

St. Thomas' Spirituality: Twelfth Talk: What Happiness Is

Having examined what beatitude, or the Beatific Vision is, and how it is an everlasting ecstasy, you may want to follow up on how Thomas this perfect happiness. In the Summa Theologiae, last section on man's last end, question 5 is the attainment of happiness. We take up the consideration in article 1 Whether man can attain happiness?

Objection 1: It would seem that man cannot attain happiness. For just as the rational is above the sensible nature, so the intellectual is above the rational, as Dionysius declares (*De Divinis Nominibus* iv,vi,vii) in several passages. But irrational animals that have the sensitive nature only, cannot attain the end of the rational nature. Therefore neither can man, who is of rational nature, attain the end of the intellectual nature, which is Happiness.

O 2: Further, True Happiness consists in seeing God, Who is pure Truth. But from his very nature, man considers truth in material things: wherefore "he understands the intelligible species in the phantasm" (*De Anima* iii,7). Therefore he cannot attain Happiness.

O 3: Further, Happiness consists in attaining the Sovereign Good. But we cannot arrive at the top without surmounting the middle. Since, therefore, the angelic nature through which man cannot mount is midway between God and human nature; it seems that he cannot attain Happiness.

On the contrary, It is written (*Psalm 94:12*): "Blessed is the man whom Thou shalt instruct, O Lord." I answer that, Happiness is the attainment of the Perfect Good. Whoever, therefore, is capable of the Perfect Good can attain Happiness. Now, that man is capable of the Perfect Good, is proved both because his intellect can apprehend the universal and perfect good, and because his will can desire it. And therefore man can attain Happiness. This can be proved again from the fact that man is capable of seeing God, as stated in FP, Q12, A1: in which vision, as we stated above (Q3, A8) man's perfect Happiness consists.

Reply O 1: The rational exceeds the sensitive nature, otherwise than the intellectual surpasses the rational. For the rational exceeds the sensitive nature in respect of the object of its knowledge: since the senses have no knowledge whatever of the universal, whereas the reason has knowledge thereof. But the intellectual surpasses the rational nature, as to the mode of knowing the same intelligible truth: for the intellectual nature grasps forthwith the truth which the rational nature reaches by the inquiry of reason, as was made clear in the FP, Q58, A3; FP, Q79, A8. Therefore reason arrives by a kind of movement at that which the intellect grasps. Consequently the rational nature can attain Happiness, which is the perfection of the intellectual nature: but otherwise than the angels. Because the angels attained it forthwith after the beginning of their creation: whereas man attains it after a time. But the sensitive nature can nowise attain this end.

Reply O 2: To man in the present state of life the natural way of knowing intelligible truth is by means of phantasms (images). But after this state of life, he has another natural way, as was stated in the FP, Q84, A7; FP, Q89, A1.

Reply O 3: Man cannot surmount the angels in the degree of nature so as to be above them naturally. But he can surmount them by an operation of the intellect, by understanding that there is above the angels something that makes men happy; and when he has attained it, he will be perfectly happy.

Thomas considers several other related problems before arriving at article 8: Whether man's happiness consists in the vision of the divine essence?

O 1: It would seem that man's happiness does not consist in the vision of the Divine Essence. For Dionysius says (*Theologia Mystica* i) that by that which is highest in his intellect, man is united to God as to something altogether unknown. But that which is seen in its essence is not altogether unknown. Therefore the final perfection of the intellect, namely, happiness, does not consist in God being seen in His Essence.

O 2: Further, the higher the perfection belongs to the higher nature. But to see His own Essence is the perfection proper to the Divine intellect. Therefore the final perfection of the human intellect does not reach to this, but consists in something less.

On the contrary, It is written (1 John 3:2): "When He shall appear, we shall be like to Him; and [Vulgate: because] we shall see Him as He is." I answer that, Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence. To make this clear, two points must be observed. First, that man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek: secondly, that the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object. Now the object of the intellect is what a thing is, i.e. the essence of a thing, according to De Anima iii,6. Wherefore the intellect attains perfection, in so far as it knows the essence of a thing. If therefore an intellect knows the essence of some effect, whereby it is not possible to know the essence of the cause, i.e. to know of the cause what it is; that intellect cannot be said to reach that cause simply, although it may be able to gather from the effect the knowledge of that the cause is. Consequently, when man knows an effect, and knows that it has a cause, there naturally remains in the man the desire to know about the cause, what it is. And this desire is one of wonder, and causes inquiry, as is stated in the beginning of the De Metaphysica i,2. For instance, if a man, knowing the eclipse of the sun, consider that it must be due to some cause, and know not what that cause is, he wonders about it, and from wondering proceeds to inquire. Nor does this inquiry cease until he arrive at a knowledge of the essence of the cause.

If therefore the human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, knows no more of God than that He is; the perfection of that intellect does not yet reach simply the First Cause, but there remains in it the natural desire to seek the cause. Wherefore it is not yet perfectly happy. Consequently, for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which alone man's happiness consists, as stated above (AA1,7; Q2,A8).

Reply O 1: Dionysius speaks of the knowledge of wayfarers journeying towards happiness.

Reply O 2: As stated above (Q1,A8), the end has a twofold acceptation. First, as to the thing itself which is desired: and in this way, the same thing is the end of the higher and of the lower nature, and indeed of all things, as stated above (Q1,A8). Secondly, as to the attainment of this thing; and thus the end of the higher nature is different from that of the lower, according to their respective habitudes to that thing. So then in the happiness of God, Who, in understanding his Essence, comprehends It, is higher than that of a man or angel who sees It indeed, but comprehends It not.

Article 4: Whether happiness once had can be lost?

O 1: It would seem that Happiness can be lost. For Happiness is a perfection. But every perfection is in the thing perfected according to the mode of the latter. Since then man is, by his nature, changeable, it seems that Happiness is participated by man in a changeable manner. And consequently it seems that man can lose Happiness.

O 2: Further, Happiness consists in an act of the intellect; and the intellect is subject to the will. But the will can be directed to opposites. Therefore it seems that it can desist from the operation whereby man is made happy: and thus man will cease to be happy.

O 3: Further, the end corresponds to the beginning. But man's Happiness has a beginning, since man was not always happy. Therefore it seems that it has an end.

On the contrary, It is written (Matthew 25:46) of the righteous that "they shall go into life everlasting," which, as above stated (A2), is the Happiness of the saints. Now what is eternal ceases not. Therefore Happiness cannot be lost. I answer that, If we speak of imperfect happiness, such as can be had in this life, in this sense it can be lost. This is clear of contemplative happiness, which is lost either by forgetfulness, for instance, when knowledge is lost through sickness; or again by certain occupations, whereby a man is altogether withdrawn from contemplation.

This is also clear of active happiness: since man's will can be changed so as to fall to vice from the virtue, in whose act that happiness principally consists. If, however, the virtue remain unimpaired, outward changes can indeed disturb such like happiness, in so far as they hinder many acts of virtue; but they cannot take it away altogether because there still remains an act of virtue, whereby man bears these trials in a praise-

worthy manner. And since the happiness of this life can be lost, a circumstance that appears to be contrary to the nature of happiness, therefore did the Philosopher state (*Ethica Nicomachea* i,10) that some are happy in this life, not simply, but "as men," whose nature is subject to change.

But if we speak of that perfect Happiness which we await after this life, it must be observed that Origen (*Peri Archon* ii, 3), following the error of certain Platonists, held that man can become unhappy after the final Happiness. This, however, is evidently false, for two reasons. First, from the general notion of happiness. For since happiness is the "perfect and sufficient good," it must needs set man's desire at rest and exclude every evil. Now man naturally desires to hold to the good that he has, and to have the surety of his holding: else he must of necessity be troubled with the fear of losing it, or with the sorrow of knowing that he will lose it. Therefore it is necessary for true Happiness that man have the assured opinion of never losing the good that he possesses. If this opinion be true, it follows that he never will lose happiness: but if it be false, it is in itself an evil that he should have a false opinion: because the false is the evil of the intellect, just as the true is its good, as stated in *Ethica Nicomachea* vi,2. Consequently he will no longer be truly happy, if evil be in him.

Secondly, it is again evident if we consider the specific nature of Happiness. For it has been shown above (Q3,A8) that man's perfect Happiness consists in the vision of the Divine Essence. Now it is impossible for anyone seeing the Divine Essence, to wish not to see It. Because every good that one possesses and yet wishes to be without, is either insufficient, something more sufficing being desired in its stead; or else has some inconvenience attached to it, by reason of which it becomes wearisome. But the vision of the Divine Essence fills the soul with all good things, since it unites it to the source of all goodness; hence it is written (*Psalm* 17:15): "I shall be satisfied when Thy glory shall appear"; and (*Wisdom* 7:11): "All good things came to me together with her," i.e. with the contemplation of wisdom. In like manner neither has it any inconvenience attached to it; because it is written of the contemplation of wisdom (*Wisdom* 8:16): "Her conversation hath no bitterness, nor her company any tediousness." It is thus evident that the happy man cannot forsake Happiness of his own accord. Moreover, neither can he lose Happiness, through God taking it away from him. Because, since the withdrawal of Happiness is a punishment, it cannot be enforced by God, the just Judge, except for some fault; and he that sees God cannot fall into a fault, since rectitude of the will, of necessity, results from that vision as was shown above (Q4,A4). Nor again can it be withdrawn by any other agent. Because the mind that is united to God is raised above all other things: and consequently no other agent can sever the mind from that union. Therefore it seems unreasonable that as time goes on, man should pass from happiness to misery, and vice versa; because such like vicissitudes of time can only be for such things as are subject to time and movement.

Reply O 1: Happiness is consummate perfection, which excludes every defect from the happy. And therefore whoever has happiness has it altogether unchangeably: this is done by the Divine power, which raises man to the participation of eternity which transcends all change.

R O 2: The will can be directed to opposites in things which are ordained to the end; but it is ordained, of natural necessity, to the last end. This is evident from the fact that man is unable not to wish to be happy.

R O 3: Happiness has a beginning owing to the condition of the participator: but it has no end by reason of the condition of the good, the participation of which makes man happy. Hence the beginning of happiness is from one cause, its endlessness is from another.

In question 3 of this section, article 8, Thomas digs into whether the blessed see the essence of God. Whether man's happiness consists in the vision of the divine essence?

Thomas clarifies the essential points in these discussions. We follow along, blending our insights with his reasons. As we go, we develop lots of other questions. You will be happy to know that Thomas takes most of these questions up, and deals with them extensively. He provides more than we want to know about most things. However, what he provides is so valuable that we always have someone translating his work into our common ways of speaking. In that tradition, his reasons fit well with what we have reviewed. What exists about true happiness or the beatific vision is a set of observable human activities, and a set of recorded revelation. To help

us with this revelation, tradition has produced commentaries by many brilliant people. Thomas mastered all this, as it was available in his time. From that mastery, he produced the information we have reviewed. So he quotes Scripture where it relates to the question, quotes tradition in the form of Church Fathers and theologians, and refers to common experience, or philosophical conclusions. He synthesizes all this into a working whole.

The examples we have seen review objections, which he resolves to conclude that man will indeed attain the Perfect Good, or God. Man will attain God by spiritual activities of knowing and loving. These are rational activities. So these are the happyfying acts of the perfectly happy man. They are the acts of contemplation, or of resting in the ultimate True and loving the ultimate Good. We will also enjoy the ultimate Beautiful. So we shall be perfectly happy in an ecstasy of complete activity, synthesizing knowing, loving and enjoying. This activity is receiving the True, Good, and Beautiful that God provides. God's Truth, Goodness and Beauty attract us, so that we cannot resist. That's why Thomas says that God is irresistible. To ensure that we freely choose Him, He veils Himself from us, attracting us from behind His human nature, which He veils further in the Bread of Life.

There is more to know about what our heavenly happiness is, but here we have the basic outline. May it encourage us all to pursue the Beatific Vision.