

Struggling with Self-Love: A Thomistic Perspective on Anxious Attachment and the Vice of Self-Diminishment

Sheryl Overmyer

Fear is born of love.

–Thomas Aquinas (ST II-II q. 123, a. 4, ad 2)

Many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of attachment relationships. The formation of a bond is described as falling in love, maintaining a bond as loving someone, and losing a partner as grieving over someone. Similarly, threat of loss arouses anxiety, and actual loss gives rise to sorrow; while each of these situations is likely to arouse anger. The unchallenged maintenance of a bond is experienced as a source of security, and the renewal of a bond as a source of joy.

–John Bowlby¹

FOR THOMAS AQUINAS, LOVE IS THE KEYSTONE FOR ALL human growth and thriving. But what if love is deficient—not only our love for others, a reality with which moral theologians traditionally grapple? Rather, what if our love for our *selves* is deficient? How might deficient self-love equally undermine human growth and flourishing, both for individuals and communities? How might deficient self-love function as a quiet but powerfully operative vice?

Here both Thomists and moral theologians largely fall silent. To study this question and lacuna, this article explores the shared conceptual space between Thomistic moral theology and the contemporary psychological framework of Attachment Theory.² Originally established in the mid-1950s, Attachment Theory is an

¹ John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 3, *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 40.

² This article participates in the spirit of the special issue from the *Journal of Moral Theology* treating depression, embodiment, resilience, and posttraumatic healing collected in “Psyche, Soul, Salvation,” ed. Christopher McMahon, *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, no. 1 (January 2020).

interdisciplinary and comprehensive theory of personality development, interpersonal functioning, and relationships. It has proven dynamic and fecund as clinical research and developmental neuroscience have validated and expanded many of its original tenets regarding developmental psychology. Attachment Theory is arguably “now the most influential theory of early socioemotional development available to science” and a major contributor to the current relational trend in the psychological sciences inaugurated in the mid-2000’s.³ Thus, Attachment Theory’s relational-affective emphases complements previous cognitive-based psychological approaches with its contributions rooted in embodied experiences, nonverbal formation, and unconscious emotional responses. Because Attachment Theory centers on human relationships, its insights bear moral implications, making it an important interlocutor with Thomistic moral theory.

Attachment Theory devotes attention to children who grow up in environments where their parents were inconsistently available, perceptive, and effective.⁴ Children who experience inconsistent parental love may develop “anxious attachment” and are likely to struggle with self-love. Yet, the sustained attention to deficient self-love central to Attachment Theory is difficult to formulate in traditional Thomistic terms. Thomists make a solid case for genuine self-love and in its service, have spilled a fair amount of ink on excessive self-love. Meanwhile, Thomists offer little on deficient self-love. Thus, Attachment Theory is poised to fill a gap in Thomistic moral thought, and set up further conversations on embodied formation and interpersonal relationality.

The juxtaposition of Attachment Theory and Thomas as two theoretical perspectives on love and human flourishing furnishes a window into a fertile field of interdisciplinary work.⁵ Pioneering work

³ Allan Schore cites a paradigm shift within psychology and across the disciplines from left brain conscious cognition to right brain unconscious emotional and relational functions. He cites trends from earlier psychoanalytic theoreticians and current developmental and affective (rather than cognitive) neuroscience in *Right Brain Psychotherapy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 16–18.

⁴ Mary Ainsworth, Mary Blehar, Everett Waters, and Sally Wall, *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1978).

⁵ Along similar lines, see a collected volume by virtue ethicists and attachment theory specialists, *Attachment and Character: Attachment Theory, Ethics, and the Developmental Psychology of Vice and Virtue*, ed. Edward Harcourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Introducing this collection Edward Harcourt writes: “As one of today’s leading theoretical orientations in developmental psychology, Attachment Theory at least has a claim to be taken seriously by philosophers. Given that fact, the introduction will now argue that philosophers working in moral psychology or in ‘virtue ethics’—whether or not they are followers of Aristotle’s own version of that outlook—ought to take more of an interest in attachment theory than they have done

in this space includes a new school of thought, proposed by psychologists William Nordling, Paul Vitz, and theologian Craig Steven Titus, who seek to integrate the theoretical and empirical bases of psychology with a Catholic view of the human person.⁶ Their primary commitments are to Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium, while they incorporate a carefully circumscribed series of compatible psychological premises into that framework. Their meta-model of Thomistic anthropology integrates Attachment Theory's insights into how the human being is intrinsically interpersonally relational. They write that Attachment Theory "identifies the qualitative significance of interpersonal attachment for receiving and giving love across the lifespan," and "of special interest are the empirical findings about the range of love, from selfish to sacrificial. The range affects psychological capacities for relationship or isolation; secure or insecure attachments; and the expression of love, indifference, and hate."⁷

In principle, Thomism is open to integrating the truths of all disciplines into its comprehensive account of God and the human person. Disciplined interdisciplinary work becomes an authentic extension of the Thomistic tradition. Yet Thomists often approach the fruits of the social sciences in critical and careful terms, and for good reason—they differ on ontological assumptions, methodologies, and use of concepts.⁸ Interdisciplinary engagement requires careful work to clarify disciplinary first principles, delineate claims about the nature of reality, and use key terms without equivocation. In his project on habits, Ezra Sullivan establishes how a Thomistic framework furnishes the basis for integration and opens to modern empirical investigations that may illuminate Thomas's insights, fill in lacunae,

to date" (*Attachment and Character*, 4). See especially Terence Irwin, "Education for Virtue: Aquinas on Passions and Attention," in *Attachment and Character*, 154–173.

⁶ William Nordling, Paul Vitz, and Craig Steven Titus, eds., *A Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person: Integration with Psychology and Mental Health Practice* (Sterling, VA: Divine Mercy University Press, 2020), iii. See Conor Sullivan, "A Theoretical Integration of the Psychology of Virtuous Friendship" (PhD Dissertation, Divine Mercy University, 2022); Elise Trompeter, "Relational Courage: A Virtue of the Secure Attachment Figure" (PhD Dissertation, Divine Mercy University, 2022). I came upon the following two works late in the revision process and will continue the conversation—Greg Kolodziejczak, "Distortions of Love as Distortions of the Self from a Psychological Perspective" (PhD Dissertation, Institute for the Psychological Sciences, 2006); Andrew Sodergren, "Attachment and Morality: A Catholic Perspective" (PhD Dissertation, Institute for the Psychological Sciences, 2009).

⁷ Titus, Vitz, and Nordling, *Catholic Christian Meta-Model*, 315.

⁸ Brandon Dahm and Alina Beary, "Introduction: Special Issue on Contemporary Thomistic Psychology," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 163–213.

and correct his mistakes.⁹ Sullivan describes how the biological and psychological sciences are contributors to our understanding, while the formal and final causes are ultimately given by theology. In a parallel manner here, I assume a Thomistic framework for love to transform specific claims from Attachment Theory about relationality and interpersonal development. To be clear, the operating claim here is not that Thomism and Attachment Theory offer identical or wholly compatible theories of the human being (I will explore how Attachment Theory's ethological and evolutionary commitments prove self-limiting). Rather, Attachment Theory's insights into anxious self-love can be absorbed into and transformed by divine love.

In this article, I place Attachment Theory's account of attachment, anxiety, and yearning for greater love within the capacious Thomistic framework of vice, virtue, and union with God. First, I introduce classic Attachment Theory to describe how and why some individuals struggle with self-love. Next, Thomism offers a clear framework for deficient self-love as an emotional pattern and the neologism of "self-diminishment" to name its corresponding vice. Then, I continue to develop the concept of self-diminishment Thomistically, using the part-whole relation to orient it toward a Christian telos. Lastly, I return to Attachment Theory to describe the healing process of self-diminishment.

Throughout this article, I touch on a hypothetical example of a loving father with what Attachment Theory calls "anxious attachment." This father type is an illustrative substitute for the stereotypical mother because studies find no association between gender and attachment style.¹⁰ I hope an anxious father will revise our expectations of this type and prove countercultural. This father's habitual mode of engagement is self-effacement as he struggles to maintain a stable connection to himself and his own good. He goes further than prioritizing the good of his family or being devoted to their good. Rather, he treats them as his sole overriding good and

⁹ Ezra Sullivan, OP, *Habits and Holiness: Ethics, Theology, and Biopsychology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Marian Bakermans-Kranenburg and Marinus H. Van IJzendoorn, "No Reliable Gender Differences in Attachment across the Lifespan," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32, no. 1 (2009): 22–23; Marinus H. van IJzendoorn and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "Invariance of Adult Attachment across Gender, Age, Culture, and Socioeconomic Status?," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 27, no. 2 (March 2010): 200–208; Gwen Gleeson and Amanda Fitzgerald, "Exploring the Association between Adult Attachment Styles in Romantic Relationships, Perceptions of Parents from Childhood, and Relationship Satisfaction," *Health* 6, no. 13 (July 17, 2014): 1643–1661. There are compelling reasons for Christian feminists to thematize the plight of the stereotypical excessively self-sacrificial mother—oppressive social systems and problematic cultural discourses of femininity enforcing and policing idealized excessive self-sacrifice.

neglects his own good. I revisit this example in each section to show how the argument progresses—first to use Attachment Theory to explain the origin of his deficient self-love and its pervasive impact on his adult relationships to self and others, next to use Thomistic terms to name his moral challenge in the vice of self-diminishment, explore its varying degrees, and differentiate it from the virtue of self-sacrifice, then to use the Thomistic part-whole relation to develop a broader way of thinking about how the anxious father's deficits are theologically relevant; and finally to discuss Attachment Theory's insights into his path for relational healing.

The argument I make within this article grapples with the reality of deficient self-love and its associated vice of self-diminishment. For reasons I explain, it is difficult to make such an argument exclusively within the Thomistic canon. Attachment Theory becomes a key contributor. Attachment Theory does more than just clarify deficient self-love and self-diminishment. In this exchange, both disciplines have something to offer. Thomas brings precision, a rich understanding of the capacities of the human person, and teleological ordering; Attachment Theory offers nuanced observations about messy human relationships and the struggle to grow in love. I hope the fruits of this encounter witness to the greater potential for cross-disciplinary exchange.

A PRIMER ON ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment Theory was first developed in the post-World War II context. John Bowlby, a British developmental psychologist, was commissioned to write a World Health Organization report on the well-being of children who lost their homes in WWII.¹¹ Bowlby's conclusions focused on the critical importance of young children's experience of warm, intimate, and continuous relationships with their mothers or permanent mother substitute. Periods of maternal separation, deprivation, and bereavement had a profound and lasting effect on children. Bowlby refined his ideas about attachment

¹¹ John Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health: A Report Prepared on Behalf of the World Health Organization as a Contribution to the United Nations Programme for the Welfare of Homeless Children* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 1951). Bowlby's pre-war work for the London Child Guidance Clinic and Tavistock Clinic in London had a similar focus on maternal deprivation and separation, and the intergenerational transmission of attachment relations. Bowlby acknowledges his debts to clinical psychologists in the 1930s and 40s who observed the impact of prolonged institutional care and frequent changes of mother-figures during early childhood; he also explains that these studies were little appreciated and indeed, his own work took some thirty years to become uncontroversial. Bowlby, "Attachment and Loss: Retrospect and Prospect," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 52, no. 4 (1982): 665.

behavioral system patterns of how children cope when feeling upset or threatened, based on the quality of connection to their primary caretaker.¹²

While Bowlby initiated a paradigm shift away from the dominant psychoanalytic frameworks of his time, his collaborator Mary Ainsworth conducted the empirical studies that validated Bowlby's normative theory and developed a taxonomy of different attachment patterns. Her early work included 1960s fieldwork on the Ganda tribe in Uganda. Ainsworth characterizes the caregiver as a "secure base" for the child to explore the world safely, and attends to gradations in maternal sensitivity and responsiveness to infant signals as contributing to attachment patterns.¹³ Ainsworth's "Strange Situation" laboratory observations gave researchers the opportunity to witness children between the ages of twelve and eighteen months left by their mothers and then reunited—secure infants are distressed upon separation but easily comforted; anxious infants experience great distress, and upon reuniting with the parent alternate between seeking comfort and "punishing" their parent for leaving; avoidant infants show minimal to no stress upon separation, having cultivated hyper-independence and over self-reliance, and upon the parent's return actively avoid contact. These three different infant responses were traced to the relational quality of the parent's interactions—secure infants have parents who are sensitive and responsive to their needs; anxious and avoidant infants have parents who are insensitive, inconsistent, or rejecting in their care.¹⁴

Ainsworth's student Mary Main expanded into a fourth style of attachment that applies best to children with abusive or traumatizing experiences. Main's research also built on Bowlby's claims about how affective and cognitive models grow from repeated experiences with the primary caregiver and are extrapolated into future attachment-related interactions. Main investigated how one's attachment style in

¹² John Bowlby, "The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 39 (1958): 350–373; "Separation Anxiety," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 41 (1960): 89–113; "Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood," *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 60 (1960): 3–39. Ultimately, Bowlby integrates the contributions of his collaborators into his trilogy; see Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 1, *Attachment* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 2, *Separation: Anxiety and Anger* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 3, *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

¹³ Mary Ainsworth, *Infancy in Uganda: Infant Care and the Growth of Attachment* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 1967).

¹⁴ YouTube offers worthwhile videos of Ainsworth's "Strange Situation" experiments.

infancy extends into adulthood.¹⁵ Her pioneering Adult Attachment Interview in the 1970's–80's traces childhood attachment strategies into all adult contexts—romantic, familial, parental, professional, neighborly, political, and ecclesial.¹⁶ Alan Sroufe further confirmed Main's conclusions in the Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Childhood (“Minnesota Studies”) tracking the psychosocial outcomes of children longitudinally across four decades. Sroufe concludes that early experience is not deterministic yet always remains a part of the developmental landscape, leading to the widely accepted conclusion that while attachment style is by no means fixed, the pattern in infancy affects a child's developmental pathway.¹⁷ The Minnesota Studies establish strong associations between early attachment security and later personality features such as self-esteem, agency, self-confidence, and positive affect.¹⁸

In recent years, Attachment Theory has expanded into developmental affective neurobiology, developmental social-cognitive neurobiology, and emotional studies. This difference is sometimes described as that between classic and modern Attachment Theory, with proponents of the latter including Allan Schore, Daniel Siegel, and Daniel Hill.¹⁹ Suffice it to say, the sheer amount of

¹⁵ Mary Main, “The Organized Categories of Infant, Child, and Adult Attachment: Flexible vs. Inflexible Attention under Attachment-Related Stress,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 48, no. 4 (2000): 1055–1096.

¹⁶ Mary Main systematically studied infant-parent separations and pioneered the Adult Attachment Interview that established a cottage industry devoted to the same. See Carol George, Nancy Kaplan, and Mary Main, *Adult Attachment Interview*, unpublished manuscript, 3rd edition (Berkeley: University of California, 1996). For example, in the mid-1980's, Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver focus on romantic relationships in “Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 3 (1987): 511–524. Meanwhile, the stability and degree of overlap between parental attachment and romantic attachment is a source of ongoing debate within Attachment Theory.

¹⁷ L. Alan Sroufe, Brianna Coffino, and Elizabeth Carlson, “Conceptualizing the Role of Early Experience: Lessons from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study,” *Developmental Review* 30, no. 1 (2010): 36–51.

¹⁸ L. Alan Sroufe, “Attachment and Development: A Prospective, Longitudinal Study from Birth to Childhood,” in *Attachment and Human Development* 7, no. 4 (2005): 349–367.

¹⁹ Allan Schore pioneered affect regulation theory, an overarching psychoneurobiological model of early emotional development in *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self* (New York: Norton, 2003), *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development* (New York: Norton, 1994), and *Right Brain Psychotherapy* (New York: Norton, 2019). See also Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell, *Parenting from the Inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive* (New York: J. P. Tarcher/Penguin 2004); Daniel Siegel, *The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobiology of Interpersonal Experience* (New York: Guilford, 1999); and Daniel Hill, *Affect Regulation Theory: A Clinical Model* (New York: Norton, 2015).

literature on Attachment Theory is extensive, vast, and continually growing. In the seventy years since its inception, Bowlby's original framework for Attachment Theory remains intact as a stable classification of human attachment behavior. In this piece, I focus on classic Attachment Theory as containing the essential conceptual apparatus shared with contemporary Attachment Theorists.

Built into Attachment Theory is the ideal and goal—healthy interpersonal relationships expressed in secure attachment. Bowlby intuitively understands secure attachments as the wisdom to know how to love well. One route for secure attachment comes through consistent, predictable parental love, care, and comfort and effective repair of relational ruptures.²⁰ Such parenting creates Ainsworth's "secure base" in love that cultivates the grounds for the child's exploration of the world, affect regulation, other- and self-relationships, and "internal working model," which I describe below.²¹ However, it is also possible for those who develop insecure attachment to work their way back toward "earned secure attachment."²² Earned security comes from healing relationships—meaningful relationships with non-caregivers who help re-pattern one's nervous system and neural circuits, increasing affect regulation, and effectively re-organizing one's relationships. This model invokes habituation and plasticity in illuminating ways, while underscoring the interpersonal aspects of affect regulation.

For our purposes, I highlight Attachment Theory for its insight into love and anxiety as funneled through "anxious attachment."²³ Here the pattern of deficient self-love emerges most clearly. Anxious attachment is likely to arise when a child is left without a sense of known or felt safety, such as a mother interacting with her child unpredictably or being unreliable in times of need. The child forms an adaptive strategy to maintain a meaningful connection with their mother. On the one hand, the child becomes preoccupied with the promise of closeness to their mother. On the other, the child draws the

²⁰ Main, "Organized Categories," 1055–1096.

²¹ John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988).

²² Mary Ainsworth holds it possible for friendships to bring about attachment security ("Attachments beyond Infancy," *American Psychologist* 44, no. 4 [April 1989]: 709–716). The work of Allan Schore and Dan Siegel support earlier intuitions of Ainsworth and Main that childhood attachment wounds can be healed relationally. See Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell, *Parenting from the Inside Out*; Allan Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self*.

²³ "Anxious attachment" (John Bowlby) is also referred to as "ambivalent attachment" (Mary Ainsworth) or "preoccupied attachment" (Mary Main).

foregone conclusion that she is lost. Oscillating between the two, the child struggles to regulate their feelings without her.²⁴

From its inception, anxious attachment is adaptive and works its way into maladaptive territory.²⁵ Anxious attachment behavior has a positive goal of providing “felt security” and protection, in sum, self-preservation.²⁶ This behavior comes at considerable cost, however, as prioritizing connection over one’s own good translates to a loss of connection to self. Bowlby proposed the rich metaphor of an “internal working model,” by which a child forms images of *self* and *others*, a blueprint for future relationships; internal working models encompass and codify behaviors, cognitions, and emotions.²⁷ The internal working model incorporates the *self* model regarding one’s own sense of worth and lovability; and the *other* model embodies expectations of the availability and trustworthiness of others in one’s social world.²⁸ The implicit internal working model of the anxiously attached, formed in relationship with their caregivers, includes hyper-engagement with the relational environment, hypervigilance, and hyperactive and compromised mentalizing.²⁹ Their attention becomes riveted on relationships and scans for hints of danger. Meanwhile, they struggle with a knotty thread of interlocking deficits of self-esteem, self-worth, self-compassion, and self-love.³⁰

²⁴ Mary Main, “Attachment: Overview with Implications for Clinical Work,” in *Attachment Theory: Social, Developmental, and Clinical Perspectives*, ed. S. Goldberg, R. Muir, and J. Kerr (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic, 1995): 407–474.

²⁵ Within Attachment Theory, it is contested where the line stands between adaptive and maladaptive attachment behaviors. See L. Alan Sroufe, Brianna Coffino, and Elizabeth Carlson, “Conceptualizing the Role of Early Experience.”

²⁶ John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

²⁷ Bowlby, “The Nature of the Child’s Tie to His Mother.” From the evidence, internal working models seem kin to habituation; this would be a fruitful area of comparison using a Thomist account of habits such as Sullivan, *Habits and Holiness*.

²⁸ Frederick Lopez and Kelly Brennan, “Dynamic Processes Underlying Adult Attachment Organization: Toward an Attachment Theoretical Perspective on the Healthy and Effective Self,” *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 47 (2000): 285.

²⁹ Hill, *Affect Regulation Theory*, 137.

³⁰ That there are differences between securely and anxiously attached children is unchallenged, per the Minnesota Studies. However, the studies that offer supporting data do not always support a conceptually precise account of what these differences are. Research into these psychometric properties typically measure self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, while self-worth is generally addressed through Harter’s Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents; of recent note, these two scales are said to be “essentially measuring one rather than two different constructs.” See Morris Rosenberg, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); *Conceiving the Self* (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1986); Susan Harter, “The Perceived Competence Scale for Children,” *Child Development* 53 (1982): 87–97; Winston Hagborg, “The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and Harter’s Self-Perception

Bowlby found that unfortunately the internal working model of anxious children proves rigid and difficult to update. Anxiously attached children have no experience or model of secure relating, and when steady loving comes their way, they have trouble recognizing or even wanting to recognize it. The pattern with their caregiver described in the previous paragraphs applies to other relationships and trails them into adulthood. Anxiously attached adults look to others for emotional regulation, a sense of ease and identity; yoked with that overreliance is a lurking fear that they will cease to be loved or be disappointed. Overreliance on others often leads to relational breakdown. Others will either fail to meet the neediness of the anxiously attached or refuse to do so. Ultimately, the anxious push them away for failing this impossible task. Their choice of relationships sets up this dynamic, as they tend to seek out relational experiences that fulfill their relational scripts—expectations and beliefs about attachment relationships. In their habitual preoccupation with others, whether clinging or hostile, the ideal of self-connection, self-regard, and self-love that makes healthy interdependence and mutuality possible seems nowhere to be found. Leonard Cohen captures their predicament in his beautiful and heartbreaking turn of phrase, “leaning out for love.”³¹

Recall our hypothetical anxiously attached father. Attachment Theory gives much attention to his own infancy and childhood as a contributing source of his anxious patterning. He is among a significant minority—across all demographics and cultures, scholars estimate the anxiously attached to be 6–22 percent of the population.³² For instance, 19 percent of adults agree that this characterizes the way they think, feel, and behave in close relationships: “I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner does not really love me or will not want to stay with me. I want to get very close to my partner, and sometimes this scares people away.”³³ Thus the anxious father’s longing for deep connection and strong desires to be close carry an intensity that veers into defensive dependence and over-reliance on others. This sets him up for unfulfilled relational needs in marriage and friendships, from clinging

Profile for Adolescents: A Concurrent Validity Study,” *Psychology in the Schools* 30, no. 2 (1993): 132.

³¹ Leonard Cohen, “Suzanne” (1966). Robert Karen reviews the strategies and defenses of anxiously attached children in *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), chap. 17.

³² George, Kaplan, and Main, *Adult Attachment Interview*; Kristin Mickelson, Ronald Kessler, and Phillip Shaver, “Adult Attachment in a Nationally Representative Sample,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 5 (1997): 1092–1106.

³³ Hazan and Schaver, “Romantic Love Conceptualized,” 515.

to hostility, in the wake of others' inability to fulfill his extensive emotional demands. Times of stress and difficult emotions tend to exacerbate relational fractures. His "internal working models" contribute to everyday struggles in parenting and his tendency is also likely to create insecure attachment in his children. While his attachment pattern preoccupies him with others, he has reduced capacity to accurately comprehend or serve their genuine good. His relationality is subconsciously aimed at shoring up his own needs, rather than giving himself in love.

Terminological Distinctions

Before integrating the foregoing insights of Attachment Theory on deficient self-love into a Thomistic framework, let me first clarify three key terms of engagement—attachment, anxiety, and love.

Within Attachment Theory, "attachment" refers to the emotional bond arising in close interpersonal relationships.³⁴ The primary sense of attachment derives from a child and their caregiver, which becomes an attachment pattern manifest in all interpersonal relationships. Attachment Theorists occasionally address attachment to external goods in the widest, diffuse, and tertiary sense, with the working thesis that our attachments to things correspond with our attachments to people.³⁵ I also examine how attachment in interpersonal relations forms the seedbed for intrapersonal emotion. Ultimately, I stick with Attachment Theorists' primary notion of attachment and expand its theological implications. Theologians have a long running preoccupation with "attachments" to objects and the ordering of desire, often in a neo-Platonic sense. This meaning of attachment denotes a tertiary sense of being attached to objects and things. Thomists attend to interpersonal attachment implicitly through the lens of virtue. This article builds a bridge between Attachment Theory's treatment of "attachment" relationships and Thomas's nuanced and developmental account of virtue.³⁶

³⁴ Another common use of attachment arises with the philosophy of "attachment parenting" (William Sears and Martha Sears). Contrary to widespread assumptions, attachment parenting and Attachment Theory (John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Mary Main, etc.) are not substantively related, nor has secure attachment shown to be correlated with attachment parenting.

³⁵ For example, Lopez and Brennan describe the self-reporting of individuals with an insecure attachment (either anxious or avoidant) as more likely to use food, sex, and alcohol to quell negative emotions in "Dynamic Processes Underlying Adult Attachment Organization," 288.

³⁶ To clarify potential confusion, Bowlby is anti-dependency. He critiques the term and concept of dependency as carrying implications that are "the exact opposite of those that the term 'attachment' not only conveys but is intended to convey" in *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 1, 228–229; see also "Attachment and Loss: Retrospect and Prospect," 667–670. Bowlby is anti-psychoanalytic and espoused Thomas Kuhn's

Thomas and attachment literature appear compatible in describing “anxiety” as evaluative cognition anticipating the threat of loss, sometimes unconscious, with somatic components.³⁷ Thomas discusses how anxiety is a natural response to the prospect of loss and is thus itself neutral (ST I-II q. 36, a. 1; q. 41, a. 4). Context dictates the moral goodness or badness of any given passion. Indeed, in Attachment Theory, anxiety assumes a negative valence when relationships shift from the adaptive sphere to maladaptive patterning. Anxious attachment behaviors can become habitual, affecting one’s characteristic actions, cognitions, and emotions described in Bowlby’s internal working model. I distinguish between everyday and pathological anxiety that the DSM-5 classifies as “anxiety disorders,” such as general anxiety disorder and social anxiety disorder.³⁸ Rather than pathological anxiety, I focus on everyday anxiety as it arises within interpersonal relationships—that is, anxiety regarding attachment relationships.³⁹ Contrary to assumptions, the feeling of anxiety does not automatically signal anxious attachment. Both anxious and avoidant attachment types deal with anxiety—in anxious attachment, anxiety concerns preoccupation with potential relational rupture and emotional over-dependency; in avoidant attachment, anxiety concerns a potential loss of independence and autonomy. Thus, my concern in this piece is not anxiety as-such, but specifically anxiety about

notion of paradigm shifts and conceptual frameworks to account for how radically different his theory is. See Alasdair MacIntyre’s qualified embrace of dependency in *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (London: Duckworth, 1999) and critique of the therapist and the social sciences in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Throughout his career, MacIntyre demonstrates a philosophically complex relationship to psychotherapy through his engagements with Freud, Erikson, Winnicott, Klein, and Lacan.

³⁷ Differences between emotion, passion, and affection enjoy a lively debate within histories of emotion. While in general I appreciate arguments that are more historicist (which would translate to using “passions,” intellectual affections, and sensory affections for Thomas), I also see that modern “emotion” is a broad term that encompasses both passions and affections. I accept that differences in theories—Thomas on passion, Bowlby on emotion, neurobiologists on affect—merit granular attention. See Amélie Rorty, “From Passions to Emotions and Sentiments,” *Philosophy* 57, no. 220 (1982): 159–172; Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Nicholas Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

³⁸ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric, 2013).

³⁹ There remain controversies within Attachment Theory about drawing meaningful correlations between attachment category and pathology. For a short history of Attachment Theorists on pathological anxiety diagnoses, see Karen, *Becoming Attached*, 391–393.

relationships.⁴⁰ Attachment Theory offers a great deal of insight into anxiety's relational origins, behavioral and cognitive patterns, and distortions of love.

Finally, and most critically, "love." Bowlby, the originator of Attachment Theory, describes love as bonding in an undifferentiated, more operationalized sense. At times, he and Ainsworth both seem inclined to use attachment and love interchangeably.⁴¹ In contrast, Thomas brings precision to a definition of "love" (*amor*) as the concupiscible passion that moves us toward the good and "charity" (*caritas*) as the habitual disposition of friendship—love of God, and neighbor and self in God. Thomas writes a great deal about the kinds of love and its vast scope, natural and supernatural. Thomists insist on the value of genuine self-love, a consistent tether amid centuries' worth of Christian temptations to forgo self-love altogether.⁴² So it is worthwhile to expand Thomas's already expansive treatment of self-love.

In popular psychology circles, self-love is synonymous with face masks and bubble baths. It draws fire as trivial and contemptuous.⁴³ This is a red herring. Deficient self-love bears grave moral import for everyone. That some self-diminish ought to prompt sorrow in Christians. It divides them from God and us from one another. Thomas writes, "Charity can have an admixture of sadness, viz., insofar as someone is saddened by what works against participation in the divine

⁴⁰ For a Thomist-friendly account of fear and anxiety, embodied emotion, and neurobiology, see Matthew LaPine, *The Logic of the Body: Retrieving Theological Psychology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), chap. 8, "Book of Nature: Embodied Emotion."

⁴¹ John Bowlby, "The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds," in *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (London: Routledge, 1976–1977/2005), 150–88; Mary Ainsworth, "Object Relations, Dependency, and Attachment: A Theoretical Review of the Infant-Mother Relationship," *Child Development* 40 (1969): 969–1025. Stephen Stratton argues that attachment rather supports the conditions to grow in love, and identifies the obstacles that hinder it in "Self, Attachment, and Agency: Love and the Trinitarian Concept of Personhood," in Paul Vitz and Susan Felch, eds., *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006): 247–268.

⁴² This debate stretches back to Duns Scotus and William of Ockham's selfless love, described in Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

⁴³ Attachment Theory accounts for habitual disregard of the inner experience of others and an inability to read the subjective mental life of others as characteristic of an avoidant attachment, which values independence and cultivates general aloofness from others as a self-protective strategy (Siegel, *The Developing Mind*, 287–290). This is accompanied by a natural tendency toward excessive self-love, well attested in Thomistic scholarship.

good either in us or in our neighbors, whom we love as ourselves” (ST II-II q. 28, a. 2).⁴⁴

THOMISTS ON SELF-LOVE, DEFICIENT SELF-LOVE, AND SELF-DIMINISHMENT

For Thomas, self-love is natural, necessary, and good (ST I q. 60, a. 3). Thomas and Thomists hold that everyone enjoys self-love, the moral life aims to check its excesses, and good relationships stem from genuine self-love. Self-love forms a critical animating principle of how we desire, search for happiness, and love others. Self-love informs a coherent interlocking system of morality and human action. Luigi Bogliolo claims: “There is nothing more natural than love of oneself; nothing is more secure, nothing is more evident in our daily experience.”⁴⁵ Yet this may not be true for the anxiously attached. They will search in vain within Thomas or Thomistic literature for relevant moral advice to identify their own tendencies and provide constructive steps forward. This section substantiates the current gap in Thomistic literature and proposes the term “self-diminishment” to fill it.

Before I proceed, I offer an additional set of terminological clarifications situated broadly within moral discourses. The Christian ideal is variously described as kenosis, self-emptying, agape, selflessness, and self-transcendence. Indeed, these terms have their own histories and contentions.⁴⁶ From here on, I describe the Christian

⁴⁴ See Pope Francis’s metaphor of the church as a field hospital in “A Big Heart Open to God,” interview with Antonio Spadaro, *America*, September 30, 2013, americamagazine.org/pope-interview; William Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital: The Church’s Engagement in a Wounded World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016). See also the knitting together of individual wounds into communal responsibility in Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

⁴⁵ Luigi Bogliolo, “Sulla fondazione tomista della morale,” in *Tommaso d’Aquino nel suo settimo centenario: Atti del Congresso Internazionale* (Rome-Naples, April 17–24, 1974), *L’agire morale* (Naples: Edizione Domenicane Italiane, 1977), 109.

⁴⁶ Christian feminists maintain a longstanding discourse that intensifies and clarifies concepts surrounding deficient self-love in excessive self-sacrifice, and the ultimate result would seem to be a distinct intensification of certain claims from Attachment Theory. Sarah Coakley and Ruth Groenhout offered a paradigm shift for feminist kenosis in Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Ruth Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, ed. C. S. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Erin Lothes Biviano retrieves a relational and kenotic anthropology in *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice: The Loss of Self, the Gift of Self* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2007). Anna Mercedes interrogates power and feminist Christology in *Power For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving* (London: T. & T.

ideal as virtuous “self-sacrifice,” springing from genuine self-love. There is also much writing on the vices of pride, cupidity, egoism, selfishness, self-preference, and self-centeredness. These, too, have their own histories and contentions.⁴⁷ Here I choose the term “self-centeredness” to capture the vice of excessive self-love. Finally, the vices springing from deficient self-love include selflessness (as a vice), unselfishness, altruism, self-abnegation, and self-annihilation. These terms are explored extensively by Christian feminists, and below I note Thomist engagement. Ultimately, I denote the condition of deficient self-love as “self-diminishment.” I am committed to self-diminishment as a name where it proves illuminating, and nothing beyond.

Thomists on Self-Love

Thomas offers several treatments of self-love within the *Summa Theologiae*, e.g., the angels and angelic nature (ST I q. 60), the natural inclination of the will (ST I q. 82), love as a passion (ST I-II qq. 26–28), as the cause of sin (ST I-II q. 77), and charity (ST II-II qq. 23–27). Even this is a narrow sampling. Going further, Thomists argue that Thomas bakes self-love into the will ontologically. One desires one’s own good and enjoys an inclination toward beatitude. All desire extends out of an initial grounding in self-love.⁴⁸ Others argue that self-love forms the very basis for the self, including all of one’s experience and subjectivity. One’s relationship to oneself orders all other love relations.⁴⁹ Others indicate how the whole structure of Thomas’s ethics lies on a bedrock of self-love.⁵⁰ They enlist classic Thomistic themes of anthropology, psychology, nature and grace, ontology, and teleology.

Initially, I hoped to sketch the current terms of the debate by surveying Thomas and his exegetes on self-love. This is a daunting task. One brief example conveys why. A classic discussion Thomas invokes centers on the twin kinds of love, *amor amicitiae* (loving

Clark, 2011). Annie Selak charts the development of this conversation to date, drawing on many of the authors above, and proposes a comprehensive feminist theological view of kenosis rooted in Jon Sobrino in “Orthodoxy, Orthopraxis, and Orthopathy: Evaluating the Feminist Kenosis Debate,” *Modern Theology* 33, no. 4 (2017): 529–548.

⁴⁷ In addition to the sources cited in footnote 52, John Lippitt summarizes contributions from moral philosophy to date in “True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice,” *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion* 66 (2009): 125–138.

⁴⁸ David M. Gallagher, “Thomas Aquinas on Self-Love as the Basis for Love of Others,” *Acta Philosophica* 8 (1999): 23–44.

⁴⁹ Anthony Flood, *The Root of Friendship: Self-Love and Self-Governance in Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

⁵⁰ Stephen Pope, “Expressive Individualism and True Self-Love: A Thomistic Perspective,” *Journal of Religion* 71, 3 (1991): 355–372.

simply and for itself; loving that for which one wills the good) and *amor concupiscentiae* (loving for something else; loving the good that is willed). At a most fundamental level, these twin loves apply to oneself—loving oneself as beloved and beatitude for oneself. Thomas invokes this distinction often (e.g., ST I q. 60, a. 3; I-II q. 2, a. 7, ad 2; II-II q. 27, a. 2). Self-love is more than preserved in *amor amicitiae*. Rather, self-love is its lively basis and vital principle. This principle extends by being united to others in love. *Amor amicitiae* names relating to others in loving them and *amor concupiscentiae* is taking their good as our own. The lover and beloved are affectively one and will the same goods (e.g., ST I q. 60, a. 4; I-II q. 28; II-II q. 25). These two principles become entwined and animate a wide-ranging discussion across the *Summa*: (1) to love one's own good is to love oneself, and (2) "friendship with another stems from friendship with oneself."⁵¹ Self-love furnishes the basis for relating to ourselves and others, constituting the background belief for Thomistic claims about the human person and ethics.

Self-love is continually formed and re-formed in the process of character formation and moral growth. While Thomists will come to depend on a developmental moral psychology to discuss the growth of self-love, their starting point is self-love.⁵² Prior to habituation and intentional activity, the ontological basis of the self is self-love. Self-love is yet another notion that is ubiquitous, presupposed, and silently at work throughout the *Summa*.

Thomists on Deficient Self-Love

Thomists lavish attention on excessive self-love in detailed and careful analyses of *superbia*, *cupiditas*, and related vices. In comparison, they exhaust their treatments of deficient self-love in a paragraph or concession. Their engagements with deficient self-love surface in conversations with modern philosophers or other ecclesial communities, suggesting that deficient self-love finds its conceptual home elsewhere. Following Thomas, they identify disordered self-love, inordinate self-love, and false self-love with excessive self-love.⁵³

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1166a 1–2; Aquinas, *De Caritate* a. 7 ad 11; *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, chap. 153; ST I q. 60, a. 3, s. c.; II-II q. 25, a. 4; II-II q. 26, a. 3, ob. 1.

⁵² Flood, *The Root of Friendship*.

⁵³ See previous footnotes 47–50 and 69. See also Jennifer Frey, "Aquinas on Sin, Self-Love, and Transcendence," in *Self-Transcendence and Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, ed. Jennifer Frey and Candace Vogler (London: Routledge, 2018), ebook.

Yet the range of false self-love surely includes its excesses and deficiencies. This section highlights the moments where Thomists broach deficient self-love. Here is a survey:

- *Self-deprecation* minimizes the love of self in view of the other.⁵⁴ Self-deprecation is a comparative lessening of the self. It devalues oneself and loving oneself within the *ordo amoris*.
- *Forgetfulness* is setting aside the self, becoming oblivious of ourselves. It is kin to (one problematic version of) “selflessness,” and distinct from (Jennifer Frey’s ideal of saintly) “self-transcendence.”⁵⁵ Forgetfulness loses the self to benefit and dissolves self-love.
- *Disinterested love* disregards one’s own beatitude while actively loving the other. Disinterested love has no active investment in one’s own good. In sum, this resonates with modern altruism.⁵⁶
- *Unselfishness* focuses on the highest good as God to the point of eradicating every trace of self-love. The Puritan Samuel Hopkins and Blaise Pascal invoke *resignatio ad infernum* and “love God only and hate self only” to extinguish love for self. Unselfishness is distinct from (Stephen Pope’s ideal of) “selflessness.”⁵⁷ Unselfishness appears to be theologically motivated self-contempt.
- *Self-hatred* is impossible, metaphysically (ST I-II q. 29, a. 4). This would be to will (not just things that are bad, but) evil toward oneself. All our acts are chosen *sub ratione boni*, not as evil. These extreme cases are marked by a person still choosing a secondary or partial good within an intrinsically evil act, or loving a lower part over the higher. As Miner writes: “‘Should we love ourselves?’ is a pseudo-question. The only real question is ‘In what manner should we love ourselves?’”⁵⁸

Self-hatred is a legitimate topic within the *Summa*, yet it is dismissed out of hand as a metaphysical impossibility. Unselfishness may also be a nonstarter—it is self-hatred for the sake of love of God, and such self-hatred was already described as metaphysically impossible. Disinterested love is often rejected for similar reasons, as Thomas “would never suggest that one is *disinterested* in one’s own happiness or perfection. Rather, one is necessarily (by nature) ordained to one’s happiness or perfection. This necessity is baked into

⁵⁴ Meghan Clark, “Love of God and Neighbor: Living Charity in Aquinas’s Ethics,” *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1040 (2011): 419. I am not enamored of the language of value, yet it seems to capture something worthwhile as a shorthand for the order of love.

⁵⁵ Frey, “Aquinas on Sin, Self-Love, and Transcendence,” Section V (ebook).

⁵⁶ Jennifer Frey, “Was Leibniz an Egoist?,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 54, no. 4 (October 2016): 601–624.

⁵⁷ Pope, “Expressive Individualism and True Self-Love,” 389.

⁵⁸ Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae Ia2ae 22–48* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 147.

his account of self-movement and the metaphysics of substance.”⁵⁹ Taken together, the impression is that these concepts sit at odds with Thomas’s commitments.

Working through the list above, forgetfulness and self-deprecation seem to be the only workable possibilities for deficient self-love by Thomists. Forgetfulness could find traction in Augustinian terms.⁶⁰ Augustine discusses a veritable range of self-love (*amor sui*) with negative, positive, and neutral moral connotations.⁶¹ Self-deprecation also seems viable. Self-deprecation is Meghan Clark’s term to capture the opposite of Thomistic charity. Clark’s overall project is to emphasize that living charity is best expressed in the active love of neighbor. As she writes about the order of charity, from which to live and guide acts of charity, she clarifies that charity is not self-deprecation. This summarizes the entirety of Clark’s treatment of self-deprecation, minus two supporting quotations from II-II q. 26, a. 4 and the twofold Scriptural commandment to love:

Charity, as explained by Aquinas, is union not self-deprecation. In accordance with his ethical theory as a whole, Aquinas maintains the importance of love of self and value of oneself. ... The reference point for charity is always ultimately God; one loves out of a relationship with or participation in the Divine. It is also the mandate given by Jesus in the love commandment. ... The important element which Aquinas is emphasizing here is that implicit within the love command is the command to love oneself. While he does not cite this here, it is the operative framework behind the entire treatise on charity. Love of oneself is a priority for one’s personal relationship with God and one’s soul.⁶²

Thus, self-deprecation minimizes loving and valuing oneself, what we might call deficient self-love and deficient self-worth. Clark’s account has the benefit of seeming to assume a self with intentionality and deliberative choice, something that seems eclipsed by forgetfulness. To be clear, this is the entirety of Clark’s account, confined to a paragraph. Still, hers is a uniquely helpful clarification. Clark echoes Thomas as she outlines the human ideal—when one’s existence is cherished as God’s beloved, one is loved for one’s own sake, and can properly love. Ultimately, this account remains rooted in Thomas’s positive contribution to the conditions of true charity and leaves us to infer ways in which we might go wrong.

⁵⁹ Frey, “Aquinas on Sin, Self-Love, and Transcendence.”

⁶⁰ See e.g., Augustine, *Sermo* 142.3; 34.7; *De Trinitate* 14.14.18.

⁶¹ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 2.

⁶² Clark, “Love of God and Neighbor,” 419–420.

Thomistic Self-Diminishment

In short order, I define self-diminishment as the vice of deficient self-love. To be deficient in self-love is to fail to love oneself, to devalue oneself, to set oneself aside, to leave unfulfilled the twofold command to love. Even if we confine ourselves to the brief treatments above, it seems there are numerous ways of being deficient in self-love—self-deprecation, forgetfulness, or (perhaps) unselfishness. As arranged within the list above, they also seem to suggest a spectrum of intensity from lesser to greater. Similarly, Sarah Coakley analyzes the “‘family resemblance’ sliding scale of meanings” from innocuous to a vicious extreme—self-risk, self-limitation, self-annihilation.⁶³

It may be possible to assemble these modes of deficient self-love under a shared umbrella, and here I propose the concept of “self-diminishment.”⁶⁴ These various ways seem to qualify as kinds of self-diminishment, as species to genus. Self-diminishment captures the vicious moral mistake that results in everything from self-deprecation to unselfishness, from self-limitation to self-annihilation. Annihilation, deprecation, and contempt are all mistakes in the *ordo amoris*. The logic of vice pertains. The greater the degree of self-diminishment, the more harm.

Thomas writes in ST q. 60, a. 3: “A man naturally desires his own good and his own perfection; and this is what it is to love oneself”; this might be augmented: *an anxious man desires others’ good and their perfection and this is what it is to love anxiously*. In the pairing of Attachment Theory and Thomism, we can now say that those who self-diminish conceive of their good and their happiness as located primarily in human connection at the expense of the self. As these concepts find their way into the framework of Thomistic vices, many other entailments come to the fore about habituation, the virtue of charity as genuine self-love, and so on.

To illustrate, we may situate the anxiously attached father’s struggles with self-love in the scheme of vices—his emotional pattern is deficient self-love, and his moral challenge is self-diminishment.

⁶³ Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 203. For an embrace of Christian annihilation, contrast Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1952), and Marta Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology: The Challenge of Gianni Vattimo* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1998).

⁶⁴ I choose the term “self-diminishment” over “self-deprecation.” While etymology does not fix meaning, it provides witness to a muddled history. The Middle English Dictionary definition of *deprecacioun* is “prayer to avert evil.” See *diminishen*: “(a) To reduce (sth.) in magnitude, diminish, lessen; (b) to lessen (sth.) in esteem, detract from.” Thus “diminishment” seems to better capture the notion we are going for, while preserving the option of self-deprecation. The term is not without issues, such as those identified in footnote 66.

There are multiple ways he may self-diminish, such as forgetfulness or self-annihilation. To take this example further, this hypothetical father receives an advanced stage cancer diagnosis just before the start of summer. Forgetfulness serves as a mild degree of self-diminishment and self-annihilation signals a most extreme degree. Were he *forgetful* in the sense described above, he may slip into denial. When he receives his cancer diagnosis, he may take in the information cognitively and under the influence of old emotional patterns, default to diminishing the seriousness of his diagnosis and treatment. He accounts only for the happy prospect of the summer family vacation, playing with his children in the backyard, and the excitement of the schoolyear to come. He becomes oblivious of his own good and consumed in the familial good. This father forgets that there is a self to benefit, who takes part in the familial good he cares about so much, a self who very much needs to be tended to and cared for. Were he to *self-annihilate* in the sense described above, he may have denial embedded in more complicated defense mechanisms. He may reject the validity of his cancer diagnosis, actively conceal the fact altogether, or become angry if it were discovered. He may even behave in ways detrimental to his health. Self-annihilation would appear nonsensical and counterintuitive as a conscious self-sabotaging strategy, yet it makes sense as a subconscious attempt to meet overriding emotional needs. On some level, he opposes the fundamental unity of self-love and other-love. Self-annihilation severs the connection between the good of the self and the familial good. Thus, we have two versions of the self-diminishing father, forgetfulness being a mild degree of deficient self-love and self-annihilation being a severe degree of deficient self-love. Moving forward, self-diminishment works as a catch-all concept that names a variety of ways we can fall short of genuine love.

The vice of self-diminishment is easily confused with the virtue of self-sacrifice. Aristotle helps clarify that this is in fact an extreme state that appears somewhat like the intermediate state.⁶⁵ Here I apply Aristotle's classic treatment of the mean and extreme states to self-diminishment—we have the mean attained by genuine self-love (self-sacrifice) and the two extremes of excessive self-love (self-centeredness) and deficient self-love (self-diminishment). Aristotle's formula is illustrative: the self-sacrificing person appears self-diminishing in comparison to the self-centered person; the self-sacrificing person appears self-centered in comparison to the self-diminishing person. In the terms of this discussion, the self-sacrificing

⁶⁵ The following paragraph is patterned on Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1108b–1109a.

person is neither self-diminishing nor self-centered.⁶⁶ Also, Aristotle explains that each of the extreme people tries to push the intermediate person to the other extreme—the self-diminishing person calls the self-sacrificing person self-centered, and the self-centered person calls the self-sacrificing person self-diminishing. Neither the self-diminishing person nor the self-centered person is correct about genuine self-love. Attachment Theory attests to the anxiously attached person's characteristic distortions of perception and expectations in the penultimate section.

Aristotle's mean and extreme states invite a brief return to the self-diminishing father. The fundamental difference between him and the self-sacrificing ideal is genuine self-love. He lacks genuine self-love, namely charity that leads to authentically self-giving actions. Aristotle suggests that the self-diminishing father may even regard the self-sacrificing person as self-centered due to their comparative abundance of self-love. Just as the self-centered person cannot mount the appropriate measure of other-regard, the self-diminishing father struggles with the necessary measure of self-regard. In fact, I will go on to explain in the next section how the self-diminishing father is incorrect about the necessary measure of self- *and* other-regard. I do this, in addition to further consideration of the theological differences between self-diminishment and self-sacrifice in the next section.

Thomas illustrates in his writing on martyrdom how the greatest acts of noble self-sacrifice imply great love, namely, charity (ST II-II q. 124, a. 2). Charity is the virtue of cultivating genuine-self-love and supports acts of virtuous self-sacrifice, whereas self-diminishment names a condition of being deficient in self-love. This provides moral grist for reflection. To start, it would seem charity can mitigate, redirect, and elevate tendencies toward self-diminishment. There also must be practices for cultivating genuine self-love. There remains much to fill out in charting the path in moral development from self-diminishment to self-sacrifice.

REFINING SELF-DIMINISHMENT: EXPANSION INTO THE COMMON GOOD

If the vice of self-diminishment merits a place among the Thomistic vices, how might we use Thomistic concepts to develop it

⁶⁶ In the terms laid out, "self-diminishment" names a vice. Tempting as it is to say the self-centered person needs to "diminish" to attain genuine self-sacrifice, we would not say that a rash person needs some cowardice to be brave. Rather, the self-centered person needs less of the emotion or sphere of behavior that the virtue regulates, viz., self-love. By contrast, John Lippitt concludes that for Christians to check the slide from true self-sacrifice into self-annihilation, they must counter-intuitively cultivate pride in "True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice," 126.

further? I examine an entry point within existing Thomistic literature that could provide a home for self-diminishment—Charles De Koninck’s retrieval of the common good. His rich treatment of Thomas’s part/whole relation reveals the plasticity of that distinction, which applies at different levels such as individual/group or creation/Creator. Thus, De Koninck’s contribution helps develop a specifically theological account of self-diminishment. As an unexpected bonus, De Koninck’s work also hints at why self-diminishment has been so little featured in Thomistic thought to date.

Love of self is the sticky tape of friendship, rooted deep within the *Summa*. Thomas echoes Aristotle, “The friendly regard (*amicabilia*) directed toward the other comes from the friendly regard that is directed toward oneself.”⁶⁷ This seems to suggest that self-love is the inescapable basis for all other-love. Thomas rewrites Aristotle’s prominent claim on self-love theologically. Thomas replies: “The Philosopher is talking about friendly regard for another in whom the good that is the object of friendship is found in some *particular* mode, but not about friendly regard for another in whom this good is found with the character of the *whole*.”⁶⁸ In God resides the totality of good. Thus, Thomas re-interprets this seminal quote by tracing how one comes to love God, the Common Good, more than oneself.

The theological common good is highlighted by Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, and of more recent note, Thomas Osborne, Ezra Sullivan, and Jordan Olver.⁶⁹ These interpreters attend the texts by Thomas we have cited on natural love in the *Summa* with additional works such as *Commentary on the Sentences* and *Questiones Quodlibetales*.⁷⁰ Thomas develops his claims about loving God as a common good by invoking the part/whole relationship. He embeds this relationship in a series of arguments, by which he holds that every part is more strongly inclined to a whole to which it belongs than to itself; the part naturally loves the whole above their individual good.⁷¹ There are natural wholes for which parts will willingly give

⁶⁷ ST II-II q. 26, a. 3, ob. 1; trans. Alfred Freddoso, www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm.

⁶⁸ ST II-II q. 26, a. 3, ad 1; trans. Alfred Freddoso.

⁶⁹ See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, *The Love of God and the Cross of Jesus*, 2 vols., trans. Jean Marie (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1947–1951); Thomas Osborne, *Love of Self and Love of God in Thirteenth-Century Ethics* (St. Louis: Herder, 1947); Ezra Sullivan, “Natural Self-Transcending Love according to Thomas Aquinas,” *Nova et Vetera* 12, no. 3 (2014): 913–946; Jordan Olver, “Love of God above Self,” *The Thomist* 80 (2016): 97–131. See Étienne Gilson, *L’esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1932).

⁷⁰ Osborne surveys these relevant texts in *Love of Self and Love of God*, 69–112; Olver does similarly in “Love of God above Self,” 103–111.

⁷¹ ST II-II q. 48, a. 10, ad 2; see also Sullivan, “Natural Self-Transcending Love,” 917.

themselves. Thomas's examples are the hand that sacrifices itself for the sake of the body; the citizen who sacrifices herself for the sake of the city; and the individual who sacrifices herself for the preservation of the species. There is an intelligible logic and account of volition informing such self-sacrifice—part for the whole. The part loves the whole more than itself because the part finds its perfection in the whole as imperfect to perfect, incomplete to complete.

We return to the example of a father who loves his family. In a virtuous version, he takes his good as the common good, the family, which lies outside himself. His investment in his family is not as an extension of himself. He loves them for their own sake. In loving his family, he primarily wishes for the good of his family; secondarily, he desires its good for himself. So far as this goes, this is all good. Our primary way of discussing this father, however, is in his *self-diminishing* capacity. The self-diminishing father values the family as a whole and devalues himself as a part. He devotes himself to the good of the family and diminishes his own good. He neglects himself as participating in that family. A part should love itself for the sake of the whole (ST I-II q. 109, a. 3).

Given how individual parts relate to natural wholes, that much more so do individuals relate to the whole good. For the Thomists named above, it is important to trace this argument through to its teleological conclusion: God is the Common Good of all.⁷² All good belongs to the universal good. Every created good is contained therein—part to whole. Ezra Sullivan quotes John Capreolus: "The cause of natural love is not merely union or unity of what is loved with the one loving, but rather the lover's being contained in being and goodness by the thing loved. In this way God contains every creature in being and goodness more than the creature is contained by itself."⁷³ The good of the part is found more wholly in God. The good of the whole is more the good of the part than its own good is.

We return to the self-diminishing father. Initially, it may seem that his love occurs at the natural level. The father-family example is a part/whole relation intelligible according to the good of nature. It would not seem to need the supernatural level. Perhaps our account of self-diminishment need not resort to theological inflections of the common good? Yet Thomas claims that God is the Common Good of

⁷² Olver argues that Thomas develops his argument from God as our whole, as Rousselot claims, to God as the common good of our whole in "Love of God above Self," 113.

⁷³ Capreolus, *Defensiones Theologiae Divi Thomae Aquinatis*, vol. 5, lib. III, d. 27, ed. Paban-Pègues (Turonibus: Stumptibus Alfred Cattier, 1905), cited in Sullivan, "Natural Self-Transcending Love," 918.

all creatures.⁷⁴ For human creatures, this includes natural and supernatural goods. Thomas commits to the coordination of our natural and supernatural ends, continuous though differentiated.⁷⁵ Particular goods are good by participation in God, the infinite universal good.⁷⁶ The father's good and our good both participate in the good wholly possessed by God.

A novel claim comes to the surface—genuine self-love is a theological matter. At this moment, we hit upon a unique value in resourcing Thomas on the workings of love. For Thomas, God is essential for articulating a coherent account of other-love; by the same token, God is the vital heart of a robust account of self-love.⁷⁷ God unites us with others, and us with ourselves. By loving ourselves in God, we love ourselves with the same love with which God loves us. Thus, self-love comes into its own via a theological route—whole to part, complete to incomplete, perfect to imperfect—as the whole good reveals the dignity of the individual good. Divine love gives vitality to all other loves. It may help underscore the affective aspects of this love, that the encounter with God affects one's entire being.⁷⁸ Accordingly, Thomas places his classic account of (natural!) self-love in its three kinds in the questions on charity. One might go further in arguing that genuine self-love is infused.

Taking a step back, there is one intriguing explanation as to why few scholars explore the part/whole argument in the mid-twentieth-century: the threat of totalitarianism. These mid-century Thomists were concerned that the individual good not be reduced to the collective, the good of the part not dissolved within the good of the

⁷⁴ Olver notes that this is a claim unique to Thomas in the medieval discussion about the natural love of God—that it is possible for all creatures—in “Love of God above Self,” 113, n. 35.

⁷⁵ For example, Jean-Hervé Nicholas, OP, *Les profondeurs de la grâce* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1969), 331–397, cited in Osborne, *Love of Self and Love of God*, 72.

⁷⁶ Osborne, *Love of Self and Love of God*, 110.

⁷⁷ Some interpreters such as Avital Wohlman and Dom Gregory Stevens illustrate this well, describing love of God as leading to love of self; e.g., Avital Wohlman, “Amour du bien propre et amour de soi dans la doctrine thomiste de l’amour,” *Revue Thomiste* 81 (1981): 204–234; Dom Gregory Stevens, “The Disinterested Love of God according to Saint Thomas and Some of His Modern Interpreters,” *The Thomist* 16 (1953): 307–333, 497–541. If the response to this proposal is to prooftext Thomas’s writing, likely centered on texts cited in footnote 51, it is most likely to reinscribe the original problems interpreters set out to address. That said, an account that carves out a new space for deficient self-love needs to attend to classic Thomistic claims about the root of natural and supernatural love of God in self-love; e.g., Gallagher, “Thomas Aquinas on Self-Love”; Christopher Malloy, *Aquinas on the Beatific Charity and the Problem of Love* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019).

⁷⁸ Daniel DiLeo cites St. Francis of Assisi, *Deus Caritas Est*, and *Laudato Si’* to this effect in “Catholic Social Teaching, Love, and Thomistic Moral Precepts,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 8, no. 2 (2019): 75.

whole. Not only does this carry menacing political consequences, it also describes the interpersonal dynamics that the anxiously attached internalize through patterning. This debate runs parallel with why Thomists have insufficiently theorized self-diminishment to date. This knotty debate in Thomistic political philosophy circles involves Mortimer Adler, William Farrell, Jacques Maritain, and Charles De Koninck. Adler, Farrell, and Maritain emphasize that Thomas does not reduce the individual good to the common good, downplaying or rejecting his commentary on part/whole relations. For instance, Maritain vaunted “personalist” accounts of the private good; meanwhile, Adler reconciled himself to a paradoxically “selfish” account of Thomas’s ethics.⁷⁹ De Koninck not only retrieves an authentic part/whole relation shorn of totalitarianism but also offers lasting takeaways inspiring Thomists of recent note.⁸⁰ De Koninck underscores the inviolable individual good, shows how all parts share the common good in an authentic manner, and holds that God is a truly common good shared by every human being. De Koninck identifies specific conditions conducive to beatitude by which the part subordinates itself to the whole and, as a result, names the grave mistake of a part diminishing its own good. Summing up, the short history of the part/whole relation in the twentieth century yields a partial explanation and solution. It gives some account for why there is much recent Thomistic scholarship devoted to the evils of excessive self-love, and little on the deficiency of self-love. So too the part/whole relation resolves the search for conceptual resources to reason about the deficiency of self-love in Thomistic terms.

Continuing this aside, it is worth remarking that the seminal Thomistic scholarship cited in this section and Attachment Theory emerge during the postwar period. As Thomists became preoccupied with self-centeredness and fending off the evils of totalitarianism, Bowlby studied the effects of separating young children from their maternal caregivers during WWII. On the one hand, there emerge strategies for protecting the inviolable self and renewed accounts of the political common good; on the other, attention to child anxiety in lacking a mother’s security, comfort, and care during critical developmental periods. Bowlby’s body of research attests to its

⁷⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951); Mortimer Adler and William Farrell, “The Theory of Democracy,” part 3.2, *The Thomist* 4 (1942): 323–324.

⁸⁰ Charles De Koninck, “In Defense of Saint Thomas: A Reply to Father Eschmann’s Attack on the Primacy of the Common Good,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 1, no. 2 (1945): 9–109. Osborne, Sullivan, and Olver all positively cite De Koninck’s solution to the part/whole problem. See Osborne, *Love of Self and Love of God*, 88–89; Sullivan, “Natural Self-Transcending Love,” 916, 926–927, 930, 942; Olver, “Love of God above Self,” 124–126.

manifold ill aftereffects and sequelae. These diverging trajectories are complementary.

Returning to the immediate project, we continue to use the part/whole relation to develop self-diminishment in the Thomistic terms. De Koninck's rich account is an ongoing resource for illustrating the conditions necessary for flourishing, including Thomas's identification of God as Common Good. De Koninck also implicitly names the conditions that fall short of flourishing, thus identifying characteristics of self-diminishment. We can home in on the generative part/whole relation. Self-diminishment directly affects the good of the *part*, reducing the individual good to the collective good in interpersonal totalitarianism. As willingly as the anxiously attached internalize this relational strategy, it violates their own individual good. It distorts a healthy relationship of part to whole, which is participatory, inclusive, and well-ordered.

Self-diminishment is more than just a mistake regarding the self, however. Self-diminishment also distorts the other aspect of the part/whole relation—the *whole*. This has theological implications, as Thomas establishes God as the Common Good. The act of self-diminishment would be to regard God as a dominant, rather than inclusive, good. God is valued at the expense, the disregard of the part (enter self-diminishment as theologically motivated self-contempt). As individual goods are integral and valuable parts of the whole, this diminishes one's regard for the common good.⁸¹ This is whole without part, a shortcutting of the full *via caritatis*. Appropriate other-directed love brings us closer to God.

Self-diminishment and self-sacrifice seem rather close in view of the part/whole relation, as inclining more toward the good of another than to its own. However, self-diminishment is sacrifice without proper self-love; good self-sacrifice presumes proper self-love. Self-diminishment is vicious; self-sacrifice is virtuous. Self-sacrifice is the condition of a constituted, valued, and loved part freely choosing to sacrifice itself for the good of the whole. The sacrifice of the part for the sake of the whole finds deeper meaning in how it is natural for a part to prefer the good of its whole.⁸²

The part/whole relation articulates a Thomistic heuristic for seeing self in relation to God and love that names that relation. Indeed, the part/whole relation bespeaks relationality as characteristic of all living things. Herbert McCabe applies Aristotle's notion of self-moving to the example of a leopard.⁸³ To move, her brain part moves the leg part—leopard moving leopard. The brain- and leg-*parts* of the leopard

⁸¹ ST II-II q. 64.

⁸² Olver, "Love of God above Self," 123.

⁸³ Herbert McCabe, *On Aquinas* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 8–9.

are actions of the *whole* (the typical example of an amputated leg illustrates how a part severed from the whole loses its identity). The whole leopard is prior and primary, parts are secondary. Meaning or significance “is a certain kind of relationship of part to whole.”⁸⁴ Parts are what they are—have their meaning—in being related to their whole. This ontological claim regarding meaning-making applies broadly with remarkable plasticity—appendages to bodies, individual animals to species, words to shared language, father to family, individual good to common good. In the part/whole relation lies the fecundity of relationality, identity, and meaning.

ATTACHMENT THEORY ON SELF-DIMINISHMENT, HEALING, AND TELEOLOGY

Once self-diminishment has been accounted for as a vice within a capacious Thomistic framework, it stands to question whether Attachment Theory’s contribution has been exhausted. The answer is a resounding “no”—Attachment Theory has more to say about origins and patterns associated with the vice of self-diminishment and even lays out a path for its healing.

Attachment Theory helps refine fundamental features of the vice of self-diminishment by describing those most inclined to self-diminishment. Attachment Theory weighs in here to state that those whose attachment patterns are marked by interpersonal anxiety are likely to prioritize relational connections to the point of preoccupation, compromising their essential connection to self and leading to struggles with self-esteem, self-worth, and self-love. Thus, there is a strong correlation between anxious attachment and self-diminishment. Granted, not all anxiously attached individuals self-diminish all the time, nor does self-diminishment mean that one is anxiously attached. Self-diminishment is also a prominent coping pattern of another attachment style, “fearful avoidant.” Rather, Attachment Theory characterizes attachment anxieties as statistically significant phenomena of overvaluing other-connection at the expense of self-connection.

Self-diminishment names the common attachment pattern of the anxiously attached, specified through varying degrees of intensity. The extent to which an anxiously attached individual self-diminishes depends on a host of factors. Factors include the depth of the original attachment wound, the significance of the current relationship perceived to be under threat, the emotional-mental states forming the context, and state-dependent memories and imagined futures. There is an epistemological layer at work too—once the anxious attachment

⁸⁴ McCabe, *On Aquinas*, 12. Thanks to Sean Larson for this connection.

system is activated, their perception may become distorted. They are prone to exaggerate threats of potential relational harm. They are unable to own their responsibility in inevitable relational ruptures. They struggle with memory and recollection.⁸⁵ Their attachment history fixes an anxious lens onto their perceptions and expectations of the world, others, and self.⁸⁶

There is more to explore as Attachment Theory meets with fundamental moral theology. For example, self-diminishment undermines agency. Social sin and self-diminishment form a self-perpetuating vicious circle, where self-diminishment is a source and the effect of social sin. Self-diminishment is a vice imposed upon the subject, what Serene Jones calls “the damage done to us” and “social relations that define us.”⁸⁷ It is crucial for the self-diminishing agent to regain grounds for agency. Yet Attachment Theory describes how anxious attachment reliably leads one to overestimate threats and underestimate themselves. Thus, anxious attachment can obscure what are presumably clear paths of choice, action, and agency.

Attachment Theory can also make good on its promise to describe the path of healing self-diminishment. It returns to the relational roots of love—even the struggle with self-love is learned in relationship. Our capacity to love is formed and transformed relationally. Self-diminishment is far more complex than an intentional choice to prefer other to self or a misguided strategy born of ignorance or resistance. One cannot resolve self-diminishment by consciously, willfully redirecting love toward self, or talking it out in traditional therapy. This is because “one” does not come to self-diminishment on their own, but in the infant-caretaker dyad. Attachment Theory begins with the nonverbal affective experience developing a fundamental sense of self and other. In other words, the mother shares her nervous system with her child.⁸⁸ This patterning contributes to the emotional core of every relationship and interchange across their lifespan. The anxiously

⁸⁵ Mary Main, “Metacognitive Knowledge, Metacognitive Monitoring, and Singular (Coherent) vs. Multiple (Incoherent) Model of Attachment: Findings and Directions for Future Research,” in *Attachment across the Life Cycle*, ed. C. M. Parkes, J. Stevenson-Hinde, and P. Marris (New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1991): 127–159.

⁸⁶ Siegel, *The Developing Mind*, 102. This could have fascinating implications for narrative theology.

⁸⁷ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 120. The agency of the traumatized individual becomes a working thesis throughout in *Trauma and Grace*. See Craig Titus, Paul Vitz, William Nordling, and The DMU Group, “Much of Human Languishing and Suffering Results from Experiences of Trauma, Misdirected Choices, Unsuitable Practices, or Damaged Relationships, Which May often Be outside of the Person’s Full Responsibility,” in *Catholic Christian Meta-Model*, 8.

⁸⁸ Sue Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby’s Brain* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004).

patterned emotional survival system is primordial and adaptive, akin to a second nature. Attachment's origin, positive aim, and internal resistance to change is embedded in deep psychological and relational roots. Those who self-diminish scan for relationship rupture and urgently seek repair. They have an activated attachment system and yet its enactment paradoxically re-inscribes duress. David Wallin writes:

The price of protection here is high. Encouraging a sense of personal helplessness, the strategy of hyperactivation precludes the integration of positive feelings about the self or others for at least two reasons. First, such feelings risk *deactivating* the attachment system upon which emotional survival has come to depend. And second, overdependency undermines self-esteem and tends to provoke the very abandonment it is unconsciously intended to avert. Hyperactivating defenses also undermine the development of mutuality in relationships, autonomy in thought or action, and, of course, affect regulation.⁸⁹

Wallin identifies numerous points for healing an attachment inclined to self-diminishment, with as many skills governing self-other relations as self-self. It is worth emphasizing that those who self-diminish must re-pattern the entire part/whole relation.

To trace one point for healing, the self-diminishing seeking wholeness must learn the complex skills of affect regulation, specifically autoregulation.⁹⁰ They need an expanded capacity to tolerate attachment-related anxiety encoded as sympathetic nervous system activation, appropriate intensity of emotion indexed to the situation, modulated sensitivity, response-flexibility, and so on.⁹¹ These densely knit sets of relations between affect regulation, cognition, and interpersonal functioning are described holistically by modern Attachment Theorists rooted in neurobiology.⁹² Regulated affect is the basis for commanding attention, access to relevant memory, self-reflection, agency and well-being, and availability for interpersonal connection. Dysregulated affect lacks these features as it entails unavailability for interpersonal relating, decreased well-being and agency, diminished or inaccessible reflective capacity,

⁸⁹ David Wallin, *Attachment in Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford, 2007), 102.

⁹⁰ Here I signal debts to Schore, Siegel, and Hill; additional sources include the founders of affective neuroscience like Antonio Damasio, *Descartes's Error* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1994), and Joseph LeDoux, *Anxious: Using the Brain to Understand and Treat Fear and Anxiety* (New York: Viking, 2015).

⁹¹ Siegel, *Developing Mind*, Chap. 7: "Self-Regulation," 239–275.

⁹² Hill, *Affect Regulation Theory*, 1–2. Hill systematically categorizes cognitive systems as attentional, perceptual, representational, memory, and reflective.

narrowed perception, compromised representational accuracy, rigidity, and reactivity. Well-regulated affect is marked by a flexible capacity for both dyadic regulation and autoregulation; dysregulated affect over-relies on dyadic regulation, autoregulation, or neither.⁹³ A thread runs through this set of capacities and habitual dispositions—we learn affect regulation in attuned interpersonal experiences. This process merits the illustrative term “interactive regulation” that ushers in a sense of self.⁹⁴ What was (mal)formed relationally can be transformed relationally. Attachment Theory witnesses to how even our capacity for self-regulation is enacted and informed in interpersonal relationships.

One last time, we return to the hypothetical self-diminishing father. We have said that the self-diminishing father’s characteristic behaviors, cognitions, and emotions can distort his relationship to himself and his relationship to others—both aspects of the part/whole relation. Accordingly, the path of healing sketched by the attachment paradigm is relational. As the father learns the complex skills of self-regulation in attuned relationship, as one essential aspect of healing anxious attachment, the space opens for affective and cognitive changes. He increases his capacities for self-regulation, such as self-command, assistive memory, and self-reflection. He discovers the basis for a coherent self, previously fragmented by emotional tumult. As he grows his flexibility in attention, and experiences more integrated representations across time, and sharpens his capacity to assess others’ mental states with reasonable accuracy, he can better appreciate others in their own integrity. As a better reader of others’ inner states and vulnerabilities, he experiences greater openness to authentic connection. For his children, these inner resources incline the father to greater spontaneity, creativity, and play.⁹⁵ The fruits of autoregulation grow alongside his experience of healthy interdependence. He thereby improves as an individual and part of a whole.

Another element for an account of relational healing is essential—we are embodied. Just as an embodied human organizes her nervous system and capacity for affect regulation, an embodied person can also invite us to re-organize our nervous system and regulate affect. Affect regulation is yoked to greater embodiment. While Bowlby is renowned for re-integrating psychology and biology to offer an integrated model of body-mind, in important ways he did not follow

⁹³ Hill, *Affect Regulation*, 25.

⁹⁴ Alan Schore coins the term “interactive regulation” and uses it throughout his work. He seems to coin the term in *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self*.

⁹⁵ See for example Allan Schore, *Right Brain Psychotherapy*, Chapter 5, “How Love Opens Creativity, Play, and the Arts through Early Right Brain Development.”

through his relational insights into pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. Psychologists have begun to fill this gap, including Siegel's modern Attachment Theory and trauma experts.⁹⁶ It would be worthwhile to bring these into dialogue with Thomas's model of body-mind and magisterial Catholic sources.⁹⁷ Constructive accounts will give greater voice to how we are embodied—with embodied emotions and cognition—and that we heal these through loving relations to other embodied beings.

Attachment Theory's theses about interpersonal relationship, embodiment, and healing are features of an innate attachment system assuming a particular inflection when situated within the lenses of evolutionary biology and psychology. Bowlby originally construed attachment as evolutionary in goal, and Attachment Theorists have since modernized his evolutionary claims.⁹⁸ Ultimately, the attachment paradigm describes the goal of interpersonal relationality and our embodied responses as an individual strategy for physical survival and reproduction. I am of two minds here. One, reason allows us to state the goal of attachment behavior as more than mere physical survival; relationality is not so much for survival as for community and communion. Does Attachment Theory undersell? Two, Bowlby seems to have well understood the scope and reach of his work as a social scientist and did not reach into matters of revelation and the ultimate end. Perhaps Attachment Theory reflects well its limited range? In any case, were one to continue to integrate Attachment Theory into a Thomistic framework, Thomists could begin the work of evaluating in what ways attachment behavior has aided survival as the first precept of the natural law, with ready recourse to higher levels of explanation.⁹⁹ By its disciplinary rights, theology goes further in describing relationality as made for a relationship with God, a

⁹⁶ Siegel, *The Developing Mind*. Trauma experts witness and care for those of us who become most dysregulated and disembodied. Thus, it is not surprising that they offer the most penetrating psychological explorations of the somatic aspects of affect, relationality, and healing. See Peter Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 1997); Pat Ogden, Kekuni Minton, and Clare Pain, *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy* (New York: Norton, 2006); Pat Ogden and Janina Fischer, *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy: Interventions for Trauma and Attachment* (New York: Norton, 2015).

⁹⁷ See for example John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988); *Letter to Families* (1994).

⁹⁸ See for example Jeffry Simpson and Jay Belsky, "Attachment Theory within a Modern Evolutionary Framework," in *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, 3rd edition, ed. Jude Cassidy and Phillip Shaver (New York: Guilford, 2018), 91–116.

⁹⁹ See for example Josef Ratzinger, "In the Beginning...": *A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

relationship named in love.¹⁰⁰ While some aspects of our experience are indeed captured by ethology, Thomism keeps a foothold in our transcendent purpose. Thomas's writing on love and charity lays out the *via caritatis* as it leads to the authentic telos of all human relationships. The Thomistic corpus joins him in naming the point of genuinely loving relationships, thereby endowed with order and meaning.

To conclude, this section is a small glimpse into how Thomism can further benefit from Attachment Theory while bringing its own goals and concerns to bear. While Attachment Theory offers valuable insight into the interpersonal dynamics of healing attachment wounds, theology remains essential in revealing what interpersonal relationality is *for*. As such, Attachment Theory's insights on relationality to Thomism are a metaphorical part finding its whole.

CONCLUSION: THE WORK THAT REMAINS

The motivation for bringing these two approaches together was to use Attachment Theory to describe the relational sources of deficient self-love as a theologically significant moral matter. It and its associated vice invited an initial conceptualization in Thomistic terms. Originally, my expectations as to the potential contributions of Attachment Theory were modest. As I explored the clinical observations and studies in Attachment Theory, I was impressed with how Attachment Theory describes the emotional struggle to self-love in characteristic and predictable patterns. I came to appreciate its account of the source of deficient self-love in our early nonverbal relationships with caretakers as implicit relational knowing. These patterns lie in embodied formation outside one's control. While some such insights came to the fore through our lens on anxious attachment, Attachment Theory has a good deal more to offer moral theology as regards the non-rational part, integrated embodiment, and the formation of the self in relationships of healthy interdependence and mutuality. These all have theological implications.

The retrieval of virtue ethics has been accompanied by robust critiques of modern individualism and egoism. It looks to a positive rehabilitation of friendship, the common good, and community. These emphases are eminently valuable and well thematized. Nonetheless, the fundamental starting point for Thomistic ethics continues to be a rational agent capable of deliberation and autonomy, who loves herself naturally. That self-love forms the basis for reaching out to others in

¹⁰⁰ For a sympathetic characterization of the disciplines, see Su Li Lee and William Nordling, "Case Conceptualization," in *A Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person: Integration with Psychology and Mental Health Practice* (Sterling, VA: Divine Mercy University Press, 2020): 565–586.

friendship, forging and participating in the common good, and building community. Virtue ethics begins to wear thin, however, when it applies identical notions of agency and selfhood to women in a patriarchal system, people of color in racialized societies, the poor and inhabitants of low-income countries, refugees and migrants, the elderly, and the differently abled. These groups, like the anxiously attached father, give us the uncomfortable self-knowledge that we have bought into a dangerous fiction. We are not independent, actualized, and wise automatons sprung fully formed from the head of Zeus. Rather, we are embodied creatures who are interdependent, bound up in networks of concern and care, mere co-authors of our own story, and mutually responsible for each other's healing. These marginalized groups, particularly susceptible to the wounds of self-diminishment, witness to the Christian work of love as ongoing, arduous, and unfinished. **M**

Sheryl Overmyer, PhD, is Associate Professor of Catholic Studies at DePaul University. During 2023–2025, she joins the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, for an inquiry on *Thriving in Diverse Contexts: A Study Program on Psychological Science for Researchers in Christian Theology*.