something already at hand and in fundamental continuity with one’s earthly life. The Johannine soteriological perspective never simply postpones the commencement of eternal life to existence after death but makes one understand that through the humanity and divinity of Christ eternal life has entered earthly existence once and for all. In Christ, earthly life and eternal life interrelate in a unique manner: “[Christ] is eternal, yet he lives an earthly life, filling it with eternal content so that, returning to the Father in heaven, he may find a place in eternity for the life he has lived on earth.”⁶⁰ And it is on these grounds that Balthasar holds that “eternal life can never be understood as a continuation of earthly life.”⁶¹ The Christological perspective also adds another important element to a theologically rich notion of eternal life in the idea that Christ gives Himself as food. Christ as Eucharistic food nourishes in us the eternal dimension of life, enabling us to participate in the life of the Trinity. It is remarkable how Balthasar finds (even if partly unwittingly) the common life-related element in biblical images of heaven: marriage and food,

⁵⁹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 27.

⁶⁰ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 375-376.

⁶¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 376.

the Father's house as a final dwelling place, the image of ripening grain (images he refers to).

The third strand of thought shaping Balthasar's eschatology is the final horizon of Trinitarian reflection. As has been noted by many, it is a meta-discourse which likewise governs his theology of creation and Christology. The Trinitarian perspective is a helpful antidote against a too philosophical (and therefore non-Trinitarian) understanding of God's eternal blessedness in terms of the blessedness of a perfect mind. It shifts the traditional emphasis on the doctrine of God to the blessedness of the Trinitarian persons who delight in their eternal exchange of giving and receiving. Within the Trinitarian horizon the content of divine (and human) blessedness is easier to spell out because here a personalist understanding of the divine communion offers a more adequate ground for an analogy between earthly human experience and divine life compared to the Thomistic and primarily philosophical analogy of mind.

Having briefly surveyed the three hermeneutic principles of Balthasar's eschatology, we can now turn to some details of his eschatological thought. As has been clear, Balthasar takes issue with the Thomistic analogy of an eternally blessed mind, and he also finds the idea of the beatific vision insufficient for the expression of the true content of final human beatitude. This is why, throughout the volume on eschatology, he consistently employs the metaphor of life instead of the metaphor of vision and he also makes an attempt to modify the Thomistic concept of eternity as atemporal duration.

So how do life and eternity come together in Balthasar's thought? First of all, Balthasar argues that the notion of temporality must not be entirely removed from a theologically adequate concept of eternity if one takes seriously the Christological principle that Christ, through the hypostatical union, mediates between earthly and eternal time. Balthasar creates the concept "Christ's time" (relying on the Johannine emphasis on Jesus's "hour" e.g. John 2:4) to express the unique realization in the incarnate Christ of the interrelation between our time and God's time. Christ's time consists in a seamless correlation between divine and human time which is only possible, in Balthasar's view, if one interprets divine eternity as analogous with time. In other words, God's time is not completely atemporal, since it must somehow encompass the temporality of the

world, but is, as Balthasar puts it, “a super-time” that is unique to God.⁶² Such super-time holds world-time and it also reveals the transcendence of earthly time.⁶³ The idea of super-time is a conceptual means for Balthasar to imagine the way the horizontal is integrated into the vertical at each moment of world history and also the way the earthly is constantly open towards the transcendent. In this manner, earthly life constantly transcends itself in the direction of eternal life. And there is more at stake than simple transcendence: the historical world is entirely “enfolded in the life of the infinite, eternal God.”⁶⁴

Once such a super-temporal notion of eternity is established, Balthasar can draw on it in an attempt to enrich a theologically thin concept of eternal life. Implicit in his account is the assumption that time and life are inextricably tied together and therefore the event-character of earthly life appears in an analogous manner also in eternal life. It is from this standpoint that he levels serious criticism against the Thomistic idea of beatific vision which he sees as an inadequate substitute for the idea of eternal life. Although never explicitly stated, what Balthasar is doing here is retrieving the biblical idea of an ever-living and everlasting God and the rich biblical imagery suggestive of life. His criticism is conducted on three fronts. First, he argues that the metaphor of seeing misses the point in presenting God as an object of sight for observation and so is unable to capture the depths of an experience of real encounter. Moreover, the idea of static beholding will never account for the way one experiences God as truly living. Second, the image of seeing suggests a subject-object relationship, whereas the theologically (and biblically) correct relationship is conceived in terms of participation in the divine life. As Balthasar argues, “the creature is meant ultimately to live, not over against God, but in him.”⁶⁵ Third, a biblically faithful account must not overlook the fact that eternal life is said to start on earth as a participation in the internal life of God, expressed through the idea of God’s

⁶² “God’s “abiding forever” must not be seen as a “non-time” but as a super-time that is unique to him; and this is illustrated by the fact that Christ’s time mediates between God’s time and world-time”. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 30.

⁶³ One may read Eleonore Stump’s analysis of Aquinas’s concept of eternity as confirming rather than opposing Balthasar’s view despite the fact that Aquinas employs different terms to express a similar idea. See Stump, *Aquinas*, 131-158.

⁶⁴ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 373.

⁶⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 425.

presence or indwelling in the believer or the idea that one must be born in and of God.

So what are the Balthasarian key elements of an enriched notion of eternal life? On the whole, he emphasizes the event-character of eternal life. Since the eternal life of the creature is nothing else than her participation in the inner life of the Triune God, such a life can never be a static and atemporal duration or a boring rest, given the fact that Trinitarian life itself is an “eternal event” of processions and perichoresis. Likewise, ultimate human fulfillment consists rather in what one might term in Balthasar’s wake the super-happenings of a never-failing vitality that manifests itself in fruitfulness, creativity, freedom, trust, spontaneity, surprise, gifting and even enrichment and growth. Here Balthasar is bound to use paradoxical language and statements (borrowed in most part from Adrienne von Speyr’s mystical works as well as from classical authors in the mystical tradition): “we shall be filled with astonished joy, constantly being given new and unexpected gifts through the creative freedom of others; and we for our part shall delight to invent other, new gifts and bestow them in return.”⁶⁶ He even equates eternal life with ‘eternal surprise’, maintaining that because in God there is eternal life, therefore we too shall participate in the surprise element of eternal living. Moreover there is in God not only surprise but also unparalleled fruitfulness manifested by a “kind of eternal ever-more” since “everything that lives in heaven seems to be growing.”⁶⁷ If eternal life is ultimately an everlasting super-event, what happens to the events that had taken place in our earthly life? Do they become irrelevant, are they preserved as a lasting memory or are they incorporated in eternal existence in another way? Balthasar claims that there is a fundamental continuity between one’s earthly and heavenly life and because our earthly existence is already in the present embedded in God the relationship between earthly events and eternal ones must not be simply conceived as a lasting memory, but rather as an abiding presence. Our earthly life-history will enter into heaven transformed and purified. This can be so because there is ‘reciprocity between heaven and earth’: “everything that is lived in a fragmentary and incomplete way on earth has always had its ultimate ground in heaven.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 404.

⁶⁷ This is a quotation from Adrienne von Speyr’s *Objektive Mystik*, 73. quoted in Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, volume V: *The Last Act*, 400-401.

⁶⁸ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, V, 413.

How is it possible? The background to this idea is the Balthasarian conception of creation as being situated within the immanent Trinitarian life. From this perspective there is no “outside” of God, the world is just an objectification of the extra-gift that the Father gives to the Son in the eternal act of generation. Our life-history enters into heaven in another important way. Balthasar holds that our earthly mission which comes from heaven will not disappear with death and the resurrection but enters with us into heaven, continuing to determine our eternal existence where there will be paradoxically “eternal intensification in eternal rest,” “eternal capacity for transformation,” and “eternal event,” which is nothing else after all than “the eternal life of love in God.”

Is this a more appealing account of God’s eternal blessedness and human eternal bliss in heaven than the one proposed by Aquinas? In many respects it is. If one takes life as an interpretative key to Balthasar’s eschatology, his entire vision receives unexpected profundity and plasticity; hidden connections come to the fore and implicit assumptions become clear. Eternal beatitude understood in terms of life has more continuity with what we are as living beings in the world. The narrative of the dynamism of an eternal super-event unfolding within the divine super-time of creative love is more attractive to our earthly imagination which is nurtured by our existence in time and space. Such dynamism, eventfulness and creativity are truly able to combat the threat of boredom and monotonous uniformity. Undoubtedly, Balthasar succeeds in furnishing a vision that makes a lasting impression through its poetic imagery and force. The traditional lacuna concerning the content of eternal life is filled here with many thought-provoking details imagined from a definitely original stance.

In other respects, however, one registers a certain sloppiness in Balthasar’s argumentation which is largely woven from the fabric of Adrienne von Speyr’s mystical insights. Despite the sustained effort to couch these insights in a theoretically well-substantiated form, one still has the impression that Balthasar suggests more at times than what he can clearly state and that certain statements axiomatically enter the discussion by the back door of mystical vision without following directly from the main flow of his theoretical argument. Moreover, one may wonder whether Aquinas’s account of the beatific vision does not already contain all the elements that are necessary for a dynamic view? Is it not the case that Balthasar is doing little more than pouring new wine into old wine-skins

when he argues for the possibility of freedom, change and variety in eternal blessedness? After all, Aquinas's idea of eternal contemplation is not as static as it appears on first glance. As the Hungarian neo-Thomist theologian, Antal Schütz (1880-1953) explains, one need not fear that the beatific vision would ever be boring.⁶⁹ The contemplative vision of God is not simply the satisfaction of one's curiosity but is rather a truly living encounter with truth, and one's final goal and ground. At this point, Schütz's discourse assumes poetic heights: in the contemplative eternal vision God reveals ever-new aspects of himself (not of degree, but of content as Schütz explains), so much so that the human mind constantly proceeds from depth to depth, treasure to treasure without becoming wary; it soars from wave to wave in the blessed Trinity's sea of light which rises and falls in him with the same richness, originality, surprising and awe-inspiring beauty that had opened up in the first instant of his heavenly existence.⁷⁰ Even if one surmises that Schütz's poetic account belongs to him rather than to Aquinas himself, one must admit that Aquinas's vision does hold a potential for a dynamic interpretation. All depends on what one considers as truly appealing: quiet and satisfying intellectual brooding or the excitement of ever-new surprises, rest or activity. Is it not really a matter of one's disposition or taste? Anton Ziegenaus, for example, seems to opt for a more static account of eternal blessedness where, instead of the idea of constant development, the idea of final fulfillment dominates.⁷¹ He argues that biblical imagery recalls the idea of a race that ends and where one finally receives the prize, or the idea of coming home to the Lord after much journeying.

In any case, the content of eternal blessedness will always remain open to interpretation and will never be specified with absolute certainty once and for all. One thing, however, is sure. That we are living is our most "vital" experience (in the original sense of the word). Life is our most intimate possession which determines us before anything else. As God's living creatures, the first thing we

⁶⁹ Schütz, *Dogmatika*, 715. Antal Schütz had two doctorates, one in theology and another in psychology from Külpe Laboratory in Würzburg, Germany. He constantly developed his knowledge and was a truly versatile mind.

⁷⁰ In a footnote Schütz indicates that he is making reference to Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III. c. 62.; however, he does not quote from this text. Aquinas writes: "Now, this desire will then be completely fulfilled, since reason will be at its peak strength, having been enlightened by the divine light, so that it cannot swerve away from what is right." The image of light must have inspired Schütz's poetic description.

⁷¹ Ziegenaus, *A teremtés*, 128-131.

long for is life, and, although the biblical author claims that God's love is better than life, what he intends by this is that God's love is the true condition of the fullness of life. Therefore, the strange reluctance one registers in current eschatologies to avoid a reference to life and call the state of eternal blessedness "communion with God" or our "final fulfillment" is largely misplaced. The idea of communion becomes incomprehensible, abstract and empty without a clear reference to life and in this sense Balthasar is right: one cannot dispense with the tiresome task of recuperating the theme of life to a discourse on our ultimate end in the communion of the Triune God. The key to a truly appealing eschatology will always remain the analogous concepts of earthly and eternal life.

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