Aquinas on the Soul’s Circular Motion: 
Ontological Independence, Self-Knowledge, and Contemplation of God 
Therese Scarpelli Cory 
Seattle University

This paper examines Aquinas’s use of the Neoplatonic concept of the soul’s “circular motion” (from Pseudo-Dionysius’s *De divinis nominibus*) or “complete return” (from the *Liber de causis*). This imagery in Aquinas is generally taken to refer either to the temporal priority of knowledge of extramentals over self-knowledge, or to the process whereby the soul comes to self-knowledge by a detour through sensible experience. I argue to the contrary that for Aquinas this imagery is not psychological, but metaphysical, dramatizing the soul’s ontological unity (i.e., its self-subsistence), and the operational unification to which it is teleologically oriented (i.e., its knowledge of its own essence).

Once the circular return is understood in this way, it becomes easier to interpret 1) Aquinas’s perplexing claim, following Pseudo-Dionysius, that the soul most perfectly achieves circular motion in contemplating God; 2) the circular motion of “*exitus-reditus*” by which creatures proceed from and return to the creator, and to which Aquinas links the Trinitarian missions. For Aquinas, I argue, the soul makes a two-fold ontological return: to itself, in its independence from matter as a self-subsisting form, and to God, in its creaturely dependence on him. This ontological return is teleologically completed by a two-fold operation in which the soul achieves unity with the source of its being: first, in its cognition of its own essence, and second in its philosophical, theological, and ultimately beatific contemplation of God.