

# Anatomy of Ludic Pleasure in Thomas Aquinas

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## The Anatomy of Ludic Pleasure in the Work of Thomas Aquinas

**Abstract:** The article carries out the analysis of ludic vocabulary used in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, which allows to discover the "hermeneutics of humour" that is characteristic for his way of thinking about man. The main objective of this publication is to test the foundations of Thomistic philosophy in regard to what is ludic, while emphasizing its anthropological (the value of the *condelectatio*), epistemological and ethical context. Within this framework, Thomas's thinking reveals certain "ludic rationality", which sees the ludic as dirigibile and, thanks to ludic pleasure, opens up to other people (reciprocity and communal dimension) and the truth. The author takes special interest in showing how jokes and games help in rational knowledge.

**Key words:** pleasure, rationality, Aquinas, eutrapelia

## Anatomía del placer lúdico en santo Tomás de Aquino

**Resumen:** El artículo hace el análisis del vocabulario lúdico utilizado en los escritos de Tomás de Aquino, que permite descubrir una "hermenéutica del buen humor" que caracteriza su manera de pensar sobre el ser humano. El objetivo del estudio consiste en sondear la base filosófica tomista de lo lúdico, destacando su contexto antropológico (el valor de la *condelectatio*), epistemológico y ético. En este marco, aparece en el pensamiento del Aquinate una "racionalidad lúdica", que percibe lo lúdico como dirigibile, y que, además, a través del placer lúdico abre al otro hombre (reciprocidad y dimensión comunitaria) y a la verdad. El particular interés se pone en exponer como el ocio ayuda en el conocimiento racional.

**Palabras clave:** placer, racionalidad, Aquinate, eutrapelia

## Anatomie du plaisir ludique chez Santo Thomas d'Aquin

**Résumé:** L'article analyse le vocabulaire ludique utilisé dans les écrits de Thomas d'Aquin, qui permet de découvrir une «herméneutique de l'humour» qui caractérise sa réflexion sur l'être humain. L'objectif de l'étude est de sonder la base philosophique thomiste ludique, en mettant en avant son contexte anthropologique (la valeur de la *condelectatio*), épistémologique et éthique. Dans ce cadre, il apparaît dans la pensée de l'Aquinate une "rationalité ludique" qui perçoit ce qui est ludique comme dirigeable mais également, à travers le plaisir ludique s'ouvre à l'autre homme (réciprocité et la dimension communautaire) et à la vérité. L'auteur s'intéresse plus particulièrement au fait du savoir comment le loisir aide à la connaissance rationnelle.

**Mots-clés:** Plaisir, rationalité, Aquinate, eutrapélie.

One of the leading men in the well-known novel by Umberto Eco *The Name of the Rose* is a friar, Jorge from Burgos, who obsessively fights against laughter because he considers it unworthy and harmful to the ideal of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup> He is ready to destroy the *Poetics* of Aristotle, because he is scared it could influence the mentality of the medieval man, and trivialise and ridicule the serious matters of Christian faith by casting a shadow over the principle of *decorum*. Whose side would Thomas Aquinas take in this “war against laughter”? Would this theologian – known for his major systematic works, for being an integral thinker, and for writing well-structured *Summae* – support the battle against laughter and entertainment?

It is unlikely that Jorge would find a supporter in Thomas and this is not only because of Aquinas’ respect for Aristotle, whose works he always approached with certain criticism anyway, but because of his awareness that pleasure, and especially its special kind i.e. entertainment, plays an important role in every man’s moral life. Although the term *homo ludens* has modern connotations (Huizinga 1998, 56), it illustrates very well Thomas’s anthropological thinking, rooted in the tradition of ancient ethical reflection (especially in relation to the virtue called *eutrapelia*) and pointing to the need for moderate entertainment in human life. In the ethical sphere of life, it plays a crucial role.

In this article, we will focus on several important issues related to the moral decency of entertainment, fun and games in order to present the cultural paradigm of medieval *Christianitas*, which sheds some light on a number of behavioural patterns of the medieval man and allows us to interpret within the correct hermeneutical perspective many specific games that historians specialized in the Middle Ages analyse. These will be clearer if we include their theological background in our considerations.

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## 1. Anatomy of pleasure in Aquinas

Aquinas often surprises his present-day readers with his broad perspective which is due to his thoughts on all the dimensions of reality. For that reason, the warnings of the Church Fathers against life focused on entertainment left a lasting impression also on Thomas's theological reflection, visible in his thoughts on the danger of fun and joy. Aquinas did not deny these possible atrophies of ludicity but he chose a different path: he appreciated humour as part of life that is authentically human and recognised its benefits for man's spiritual activity.

It is significant that Thomas explores the subject of entertainment against a broad philosophical backdrop, on the basis of specific "hermeneutics of meeting": a cursory reading of his texts – which include quotations from the Holy Bible, opinions of ancient philosophers (Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca) and the Church Fathers (John Chrysostom, Gregory the Great)– demonstrates his attempt to integrally work out a solution based on all available sources of medieval culture. He is interested in program integrity and exhaustive, complete approach, and when it comes to important differentiations and clarifications, he tackles each subject with the diligence of a "theological surgeon" (Turner 2013, 25).

According to Aquinas, pleasure is not an unnecessary addition, but an important factor to be taken into consideration when discussing good behaviour. Before we focus our attention on the issue of fun, games or jokes, let us have a look at a brief description of pleasure and its genealogy, which will constitute an important background for our reflection on ludic pleasures. In order to accurately locate entertainment, it is crucial to make a basic typology of pleasure that we can find in the works of Aquinas.

Thomas associates the pleasure described in Latin as *delectatio*<sup>2</sup> with action: it is as natural as the act itself, and it can even improve the act (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 151, a. 3c). Thomas defines it in terms of satisfaction and fulfillment of desire thanks to having a desired good –*Id autem quod terminat motum appetitus ut quies in re desiderata, est delectatio*– (*S.Th.*, I, q. 5, a. 6c). It is, therefore, the movement of the soul, which starts when

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2 Etymology seems to suggest loud articulation (*de-lectio*), order.

desire comes to an end: it is having the desired good as the present one. It means the total and pure present, *tota simul*, and the absolute state of inaction in the good. Saint Thomas notes that for this reason pleasure in a way becomes the goal, as long as it means delectation (*fruitio*) in good. We are dealing here with a certain “overlapping” of two goods: action towards the good and good resulting from rest, from pleasure. Striving for good and achieving pleasure from this action is a significant doubling (*S.Th.*, I–II, q. 33, a. 4c).

Pleasure in itself is neither good nor bad, it gains its moral qualification depending on the object that it is in relation with, that it finds delectation in: whether it is in agreement with reason or not. It is therefore a general term that refers to the feeling of pleasure and so it can be understood in sensual as well as spiritual meaning.

Thomas describes pleasure as *quies*, a fulfillment that is not possible without a previous act of reason, which accepts (*consensus*) the object of pleasure. Here, we enter the space of the moral responsibility of man who has the influence over the type of pleasure (*S.Th.*, I–II, q. 74, a. 6). According to Aquinas, this presence of reason in pleasure does not diminish its size: “reason does not diminish pleasure in senses but makes sure that no lustful forces cling to pleasure without moderation (*S.Th.*, I, q. 98, a. 2, ad 3).

### 1.1. The Balance of Pleasure?

To such outlined framework, which includes Thomas’s reflection on ludic pleasure, we need to add two more observations that will prove to be crucial when the question about the nature of entertainment and fun is posed. In order to understand the meaning of games, it is important to take into account certain *ordo delectationis*, as well as the value of time spent with somebody else, i.e. it is crucial to step out of the dangerously simplistic perception of the object that does not take into consideration the possibility of sharing pleasure with another person. Let us start with the first observation.

Pleasure is not a strange element in man’s life, quite the contrary: it appears to be a crucial factor that should be sought because “the best remedy for tired soul is to break away from intense intellectual

work for a moment and have some fun” (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 168, a. 2c). It is true because –according to what Thomas wrote in the commentary to *Sententiae*– pleasure “completes” action as well as life, which we all love so much (*In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 4, ad. 4). Pleasure is also associated with reason and does not interfere in its functioning (which was so often mentioned in the ideal of ancient cognition). There is however certain hierarchy of pleasure –“spiritual pleasure is more sublime than the carnal one” – (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 180, a. 7), because carnal pleasure throws man off the path of correct use of reason and leads him away from what is the biggest –*optimum*– pleasure: *fruitio Dei*, i.e. the contemplation of God.

The teleological nature of Thomas’s thinking becomes visible here; however, it has to be understood correctly: it is not about eradicating all the sensual pleasure and treating different kinds of pleasure as “opposite” and “excluding”, but directing it onto the final goal and making it part of every man’s journey towards happiness. It cannot be understood as the *cumulus* of pleasure (this way, we could say after Boetius that even animals are happy), because happiness is much more than that. It is important to remember that the soteriology according to Thomas Aquinas does not require sacrificing one pleasure for another; it was the neo-platonic or orphic visions that saw man as “soul” imprisoned in a body that led to such reductionism. That is why Thomas’s world is a pleasant world, it gives man the answer to grace and is the path towards the ultimate pleasure, or the “holy pleasure” if we quote Thomas (*In IV Sent.*, d. 14, q. 1, a. 4, qc. 2 s.c. 1). According to him, grace penetrates also the world of human pleasure.

Thomas’s thoughts on this matter –the never ending question about superiority on some pleasures over others– appears once more in the last biblical commentary of Aquinas on the Psalms and to a certain extent it summarises Thomas’s theological work. When explaining Psalm 18 (Vlg), Aquinas poses a somewhat provocative question when he wonders which pleasure gives more pleasure:

But are spiritual delights more delightful? The answer is yes: and for a threefold reason. For one, on part of the good we delight in, which is a more powerful good, and for reason of the delight, which is a greater

good, therefore more delightful. Second, on part of the potency that takes delight, because the intellectual faculty is stronger than the sensitive faculty. Third, because of the mode of the delights. Bodily delights consist in becoming and in motion; such as in foods and other things. Motion, however, is something imperfect; and it implies something future and past; because the whole is not possessed at once. Spiritual delights, however, are not in motion: because they consist in loving and understanding the good that is not in motion; but accidentally bodily delights are more desired, insofar as some abound in the senses and fall short in intellect (*In Ps.*, 18., n. 7).<sup>3</sup>

It is about what man has in abundance, because that is what he searches for; it is about concern over “desire” and the importance of how it is directed by reason.

## 1.2. The Value of *Condelectatio* and Ludic Pleasure

Let us now turn to the second observation. Even Horatio in *Ars poetica*, when he formulated the objectives of literature in *aut prodesse...aut delectare*, pointed out that it is best if both goals –education and pleasure– go together. Medieval pedagogics, from the times of Alcuin of York, also followed that path (Lauand 1998, 76). According to Aquinas, this link between education and pleasure is possible when we have a chance to be around truly wise people: “a wise man considers it his duty to introduce a common happiness (*condelectatio*) into his coexistence with others, according to the words of the Psalm (132, 1): “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” (*S.Th.*, II–II,

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3 “Sed numquid spirituales delectationes sunt delectabiliores? Dicendum est quod sic: et est triplex ratio. Una ex parte boni delectati quod est potius bonum, et ex causa delectationis, quod est majus bonum, ergo magis delectabile. Secunda ex parte potentiae delectantis, quia vis intellectiva est fortior sensitiva. Tertia ex modo delectationum. Corporales delectationes consistunt in fieri et in motu; sicut in cibis et in aliis. Motus autem est quid imperfectum; et quoddam futurum et praeteritum importat; quia non habetur totum simul. Spirituales autem delectationes non sunt in motu: quia consistunt in amando et intelligendo bonum, quod non est in motu; sed per accidens plus desiderantur illae, in quantum abundant aliqui in sensu, et deficiunt in intellectu” (transl. Hugh McDonald).

q. 114, a. 1, ad 3).<sup>4</sup> Joke and laughter create the above mentioned *condelectatio*, and thus become a factor that builds a community and enables the feeling of happiness together.

It is interesting that even in his first systematic work, in the commentary to *Sententiae*, Thomas pointed out that wisdom and entertainment share a common feature: they both are goals in themselves and are not taken up for any other reason (*In I Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 5 expos).<sup>5</sup> Thomas makes these deliberations within the framework of friendship, which obliges us sometimes to refrain from laughter and keep serious, since making jokes in the face of evil “could give the impression that we condone their sins, and even encourage them to commit more. The Scripture says (Eccle 7, 24): Are daughters yours? Watch over their bodies. And you should not display a light-hearted attitude toward them.” (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 114, a. 1, ad 3).<sup>6</sup>

And what place does the pleasures associated with entertainment take here?

## 2. Joke and Ludic Action in Aquinas: *Finis et Forma*

Thomas is primarily interested in the ethical assessment of the role of entertainment in man’s life and the influence it has on the development of man’s moral life: Are laughter and jokes always bad? Are they helpful or detrimental to man? They are not new dilemmas, as early as in the days of Tertullian (*De spectaculis*) much thought was given to the issue of whether spectacles and entertainment do not clash with the ideal of life proposed by the Gospel. St. Augustine also paid lots of attention to this issue in his letters (Zagórski 2013, 78).

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4 “Pertinet ergo ad sapientem ut condelectationem afferat his cum quibus conversatur, non quidem lascivam, quam virtus cavet, sed honestam; secundum illud Psalm. ecce quam bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum”.

5 See also *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 2, a. 6, ad 1: “Unde sicut bonum propter seipsum appetitur, ita et delectatio propter se, et non propter aliud appetitur, si ly propter dicat causam finale”.

6 “Pertinet ergo ad sapientem ut condelectationem afferat his cum quibus conversatur, non quidem lascivam, quam virtus cavet, sed honestam; secundum illud Psalm. ecce quam bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum”.



Thomas's point of view, as usual, stands out already in the macro-theological description, i.e. in the way he introduces this subject into the broad range of theological issues. The order of the discourse is not accidental; it uncovers a bigger idea hidden in each word. It is important to note that Aquinas decides to describe the nature of ludic pleasures in *Summa Theologiae* as part of his deliberations about the virtue of temperance, and more specifically about one of her parts, i.e. modesty (*modestia*). The choice is not accidental and uncovers important views of Aquinas. However, understanding his point of view is not possible without a broader context made up of numerous references to the ancient idea of pleasure (especially by Cicero and Seneca). Shallow depictions of the medieval vision of pleasure (especially in the context of sexual pleasure) to this day are wrongly attributed to Thomas, that is why it is important to analyse the key works of Aquinas in order to understand his viewpoint when it comes to "laughter" and "entertainment" (Calvo 2008, 178).

In our analysis of ludic pleasures, we will review its most important aspects mentioned and described by Thomas, expressed by Latin terms from his dictionary: *iocus* (joke) and its derivative *verbum jocosum* (humorous expressions, jokes), *scurrilitas* (vulgar jokes), *iocularitas* (humour) and *risus* (laughter). All of them are included by Aquinas in the category of *levitates*.

However, before we analyse each of these terms, it is important to focus on what Thomas calls "entertainment" (*operationes ludicrae*). The key text in this analysis will be one of the questions of *Summa Theologica*, from *Secunda Secundae* (q. 168), which refers directly to the subject of interest here. Very valuable as well will be other texts by Aquinas, especially quotes from his biblical commentaries and other systematic works.

It is important to start with the statement that ludic pleasures are for Thomas an interesting anthropological contribution: amongst various human activities there are some that are just a means towards achieving a goal, but there are also some that are a goal in themselves, e.g. contemplation. So which place does entertainment take? As mentioned before, it is one of the activities that constitute a goal in themselves – the definition proposed by Thomas is clear: jokes or games are "expressions or actions

whose goal is nothing but pleasure for the soul” (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 168, a. 2c).<sup>7</sup> Entertainment is an enjoyment in itself (*In I Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 5 expos.)<sup>8</sup> and as such its main goal is to dispel *fatigatio animalis*, i.e. any mental tension, which could possibly have dangerous consequences. Entertainment is supposed to help the soul re-establish the right proportions and strength, and that is why, in this space of human activity appears a special virtue that has been known since the days of Aristotle as *eutrapelia*.

What is most visible in entertainment and games is their pure altruism because they are the ultimate reasons they are taken up, although –according to what Thomas points out in *Summa contra Gentiles*– sometimes it happens that entertainment can have a positive influence on man. One example can be education: we decide on entertainment to study better (*Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 2, n. 9)<sup>9</sup>, because “a tense soul” cannot function well. It is like a bowstring in a tightened bow that can break if it is in an extreme position all the time. Therefore, the situation is not as clear as when we deal with speculative thinking, because entertainment appears to have an additional objective: it is supposed to bring relief to the mind, ease its effort, bring back the lost enthusiasm for studying: “scilicet ut per eas quodammodo mente relevati, magis simus postmodum potentes ad studiosas operationes: alias esset semper ludendum, si ludus propter se quaereretur, quod est inconveniens” (*Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 25, n. 9). Life spent only on entertainment and fun is considered by Thomas “inappropriate”.

One way out of this dilemma (is entertainment a goal in itself or not?) is suggested by Thomas in *Summa Theologiae* where he divides

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7 “Huiusmodi autem dicta vel facta, in quibus non quaeritur nisi delectatio animalis, vocantur ludicra vel iocosa”.

8 “Ludens, propter otium contemplationis sapientiae. Sicut enim operationes ludi non appetuntur propter aliud, sed in seipsis habent delectationem”.

9 “Sunt autem aliquae actiones quae non videntur esse propter finem, sicut actiones ludicrae et contemplatoriae, et actiones quae absque attentione fiunt, sicut confricatio barbae et huiusmodi: ex quibus aliquis opinari potest quod sit aliquod agens non propter finem. Sed sciendum quod actiones contemplativae non sunt propter alium finem, sed ipsae sunt finis. Actiones autem ludicrae interdum sunt finis, cum quis solum ludit propter delectationem quae in ludo est: quandoque autem sunt propter finem, ut cum ludimus ut postmodum melius studeamus”.

goals into “external” and “internal”. Jokes have no external goal, they are directed onto the wellbeing of a person having fun (*ordinatur ad bonum ipsius ludentis*), “since they are pleasant or give them a rest” (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 1, a. 6, ad 1). “Wellbeing of a person having fun” is a reminder that we are dealing with the same subject, which in Aquinas’ thinking excludes certain moral schizophrenia that would imply that the person having fun is different from the one performing everyday duties.

But the rest that Thomas has in mind is not a rest from rationality; it is not falling into the abyss of thoughtlessness, as if jokes and fun were by default actions that do not require thought. It does not mean that there are no rules that would apply to the world of jokes. They also have their *ordo*, because as ludic actions they are *dirigibilia*, subject to the leadership of the reason.<sup>10</sup> The virtue that watches over the right amount of reason in this respect and helps avoid deficiency or excess of fun (both these scenarios are analysed in detail by Thomas) is modesty, i.e. *eutrapelia*. It is not used to stop or curb pleasure but to give the right measure of it, and Thomas explains the etymology of this word which indicates that *eutrapelia* turns words and actions into enjoyment (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 168, a. 2c). It is supposed to protect man from “excessive entertainment” that ruins good fun and destroys its beauty (let us not forget that in Thomas’s aesthetics proportions were of high importance) (Costarelli 2010). When we exceed the measure of reason –the *regula rationis*– two things can happen, according to Thomas: on the one hand, it is the inadequacy of a “material” kind when in games man uses activities that in their nature are far from the moral law and might harm others. Fun becomes an opportunity to cause evil, to morally corrupt and so it completely distorts the sense of what Thomas understood as *ludus* and the pleasure that comes from it that is oriented towards “refreshment and rest for the soul” (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 168, a. 2, ad 3).<sup>11</sup> Thomas refers to

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10 *S.Th.*, II–II, q. 168, a. 3 co. “Respondeo dicendum quod in omni eo quod est dirigibile secundum rationem, superfluum dicitur quod regulam rationis excedit, diminutum autem dicitur aliquid secundum quod deficit a regula rationis. Dictum est autem quod ludicra sive iocosa verba vel facta sunt dirigibilia secundum rationem. Et ideo superfluum in ludo accipitur quod excedit regulam rationis”.

11 Thomas is aware of the existence of “sinful happiness”, which derives from bad imagination

the comparison of St. Augustine and points out that, similarly to music where moments of silence and pause are necessary to bring out the fullness of sound, in man's life entertainment is not a strange behaviour but is natural and important for our existence.

Fun does not assume an ethically wrong character on the level of intentions (because its goal is to give pleasure and not to cause any harm); however, it is the actions that are wrong in themselves that can make fun become "harmful and shameless" (*flagitiosus et obscenus*) (*S.Th.*, II-II, q. 168, a. 3, ad 1). One example of such distortion, as Aquinas points out in *De malo*, is a situation where jokes lead to hatred or promiscuity.<sup>12</sup> Fun is supposed to take away from man the tension resulting from troubles, but –because of moral bend at the very root– it actually becomes an additional burden (this is suggested by Thomas at the stage of terminological analysis).

The second instance refers to overstepping the lines of appropriateness of place and time, which for Aquinas means that the pleasure derived from entertainment is put above everything else (and becomes the only point of reference) and is made the idol of human life. It is only this postulated proportionality that makes ludic activities pleasant for man, which Thomas explains in his treaty on feelings:

The more proportional and natural an action is in relation to its performer, the more pleasant it becomes. Because human energy is limited, an action can be proportional in relation to its performer only to a certain respect. If the right measure is overstepped, the action will not be pleasant but will become disagreeable and arduous. That is why we find sleep, games and similar activities [*otium et ludus et alia*] related to rest and relaxation pleasant – they remove the distress related to the effort and difficulty of labour (*S.Th.*, I-II, q. 32, a. 1 ad 3).

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based on pride, vain glory or hatred.

- 12 *De malo*, q. 2, a. 8 co. "Sicut enim aliqui actus ex suo genere sunt boni, et aliqui ex suo genere sunt mali, ita aliqua peccata ex suo genere sunt venialia, et aliqua ex suo genere mortalia. Circumstantia ergo quae sic aggravat ut novam speciem peccati constituat, potest constituere speciem peccati mortalis, et ita aggravat in infinitum; puta, si aliquis loquatur verbum iocosum ut provocet ad libidinem vel ad odium".

## 2.1. Eutrapelia and Her Different Faces

In such outlined perspective of understanding pleasure, entertainment and fun become necessary for truly human life: *Ludus est necessarius ad conversationis humanae vitae* (*S.Th.*, II–II, q. 168, a. 3 ad 3). Entertainment should appear in life with frequency described by Thomas as *interdum*, i.e. occasionally, sometimes. It basically means that *seria* and *ludus* go together, they are entwined in certain aspects of life, sometimes forming a kind of existential *aenigma*. Therefore, Thomas not only sets a rigid statistical norm, but in a way typical for his ethical language, he points to the measure of reason as the factor deciding on the appropriate proportion of jokes in man's life.<sup>13</sup>

The virtue regulating it is the above mentioned eutrapelia. This term has been used since the times of Aristotle to describe someone who “is good at turning words and actions into pleasure”. It is about making good use of things. This “good skill at turning” that forms part of eutrapelia, is conditioned by the laconic “good” that suggests taking into account what is appropriate (*convenientia*). Its meaning comes to light with full force when Thomas makes an attempt to anatomically describe fun and entertainment. Two extreme viewpoints that exceed the measure of reason become visible then, but the virtue of eutrapelia guards reason against them and aims towards the “golden middle”.

It is important to bear in mind that in this anatomical description of ludic activities, Aquinas identifies two components: on the one hand, he mentions pleasure (*delectatio*) alone –the unorganised, disordered and almost slavish relationship with entertainment, that opposes the virtue of eutrapelia; on the other hand, in every form of entertainment there is an element of pause or rest– *remissio sive quies*, which stands in opposition to overworking.<sup>14</sup> Through entertainment, the speeding human life gets the necessary pause, which helps recover the lost existential essence, constitutive of man (Yepes 1996). As Josef Pieper (1998,

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13 *S.Th.*, II–II, q. 168, a. 2c: “necesse est talibus interdum uti, quasi ad quandam animae quietem”.

14 *S.Th.*, II–II, q. 138, a. 1 ad 3. “Ad tertium dicendum quod in ludo duo est considerare. Uno quidem modo, delectationem, et sic inordinate lusivus opponitur eutrapeliae. Alio modo in ludo consideratur quaedam remissio sive quies, quae opponitur labori”.

50) recalls when interpreting the intuitions of St. Thomas Aquinas, it is not work as such that decides that entertainment is needed, but it's in itself necessary for man's ability to transcend, which in reality implies the acceptance of secrecy the world.

Eutrapelia, situated in the dynamism of human rest, encompasses a variety of perspectives, which Thomas associates even with the type of behaviour described as strict. However, strictness does not mean a total rejection of pleasure, but excessive and disorganised tendency to it. Therefore, eutrapelia has its "names", which Thomas links to talkativeness (*affabilitas*) or friendliness, to pleasant politeness (*iucunditas*). It is a *pars potissima* of modesty, which is supposed to make sure that man does not step outside *modum debitum* when having fun.<sup>15</sup> Following Aristotle, Thomas sees it as located between roughness and clownery.

## 2.2. Entertainment and Other People. Laughter and Its Meaning

Eutrapelia introduces necessary order into the ludic sphere: it not only restrains excessive focus on entertainment (at the expense of important issues), but also introduces it as an element that gives life flavour when good fun is needed (Thomas quotes Aristotle who said that this kind of pleasure should be like a pinch of salt that adds flavour to a dish). Its lack can spoil even the most refined dish: that is why those who lack a sense of humour (*in ludo deficiunt*) deserve to be called "heavy", "dull" and "bitter". The heaviness that Aquinas has in mind is related to the lack of reaction to the moderate jokes from others, which is of consequence on other people: lack of sense of humour does not only affect the subject, but spoils pleasure for others as well. The lack of sense of humour is, therefore, an offence towards the reason, which requires its presence. But at the same time it is an interesting way to emphasize the social character of ludicity, referring to the deepest ethical intuitions of Aquinas, which he built –according to E. Stump– on "the second personal relationship".

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15 *Super Sent.*, lib. 3. "Ad tertium dicendum, quod modestia non dicitur ex hoc quod imponat modum in qualibet materia secundum quod hic accipitur, sed tantum in exterioribus gestibus, ut scilicet in eis maturitas debita observetur; et hujus virtutis pars potissima est eutrapelia, quam philosophus ponit 5 Ethic. quia etiam in ludicris, in quibus est difficilium, modum debitum non excedit".

From this perspective, it is easier to understand a number of texts by Aquinas presenting the value of laughter, which becomes a synonym of joke and serves to cheer up. In Thomas's works, *ludus* in fact equals *iocus*, it is not a coincidence that they are synonyms (Lauand 2010). Laughter makes cheerfulness expand because alike qualities make each other's actions even more powerful: *omne autem simile auget suum simile*.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, laughter (*risum*) is for Thomas a manifestation of selfless interest in a particular thing: we laugh when we like a thing for itself, not for any other reason.<sup>17</sup> Laughter becomes a sign of authenticity, an interest of good for good itself.

At the same time, however, Thomas is aware that the borderline of joke is thin and many distortions can take place:

Cheerfulness allows the use of funny words not to insult someone or make them sad, but to make jokes and make them laugh. If all the appropriate circumstances are preserved, there is no sin. However, if someone makes jokes in order to hurt the person that they are directing them at and make others laugh at their expense, a sin is committed (*S.Th.*, II-II, q. 72, a. 2, ad 1).

That is why Thomas points out that “a joke has to be appropriate, depending on the matter and the person” (*S.Th.*, II-II, q. 168, a. 2c). It gains its power in the atmosphere of friendship, in which sympathy and compassion of a friend not only weaken the burden of experience, but also lower the level of sadness *ex admixtione delectationis*: for it is very pleasant to experience someone's friendship.<sup>18</sup>

However, a joke can also serve as a weapon, and thus ceases to be *eutrapelia*, i.e. it is not the virtue that builds social bonds and is a sign

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16 *S.Th.*, I-II, q. 38, a. 2 ad 2. “Omne autem simile auget suum simile. Et ideo per risum et alios effectus laetitiae augetur laetitia, nisi forte per accidens, propter excessum”.

17 *In Iob* 9: “de illis enim ridere solemus quae nobis secundum se placent”.

18 *Super Iob*, cap. 2: “Considerandum est autem quod amicorum compassio consolativa est, vel quia adversitas quasi onus quoddam levius fertur quando a pluribus portatur, vel magis quia omnis tristitia ex admixtione delectationis alleviatur: delectabilissimum autem est experimentum sumere de amicitia alicuius, quod maxime sumitur ex compassione in adversis, et ideo consolationem affert”.

of man's freedom –as Aquinas sees this virtue from Aristotle's perspective (Amir 2013 12)–, but can be used to destroy community relations. That is how we can interpret the fact that St. Paul included eutrapelia (Ef 5, 4) in his list of flaws that a good Christian should avoid. Thomas interprets his words as a warning not against the Aristotelian virtue, but its close imitation, which he calls *scurrilitatas*, i.e. *verbum ioculatorium*. It is about rejection of vulgar or crude jokes, whose only goal is to get others' attention and approval, to flatter them with brief pleasure.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3. Theology of “Good Humour” in Thomas Aquinas.

#### Ludicity and Truth

It is important to point out that for St. Thomas entertainment is not opposite of *honestitas*. In his theology, good humour always remains lined with love for others, and he reflects about it (with exception of a few texts derived from biblical commentaries) mainly in connection with anthropological and ethical issues.

According to Thomas, “good humour” is *verbum iocosum*, i.e. funny words (although for Tomas *iocus* means also game and entertainment), which are not pointless or directed at ethical nothingness: they also should serve the good. That is why during analysis of Thomas's texts it is possible to come to conclusion that he presents a kind of “theology of good humour”. He points out that jokes can sometimes become useless words (*otiosum*), which according to Mt 12, 36 men will have to give account of on the day of his final judgement. Thomas defends “good humour” in the commentary to *Sententiae*<sup>20</sup> and states that not all jokes are the same, not

19 *In Eph.*, cap. V, lect. 2: “Et scurrilitatem, id est verbum ioculatorium, per quod aliqui volunt inde placere aliis”. *Matth.* XII, v. 36: “de omni verbo otioso quod locuti fuerint homines, reddent rationem de eo in die iudicii”. According to Thomas, St. Paul understood eutrapelia in Ef 5,4 not as a virtue in its Aristotelian meaning, but as a distortion, commonly identified with her, and yet so different.

20 *In II Sent.*, d. 40, q. 1, a. 5 ad 8. “Ad octavum dicendum, quod verbum est immediatus effectus rationis; et ideo minus potest verbum praeter deliberationem esse quam factum: et propter hoc, verbum otiosum magis est peccatum veniale quam factum otiosum. Sciendum tamen, quod secundum Gregorium, otiosum est quod caret intentione piae voluntatis, aut ratione justae necessitatis; unde non omne verbum jocosum est otiosum, si ad recreationem referatur: quia etiam in jocis contingit esse virtutem eutrapeliam, de qua philosophus in 4 Ethic”.



every joke is useless. In the tradition of medieval theology, *otiosum* was understood as the lack of pious inclination of will (i.e. will to uncover the good and to strengthen in good) or honest justification. The criterion here is *ad recreationem*, if it has certain “usefulness”. Hence the question that used to appear in the theological culture of the Middle Ages, is joke a sin and if so, what kind of sin: venial or mortal?

Although aware that a joke may become a weapon that harms others and pulls man dangerously far away from what is most important, Thomas does not give into the temptation to agree with Jorge from Burgos and reject all jokes as theologically incorrect and superfluous. In his “theology of good humour”, there is place for joke that is born *ex causa rationabili* and is neither useless nor sinful: when reflecting about depravations, Thomas notes that “joke is a venial sin if it is made for no reason; however, if there is a reasonable cause for making a joke, it is not useless or sinful” (*S. Th.*, II–II, q. 43, a. 7 ad 5).<sup>21</sup> What emanates from these words of Aquinas is the concern about the “ludic rationality”, which is expressed in the guarding of the norms of reason or rationality in games and entertainment; taking into consideration the role of reason properly formed in the ethics of Thomas, it means turning joke into good –our own good as well as that of others–. Aquinas does not agree with idolatry of entertainment but sees it as means and tool that can be used for achieving authentic good.

In *Summa theologiae* Thomas seems to agree that jokes should not be mixed with serious theological issues when he quotes St. Ambrose, the opponent of using jokes in biblical education; however, it is this “reasonable cause” mentioned above that finds a place also in the discourse characteristic of sacred doctrine (*sacra doctrina*). It is not his goal to reject the principle of order, *decorum*, which required serious tone for discussing serious matters: the more sublime the issue, the bigger was defence against jokes; it is understood most of all as concern

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21 “Sed hoc implicat contraria, si enim faciendum est, iam non est malum neque peccatum; nam peccatum non potest esse eligibile. Contingit tamen aliquid propter aliquam circumstantiam non esse peccatum veniale quod, illa circumstantia sublata, peccatum veniale esset, sicut verbum iocosum est peccatum veniale quando absque utilitate dicitur; si autem ex causa rationabili proferatur, non est otiosum neque peccatum”.

about the clarity of transmission of the message and protection against trivialising what is sublime in human life. It is concern about the “high tones” of human existence.

What Thomas postulates is most of all using joke *causa piae utilitatis* (*In IV Sent.*, d. 9, q. 1, a. 4 qc. 2 ad 3), for pious usefulness, which in the case of theological reflection can result in cognitive openness: to some extent, the very didactics of practicing theology, with its play of arguments and disputes, had this ludic dimension that Thomas talks about. Deepening the knowledge about God happened through opening the mind to the truth that was given to the human mind: this “surplus of knowledge” man is also able to gain through discursive action, which takes the form of casual *disputatio*. It was first highlighted by Hugh of St. Victor in *Didascalion*, when he juxtaposed the methodical rigour *lectio* and openness, breaking certain common principles that appear in meditation (Carruthers 2013, 19). This departure from everyday life and its rhythm had in medieval culture a creative meaning, which served to open people up for what was new.

It is important to stress out this “usefulness”, which puts games and entertainment in the service of full personal development of man or the benefit in more intense intellectual activity (Pieper 1998). It is followed by contemplation, which entertainment prepares us for in a way, by introducing man to rest and peace of mind. Games must be oriented towards the ultimate goal of man. Thomas goes even further: well organised game not only makes contemplation easier, it also makes it possible for man to have a good time while contemplating; ludic activities make troubles go away and open man up to knowledge.

While analysing the relationship between theology and fun, two immensely important biblical texts spring to mind, in which the motive of games appears and serves to express certain theological ideas. They link wisdom to fun and discover the far-reaching analogies between them, introducing at the same time *ludus* into the field of theological interests. The first text comes from the Book of Proverbs (8, 30–31) and refers to God’s Wisdom that plays in front of God (*ludens coram eo omni tempore, ludens in orbe terrarum et deliciae meae esse cum filiis hominum*), which illustrates and refers to Christ as the Wisdom of

God.<sup>22</sup> In order to explain this passage in the commentary on the Gospel of John, Thomas divides the above sentence into two parts (*ludens in orbe* and *deliciae meae*) and then notices in this ‘playing’ of Wisdom in front of the Maker the double happiness of Christ: happiness for his own and his Father’s good, as well as the good of all creatures.<sup>23</sup>

The second quote comes from the Wisdom of Sirach, which in the Vulgate version of the Bible was translated as: “be first to run home to the house, and there withdraw thyself, and there take thy pastime”<sup>24</sup> (*Praecurre prior in domum tuam, et illuc advocare et illic lude, et age conceptiones tuas*, Syr 32,14–16). It was used by Thomas in the prologue to his commentary on *De Hebdomadibus* by Boethius, the third work of his *Opera sacra*, in which he praises the sublime nature of education and gaining wisdom. It is a characteristic feature of Thomas’s prologues, built on the analysis of a selected biblical fragment. He follows the words of Sirach and contemplates whether it is appropriate to juxtapose wisdom and fun:

It is considered appropriate to see wisdom as pleasure (*ludo*), for two reasons that we discover in ludicity. Firstly, because ludicity is pleasant, and contemplation contains the highest pleasure: that is why Sir, 24 talks through the lips of wisdom: my spirit is sweeter than honey. Secondly, because ludic activities are not directed at any particular goal but are wanted for themselves. The same happens with pleasures caused by wisdom (Exp. *De Hebdomadibus*, prol.).<sup>25</sup>

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22 *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1, cap. 91, n. 10. “Dicitur enim in Psalmo: delectationes in dextera tua usque in finem”. Prov. 9: „delectabar per singulos dies ludens coram eo, dicit divina sapientia, quae Deus est”.

23 *In Io.*, cap. XV, lect. 2: “Deus autem se amat et creaturam, praecipue rationalem, cui infinitum bonum communicat. Christus ergo de duobus ab aeterno gaudet: scilicet de bono suo et patris”; Prov. VIII, 30: „delectabar coram eo ludens in orbe terrarum. Item de bono creaturae rationalis”; ibid. VIII, 31: „deliciae meae sunt esse cum filiis hominum, idest, in hoc quod communicor filiis hominum”.

24 Transl. Douay-Rheims.

25 “Ubi considerandum est, quod sapientiae contemplatio convenienter ludo comparatur, propter duo quae est in ludo invenire. Primo quidem, quia ludus delectabilis est, et contemplatio sapientiae maximam delectationem habet: unde Eccli. xxiv, dicitur ex ore sapientiae: *spiritus meus super mel dulcis*. Secundo, quia operationes ludi non ordinantur ad aliud, sed propter se quaeruntur. Et hoc idem competit in delectationibus sapientiae.

Now Thomas understands the entrance into the house in *Sir* 32, 14 as setting free of the mind from everything that makes it difficult to fully contemplate the truth, any external concern. Then it is possible to link *lude* with wisdom, which leads to *age conceptiones tuas*, i.e. capturing the truth.

Here theology meets *ludus*: the sacred doctrine is a discipline that is more theoretical, with no objectives, practised for the truth and thus related to wisdom. Theology plays according to its own rules, and this “complexity”, which comes to light in theological reasoning, contributes to even more pleasure: *Et omne, quod est mistum, est magis delectabile, quam quod est simplex; sicut symphonia, quam vox acuta tantum, vel gravis tantum* (*Sentencia De anima*, lib. 3, l. 2, n. 15).<sup>26</sup> From Thomas’s perspective, it is about searching for the truth through ludicity, which is understood as a state of soul. It means openness towards the multidimensionality of the world.

## Eutrapelia – the Virtue of Balance

Maurice Blondel often quoted a sentence by Pope Leon XIII –*vetera novis augere*– to demonstrate the proper direction of reflection about Thomas: rejection of the literalism or simple concordism and embracing “revitalisation”, which broadens *vetera* with a new perspective of the present (Conway 2008, 121). A similar suggestion may be made when we reflect about the place of ludicity in man’s life and here the voice of Thomas Aquinas deserves to be heard; especially today, when the entertainment culture describes our beliefs, and in consequence leads to individualism, self-focus, and reduction of the world to oneself.

Thomas’s view of ludicity has an anthropological and ethical character, which means that it opens up to the presence of virtues and flaws. It decides about what is constitutive of human life: accepting its boundaries, its limits –everyone needs a rest–. It is supposed to make people’s coexistence open and pleasant. *Ludus* can serve to “unblock” the will to study, and that is why Thomas sees jokes as having didactic qualities.

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26 Originally, this text by Aquinas referred to senses and their variety, but this comparison can be also applied to games.

According to Thomas, the term *ludus* is very broad: it encompasses many different human actions, from entertainment and games to physical effort, smile, light activities and even school. Whether something is considered a game or not, depends on intentionality, which at the same time is a sign of freedom (Peláez 2009, 125). Ludicity means rest that is not purely passive, but an activity that shapes and develops our characteristics. Game transports us into different time and space, far away from every-day reality, and that is why its only goal is itself. It opens us up to “beyond and above” without which man would not be man: as Aristotle used to say, man needs a bit of “divinity” to fully be himself.

This way Thomas warns against dangers that threaten us when we see game as a goal in itself (in absolute sense). Eutrapelia, the virtue of inner balance, guards the true ludic pleasure. It searches for festive happiness which makes social life easier, but at the same time it is also a personal virtue that introduces healthy entertainment into the life of an individual. It becomes a reminder that it is not only about having free time in the quantitative sense, but it is about the way it is spent. Who knows, this medieval lecture by Thomas may be more up-to-date today than it has ever been before.

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