



ARISTOTLE AND SAINT THOMAS ON HAPPINESS

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"The pursuit of happiness" — along with life and liberty — is one of the unalienable rights that we were endowed with by our Creator according to the Declaration of Independence. But in spite of the word being so deeply embedded into our national consciousness, I wonder how many Americans can actually define this thing we say we have a right to pursue. Relatively few, I would guess.

Let us do our part to remedy this defect by considering what the Angelic Doctor had to say of happiness. Prescinding from the Declaration, the subject of happiness is of great importance.

We begin with a brief glance at the ideas of Aristotle, who is one of Saint Thomas' sources for his own thoughts. According to philosopher Richard Kraut, "Aristotle's search for the good is a search for the highest good, and he assumes that the highest good, whatever it turns out to be, has three characteristics: it is desirable for itself, it is not desirable for the sake of some other good, and all other goods are desirable for its sake." What Aristotle considers "the good" is important in this discussion precisely because Aristotle calls the state of someone who achieves his good eudaimonia, or happiness. (The word literally translates, "good spirit.")

According to Jacques Maritain, for Aristotle, "Eudaimonia is the state of a man in whom human nature and its essential aspirations have attained their complete fulfillment, and attained it in conformity with the true hierarchy of ends proper to that nature."

The end for which man is made is, according to Aristotle, happiness. He says that happiness or "eudaimonia," is something built into man's nature to desire. We all want happiness — and the foolish things man does he does to attain happiness, but in the wrong way. In other words, we sin because we think it will make us happy. But the wise man goes about seeking his true happiness in the right way.

Now that end for which man is made, happiness, is also the summum bonum, the greatest good, or the sovereign good of man. In naming "the good" as our end, Aristotle is in agreement with Socrates and Plato, although he differed with them in having happiness as being identical with the good.

For Aristotle the good is both a reward for the highest virtue and the best activity of what is highest in man. Since, for Aristotle, what is highest in man is the intellect, then the speculative contemplation of truth is man's highest good and his happiness. (It should be obvious how this concept can be easily

"baptized.")

This is why Aristotle's ethics is called a "eudaimonistic" ethics. The ethical man, the good man, is the one who lives well, meaning that he lives virtuously in such a way that he may grow in wisdom and contemplate truth with his intellect. This is what is desirable for its own sake, with all other goods being ordered and directed to it. This end perfects what is highest in man, not his animal faculties, but his intellect.

The pursuit of happiness not a selfish thing, because, for Aristotle, "happiness is an operation according to perfect virtue." Now, to accomplish perfect virtue requires the practice of virtues that are not only directed to the perfection of the self, but also to the good of others in human society. For Aristotle, political ethics (that is, the way man pursues the good in society) is of a higher order than personal ethics. Moreover, there is a mutual complementarity between personal ethics and political ethics because politics has as its purpose that man might live in society in a virtuous way so as to pursue the common good. While Aristotle's ethical philosophy is not selfish, it does lack the kind of heroic self-sacrifice that is perfected in the supernatural life of virtue epitomized by Our Lord, His Mother, the martyrs, and the other saints.

Aside from this, there are other obvious defects in Aristotle's ethical theory, including its failure to name man's actual ultimate end, and its limiting of happiness to a handful of old philosophers who have done all that is necessary to achieve eudaimonia in this life. When Christian philosophers build upon Aristotle's ethics, they must supplement these deficiencies with the data of revelation, and even insights from Plato, whose theories of man's end, though also imperfect, were more anticipatory of the Christian notion of Heaven. Saint Thomas is blunt in his assertion that "In his book on Ethics the Philosopher treats of imperfect happiness, such as can be had in this life" (ST Ia IIae, 3, 6, ad 1).

Saint Thomas Aquinas on Happiness

For Saint Thomas, it is God Himself which is both man's happiness, and his summum bonum. As the Angelic Doctor puts it, "... man's happiness consists essentially in his being united to the Uncreated Good, Which is his last end" (ST Ia IIae, 3, 3, respondeo). The way that man possesses this end is by the Beatific Vision whereby man sees the Divine Essence. Saint Thomas cites the words of 1 John 3:2 as proof: "When He shall appear, we shall be like to Him because we shall see Him as He is." Aquinas agrees with Aristotle in making man's good consist in the speculative contemplation of truth, but this

contemplation far exceeds what Aristotle could possibly have imagined, since the Truth spoken of here has a capital "T," for it is the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost — the Holy Trinity, seen as It is in Its very essence. Again, as Saint John wrote in his first canonical epistle: "we shall see Him as He is."

It is only by knowing God in His essence — or "face-to-face" — that man can achieve his ultimate happiness, that is to say, his "beatitude," which we also call "salvation," "heaven," and "eternal life." Saint Thomas cites Our Lord's words in John 17:3: "This is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God."

For Saint Thomas, God is Happiness Itself in His very essence. Human happiness consists in a created participation in that Happiness of God. Similarly, God is Goodness itself, and our enjoyment of the highest Good is our possession of God Himself, by knowledge. Given Saint Thomas' position on the precedence of the Intellect over the Will, it should come as no surprise to us that he associates happiness with the intellect and not the will. The three functions of the will — desire, love, and delight — are not means of possession. Desire and love draw a man to his good, while delight results from possession of the good. It is the intellect that possesses God, our highest Good, so the "Beatific Vision" is no bodily vision; it is the intellect directly intuiting the Divine Essence. If this sounds too complicated, let us return to the language of Our Lord Himself in Saint John's Gospel: "This is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God." Knowledge is an act of the intellect.

But the will is not left out of Heavenly Beatitude because the whole person experiences the goodness of God in Heaven. The will takes its supreme delight and love in the possession of the highest Good. It can no more desire, because all desires are fulfilled, so it will experience perfect peace as well as delight and love. Even the lower faculties of man will enjoy beatitude; Saint Thomas cites Saint Augustine on this point, who says, "the body and the bodily senses will receive a certain overflow, so as to be perfected in their operations" (ST Ia IIae, 3, 3, respondeo).

Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes

What I have said so far about Saint Thomas' ideas on happiness comes from that part of the Summa where he answers the question, "What is happiness?" It would be wrong of me not to mention something of what he says elsewhere concerning the Beatitudes. Here is a rather beefy excerpt (ST Ia IIae, 69, 1, respondeo):

As stated above (I-II:2:7; I-II:3:1), happiness is the last end of human life. Now one is said to possess the end already, when one hopes to possess it; wherefore the Philosopher says (Ethic. i, 9) that "children are said to be happy because they are full of hope"; and the Apostle says (Romans 8:24): "We are saved by hope." Again, we hope to obtain an end, because we are suitably moved towards that end, and approach thereto; and this implies some action. And a man is moved towards, and approaches the happy end by works of virtue, and above all by the works of the gifts, if we speak of eternal happiness, for which our reason is not sufficient, since we need to be moved by the Holy Ghost, and to be perfected with His gifts that we may obey and follow him.

What Saint Thomas is saying here is that the eight Beatitudes Our Lord enumerated in the Sermon on the Mount are acts of the virtues perfected by the gifts of the Holy Ghost. He is also saying that they are an anticipation in this life of heavenly beatitude. It is for this reason that we can have, even in this vale of tears, an imperfect happiness that is a seed of the future happiness of celestial bliss.

Aquinas notes that there are two aspects to each Beatitude: the merit and the reward. The merit pertains to this life, for it is only in via or "on the way" of our earthly pilgrimage that we can merit. The reward pertains imperfectly to this life in the case of those who practice a high degree of virtue perfected by the Gifts of the Holy Ghost. But the rewards pertain perfectly to the next life for the elect, where they are enjoyed in an uninterrupted way. Let us look at just one to illustrate the structure of each Beatitude: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God." The merit is cleanness of heart which entails the practice of various virtues (not only chastity) in an excellent degree as perfected by the Gifts of the Holy Ghost. The reward is a certain contemplative experience of God even in this life, which Saint Thomas — no doubt speaking from experience — called "some beginning of happiness, such as is found in those who have attained perfection." What the mystical theologians call a quasi-experimental knowledge of God is the reward for this high virtue. Yet, even for the very holy, these contemplative experiences will be admixed with trials, tribulations, and other earthly distractions of various sorts. The happiness is not unalloyed or uninterrupted. But in the next life, the reward of "seeing God" in beatitude is perfectly achieved. A similar analysis can be carried out on each of the other seven Beatitudes.

Saint Thomas Aquinas on Man's Finality and Grace

Now a few words need to be said about economy of creation and redemption as they relate to man's end. For Saint Thomas, the order of material creation and the order of grace both revolve around man's

supernatural finality. Man, the crowning achievement of creation, was made to know: "All men by nature desire to know," as Aristotle observed in words Saint Thomas frequently referenced. In man's very metaphysical structure was woven a natural desire for God, a desire which cannot be achieved by man's unaided nature, even when that nature is perfected by the practice of the moral virtues and the striving for wisdom as understood by the philosophers. That end, which is supernatural, could only be achieved by an elevation above our nature into a kind of connaturality with God. In other words, only if we are made "partakers of the divine nature," as Saint Peter says (2 Pet. 1:4), can we achieve the supernatural end for which we were made.

Yet grace builds on nature, so there are certain natural perfections which are necessary for man to achieve his end. The natural law, which is the rational creature's participation in the eternal law of God, is designed — as is all law, according to Saint Thomas — to direct man to his end. This natural law, also called the moral law, is summarized in the ten commandments.

The supernaturally revealed law of the Old Testament was higher than the natural law, but also inadequate to the task, though it prepared the human race for what will ultimately help man to achieve his end. It was not until the coming of Christ and the revelation of the Law of Charity on the Mount of Beatitudes that the Law is revealed that can effectively lead man to his ultimate end. The New Law, while it is written down at least in part, is only secondarily a written law. For Saint Thomas, the New Law of Christ consists primarily and essentially in the giving of the Holy Ghost, the Sanctifier. It is for this reason that the New Law, unlike its Old Testament prefiguration, can lead man effectively to his end by justifying him, that is, making him holy by putting him in the state of grace.

Now, if Saint Thomas makes the essence of the New Law the giving of the Holy Ghost, this does not imply some sort of purely "spiritualized" religion divorced from the Incarnational, sacramental, and ecclesiastical economy we are familiar with as Catholics. Not at all, for the New Law is, as Saint Paul calls it, "The Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:2), and Saint Thomas cites this passage when he refutes the "spiritualist" errors of Joachim da Fiore. For Saint Thomas, it is the Holy Ghost that sanctifies us through the priesthood, through the sacraments, and through the teaching Church. It is the Holy Ghost whose grace and gifts impart and perfect the theological and moral virtues.

The New Law of Christ, then, is the law of the Spirit, and everything we associate with this life has as its purpose to direct man to his ultimate end, the possession of his highest Good and his happiness. These include sanctifying and actual grace, the infused theological and moral virtues, the Gifts of the Holy

Ghost, the Church, the sacramental economy, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the grace-aided struggle against sin, reparation, sacrifice, penance, fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and the works of mercy. All of it was merited by Jesus Christ on the Cross; all of it brings us to the Holy Trinity. All of it — and here, I go beyond Saint Thomas to newer theological insights — is mediated to us through the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mediatrix of all graces.

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