

ST. THOMAS'S PROLOGUE TO QUESTION 2

Where Does Complete Happiness Lie? Failed Candidates

TEXT

- [1] *We have now to consider happiness:*
[2] *and (1) in what it consists;*
[3] *(2) what it is;*
[4] *(3) how we can obtain it.*

PARAPHRASE

Having found that the sole ultimate purpose of all human beings is supreme happiness, we must now consider supreme happiness itself.

This leads us to take up three topics: First (Question 2), in what supreme happiness is found; second (Question 3), what it is in itself; and third (Questions 4–5) how it can be attained.

[1] In Question 1, we found that acting for a purpose is a property of man; that although subrational things also act for purposes, man does so under his own agency and direction; and that the purpose of an act makes it the kind of act that it is. Furthermore, we found that each human being pursues some aim as an *ultimate* purpose, not for something else but for its own sake; that he being pursues *just one* purpose as ultimate; and that he directs *everything* to it. Finally, we found that all human beings have the *same* ultimate purpose, the fulfillment of which only rational beings are capable.

Although we have given names to this ultimate purpose, such as supreme or consummate happiness, complete or perfect flourishing, and beatitude, we don't yet know much about it. St. Thomas has anticipated his later conclusion that it is found in the enjoyment of God, but he has not yet justified that conclusion. So there is a lot of work to do.

[2] The Latin for this query is *in quibus sit*, literally, "in what it is," which may be rendered in what it *lies*, in what it is *found*, or, as St. Thomas says later, in what it *consists*. To ask whether happiness "is" in X or "consists" in X is to ask

whether happiness lies in having X. Notice that knowing where happiness lies is not the same thing as knowing how to attain it; that inquiry will not be taken up until Questions 4–5.

Actually, however, the results of Question 2’s investigation are all negative, so the title “In What It Is” is rather misleading. I have therefore paraphrased the title of Question 2 as “Where Does Complete Happiness Lie? Failed Candidates.”

[3] Having learned where supreme happiness does *not* lie, we now ask *what it is* (*quid sit*). Since the quiddity or “whatness” of a thing is its essence, I amplify this as “what it is *in itself*,” and to clarify the contrast with Question 2, I have paraphrased the title of Question 3 as “What Then Is Happiness in Itself, and in What Does it Really Lie?”

The doubling of this new title reflects the fact that more is going on here than finding where happiness does happen to lie. Suppose, just for purposes of discussion, that the happy people really had turned out to be the rich ones. One would still have to ask “*What is* this thing ‘happiness’ that rich people enjoy?” Perhaps someone might answer, “It’s just a feeling they are having.” But even if that were true, it wouldn’t answer the question, for what is a feeling? Notice too that the gerund “feeling” is formed from the verb *to feel*, but verbs indicate actions. So could it be that happiness is an *activity* – something that is being *done*? If so, what is it in happy people that is doing it? Is happiness something their bodies are doing, something their minds are doing, or what?

[4] Even if one did know in what supreme happiness lies, one would also still have to ask how to attain it. Even supposing that one knew that it lies in wealth, for example, how should it be attained? Through excelling in business? Through becoming the sole possessor of some resource that everyone wants to buy? Through having the luck to be born to wealthy parents? Perhaps even by being a gold digger: An entire generation was shaped by the Madonna lyric, “The boy with the cold hard cash / Is always Mister Right / ‘Cause we are living in a material world / And I am a material girl.”¹ As the singer explained in an interview, “You are attracted to men who have material things because that’s what pays the rents and buys you furs. That’s the security. That lasts longer than emotions.”² Curiously, many materialists go to great lengths to claim that the rich command not only tangible goods such as furs, but even spiritual goods. For example, one of the millions who grew up with the song suggests that “embracing my materialism has taught me how to really love others and myself.”³

¹ “Material Girl,” sung by Madonna Louise Ciccone (“Madonna”), music and lyrics by Peter Brown and Robert Rans, producer Nile Rodgers, released November 30, 1984.

² Quoted in Christopher Feldman, *Billboard Book of Number 2 Singles* (New York: Billboard Books, 2000), p. 195. Feldman says the review appeared in *Company* magazine in 1986. Notwithstanding the title of the book the song actually reached first place on the charts.

³ Shannon Bindler, “Being a Material Girl Is All Right with Me,” Huffington Post (July 28, 2018), www.huffpost.com/entry/being-a-material-girl-is_n_3347210.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, St. Thomas proceeds more systematically than Madonna. In Question 4, he considers the things that are required for the attainment of supreme happiness – which conditions must be satisfied to achieve it. For example, even if it is not the same thing as wealth, does it require wealth *at all*? Does it require a virtuous will? Can I possess it by myself, or is it real only if I have friends to share it with? As we go along, we find a need for subtle distinctions. For example, though in Question 2 St. Thomas asks whether supreme happiness *lies in* some form of pleasure, in Question 4 he asks whether it *requires* some form of pleasure. This is not the same thing, as we will see.

Finally, in Question 5, St. Thomas turns to the attainment of supreme happiness in itself. Can it be attained at all? If so, can a person attain it by his own power? Can one person attain it to a greater degree than another? At the very end, taking in all that we have now discovered about supreme happiness, he more fully reprises a question he has already considered in part: Does everyone *really* desire it?

[1] *Concerning the first there are eight points of inquiry:*

[2] (1) *Whether happiness consists in wealth?*

[3] (2) *Whether in honor?*

[4] (3) *Whether in fame or glory?*

[5] (4) *Whether in power?*

[6] (5) *Whether in any good of the body?*

[7] (6) *Whether in pleasure?*

[8] (7) *Whether in any good of the soul?*

[9] (8) *Whether in any created good?*

Concerning just the first of these three topics, eight questions present themselves for consideration.

1. Is it found in wealth?

2. Is it found in honor?

3. Is it found in fame or glory?

4. Is it found in power?

5. Is it found in some bodily good?

6. Is it found in bodily pleasure – or even intellectual delight?

7. Is it found in *any* good of the soul?

8. Is it found in any created good whatsoever?

[1] The roster of candidates for happiness may seem arbitrary at first glance, but it is tightly organized around the three general categories of created goods: External goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul. St. Thomas devotes four Articles to external goods – wealth or riches in Article 1, honors in Article 2, fame or glory in Article 3, and power in Article 4. Of course there are many more external goods, but at the end of the *respondeo* in Article 4 he gives reasons to think that no external good whatsoever suffices for supreme happiness. He finds Article 5 sufficient to discuss the goods of the body in general. To goods of the soul, he devotes two Articles, for the sixth considers a particular good of the soul, pleasure, while the seventh considers goods of the soul in general. Finally, having dealt with all three categories of created goods, St. Thomas concludes in

Article 8 with an even more general argument showing that no created good whatsoever could suffice for happiness.

[2] By this time it is not hard to guess that St. Thomas replies “No” to the question of whether supreme happiness lies in riches. Even so, there are two mistakes to be avoided, not just one. At one extreme are those who give the wrong answer – not just the “material girls” mentioned above, but material boys, material men, and material women. At the other are those who give the *correct* answer, but without sufficient reflection – who say “No” merely because they have learned moralistic platitudes. There is little strength in that sort of “No,” for to resist the allure of the god Mammon, one must understand the force of his powerful attractions and why they are illusory. St. Thomas does not dismiss them with conventional pieties, but considers them seriously.

[3] By honor, or honors, St. Thomas means the dignities, such as titles, medals, offices, and marks of deference, which are given to those who are admired for some excellence. Aristotle had argued that people pursue honor just to be confirmed in their belief that they are the sort of people who deserve to be honored, for “men seem to pursue honor in order that they may be assured of their goodness; at least it is by men of practical wisdom that they seek to be honored, and among those who know them, and on the ground of their virtue.”⁴

[4] By fame and glory, in contrast with honor, St. Thomas means not the dignities given to renowned persons, but the sheer fact of their renown. It was of glory that St. Augustine was writing when he said of the Roman political class, “the desire [with] which the Romans burned is the judgment of men thinking well of men.”⁵ Interestingly, the Latin terms *fama* and *gloria* can be used for bad as well as good reputation. Machiavelli, who idolized the Romans and thought great men seek above all to be remembered, advised those who crave fame that if they cannot achieve it through magnificently good deeds, then they should seek it through spectacularly evil ones. “Actually, however, most men prefer to steer a middle course, which is very harmful,” he lamented, “for they know not how to be wholly good nor yet wholly bad.”⁶

[5] Here St. Thomas is addressing those who crave power for its own sake, who think supreme happiness lies in the sheer enjoyment of dominating others. The old-fashioned sort of tyrant desired that his will be obeyed, but had no particular program. The newer, totalitarian sort of tyrant yearns to overturn the natural order

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, Book 1, Chapter 5 (public domain). He continues that one who does seek honor to be assured of virtue really thinks virtue is better.

⁵ St. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Book 1, Chapter 12 (public domain), available at <http://newadvent.org/fathers>. Here St. Augustine uses *gloria* in the sense in which St. Thomas uses it.

⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses [on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius]*, trans. Leslie J. Walker, S.J., rev. Brian Richardson (New York: Penguin, 2001), Book 1, Chapter 26 (p. 177). Machiavelli devotes the following chapter (1:27) to examples.

of society and impose a new order of his own devising. One suspects that these are not entirely different motives, but only different varieties of the same one.

Someone might protest that St. Thomas ignores other motives for power, for some seek it not just because they enjoy domination, but because they think it will secure them in the other things they desire, such as comforts, pleasures, and protection from the vicissitudes of fortune – or perhaps because they consider it the path to honor, fame, or both. But since people of these sorts seek power for the same kinds of reasons considered in Articles 1, 2, and 3, St. Thomas does not need to address them again here; he can rely on what he said there.

[6] Goods of the body include such things as health, strength, beauty, and swiftness. To hold that supreme happiness lies in some bodily good presupposes either that we are nothing but bodies, or, if we have souls too, that our bodies are more important. Among other things we must discuss why St. Thomas considers these views problematic.

[7] The discussion of pleasure in Article 6 concerns chiefly bodily pleasures, delights of the senses. However, the main part of his argument applies just as well to intellectual delights, for example, being pleased by the order and beauty of the sky. Since goods of the body were discussed in Article 5, it may at first be surprising that St. Thomas did not consider bodily pleasures there. However, things such as health and strength are *endowments* of the body. By contrast, the pleasures of the body are *experiences* that come and go, depending on the satisfaction of bodily desires.

[8] In the previous Article we dealt with intellectual delights, which are goods of the soul; now St. Thomas considers goods of the soul more generally. Even conceding that the soul is superior to the body, it is not at first clear whether happiness *simply is* some good of the soul. The solution to the puzzle lies in a distinction we have already seen, between the thing in which our good lies and our enjoyment of that good.

[9] The question as to whether supreme happiness lies in *any* created good encompasses a great many possibilities, among them Aristotle's candidate for beatitude, as we see below.

DISCUSSION

Just a Copycat?

St. Thomas is sometimes disparaged for having supposedly merely retraced Aristotle's discussion of where supreme happiness lies. Sometimes it is even claimed that he and Aristotle arrived at the same answer: Contemplation. Let us take these two criticisms in turn.

As to the first criticism: It is true that Aristotle considered a number of common opinions about the matter. Most people, he says, identify the happy

life with the life of pleasure. Some, who are especially drawn to large enterprises, especially politics, identify the happy life with honor. Since they seem to pursue honor to be assured of their virtue, some identify the happy life with virtue. Finally, some identify it with philosophical contemplation. But although the Aristotelian discussion is illuminating, for at least two reasons it leaves much to be desired, and St. Thomas's investigation is far superior.

The lesser of the two reasons is that some of the possibilities Aristotle considers seem to be equivocal. For instance, he seems to roll honor together with glory, but it is not at all clear that these are the same thing. Contemplation is another example, for he has in mind especially the contemplation of divine matters, but should we be thinking of something more like philosophy, or more like prayer?

The greater reason is that Aristotle's discussion is not, and cannot be, conclusive. For though his four possibilities are suggestive, they do not even come close to exhausting the common candidates. My students often protest, "Why not love?," "Why not friendship?," or "Why not popularity?" Nor would the difficulty be solved had Aristotle added a few more possibilities to his list, because no matter how many he had listed, one could always think of another.

By contrast, not only does St. Thomas consider a greater number of discrete possibilities, he quarters the *entire domain* of possibilities. For example, he considers not just whether fulfillment lies in this good of the soul or that, but whether it lies in any good of the soul. Still more important, after considering a variety of created goods, he asks whether fulfillment lies in any created good whatsoever. This goes far beyond what Aristotle did.

As to the second criticism, that Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas arrived at the same answer: It is true that both think supreme happiness must engage our highest power, intellect, the one that sets us apart from all other animals. But there are two profound differences between their approaches.

The first difference is that Aristotle seeks no more than the happiness available to us within certain limits. As we will see later, St. Thomas looks further, distinguishing between the shadow of happiness available within the limits Aristotle set himself, and the fullness of happiness that is genuinely possible beyond those limits. Later on we will consider what these limits are, and how it is possible to go beyond them.

The second difference is that what Aristotle means by contemplation is profoundly different than what St. Thomas has in mind. Aristotle had argued that the most perfect happiness is found in a certain elite activity: the philosophical enjoyment of our finite intellectual powers in pondering things higher than ourselves. Such things include both unchanging truths, such as the principle of non-contradiction, and unchanging objects, such as the stars, which Aristotle considered perfect, immutable, and divine. Among the unchanging objects, Aristotle includes God himself. Yet we must note well

that in Aristotle's view, God is not distinct from the universe but part of it. Moreover, Aristotle viewed this God as utterly self-involved – “thought thinking itself.”⁷ Since such a God would need nothing from us, it seemed to Aristotle to follow that there could be no friendship between God and man. God is at best the object of our cold admiration and refined intellectual pleasure.

For St. Thomas too, happiness is connected with knowing God, but his understanding of the matter is very distant from Aristotle's. In the first place, God is not just a being, even a very important being, but the *Source* of being – not a mere part of the universe, a thing among things, but its Creator. This places Him far beyond the capacity of our created minds. We can know by reasoning *that* He exists, and we can reason out a variety of truths *about* Him – more of them, by the way, than Aristotle worked out – but by their own powers, our created minds cannot behold the Creator in His own being.

So unless this God supernaturally elevates us so that our minds might behold Him as He is in Himself, the most characteristic longing of our very highest powers remains utterly frustrated. But since only a God who takes an interest in us would raise us up to behold Him, such a God would be very different from Aristotle's self-absorbed God. And since such an elevation could take place only by Divine gift, it would not be the proud achievement of an intellectual elite, but the grace of God to those humble and pure enough to receive it.

⁷ “Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking.” Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross (public domain), Book 12, Chapter 9; see also Chapter 7.