**Title: Is Christian love utterly selfless? A short defence of St Thomas Aquinas's conception of self-love**

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**Abstract**

St Thomas Aquinas interprets the biblical command “Love your neighbour as yourself”, to mean that I should love myself more than my neighbour. My self-love is the model for my love of neighbour, and for Aquinas, “the model exceeds the copy”. The prioritising of self-love seems at first contrary to the call to Christian love, since the central image of Christ crucified propounds a concept of sacrificial, unselfish love. Indeed, Aquinas’s view is contrary to that of other Christian writers, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, who claims that the essence of Christian love is a kenotic self-emptying. In this article I will provide a short defence of Aquinas’s understanding of Christian love, suggesting that the relation to the self is crucial in informing how one relates to others, and implying that ‘selfless’ actions cannot be separated from some form of ‘self-love’.

**Keywords:** Aquinas, Christianity, self-love, theology, neighbour

**Main article**

‘Love yourself’ is a mantra often uttered in our present culture, referring to self-care, boosting one’s confidence, and self-acceptance. Yet self-love is seen by some as a moral vice – as nothing but self-centredness. The Christian conception of love is rooted in God, who is Love itself (1 John 4:8). Christian love is not self-centred but sees Christ’s act of loving sacrifice on the Cross as a model to imitate. However, the Christian command to “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:31; Matthew 22:39) implies that some sort of self-love is involved in the love that Christians are called to. Medieval theologian St Thomas Aquinas suggests that self-love is necessary to love your neighbour, raising the question of whether Christian love is truly selfless, and suggesting the importance of the relation to the self in how one relates to others.

In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas asks “Whether out of charity, man ought to love himself more than his neighbour?”.[[1]](#endnote-1) Referring to the biblical command to “Love your neighbour as yourself”, Aquinas asserts that love of self is the model for love of neighbour. Since “the model exceeds the copy”, as a Christian I should love myself more than my neighbour.

For those seeking the rationale rather than the moral maxim in isolation, two things must be understood: the foundation of love, and the ‘order of charity’. For Aquinas, charity (synonymous with love in this context) has an inner unity, meaning that even if it is directed at different objects (e.g. God or neighbour), it is still the same virtue. This is because the sole basis and end of charity is the “goodness of God”.[[2]](#endnote-2) Unity is therefore important for Aquinas in determining how one is to love, since the basis of love is a unity. He claims that what is closer to me in unity is what I should love the most. This is where charity can be “secondarily” divided into different acts of love in the ‘order of charity’ – love of God, self, and neighbour.[[3]](#endnote-3) First, Aquinas claims that I should love God more than myself and my neighbour because I have a closer unity with God than I do with myself. My unity with myself derives its existence from my participation in God – it could not exist alone.[[4]](#endnote-4) Since unity is the basis of love, and I am most closely united to God, I should love God more than myself or my neighbour. After God, I should love myself more than my neighbour, because I am closer to myself (by unity – I am one with myself) than I am to my neighbour (by union – I am united to them).[[5]](#endnote-5) Hence the varying levels of unity I have with God, myself, and my neighbour determine the order in which I love. This ‘order of charity’ explains why self-love is the model for love of neighbour: since my unity with myself is better known to me, it is more apt a model to love others.

This notion that I should love myself more than my neighbour is rebuked by some Christian writers. Indeed, on the surface it is easy to misunderstand Aquinas’s words, seeing them as supporting self-centredness and egoism. Lutheran philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, writing in the nineteenth century, does not see self-love as exceeding neighbour-love,[[6]](#endnote-6) and is wary even of preferential love (loving one person more than another) as a form of selfishness.[[7]](#endnote-7) Furthermore, twentieth century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar sees Christian love as a kenosis (self-emptying), manifested most truly in Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. It is “precisely in – and *only* in – the kenosis of Christ, the *inner* mystery of God’s love comes to light”.[[8]](#endnote-8) Balthasar opposes “true love” with egoism and self-love.[[9]](#endnote-9)

However, Aquinas is endorsing neither egoism nor self-centredness. True self-love is not putting my material needs before those of my neighbour. Drawing on the writings of St Paul (2 Corinthians 4), Aquinas claims that true self-love is prioritising the “inward man” (what is rational) over the “outward man” (what is corporeal).[[10]](#endnote-10) When I prioritise my bodily desires over my rational desires, or over the needs of others, I am not loving myself. Therefore, there is only a conflict between “true love”, as Balthasar would claim, and “self-love”, if the latter is really a corruption of self-love, in which my outward self is prioritised.[[11]](#endnote-11) Aquinas is clear that I should love my neighbour more than my own body. Therefore, I should be willing to sacrifice my material needs and even my earthly life for my neighbour. This is no egoistic ethic. Nevertheless, my self-love, prioritising my inward self, means that I must prefer my own *spiritual* good even to my neighbour’s spiritual good. For example, if there were some situation where my committing a sin would prevent my neighbour from doing so, I must not do it. In the order of charity, I must love God first. To sin is not to love God, so sinning for the sake of my neighbour would violate this order of charity. Moreover, as stated previously, love has an inner unity. Aquinas writes that it is “the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbour”.[[12]](#endnote-12) I love my neighbour “that he may be in God”. Therefore, to sacrifice my spiritual needs for my neighbour would not be loving my neighbour, because true neighbour-love involves love of God, which such an action would lack.

The modern moral theologian Eberhard Schockenhoff posits that Aquinas’s understanding of the biblical command to love your neighbour as yourself overcomes the “opposition” of egoism and altruism.[[13]](#endnote-13) It acknowledges the closeness of my relation to myself, which is to be used as a model for loving others. For Aquinas, loving my neighbour can never be without self-love, but it can be and should be completely unselfish. In a Christian worldview where it is good for me to love others, and where I must love my neighbour *as* myself, perhaps a truly selfless act is a misconception of what it means to love.

A painting of a person with a bird flying

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Figure: (Antoni Viladomat, St. Thomas Aquinas, first half 18th century. Oil on canvas, Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.)

**Bibliography**

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[3] Eberhard Schockenhoff, ‘The Theological Virtue of Charity (IIa IIae, qq. 23-46)’, trans. by G. Kaplan and F. G. Lawrence, in The Ethics of Aquinas, ed. by Stephen Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), pp.244-258, (p.252).

[4] Andrew J. Hayes, review of Anthony Flood, The Metaphysical Foundations of Love: Aquinas on Participation, Unity, and Union (2018), The Review of Metaphysics, 73 (2019), 366.

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[7] Kierkegaard, Section IIB, p.53.

[8] Hans Urs von Balthasar, Love Alone is Credible, trans. by D. C. Schindler (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), p.87.

[9] Robert Miner, ‘Thomas Aquinas and Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Dialogue on Love and Charity’, New Blackfriars, 95 (2014), 504–524, (p.515).

[10] Aquinas, II-II, q.25, a.7.

[11] Miner, p.521.

[12] Aquinas, II-II, q.25, a.1.

[13] Schockenhoff, p.254.

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