

Thomas Aquinas on Happiness

from *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Questions 1-5 (~1270 AD)

translated by Thomas Williams (2014)

Question 1. The Ultimate End of Human Beings

Article 7. Is there one and the same ultimate end for all human beings?

It seems that there is not one ultimate end for all human beings: ...

2. The whole of human life is regulated by the ultimate end. So if there were one ultimate end for all human beings, different people would not devote their lives to different concerns. That is obviously false.

On the contrary. Augustine says in *On the Trinity* XIII that all human beings agree in desiring the ultimate end, which is happiness.

Reply. There are two ways in which we can speak about the ultimate end: in terms of what it means for something to be an ultimate end, and in terms of the thing that meets that description. In terms of what it means for something to be an ultimate end, all human beings agree in desiring the ultimate end because they all desire to attain their own perfection, and that is what is meant by "ultimate end," as I have explained [I-II.1.5].¹ But in terms of the thing that meets that description, human beings do not all agree in their ultimate end: some desire wealth as their full and complete good, whereas others desire pleasure and others desire something else—just as what is sweet is pleasant to everyone's taste, but some people prefer the sweetness of wine, others the sweetness of honey or some other sweet thing. The unqualifiedly best sweet thing must be the one that someone with the best possible sense of taste finds most pleasant, and similarly the most complete good must be the one that someone with well-disposed affections desires as ultimate end. ...

Response to 2. People devote their lives to different concerns because they seek the ultimate end in different things. ...

¹ There, he writes, "First, since everything desires its own perfection, what people desire as their ultimate end is what they desire as a good that is perfect and brings them to completion. ... Therefore, an ultimate end must so satisfy a person's whole desire that there is nothing else outside it left over to be desired."

Question 2. The Things in Which Happiness Consists

Article 1. Does human happiness consist in wealth?

... The human good consists in holding on to happiness rather than in letting it go. But as Boethius says in *Consolation of Philosophy* II “the glory of wealth is in giving it away rather than in hoarding it; for greed makes people contemptible, but generosity brings renown.” Therefore, happiness does not consist in wealth.

Reply. Human happiness cannot consist in wealth. You see, as the Philosopher says in *Politics* I, there are two sorts of wealth: natural and artificial. Natural wealth includes the things that help human beings meet their natural needs: for example, food, drink, clothing, means of transportation, shelter, and things like that. Artificial wealth includes things, such as money, that do not help nature in and of themselves, but were developed by human ingenuity to be an easy means of exchange, as a sort of measure of things that can be bought and sold.

Now it is evident that human happiness cannot consist in natural wealth, since natural wealth is sought for the sake of something else—namely, to preserve human nature—and so it cannot be the ultimate end for human beings; rather, human beings are the end of wealth. ...

Now the only reason to pursue artificial wealth is for the sake of natural wealth: people pursue money only because they can use it to buy things they can use for the necessities of life. So artificial wealth is much further from the character of an ultimate end than natural wealth is. Therefore, happiness, which is the ultimate end for human beings, cannot consist in wealth. ...

Article 3. Does human happiness consist in glory or fame?

Happiness is the true human good. Fame or glory, however, can be false; for as Boethius says in *Consolation of Philosophy* III, “Many people have stolen a great name through the false opinions of the vulgar. What more shameful thing can be imagined than this? Those who receive such false acclaim must surely blush to hear themselves praised.” Therefore, human happiness does not consist in fame or glory. ... [H]uman knowledge is often mistaken, especially when it comes to particular contingent matters such as human acts. For that reason human glory is frequently mistaken.

Article 4. Does human happiness consist in power?

It seems that happiness consists in power:

1. All things desire to become like God, who is their ultimate end and first principle. Now human beings who are in positions of power seem to resemble God the most, because they are like him in power. ... Therefore, happiness consists in power.
2. Happiness is a perfect good. Now the most perfect good is for someone to be able to rule over others, which is true of those who are in positions of power. Therefore, happiness consists in power. ...

On the contrary. Happiness is a perfect good, whereas power is highly imperfect. That is why Boethius says in *Consolation of Philosophy* III, that "human power cannot banish the gnawings of anxieties or avoid the stings of fears." And later, "Do you think someone is powerful when he goes about surrounded by bodyguards, more afraid of those whom he bullies than they are of him?" So happiness does not consist in power.

Reply. There are two reasons that happiness cannot consist in power. The first is that power has the character of a principle ... whereas happiness has the character of an ultimate end. The second is that power is for both good and evil, whereas happiness is the proper and perfect human good. So it would make more sense for some happiness to consist in the good *use* of power—which comes about through virtue—than in power itself.

But in fact we can give four general arguments to show that happiness does not consist in *any* of the external goods that we have discussed:

- First, since happiness is the supreme good for human beings, it excludes everything bad. But all of the goods we have discussed can be found both in good people and in bad.
- Second, since it is part of the nature of happiness that it is self-sufficient, as is clear in *Ethics* I, it must be the case that once happiness has been attained, no good thing necessary for human beings is missing. But when any one of the goods we have discussed has been attained, there can still be many goods necessary for human beings that are missing: for example, wisdom, bodily health, and those sorts of things.

- Third, since happiness is a perfect good, nothing bad can afflict anyone as a result of happiness. That is not true of any of the goods we have discussed: Ecclesiastes 5:12 says, for example, that wealth is sometimes conserved to the detriment of its owner, and similar considerations clearly apply to the [others] as well.

- Fourth, human beings are directed to happiness by *interior* principles, since they are directed to happiness naturally. But each of the four goods we have discussed is instead a result of *exterior* principles, and in more cases than not they are a matter of good fortune, which is why they are also called “goods of fortune.” For these reasons it is clear that happiness in no way consists in any of the goods that we have discussed thus far.

Response to 1. The divine power is its own goodness, which means that God cannot use his power in any way other than well. But this is not the case for human beings. As a result, becoming like God with respect to his power is not sufficient for human beings to be happy, unless they also become like God with respect to his goodness.

Response to 2. Just as it is an outstandingly good thing for someone to exercise power well in governing many, so too it is an outstandingly bad thing for someone to exercise power badly. And thus power can be both for good and for bad. ...

Article 6. Does human happiness consist in pleasure?

It seems that human happiness consists in pleasure:

1. Since happiness is the ultimate end, it is not desired for the sake of anything else; rather, other things are desired for the sake of happiness. And this is true of delight most of all: “for it is ridiculous to ask someone why he wants delight,” as is said in *Ethics* X. Therefore, happiness consists most of all in pleasure and delight. ...
3. Since desire is for what is good, it seems that what all things desire is the best thing of all. Now all things desire delight: the wise, the unwise, even things that lack reason. Therefore, delight is the best thing of all; and so happiness, which is the supreme good, consists in pleasure.

On the contrary. Boethius says in *Consolation of Philosophy* III, “Anyone who is willing to call to mind his own lusts will understand that pleasures end in sorrows. If pleasures could make people happy, there would be no reason not to say that cattle too are happy.”

Reply. As is said in *Ethics* VII, “Because bodily delights are more familiar to most people, they have monopolized for themselves the word ‘pleasures,’” even though there are other, higher, pleasures. But happiness does not primarily consist even in those higher pleasures. The reason is that ... all delight is a proper accident that follows from happiness or from some part of happiness; after all, people experience delight because they possess some good that is suited to themselves ...

Bodily pleasure, however, cannot follow from the complete good even in the way just discussed. The reason is that it follows from a good apprehended by sense, which is a power of a soul that makes use of a body; and a good that belongs to the body—a good that is apprehended by sense—cannot be the complete human good. For since the rational soul exceeds any proportion to corporeal matter, the part of the soul that is not bound to any bodily organ is, in a sense, infinite in comparison with the body itself and with the parts of the soul that are tied to the body—just as immaterial things are, in a way, infinite in comparison with material things, given that form is somehow contracted and made finite by matter, which is why form that is not bound up with matter is, in a way, infinite. ... From these considerations it is evident that no good suited to the body—no good that causes bodily pleasure through the apprehension of sense—is the complete good for human beings; any such good is negligible by comparison with a good of the soul. This is why Wisdom 7:9 says that “all gold, by comparison with wisdom, is a speck of sand.” Accordingly, bodily pleasure is neither happiness itself nor an essential accident of happiness.

Response to 1. ... [D]elight *just is* desire’s resting in something good. For that reason, in the same way that what is good is desired for its own sake, delight too is desired for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, if ‘for the sake of’ indicates a final cause. On the other hand, if ‘for the sake of’ indicates a formal cause—or, better yet, a moving cause—then delight is in fact desirable for the sake of something else, namely for the sake of a good. A good is the object of delight and is consequently its principle; a good gives delight its form—after all, the whole reason that delight is desired is that delight is a resting in the desired good. ...

Response to 3. All things desire delight just as all things desire the good—and yet they desire delight under the aspect of good; they do not desire good under the aspect of delight, as I have explained. Hence, it does not follow that delight is the greatest good or an intrinsic good; rather, what follows is that every delight follows from some good, and that there is a delight that follows from the greatest, intrinsic good.

Article 8. Does human happiness consist in any created good?

... **On the contrary.** Augustine says in *City of God* XIX, "As the soul is the life of the flesh, God is the happy life of the human being. Of God it is said, 'Happy is the people whose God is the Lord.'"

Reply. It is impossible for human happiness to lie in any created good. For happiness is a complete good, one that totally satisfies appetite; for otherwise, if there were still something left to be desired, happiness would not be the ultimate end. Now the object of the will—that is, of the distinctively human appetite—is the universal good, just as the object of the intellect is universal truth. From this it is evident that nothing but the universal good can satisfy the human will. And the universal good is not found in any created thing, but only in God, since every creature has goodness by participation. For this reason God alone can fully satisfy the human will, as is said in Psalm 102:5: "He satisfies your desire with good things." Therefore, human happiness consists in God alone. ...

Question 3. What Is Happiness?

Article 8. Does human happiness consist in the vision of the divine essence?

... We read in 1 John 3:2, "When he appears, we will be like him, and we shall see him as he is."

Reply. Ultimate and perfect happiness cannot consist in anything other than a vision of the divine essence. In order to make this evident, we need to consider two things. First, human beings are not perfectly happy as long as something is left for them to desire and seek. Second, the perfection of each capacity is determined by the nature of its object. Now the object of the intellect is what something is, that is, the essence of a thing, as is said in *De anima* III. Hence, the intellect attains perfection to the extent that it knows the essence of some thing. If, then, an intellect knows the essence of some

effect through which the essence of the cause cannot be known (in other words, through which the intellect cannot know *what* the cause is), the intellect is not said to reach the cause in an unqualified sense, even though it can know through the effect *that* the cause is. And so when human beings know an effect, and know that it has a cause, there remains a natural desire in them to know what the cause is. That desire is a kind of wonder, and it causes inquiry, as is said at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*. For example, if someone sees a solar eclipse, he reflects that it has some cause. And because he does not know what that cause is, he wonders about it, and out of his wondering he proceeds to inquire. And this inquiry does not come to an end until he arrives at a knowledge of the essence of the cause. So if the human intellect, through knowing the essence of some created effect, knows of God merely *that* he is, the perfection of that intellect has not yet reached the First Cause in an unqualified sense; instead, there remains in it a natural desire to seek the cause. Hence, it is not yet perfectly happy. So perfect happiness requires the intellect to reach the very essence of the First Cause. And in this way it will have its perfection by being united with God as its object; and human happiness consists in this alone, as I have said. ...

Question 4. The Things That Are Required for Happiness

Article 4. Is rectitude of will required for happiness?

... Matthew 5:8 says, "Happy are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." And Hebrews 12:14 says, "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see God."

Reply. Rectitude of will is required for happiness both *antecedently* and *concomitantly*. It is required antecedently because ... an end is related to what is for the end as form is related to matter. Hence, in the same way that matter cannot acquire form unless it is disposed to that form in the appropriate way, so too nothing can acquire an end unless it is ordered to that end in the appropriate way. And for that reason no one can arrive at happiness without having rectitude of will.

Rectitude of will is required concomitantly because (as I have said) ultimate happiness consists in the vision of the divine essence, which is the very essence of goodness. And so the wills of those who see God's essence necessarily love whatever they do love as ordered to God, in the same way that the wills of those who do not see God's essence necessarily love

whatever they do love under the general notion of good that they have come to know. And this is the very thing that makes a will right. Hence, it is evident that there cannot be happiness without an upright will.

Article 6. Is the perfection of the body required for happiness?

... Happiness is the reward of virtue, which is why John 13:17 says, "You will be happy if you do these things." But what is promised to the saints as their reward is not only the vision of God and [its attendant] delight, but also a good condition of the body. After all, we read in the last chapter of Isaiah [66:14], "You will see, and your heart will rejoice, and your bones will flourish like the grass." Therefore, a good condition of the body is required for happiness. ...

Question 5. The Attainment of Happiness

Article 3. Can someone be happy in this life?

It seems that happiness can be possessed in this life:

1. Psalm 118:1 says, "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord." Now that can happen in this life. Therefore, someone can be happy in this life.
2. Imperfect participation in the supreme good still counts as happiness ... And human beings can participate in the highest good, albeit imperfectly, in this life, by knowing and loving God. Therefore, human beings can be happy in this life.
3. What many people say cannot be completely false. After all, it seems that what is in many is natural, and nature does not go completely astray. Now many people think there is happiness in this life, as is evident from Psalm 143:15, "They have called the people happy who have these things"—meaning, the goods of the present life. Therefore, someone can be happy in this life.

On the contrary. Job 14:1 says, "Human beings, born of woman, living but a short time, have their fill of many miseries." Now happiness is incompatible with misery. Therefore, human beings in this life cannot be happy.

Reply. One can have some share in happiness in this life, but perfect and genuine happiness cannot be possessed in this life. We can establish this conclusion in two ways. The first way looks at the general notion of happiness. Because happiness is a perfect and sufficient good, it excludes all evil and fulfills every desire; but in this life it is not possible to exclude all evil. Indeed, this present life is beset by many evils that cannot be avoided: ignorance on the part of the intellect, inordinate affection on the part of appetite, and many punishments on the part of the body, as Augustine carefully explains in *City of God* XIX. And similarly, the desire for good cannot be fully satisfied in this life. You see, human beings naturally desire to retain the good that they have, but the goods of the present life are transitory, since life itself—which we naturally desire and would want to retain forever, since human beings naturally shrink from death—is transitory. For those reasons, it is impossible for anyone to possess genuine happiness in this life.

The second way takes into account the particular thing in which happiness consists, namely, the vision of the divine essence, which human beings cannot achieve in this life ...

From these considerations it is perfectly clear that no one can attain genuine and perfect happiness in this life.

Response to 1. Some people are called happy in this life either because they have the hope of attaining happiness in the life to come (as in Romans 8:24, “We have been saved through hope”) or because they have some share in happiness by enjoying the highest good in some way.

Response to 2. There are two ways in which participation in happiness can be imperfect. One way is on the part of the object of happiness, because it is not seen in its essence. This sort of imperfection takes away the character of true happiness. In the other way, participation can be imperfect on the part of the one who participates in happiness, who does indeed attain the object of happiness in itself—that is, God—but imperfectly, by comparison with the way in which God enjoys himself. ...

Response to 3. Human beings think that there is some happiness in this life because there is some likeness to true happiness, and thus they are not completely astray in their thinking.

Article 5. Can human beings attain happiness through their natural powers?

... **Reply.** The imperfect happiness that can be possessed in this life can be acquired by human beings through their natural powers ... But perfect human happiness, as I said above [I-II.3.8], consists in the vision of the divine essence. Now to see God in his essence is above not only human nature, but also the nature of any creature ... For the natural knowledge of any creature accords with the mode of its substance ... Now any knowledge that accords with the mode of a created substance falls short of a vision of the divine essence, which infinitely surpasses every created substance. Hence, neither human beings nor any other creature can attain ultimate happiness through their natural powers. ...

Article 7. Are any deeds required of human beings in order for them to receive happiness from God?

It seems that no deeds are required of human beings in order for them to receive happiness from God:

1. God is an agent of infinite power, so he does not require any matter, or condition in matter, as a prerequisite for acting; he can produce the whole thing all at once. ...

On the contrary. John 13:17 says, "If you know these things, you will be happy if you do them." Therefore, one comes to happiness through action.

Reply. As I said above, rectitude of will is required for happiness, because rectitude of will *just is* the will's proper ordering toward the ultimate end; that ordering is required for the attainment of the ultimate end in the same way that the proper condition of matter is required for the attainment of form. But that is not enough to show that any action on the part of a human being has to *precede* happiness: God could, after all, simultaneously cause the will both to tend rightly to the end and to attain the end, in the same way that he sometimes simultaneously both conditions matter and induces a form in it.

Yet the ordering of divine wisdom requires that this not happen. After all, as *On the Heavens* II says, "Of those things that are apt to have a perfect good, some have it without motion, some by one motion, and some by several motions." Having a perfect good without motion is characteristic of

something that has that good *naturally*, and only God has happiness naturally; accordingly, it is proper to God alone that he is not moved to happiness by any preceding motion. Now since happiness outstrips any created nature, no mere creature fittingly attains happiness without a motion, that is, an activity by which it tends toward happiness. But in keeping with the order of divine wisdom, the angels, who are above human beings in the order of nature, attained happiness by a single motion of meritorious action ... whereas human beings attain happiness by many motions of actions, which are called merits. This is also why, according to the Philosopher, happiness is the reward for virtuous actions.

Response to 1. Human actions are required as prerequisites for the attainment of happiness, not because of any insufficiency in God's power to cause happiness, but so that the order of things might be preserved. ...

Article 8. Does every human being desire happiness?

It seems that not everyone desires happiness:

1. One cannot desire what one does not know ... And many people do not know what happiness is: as Augustine says in *On the Trinity* XIII, this is evident from the fact that "some placed their happiness in the pleasure of the body, some in the virtue of the soul, and some in other things." Therefore, not everyone desires happiness.
2. The essence of happiness is the vision of the divine essence, as has been said. But some people hold the view that it is impossible for human beings to see God in his essence, and so they do not desire it. Therefore, not all human beings desire happiness.
3. Augustine says in *On the Trinity* XIII, "They are happy who have everything they want, and want nothing bad." But not everyone wants this: after all, some people want bad things, and they *want* to want bad things. Therefore, not everyone wants happiness. ...

Reply. One can consider happiness in two ways. One way is in terms of the abstract notion of happiness. And in this way it is indeed necessary that every human being wills happiness. After all, the abstract notion of happiness is that it is a complete good, as I have said. Now since the good is the will's object, a person's complete good is what totally satisfies that

person's will. Thus, desiring happiness is just desiring that one's will be satisfied—and everyone wants that.

In another way, we can speak of happiness in terms of the particular description of what happiness consists in. And in this way not everyone grasps happiness, because not everyone knows the particular thing to which the abstract notion of happiness applies. And consequently, in this regard, not everyone wants happiness.

From this the **Response to 1** is clear.

Response to 2. The will follows the apprehension of intellect or reason. Now it can happen that reason can consider one and the same thing in various ways, and accordingly it can happen that one and the same thing is desired in one way but not desired in some other way. Thus, happiness can be considered under the description "final and complete good," which is the abstract notion of happiness; and the will naturally and necessarily tends toward happiness considered in this way, as I have said [main reply and 4.2]. Happiness can also be considered under various particular descriptions, involving the activity itself or the active power or its object; and the will does not necessarily tend toward happiness considered in that way.

Response to 3. This definition of happiness that some have put forward—"they are happy who have everything they want" (or, alternatively, "who have obtained everything they longed for")—is good and sufficient *if you understand it in a certain way*; in another way, however, it is incomplete. For if one understands it simply in terms of all the things that human beings desire through their natural appetite, it turns out to be true that those who have everything they want are happy, because the only thing that satisfies natural human appetite is a perfect good, which is happiness. But if one understands that definition in terms of the things that human beings will according to the apprehension of reason, then having everything one wants is not characteristic of happiness, but rather of misery, since having such things can stand in the way of having everything one wills naturally, in much the same way that reason sometimes takes certain things to be true that in fact stand in the way of knowing the truth. It is because he understands the definition in this way that Augustine adds "and wants nothing bad" to complete the definition, although the first part—"they are happy who have everything they want"—would be sufficient if interpreted correctly.