

# Communal Knowledge and the Beatific Vision

JOSHUA COCKAYNE

*University of St Andrews*

[jlc22@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:jlc22@st-andrews.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** In this paper, I will consider what role, if any, our communion with the saints plays in our knowledge and communion with God. By considering recent work on the epistemology of personal knowledge and epistemology of religious ritual, I argue that our communion with the saints in some way enhances our knowledge of God. This conclusion has implications for our understanding of the beatific vision. According to Thomas Aquinas, those who are saved will receive a vision of the divine essence and thereby come to perfect knowledge of God. In attaining this perfect knowledge, Aquinas maintains, a human being will be perfectly happy. Thus, on Aquinas's picture of the doctrine, communion with the saints is not necessary for perfect happiness or perfect knowledge of God. I suggest that there are two solutions to this problem. First, following Christopher Brown, we must say that whilst perfect happiness cannot be improved upon it can be somehow more extensive. Or, secondly, we must say that, in some sense, the beatific vision is communal in nature. Whilst God remains the object and source of perfect happiness on such an account, our vision of God is a shared vision.

**Keywords:** Beatific vision, Communion with the saints, Aquinas, Epistemology.

## Introduction

We find the clearest articulation of the doctrine of the beatific vision in Scripture in 1 Corinthians 13, in which Paul writes that, 'now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). Paul contends that we only have partial knowledge of God in this life, due to our imperfect perception of God, but yet, in the life to come, we will *see God face to face* and thereby come to know *fully*.

To consider what role our communion with other people might play in our communion with God and what implications this has for understanding of the beatific vision, I first consider a more general question: What is it to know a person fully? By drawing on recent work by Eleonore Stump (2010) and Bonnie M. Talbert (2015), I give an analysis of personal knowledge. A minimal condition for knowing someone personally, I argue, is that we are acquainted with that person, that is, we *see them face to face*. According to Stump's work, the kind of knowledge that one

gains in face to face interactions is a kind of non-propositional and second-personal knowledge.

Stump's discussion of personal knowledge points towards a way of understanding the doctrine of the beatific vision. As Thomas Aquinas describes this doctrine, '[f]inal and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence...for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which alone man's happiness consists' (*ST*, I-II:2:8).<sup>1</sup> By discussing David Worsley's (2016) recent work on this doctrine, I show how a vision of God might allow us to know God. On Worsley's account, at the beatific vision, a person is acquainted with God's goodness and God's essence, giving them non-propositional, second-personal knowledge of God.

However, on Aquinas's account of the beatific vision, there is seemingly no role for a person's relationship with other people. On Aquinas's view of the afterlife, all that is necessary is that our souls behold the essence of God. And thus, our communion with the saints is not necessary for eternal happiness. As I will argue, this position seems strange given the New Testament emphasis on community, even in the life to come. Moreover, Aquinas himself wishes to stress the importance of the communal aspect of the Christian afterlife. For instance, he contends that friends add 'well-being to happiness' (*ST*, I-II, 4, viii).

Adding to this worry, I suggest that there are independent reasons for thinking that the communion with the saints somehow contributes to our knowledge of God in the life to come. To show why, I return to the earlier analysis of knowing a person well. As Talbert has argued, there is an importantly practical dimension to our knowledge of persons, and this has been explored in the context of religious worship in recent work by Terence Cuneo (2016). Cuneo suggests that it is possible to gain a kind of practical interpersonal knowledge of God through the practices of the Church. Yet, as I draw attention to, the kind of practical knowledge which we gain through the practices of the Church depends on our relationship with our fellow worshippers in the community of the Church. As many theologians have argued, in this life, gaining practical knowledge of how to engage God is importantly corporate. So, I argue, our practical knowledge of God depends importantly on our relationship to the Church.

I then suggest that this practical dimension to our knowledge of God continues into the next life. There are good theological reasons to suppose that we will worship as a Church triumphant in the life to come. Whilst our happiness does not become more perfect through the practical knowledge of the Church, our corporate engagement with God allows us to have a more extensive knowledge of God. Just as

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst not all traditions in the Christian Church affirm the doctrine of the Beatific Vision, or at least not in the precise terms that Aquinas uses, the idea that Christian believers have imperfect knowledge of God in this life and, yet will come to perfect knowledge of God in the next life, seems uncontroversial.

our human relationships flourish in different social environments, our relationship with God is enhanced and improved by our communion with the saints.

Thus, the puzzle remains for Aquinas's account: how can friends add well-being to happiness? To answer this question, I first appeal to Christopher Brown's (2009) analysis of Aquinas's account of friendship in heaven. According to Brown, whilst friends are not strictly necessary for our perfect happiness, they allow for a kind of supremely perfect happiness. That is, whilst a person's desires and aims are satisfied in their vision of God at the beatific vision, through their relationship with the resurrected Church, a person's happiness is somehow more extensive. According to Brown, the best model to explain what our friendship with others adds to our happiness, is the Church in this life—although God is rightly the object and focus of our worship, something is gained through worshipping in community (Brown 2009, 239–40). However, it might be argued, Brown's solution is really only a pseudo-solution, based on a redefining of the word 'perfect'.

Finally, I suggest, diverging from Aquinas, that if we reject Brown's proposal, then we might suppose that the beatific vision is somehow a shared vision. According to this second solution, rather than supposing our knowledge of God becomes more extensive after the beatific vision, we should hold that the vision itself is shared. Thus, God is properly regarded as the object and source of perfect happiness, but our experience of God is one which also involves being aware of the common awareness of all the other saints in glory.

### **Knowledge of persons**

To understand the relationship between a person's knowledge of God and her final vision of the divine essence, let us consider more generally what is involved in knowing someone personally.

Eleonore Stump (2010) considers the question of what it is to know someone personally in *Wandering in Darkness*. She begins by noting that although analytic epistemology focuses almost entirely on propositional knowledge, there is a certain kind of knowledge which does not appear to be reducible to propositions. For instance, she gives the example of the kind of phenomenal acquaintance knowledge of what red is like—something which no amount of propositional enquiry will allow a subject to know. The only way of knowing what red is like, according to Stump, is by seeing red objects. This is very similar to the kind of knowledge involved in knowing a person, she thinks. Stump argues that whilst we can know all about a person by learning propositions about her, knowing a person requires acquaintance with that person (2010, 53). More specifically, she argues, a minimal condition for knowing someone personally is that I have a 'second-person experience' (Stump 2010, 75) of that person. Stump gives the following conditions for such an experience:

- (1) Paula is aware of Jerome as a person (call the relation Paula has to Jerome in this condition 'personal interaction')

- (2) Paula's personal interaction with Jerome is of a direct and immediate sort,  
and
- (3) Jerome is conscious. (Stump 2010, 75–76)

Very minimally, then, to know someone personally to have a second–person experience of them. This condition seems intuitively to be correct. We can see this intuition at work in the phrase 'I know of him, but I don't *know* him'. Or, to put this in Stump's terms—'I know plenty of propositions about him, but I've never met him, that is, I've never had a second–person experience of him'.

Note personal knowledge appears to come in degrees. For instance, it makes sense to say, 'I know Paul better than Steve', or 'I know Paul well, but I could know him better'. Whilst such expressions are easy to grasp, they are less easy to analyse; it is not entirely clear just what it means to know a person well or better than another person. Now, whilst the kind of acquaintance knowledge which Stump describes is clearly important for knowing a person, being acquainted with a person and knowing a person well are clearly different. My acquaintance with a stranger on the bus allows me to gain some kind of knowledge of that person, but in order to know that person *well* or *closely*, something else is needed. That is, acquaintance knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for knowing a person well. Let us examine what else is needed for knowing someone well.

Bonnie M. Talbert (2015) describes the difference in degrees of personal knowledge by noting that '[w]e are typically said to know people in a weak sense simply by virtue of having meeting them...at the end of the spectrum, knowing someone in the stronger sense—knowing him/her well—involves a good deal more' (Talbert 2015, 194). Talbert argues that knowing someone well is 'normally the product of a sequence of interactions' (Talbert 2015, 194) of which the following are minimal requirements:

- (1) We have had a significant number of second person face–to–face interactions with A, at least some of which have been relatively recent.
- (2) The contexts of those interactions were such as to permit A to reveal important aspects of her/himself, and A has done so.
- (3) A has not deceived us about him/herself in important respects.
- (4) We have succeeded in accurately perceiving what A has revealed – i.e. S is not 'blinded' by his/her own biases or other impairments. (Talbert 2015, 194)

We will return to Talbert's analysis in due course. First, let us consider the role of the beatific vision in giving us acquaintance knowledge of God.

### **The beatific vision and human happiness.**

According to Aquinas, in the life to come, we will come to a perfected knowledge of God through a kind of beatific vision of God's goodness. In the *Summa Theologiae*, he writes that,

Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence...for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which alone man's happiness consists, as stated above (*ST*, I-II:2:8).

On Aquinas's account of human happiness, it is only by seeing the divine essence at the beatific vision that a person can be happy. Aquinas derives this conclusion from the nature of human happiness; all human action, according to Aquinas, aims at some good—the acquisition of wealth or the cultivation of virtue, instance. Now, for Aquinas, there must be an ultimate good which human action is aiming towards, a good which is good only for its own sake. As Christopher Brown notes, for Aquinas, the ultimate good for human beings 'is something such that all by itself it entirely satisfies one's desire' (Brown 2009, 227). Furthermore, Aquinas thinks, the only plausible candidate for the kind of good which can satisfy all human desire is an infinite, universal good (Brown 2009, 220). Thus, Brown notes,

intellectual creatures can conceive—at least abstractly—the notion of *knowing it all*, and in turn, *having every conceivable and realistic good*. So the human good cannot consist in *this* particular good—*unless* this particular good can provide every conceivable and realistic good—since although such a good might be very satisfying, it will not leave us at rest but in the state of still desiring something else. The universal good is not to be found in any creature...since any creature is simply a certain finite participation of the universal good...Therefore, no created good can be that in which happiness consists...For Aquinas...God is the perfect good, the universal good, goodness in itself, infinite goodness. All finite goods are, as it were, certain images, reflections, or participations of the absolutely perfect goodness which is God (Brown 2009, 229–230).

And therefore, for Aquinas, the only thing which is strictly necessary for human happiness is God. The fulfilment of perfect happiness is something which can only occur when a person comes to know God fully in the vision of the divine essence.

Let us see how Aquinas's account of the beatific vision aligns with the discussion of personal knowledge in the previous section. David Worsley (2016), in applying Stump's analysis, has argued that at the beatific vision when an individual sees God face to face, she gains a kind of non-propositional acquaintance knowledge of God. Worsley argues for this point by considering the kind of knowledge which Lucifer lacked prior to his fall. Worsley considers this example to try and distinguish Lucifer, who rejected God despite seemingly knowing God relatively well from the saints in

glory who will never reject God in paradise due to their knowing God *fully*. The difference, he contends, is due to the knowledge gained by the saints at the Beatific Vision. According to Worsley, 'Lucifer, prior to his decision, had all relevant [propositional] knowledge; however...Lucifer lacked at least some relevant [non-propositional] knowledge...I can think of only one suitable candidate for a kind of [non-propositional] knowledge that Lucifer could not have had, namely, the kind of perpetual and everlasting knowledge of God, God's love and God's goodness that members of the Trinity share with each other' (Worsley 2016, 95). Worsley argues that this non-propositional acquaintance with God and God's goodness which is shared by the members of the Trinity is the best candidate for the kind of knowledge which the saints acquire at the beatific vision (Worsley 2016, 97–98).

Thus, Worsley contends, in seeing God face to face, a person becomes acquainted with God's essence and his goodness in a way which integrates her will and perfects her happiness. We can also see that this kind of acquaintance knowledge of God allows for a person to come to know God *fully*, whereas previously, she could only know *in part*. I think we can reasonably assume that at the beatific vision, in beholding God's essence, a person would meet Talbert's criteria for knowing a person well. First, she would have had a 'significant number of second face-to-face interactions' (Talbert 2015, 194) with God in coming face to face with him at the beatific vision. Secondly, if Worsley is right in thinking that the beatific vision is specifically a kind of acquaintance with God's goodness, we can also assume that, she has not been deceived by God in her experience. Thirdly, the beatific vision also seems to meet Talbert's success criteria, if a person comes to perfect happiness and internal integration at the vision, then we can also assume that she would not be 'blinded' by 'his/her own biases or other impairments' (Talbert 2015, 194).

And therefore, it seems that at the beatific vision, a person comes to know God well, or to use Paul's term, 'fully'. Yet, even if this account of knowing God at the beatific vision is plausible, it arguably paints a picture of the Christian afterlife which is not in keeping with Scripture. In particular, as we will see in the next section, on such an account, there is seemingly no role for the community of saints to play in our perfect happiness and knowledge of God.

### **Community and union with God**

On Aquinas's account of the beatific vision, an acquaintance with God's goodness is both necessary and sufficient for human happiness. The implication of this position, however, is that if only God is necessary for human happiness, then the community of the Church is not necessary for human happiness. Thus, Aquinas writes that '[i]f...we speak of perfect happiness in our heavenly home, then companionship with other human beings is not strictly necessary, since a man is wholly and completely fulfilled in God' (*ST*, I-II, 4, viii). Although, as we will go on to see, Aquinas does

think that the community of the Church is important for our existence in the life to come, it is not necessary for human happiness at the beatific vision.<sup>2</sup>

Problematically, this view of the afterlife seems far from the New Testament depictions of the life to come in which the community of the Church is resurrected and united with Christ in glory. Contrary to how it is sometimes supposed, the narrative of Christian Scripture is not merely one of personal salvation and personal relationship with God. The picture of creation and redemption which Scripture presents throughout is one in which God rescues his people from the slavery of sin and in which the Church is united with Christ. Consider the description of God's final New Creation in the book of Revelation, for instance:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Revelation 21:1-2).

Just as it is true that the Church, in this life, is made up of many individuals who constitute a larger group, the Bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem will be made up of the saints in glory. Yet, the picture which is painted in Scripture is one in which the people are united with Christ and not merely individual souls.<sup>3</sup> As the Apostle's Creed puts it, 'I believe in the holy catholic church: the communion of saints'.

Now, although the account of the afterlife presented in the *Summa* (at least as I have interpreted it so far) may seem to be very different to the traditional Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, as Christina Van Dyke notes, just as the communion of saints is not necessary for human happiness, neither too are our bodies necessary. Van Dyke explains that, for Aquinas, '[i]n the life to come, our bodies will no longer be directed towards their original activity (namely, gathering information necessary for cognition). God will have replaced the body's role in our intellectual functioning' (Van Dyke 2015, 282-3). And, thus, she continues: "The body's main function apart from assisting in cognition is to help us participate in the active life. But, as we've seen, Aquinas holds that the only activity that persists beyond this life is contemplation... Ultimately, Aquinas's account of the beatific vision appears to render our bodies nothing more than glorious hood ornaments" (Van Dyke 2015, 290).

<sup>3</sup> Not only this, but the ultimate hope of Christian salvation, at least as it is presented in the New Testament, is primarily one of bodily resurrection and not disembodied union with God. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

picture, Aquinas is clearly aware of the theological importance of the Church in the life to come. For instance, elsewhere he writes,

We must observe that the Church is Catholic or universal...in point of time. For there have been those who said that the Church was to last until a certain time; but this is false, since this Church began from the time of Abel and will endure to the end of the world: *Behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world* (Matthew 28:10), and after the end of the world it will continue in Heaven (Exposition of the Apostle's Creed, 9<sup>th</sup> article, p 78–79).

Later, in the same text Aquinas continues,

The pleasant companionship of all the blessed, a companionship this is replete with delight: since each one will possess all good things together with the blessed, for they will all love one another as themselves, and therefore, will rejoice in the happiness of others' goods as their own, and consequently the joy and gladness of one will be as great as the joy of all: *the dwelling in thee is as it were of all rejoicing* (Psalm 86:7) (ibid., 88).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, whilst community with the Church is clearly not *necessary* for the beatific vision and the perfection of human happiness, Aquinas does seem to recognise its importance. Indeed, in the *Summa*, immediately after stressing that community is not necessary for perfect happiness, Aquinas continues by noting that 'friends add a well-being to happiness' (*ST*, I-II, 4, viii). However, this is a phrase which is not transparent. How can perfect happiness be improved upon?

### Personal knowledge and practice

To answer the above question, first, let us return to our account of personal knowledge. Talbert's four criteria for knowing a person well are supposed to function as '*prima facie* evidence for a claim to know A well' (Talbert 2015, 196). However, she continues, these conditions do not yet explain the nature of personal knowledge. In order to do this, she thinks, 'we must examine the contents of various sorts of intentional states over time' (Talbert 2015, 196). Talbert claims that personal knowledge is grounded by different kinds of knowledge—we must know about a person (that is, have propositional knowledge about them), we must have acquaintance knowledge (i.e. the kind of knowledge I referred to above as 'second-personal knowledge'), and she must have a kind of practical knowledge how to engage with that person (Talbert 2015, 196–97).

Here, I am going to pay particular attention to the role of practical knowledge in knowing someone personally as I think that this has interesting applications for our

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<sup>4</sup> We see this idea that embodiment and communion with others will enhance our vision of God in Dante's *Paradiso*, Canto 14, lines 25-84.



understanding of the communion of the saints and can allow us to expand Brown's suggestion in more detail. Let us consider Talbert's discussion of practical interpersonal knowledge. She writes that

to know another is to know how to interact with him/her over time. Knowing how to interact with a particular person starts with the largely ineffable ability to recognize him/her, which recognition comes to be associated with a more complex mental representation of that individual.

Our interactive skills are largely intuitive and difficult to express in propositional terms. For example, when I am talking to Shannon, I find that I pace remarks differently than I do when I am talking to Deme. Without thinking about it I seem to adjust the pace of my conversation to what I somehow perceive is most suitable to the interaction. When I am talking to Erin, who is five, I enunciate my words more clearly and in a different tone of voice than I use with adults. And I listen to her differently as well, using my background knowledge of her daily life to follow her train of thought as she jumps from topic to topic without the explanatory transitions that characterize adult speech...To some extent the mental state detectors function generally – e.g., we recognize the facial expression of surprise in complete strangers. But as we come to know a person better we fine-tune them in ways that allow us to gain more information faster about what s/he is thinking and feeling, to avoid conflicts and confusion, and to facilitate various cooperative endeavours. This seems to happen via unconscious pattern recognitions that create expectations in interactions with specific others (Talbert 2015, 197).

As Talbert notes, the kinds of practical knowledge involved in knowing a person well are complex (Talbert 2015, 197), and personal knowledge is an area which epistemologists have generally ignored. Yet, the kinds of abilities which Talbert refers to seem to be vital aspects of knowing a person well.<sup>5</sup> Note, that unlike the four criteria which Talbert lists as giving *prima facie* evidence for knowing a person well, she does not specify just how the different kinds of knowing (propositional, acquaintance and practical) relate to knowing a person well. Assumedly, the reason

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<sup>5</sup> Some might worry, however, that the kind of knowledge which Talbert describes here is not really distinct from propositional knowledge. Intellectualism is the thesis that all knowledge is reducible to propositional knowledge. If intellectualism is true, then all personal knowledge is a species of propositional knowledge. Whilst the truth of intellectualism is an issue which philosophers have debated in some detail, we can avoid committing to too strong a position by noting that even if know-how is reducible to knowledge-that, even the intellectualist recognizes some difference between know-how and know-that. For instance, the intellectualist will typically describe gaining know-how as an example coming to know a proposition in a 'practical mode of presentation' (Stanley and Williamson 2001, 427) or 'practical way of thinking' (Stanley 2011, 130). Even this very thin notion of knowing-how, however, is compatible with the account of personal knowledge described above. The individual improves her epistemic state by learning how to ride a bike, for example, in the practical way, i.e. by getting on a bike and pedalling it, even if she already knew all of the propositions involved (from reading a manual, for example). Given this, gaining a new perspective or a new mode of understanding for a proposition one already knows is still to improve one's epistemic state and so there is still some relevant difference between know-how and know-that.

for this is that whilst different kinds of knowledge are important in knowing someone personally, it is very difficult to specify precisely how much of each kind of knowledge one needs. Personal knowledge appears to resist such a careful analysis.

Similarly, it might be difficult to see just what is involved in knowing God well, yet, as we will see, the practical aspect of knowing a person is helpful in giving an analysis of how the communion of saints could expand our perfect happiness and knowledge of God.

### **Practical knowledge of God**

Continuing the thought that practical knowledge is important for knowing a person, Terence Cuneo (2016) has suggested that knowing God personally requires knowing–how to engage with God. He writes that,

The central aim of the Christian life is not to theorize about God but to know God...When I speak of knowing God, I have in mind a considerably broader notion of knowing than that employed by most epistemologists, who tend to think of knowledge as a species of knowing that or having acquaintance with an object. The sense of knowing that I have in mind is not easy to articulate, but it is probably best described as *being in rapport* with someone. When one is in rapport with another, one does not simply enjoy some sort of privileged epistemic contact with that person. One also knows how to engage that person, and, often, what that person cares about. In this respect, the concept of knowing with which I am working belongs more nearly to a cluster of virtue theoretic notions according to which knowing someone is not only a mode of understanding but also an achievement, typically accomplished only with time, familiarity, effort, and discernment (Cuneo 2016, 148–49).

According to Cuneo, this observation concerning the epistemology of personal knowing should also inform our religious epistemology too. If God is a person, then knowing God cannot be a matter of knowing certain facts about God, but it must also include knowing how to engage God in certain ways.<sup>6</sup> Cuneo's analysis of ritual knowledge allows us to see how the practices of the Church allow a person to grow in our knowledge of God. He writes that,

[L]iturgy makes available act–types of a certain range such as chanting, kissing, prostrating, and eating that count in the context of a liturgical performance as cases of

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<sup>6</sup> As Dru Johnson (2016) argues, ritual practice is essential component of coming to know God as it is described in the Hebrew Scriptures. These practices are not intended simply to teach the Israelites about God, according to Johnson, but rather, they allow a person to gain a certain kind of practical knowledge which allows them to see the world in a certain way (2016, 5). The account of knowledge which is presented in Scripture, according to Johnson 'is a process of discovery led by God himself' (Johnson 2013, 25). The model Johnson thinks is best fitted to explain the epistemology of Scripture is one in which a human being is taught to see the world in a certain way through repeated practice and ritual (Johnson 2013, 23).

blessing, petitioning, and thanking God...If this is correct, the liturgy provides the materials for not only engaging but also knowing how to engage God. Or more, precisely: the liturgy provides the materials by which a person can acquire such knowledge and a context in which she can exercise or enact it....to the extent that one grasps and sufficiently understands these ways of acting, one knows how to bless, petition, and thank God in their ritualized forms. One has ritual knowledge (Cuneo 2014, 383).

For Cuneo, it is not the case that liturgical action merely accompanies the act of blessing God, but rather, if done correctly, a person can learn to bless God just by performing a certain action correctly. Thus, just as in any other personal relationship, knowing-how to engage God is vital to knowing God.

Moreover, the kind of practical knowledge Cuneo has in mind here appears to be importantly corporate in nature. Even the cases of our personal knowledge more generally, however, our experience and engagement with other persons is importantly social. For, instance, in his discussion of friendship, C.S. Lewis observes that,

if, of three friends (A, B, and C), A should die, then B loses not only A but 'A's part in C', while C loses not only A but 'A's part in B', while C loses not only A but 'A's part in B'. In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him 'to myself' now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves (Lewis 1960, 73-74).

If Lewis's observation can be applied more generally to our epistemology of knowing persons, the lesson would be that much of our practical knowledge of how to engage other persons, as well as our phenomenal knowledge of what other persons are like is dependent on the context our experience. Even with friends whom we have known for many decades, there are aspects of their character which surprise us when seen in company of others. If knowing a person depends on knowing what they are like and knowing how to engage them, then it must take into account how social environments change that individual.

This observation can be extended to our engagement with God. Indeed, given that much of our interaction with God is in the context of corporate worship, our practical knowledge of God and our knowledge of what God is like will be changed depending on those who we worship alongside. As I've suggested elsewhere (with David Efird (forthcoming.)), in worshipping God alongside others, we make it possible for our fellow worshippers to shape our engagement with God through liturgy. First, others can shape the content of our engagement with God. Those familiar with attending Church with young infants will attest to the distraction that others can be to one's worship of God. However, there is also the possibility that

being others will influence the content of our worship in positive ways too. Individuals from different traditions or stages of life will bring home different aspects of God's character and require from us different practical ways of engaging with God. Secondly, the presence of others can also direct our attention towards God in various ways, that is, our fellow congregants can have a causal role in what we attend to during worship, as well as shaping the content of our experience. For example, by noticing a person's posture, or the intonation of their prayers, we might direct our attention to an aspect of God's character which we were previously unaware of. Just as other people can redirect our perception of the world by pointing to different features of our environment, corporate worship makes possible a certain kind of other guided perception of God.

Along with this social dimension of personal knowledge, there is arguably something different and unique about our engagement with God. Our knowledge of God is dependent on our engagement with others in way that our personal knowledge more generally is not. The reason for this is that the Church is the primary means of engaging with and knowing God. As Nicholas Wolterstorff puts this point, 'The church blesses God, praises God, thanks God, confesses her sins to God, petitions God, listens to God's Word, celebrates the Eucharist. It's not the individual members who do these things simultaneously; it's the assembled body that does these things' (Wolterstorff 2015, 11). In learning how to engage God through liturgy, one gains practical knowledge by engaging in group actions. As I have argued in detail elsewhere (Cockayne, forthcoming.), the actions involved in liturgical worship should not be considered merely as a collective of individual actions, but rather as a group action which is constituted by many individuals.<sup>7</sup> An example from music should suffice to make the point here. Plausibly, the actions that are involved in learning how to play a solo piece for the violin are different in kind to those involved in learning how to play in an Orchestra. Consider an example from John Searle to explain the difference between these two actions:

Imagine a group of people are sitting on the grass in various places in a park. Imagine that it suddenly starts to rain and they all get up and run to a common, centrally located shelter. Each person has the intention expressed by the sentence 'I am running to the shelter.' But for each person, we may suppose that his or her intention is entirely independent of the intentions and behaviours of others....Now imagine a case where a group of people in a park converge on a common point as a piece of collective behaviour. Imagine that they are part of an outdoor ballet where the choreography calls for the entire corps de ballet to converge on a common point.

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<sup>7</sup> As I argue in detail, the analysis of group action which is appropriate for explaining group liturgical action will depend on the specific case we are considering. As Deborah Tollefsen argues, '[w]hen two people take a walk together they are engaged in a form of shared-agency, but in doing so they do not form a unified agent to which we attribute beliefs, goals, and intentions' (Tollefsen 2015, 5). I suggest that both accounts of shared-agency (such as the one outlined from Searle below) and group-agency (such as the one Tollefsen defends) can explain different features of what it is for the Church to act together in worship.

We can even imagine that the external bodily movements are indistinguishable in the two cases; the people running for shelter make the same types of bodily movements as the ballet dancers. Externally observed, the two cases are indistinguishable, but they are clearly different internally. What exactly is the difference? Well, part of the difference is that the form of the intentionality in the first case is that each person has an intention that he could express without reference to the others, even in case where each has mutual knowledge of the intentions of the others. But in the second case the individual “I intend”s are, in a way we will need to explain, derivative from the “we intend” (Searle 1990, 92).<sup>8</sup>

Although there is a vast literature on precisely what the difference is between these two cases, it seems almost unanimous in the literature that there is a difference between group actions and individual actions. For our purposes here, all we need to note is that if this is indeed the case, then the clear majority of the knowledge—how which is gained by engaging in the rituals of the Church is dependent on others in the Church.<sup>9</sup> Let us return to the musical example to see this difference. Suppose a person is stranded on a desert island with a violin and many famous orchestral scores. She comes to know how to play the violin whilst stranded on the desert island, and indeed, she learns how to play many orchestral violin parts. Now, when the stranded musician is rescued and comes to play in an orchestra for the first time, does she learn something new? If Searle (amongst others in this literature) is correct, then the musician is performing a different kind of action when she plays in the orchestra and thus, she gains a different kind of knowledge. Yet, unlike the knowledge she gained whilst alone the desert island, her knowledge of how to play in an orchestra is dependent on the other members of the orchestra. As S. Orestis Palermos and Deborah P. Tollefsen (forthcoming) argue, group-know-how does not appear to always be straightforwardly reducible to individual know-how. As they suggest, analysing group-know-how in merely additive terms leads us to the counter-intuitive consequences. For instance, in the case of the Corvette car production line, such a reduction would imply that,

no one knows-how to make a Corvette. Each individual in the company knows their own domain but no person knows-how to do all the various things that comprise making the Corvette...Corvettes are made but apparently no one knows-how to make them (Palermos and Tollefsen forthcoming, 6).

Yet, such a conclusion seems strange—we attribute know-how to groups all the time, car manufacturers win awards for their cars, orchestras receive praise for the way they perform symphonies, and corporations receive criticism for how they operate ethically. As Palermos and Tollefsen go on to suggest, many examples of group

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<sup>8</sup> In Cockayne (forthcoming) I consider the application of the collective intentionality literature to the case of liturgical action.

<sup>9</sup> For Cuneo, Searle’s analysis helps to explain how it is that we are able to take part in group liturgical actions, such as singing, for instance (Cuneo 2016, 126-144).

action are too complex to analyse in reductive terms, and they argue that, instead, we should regard know-how as emerging from complex group interaction in a non-reductive way (Palermos and Tollefsen forthcoming, 26–27). We can see this point straightforwardly, without having to examine the details of Palermos and Tollefsen's arguments, however. Even if we are reductive about the nature of group-know-how, it seems intuitively correct to say that the violin player in the orchestra does not know-how to perform the symphony, but rather, she knows-how to play her *part* in the symphony. Only the orchestra knows-how to perform the symphony (regardless of how we analyse what this means).

Now, this observation seems to have some relevance for the kind of know-how we can gain from liturgy. In participating in communal acts of worship, a person gains certain kinds of know-how relating to God. Yet, this knowledge is not gained in isolation. Indeed, just like the orchestral musician, the practical knowledge which is gained in liturgical worship is importantly dependent on the other worshipper present. This idea finds some purchase in theological writings concerning the nature of worship. Evelyn Underhill, for instance, writes that

[t]he worshipping life of the Christian whilst profoundly personal, is essentially that of a person who is also a member of a group...The Christian as such cannot fulfil his spiritual obligations in solitude. He forms part of a social and spiritual complex with a new relation to God; an organism which is quickened and united by that Spirit of supernatural charity which sanctifies the human race from above, and is required to incarnate something of this supernatural charity in the visible world. Therefore even his most lonely contemplations are not merely private matter; but always to be regarded in their relation to the purpose and action of God Who incites them, and to the total life of the Church (Underhill 1936, 83).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> We also find this idea that our worship is composed of many parts which constitute a bigger whole in Scripture. For instance, Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:1-26).

If we wish to give a non-reductive account of the actions involved in worshipping God in the Church, then it looks as if there are certain aspects of knowing God practically which depend on our relationship to the Church.

The pertinent question, at this point, is whether the communal nature of knowing God is a feature only of this life, or whether it is an important part of knowing God more generally. Given the way in which the Church's relationship with God is presented in Scripture, it would be strange if this were a feature of relating to God which were unique to this life. As Underhill notes, the corporate nature of worship extends beyond this life into the next. She writes that,

in the Apocalyptic vision, the worship is genuinely congregational: an opportunity for the whole Body, sinking differences of understanding and feeling, to join Angels and Archangels, saints and elders, and all the creatures of the earth and sea in praising and glorifying the Holy Name (Underhill 1936, 98).

A distinction is often made between the Church militant, constituted by those who still worship God on earth, and the Church triumphant, who worship God in heaven in its perfected state.<sup>11</sup> As we saw previously, Scripture describes the Church triumphant engaging in the worship of God in the new creation (Revelation 19:6–7, 7:11–16). Underhill suggests here that it is the Church triumphant, as a congregation, which receives the beatific vision and worships God in the New Creation.

As we have seen, this way of thinking about the continuation of the Church in the life to come also seems to be in keeping with how Aquinas thought about the communion of saints. However, it remains to be seen how such a picture could be consistent with Aquinas's account of happiness. It is to this issue I turn in the final section.

### **Supremely perfect happiness and the communal vision of God**

Given the account of communal knowledge presented in the previous sections, it appears that a complete knowledge of God must in some way involve the Communion of the Saints and particularly our practical knowledge of engaging God in community. Yet, this seems to put tension on the claim that only God is necessary for perfect happiness. In this section, I consider Brown's interpretation of Aquinas in response to this objection, before considering the viability of his response.

As Brown (2009) notes, it is often objected to Aquinas's account of human blessedness in the life to come that it is a 'distortedly individualistic account of human happiness or else one that is inconsistent with religious and philosophical traditions that Aquinas himself accepts as true' (Brown 2009, 225). However, Brown argues, this objection is misguided since Aquinas clearly gives an important place for human community in the eschaton (Brown 2009, 225). Brown attempts to give an

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, as this distinction is understood in the Anglican tradition, see Paul Avis (2013, 81).

account of what Aquinas means when he writes that although ‘companionship with other human beings is not strictly necessary’ for happiness, ‘friends add a well-being to happiness’ (*ST*, I-II, 4, viii).

To do this, Brown makes a distinction between ‘perfect human happiness’, that is, the fulfilment of human happiness at the beatific vision, and what he calls ‘supremely perfect human happiness’ (Brown 2009, 236). Whilst, as we have seen, having community with other persons is not necessary for perfect human happiness (‘since having a vision of the divine essence is the necessary and sufficient condition for enjoying perfect happiness’, as Brown puts it (Brown 2009, 236)), Brown argues that having friends *is* necessary for enjoying supremely perfect human happiness (Brown 2009, 236). Or, as he summarises this position later, ‘for Aquinas perfect happiness comes in degrees’ (Brown 2009, 239).

What does distinction amount to? And how can perfect happiness come in degrees? To answer these questions, Brown argues that Aquinas’s view on this issue can be summarised as something like the following position:

God alone is the *object* of perfect human happiness. Human beings *attain* perfect happiness insofar as they come to enjoy the vision of God’s essence. Nonetheless, someone can be perfectly happy—having all of her desires sated—while not enjoying this perfect happiness *to the extent* that is possible for a human being. Such a human being is perfectly happy, but not enjoying the well-being of perfect happiness (Brown 2009, 237).

Whilst Brown thinks that this position is not a precise summary of the relationship between perfect happiness and well-being in Aquinas, he thinks that it can help us to see how such a view can be expounded. Brown then suggests that we might understand Aquinas’s position on the role of community in improving a person’s well-being in the following way:

Insofar as we enjoy the vision of God—which we can do as a solitary soul—we are perfectly happy. This is because in seeing the essence of God, we come to enjoy goodness itself...But perhaps we can say that our happiness increases in extent insofar as we see...other human beings—creatures for whom we have a natural desire to will good—happy in God as well....In other words, St. Paul can see God’s essence not only through his own experience of God—naturally colored by his own life’s journey, but also through the eyes of friends in Christ who saw a different aspect of God because of their own distinctive vocations, stories, and crosses. St Paul’s vision of God is now greater in extent than it was before the consummation of marriage of Christ and the Church (Brown 2009, 239–40).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Similarly, with regards to the body, Brown notes that, for Aquinas: “St. Paul’s happiness is more *extensive* after the general resurrection than before, for at that point St. Paul not only enjoys a vision of God’s essence—which is something he can do without the body—but he also enjoys it as an embodied being. There is more of St. Paul to enjoy God after than before the general resurrection” (Brown 2009, 239).



Thus, it is not the case, for example, that Paul's desires are not satisfied or that he is not perfectly happy following the beatific vision, and before his resurrection and union with his fellow saints. But rather, as Brown puts it, 'his enjoyment of God is not *as extensive* as it could be' (Brown 2009, 239). On this reading of Aquinas, the community of the saints is not necessary for perfect happiness, but it is required for supremely perfect happiness, or, in Aquinas's words, it adds *well-being* to happiness. Brown contends that such an interpretation allows us to stress the importance of God as the 'sole object of human happiness' (Brown 2009, 244) as well as making sense of what Aquinas says about the role of the saints, both in the *Summa* and elsewhere. Brown concludes by suggesting that the model of Church worship in this life can help us to see the relation between our knowledge of God and our relationship to the community of the saints (Brown 2009, 244). He writes, 'Although the Mass...involves being aware of the presence of other creatures—and particularly other human beings—the attention of the faithful is always directed (by the divine liturgy itself) ultimately to God' (Brown 2009, 244). Thus, as Brown presents it, something like the account of communal knowledge sketched above can help us to make sense of Aquinas's account of happiness.

On this picture, whilst we might consider a person's knowledge to be perfected in coming to know God fully at the beatific vision, there is a sense in which this knowledge could be supremely perfected through our experience as part of the communion of saints. And thus, in a certain sense, whilst communion with the saints is not necessary for communion with God, in another sense, it is necessary for supremely perfect communion with God. If we follow Brown's suggestion, then on Aquinas's picture, whilst our relationship to the glorified Church is not necessary for our perfect happiness and full knowledge of God it does in some way expand this happiness. Analogously in the case of knowing God fully, at the beatific vision we come know God fully. As we have seen, we can arguably fulfil all of Talbert's criteria for knowing a person well in virtue of a person's knowledge of God at the beatific vision. And yet, there are kinds of knowledge which can only be gained through the practices of Church, and, by extension, which can only be gained through the practices of the Church triumphant. Just as the orchestral player can gain knowledge—how to play their part, we ought to regard the worship of the Church as an action constituted by the actions of many individuals, united together.

However, whilst Brown's account appears to relieve the pressure on Aquinas's account to some extent, we might object that his solution merely amounts to a redefinition of terms, rather than a genuine solution. If a state of happiness can be expanded upon, why does it count as perfect?<sup>13</sup> To say that our knowledge of God's

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Note that Brown's reading of the role of the body in Aquinas's account of the afterlife is slightly different to Van Dyke's (see fn2). Whilst both recognise that the body cannot be strictly necessary for Aquinas, Van Dyke holds that the body must merely be a 'hood ornament' (Van Dyke 2015, 290), whereas Brown gives an account of how bodies might be required, even if not necessary.

<sup>13</sup> With thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this worry.

essence gives us 'perfect happiness', and when that is added to with the knowledge gained from our communal knowledge, we have 'supremely perfect happiness', is not to solve the problem.

At this point, we are left with a dilemma: Either we accept that Brown's use of *supremely perfect happiness* is legitimate, and that perfect happiness can be in some way extended on, or we diverge from Aquinas's account of perfect happiness and the beatific vision.

One way of exploring this second option which admittedly diverges from Aquinas's own account, but which is broadly in keeping with his concerns, is to think of the beatific vision itself as somehow communal. Thus, rather than thinking that persons enter into the Church triumphant after receiving the beatific vision, on this picture, in unity with the saints in glory, we see God face to face. A way to gesture towards what this might look like is by considering what psychologists call 'mutual object focusing'. As John Campbell describes this phenomenon,

joint attention is a primitive phenomenon of consciousness. Just as the object you see can be a constituent of your experience, so too it can be a constituent of your experience that the other person is, with you, jointly attending to the object. This is not to say that in a case of joint attention, the other person will be an object of your attention. On the contrary, it is only the object that you are attending to. It is rather, that, when there is another person with whom you are jointly attending to the thing, the existence of that other person enters into the individuation of your experience. The other person is there, as co-attender, in the periphery of your experience. The object attended to, and the other person with whom you are jointly attending to that object, will enter into your experience in quite different ways.... the individual experiential state you are in, when you and another are jointly attending to something, is an experiential state that you could not be in were it not for the other person attending to the object. The other person enters into your experience as a constituent of it, as co-attender, and the other person could not play that role in your experience except by being co-attender (Campbell 2005, 288–89).

This account of mutual object perception can help us to see how the beatific vision can be of God, yet somehow shared. On this interpretation, our vision of God is the mutual object of the attention of the gathered saints in glory. As Campbell admits, 'there seems to be no limit to the number of people who could be jointly attending to the same object' (2005, 287). Thus, as a mutual object of perception of all the saints in glory, our vision of God would be importantly shared. The result of this would be that our practical knowledge of engaging with God would be intertwined with the practical knowledge of one's fellow perceivers.

The benefit of thinking of the beatific vision in these terms is twofold: First, it does justice to important theological claims in both Scripture and Tradition about the communion of saints. Yet, despite this, it does not require us to say that God is not both the source and the object of perfect happiness. On such a picture, it is still our vision of God's essence which is essential for perfect human happiness, and only

God could satisfy our desires. However, the means of receiving such a vision would be bound up in our relationships to the Church in glory. Secondly, it also allows us to see how the communal nature of our worship of God in this life might continue into the next. Just as we can shape and direct one another's imperfect perceptions of God in corporate worship in this life, a collective beatific vision would be one in which we were aware of God's essence as the object of our perception, whilst sharing this object with countless other perceivers. However, unlike worshipping God in this life, this would be a vision shaped and directed by one another's perfected perceptions of God.

On this second suggestion, we need not invoke the distinction between perfect happiness and supremely perfect happiness. God alone can provide perfect happiness, and God alone is the object of perfect human happiness. But diverging from Aquinas, I have suggested that the means of our receiving this vision of God's perfect essence is through our relationships with others in the Communion of Saints. Thus, in a certain sense, the beatific vision should properly be regarded as a communal vision. Our personal knowledge of God, and in particular, our practical knowledge how to engage God, would still be perfected by our vision of God's goodness, yet, in an important sense, such knowledge would be dependent on the shared nature of our vision.<sup>14</sup>

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