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# Aquinas on Happiness

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# AQUINAS ON HAPPINESS

by

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B.A., Colorado Christian University, 2006, 2007

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A dissertation submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Philosophy

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This thesis entitled:

*Aquinas on Happiness*

written by Joseph Lee Stenberg

has been approved for the Department of Philosophy

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Christina Van Dyke

Date\_\_\_\_\_

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

## ABSTRACT

Stenberg, Joseph Lee (Ph.D., Department of Philosophy)  
*Aquinas on Happiness*

Thesis directed by Professor Robert Pasnau.

This dissertation is a philosophical study of Thomas Aquinas's theory of human happiness. I aim to give a careful, charitable, analytical, systematic exposition of his theory of happiness. The project is motivated both by the belief that Aquinas is a worthy interlocutor in thinking about happiness and by the conviction that happiness plays a foundational role in Aquinas's broader ethical thought. The study takes as its point of departure a detailed summary of Aquinas's Treatise on Happiness in the *Summa Theologiae*. In addition to providing a comprehensive sketch of Aquinas's basic account of human happiness, that summary reveals a series of difficult interpretive questions, the answers to which determine how we think about the most fundamental elements of Aquinas's theory. The questions it raises are: What is Aquinas's method? According to Aquinas, what is perfect or heavenly happiness fundamentally? What is imperfect or earthly happiness really? And what fundamentally explains degrees of perfect and imperfect happiness? Only when we have answers to all of those questions can we claim to have a systematic understanding of Aquinas's views in this domain. Answering each of these questions occupies a chapter of the dissertation. The first and last of these questions have received little sustained attention from commentators, and so I break new ground simply by attempting systematic, detailed answers to them. In the case of determining Aquinas's account of the deep natures of perfect and imperfect happiness, I argue for novel interpretations of Aquinas's views that, in my view, better capture the texts and are more interesting philosophically. In doing so, I also offer reasons for rejecting dominant and long-standing interpretations of Aquinas's views on these matters. Taken together, my dissertation constitutes a systematic rethinking of Aquinas's theory of human happiness.

## DEDICATION

To the two men who have overseen my philosophical education:

Bob Pasnau and St. Thomas Aquinas.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My debts are many and great. I thank Bob Pasnau for his tireless work on my behalf, for his critical feedback, and for his ongoing support. The present study would be far worse without his efforts and, more fundamentally, I would not be the philosopher that I am without his guidance these last seven years.

I also want to thank Mitzi Lee, Dan Kaufman, Christina Van Dyke, and Chris Heathwood for serving on the dissertation committee. They have all played an important role in shaping me and my views.

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## ABBREVIATIONS FOR AQUINAS'S WORKS

| Latin title  | Abbreviation     |
|--|------------------|
| <i>Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum</i>                            | Super Sent.      |
| <i>Summa Contra Gentiles</i>   | SCG              |
| <i>Summa Theologiae.</i>   | ST               |
| <i>Prima Pars</i>  | ST Ia            |
| <i>Prima Secundae</i>  | ST IaIIae        |
| <i>Secunda Secundae</i>  | ST IIaIIae       |
| <i>Tertia Pars</i>   | ST IIIa          |
| <i>Responsio ad Magistrum Ioannem de Vercellis de 108 Articulis.</i> | De 108 articulis |
| <i>Expositio libri Posteriorum.</i>                                  | In Post. Anal.   |
| <i>Sententia Libri Ethicorum</i>                                     | SLE              |
| <i>In Symbolum Apostolorum</i>                                       | ISA              |
| <i>Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate</i>                            | QDV              |
| <i>Quaestiones Disputatae De Malo</i>                                | QDM              |
| <i>De Regno ad Regem Cypri</i>                                       | De Regno         |

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Aquinas on Happiness*

#### *§1: The aim of the study*

This dissertation is a philosophical study of Thomas Aquinas's theory of human happiness. I aim to give a careful, charitable, analytical, systematic exposition of his theory of happiness. As I show over the course of the study, I think that this sort of exposition will lead us to rethink Aquinas's theory of happiness in a number of fundamental respects. Furthermore, it seems to me that, once properly understood, Aquinas's theory provides an interesting and, in many ways, distinctive alternative theory of happiness to those on offer today.

#### *§2: The pursuit of happiness*

As a general matter, examining the nature of happiness certainly seems worthwhile. After all, we want to be happy. We want those we care about to be happy. The desire for and pursuit of happiness is entirely unsurprising. We want good lives and lives that are good for us. We want our lives to go well and we want to make the lives of our family members, friends, and others for whom we care better. Happiness matters to us.

The practical pursuit of happiness for ourselves and others leads many of us to a related theoretical pursuit: we want to know about happiness and how to get it. We want to know the target at which we should aim, if we are to live happy lives. Interest in these matters is so great that we have started conducting studies to try to figure out who is happy and, hopefully, why. We are told that the Pennsylvania Amish tend to be as happy as those on *Forbes's* list of wealthiest Americans, and that the Maasai (a tribe of East African herders) tend to be happier than college students from a

collection of 47 nations.<sup>1</sup> We are told that Denmark is the happiest nation, Costa Rica the 6<sup>th</sup> happiest, and the United States the 14<sup>th</sup> happiest.<sup>2</sup> And we're left to debate and try to tease out why these things are so.

So what is happiness? One might think that, if we can measure it well enough to make these judgments, then of course we know what it is. That thought, however, is mistaken. The question *what is happiness* is far from settled. The surveys used to collect most “happiness” data either try to measure life satisfaction or various elements of felt experience, such as pleasure. Much of the appeal of life satisfaction and felt experience as measures of happiness is clear. First, both seem connected to our ordinary conception of happiness, since it seems obvious that a thoroughly dissatisfied person or a person whose life is enveloped by debilitating pain isn't happy. And, second, it seems plausible that we can measure both through questionnaires. However, even the choice to think of happiness as having to do with satisfaction rather than felt experiences, or vice versa, is an important one. Not only does this choice affect one's theory about what happiness ultimately *is*, but it also affects one's results on the ground. For example, although the United States is ranked as the 14<sup>th</sup> happiest nation on a satisfaction metric, it falls to 57<sup>th</sup> when assessed on a felt experience metric.<sup>3</sup> So the debate over *what happiness is* remains a pursuit with both theoretical and practical import.

And, make no mistake: this debate about theories of happiness has very real implications for the practical pursuit of happiness in our own lives and in the lives of those for whom we are concerned. At the political level, the level at which our concern is for all citizens, the wide gap between how the United States performs on one metric as opposed to the other suggests that, if we take the happiness of the citizenry as an important goal in decision-making, we have a vital choice to

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<sup>1</sup> W. Tov and E. Diener, “Culture and Subjective Well-being,” in S. Kitayama and D. Cohen (eds.), *Handbook of Cultural Psychology* (Guilford Press, 2007), pp. 691-713.

<sup>2</sup> *Gallup Global Well-being: The Behavioral Economics of GDP Growth* (2010). <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/126965/gallup-global-well-being.aspx>>.

<sup>3</sup> W. Tov and E. Diener, “Culture and Subjective Well-being.”

make. How are we going to measure the success of our policies? Will we treat happiness as having to do with satisfaction or felt experience or something else? And that decision may well dictate the best policies for achieving higher levels of “happiness” in the country. At the personal level, this same decision confronts us: do we think of happiness as having to do with satisfaction, felt experience, or something else? But instead of affecting policy decisions, our answer will likely affect our choices as to whether we should pursue a more meaningful job or a job with more leisure time, whether we should use our free time to take up a new hobby or watch TV, etc. And with children, a parent’s implicit or explicit theory of happiness may well influence her view about whether music lessons are worth it, how much to push kids to try new things, and so on. So there can be little doubt that theories of happiness really do have practical implications. In part because theories of happiness have such important practical implications, conceiving of happiness in the wrong way may have significant, pernicious effects. For example, if happiness really is something more than, say, being satisfied with your life or having pleasant feelings, then accepting that happiness is nothing more than one of these may well lead to an impoverished view of what we should want out of life both for ourselves and for those we care about and to act accordingly.

One benefit of turning to the past in thinking about a perennial topic as important as happiness is that some of the factors that shape and potentially distort theories of happiness today had no significant effect in shaping such theories in the past. For example, the great concern among psychologists today to make happiness measurable – which may very well lead to an impoverished view of happiness – had no influence on thinkers in the distant past, such as Aquinas. And so at least some of the potentially distortive influences that shape our present theorizing about happiness did not play any significant role in shaping past views about what happiness really is.

That is not to say that Aquinas’s thinking isn’t shaped in part by what some might consider potentially distortive influences. For example, Aquinas is keen to connect his theory of happiness to

various theological tenets. One might think that doing so will likely lead Aquinas to think wrongly about what happiness truly is. Be that as it may, the historical distance that Aquinas enjoys from contemporary concerns gives us reason to think that he may have something important and “new” to teach us about happiness, since his work is unaffected by our current, contingent concerns.

One might, however, worry that the fact that Aquinas occupied a different historical milieu is a liability for another reason. Aquinas certainly didn’t use the English term ‘happiness’ in his work; the two Latin terms that he does use, which are generally translated into English as ‘happiness,’ are ‘*beatitudo*’ and ‘*felicitas*.’ Perhaps neither of these refers to anything at all like our concept of *happiness* in the first place.

Now, this worry may be mitigated somewhat by the fact that it is at least plausible to think that the English term ‘happiness’ is used to pick out multiple concepts. One might think, for example, that the psychologists have carved out one use of the term that refers purely to a psychological state characterized by pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, or positive affect more generally. But it seems that there is another use of the term ‘happy’ that picks out a concept that concerns psychological states *and* something more. Plausibly, this further use of the term is what people have in mind when they say things like, “I thought that I was happy before, but now I know that I wasn’t.” In such a case, the person in question presumably need not be claiming that she was previously mistaken in believing that she was consistently in a psychological state characterized by pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, or positive affect more generally. It seems plausible to think that such a person could straightforwardly be using the term ‘happy’ to pick out a state of affairs that requires something over and above a psychological state characterized by positive affect. It is perhaps because the English term is ambiguous that there is such a wide ranging class of views that

are put forward as theories of *happiness*.<sup>4</sup>

The worry should be further mitigated by clear points of similarity between what Aquinas investigates under the titles ‘*beatitudo*’ and ‘*felicitas*’ and what we investigate under the title ‘happiness.’ Before addressing those points of similarity, however, as a matter of clarification, it is important to note that Aquinas doesn’t use these two Latin terms entirely consistently to pick out different things.<sup>5</sup> Almost always, ‘*felicitas*’ is used to refer to earthly, imperfect happiness. But ‘*beatitudo*’ is frequently used in reference to both earthly, imperfect happiness *and* heavenly, perfect happiness; although, generally, when referring to earthly happiness as ‘*beatitudo*’ Aquinas adds the adjective ‘*imperfecta*.’ Because Aquinas treats ‘*beatitudo*’ as the more general term, I use it in the discussion that immediately follows.

I now return to the key points of similarity. Certain key elements of the extension and core intension of ‘happiness’ have a place in Aquinas’s theory of *beatitudo*. In particular, Aquinas, like us with respect to happiness, thinks that people leading all different sorts of lives can, in principle, be *beatus*; *beatitudo* is not, for example, only available to the intellectual or religious elite. He also thinks that part of what it is to be *beatus* is to enjoy or be pleased by what it is that one is doing, and so conforms to the notion that happiness at least in some way involves positive affect.

And, to take one final important feature, he thinks of *beatitudo* as being intimately tied with human well-being, just as many tend to think of happiness as being intimately tied with human well-being – well-being concerns how well one’s life is going for one, or how one is faring.<sup>6</sup> Of course, as a general matter, one might be faring well or badly. Aquinas’s concept of *beatitudo* picks out a special

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<sup>4</sup> To see how wide-reaching the disagreements are regarding what happiness is see, e.g., Fred Feldman’s *What is this thing called, ‘happiness?’* which includes a discussion of a wide number of views about what happiness really is. (Fred Feldman, *What is This Thing Called Happiness?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)).

<sup>5</sup> Some commentators apparently don’t recognize this fact. See, e.g., Joseph Novak, “Aquinas on Aristotle: Ethical Eudaimonism or Biblical Blessedness?” In E. Andujar, B.C. Bazan, and L.G. Sbrocchi (eds.). *Les Philosophes Morales et Politiques au Moyen Âge. Proceedings of the SIEPM* (Vol. 1 (1996): 429-442), 433.

<sup>6</sup> Aquinas explicitly connects happiness, for example, with “living well.” (See, e.g., SLE lib.1 l.4 n.3.) And it is clear that Aquinas thinks there is no better state *for a human being* than the perfectly happy state.

subset of those who are not only faring well, but are faring especially well. We can think of Aquinas's *beatus* as a special class of those enjoying a positive level of well-being. So when discussing Aquinas's views about *beatitudo*, I am talking about a special class within the broader category of those who are faring well or, in other words, a sub-set of those in the positive range of well-being. In this study, the focus on happiness, or, *beatitudo*, rather than well-being more generally is a result of the fact that, although Aquinas does seem to make room for degrees of well-being below the threshold of happiness, Aquinas doesn't seem particularly concerned with giving a systematic account of why one unhappy person is faring better than another.<sup>7</sup>

Now, since so little of Aquinas's view has been discussed and I have not even attempted anything like a comprehensive discussion of modern uses of the term 'happiness,' we are not in a position to determine whether Aquinas's theory of *beatitudo* can plausibly be construed as a theory of happiness in one of the modern senses of the term – assuming there are multiple senses. However, it seems to me that this is enough, at the very least, to justify the use of the English term, 'happiness,' to translate the Latin term, '*beatitudo*.'<sup>8</sup> And, at most, it is enough to justify treating as a working hypothesis the claim that Aquinas's theory of *beatitudo* should be counted as a theory of happiness in some modern sense of the term. Whether that working hypothesis is ultimately defensible will, of course, depend both on how we are to think about what is picked out by 'happiness' today and the content of Aquinas's account of *beatitudo*. With these preliminary remarks in view, I will now describe a number of fundamental elements of Aquinas's theory of happiness, as I understand it – elements that I will go on to defend as a reading of Aquinas in the dissertation.

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<sup>7</sup> One can, however, see him making that sort of judgment in particular cases when discussing, e.g., whether the worst thing that can befall a person (*summum hominis malum*) is some kind of pain or sadness (ST IaIIae q.39 a.4).

<sup>8</sup> The only other obvious option is translating '*beatitudo*' as 'blessedness.' But I think that, among other things, translating '*beatitudo*' in that way risks making it sound as though Aquinas is concerned exclusively with a religious form of life or some lofty spiritual ideal (which he isn't), and it also risks making it sound as though *beatitudo* is something that just happens to you (which it isn't).

§3: *Aquinas's theory of happiness, in brief*

As I read him, the heart of Aquinas's theory is that happiness is a matter of engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities. Happiness of whatever sort has this structure. To begin with, what Aquinas calls "perfect happiness," which is the happiness available to the saints in heaven, has this structure. This is so because happiness of this perfect sort is a matter of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence, which is not only a genuinely good and enjoyable activity, but the very best and most enjoyable activity possible (with God's help) for a human being. It is so great an activity, in fact, that the gap between that activity and all others grounds a distinction in kind between perfect happiness, on the one hand, and what Aquinas calls "imperfect happiness" on the other. Although in the case of the imperfect happiness of earth the relevant activities are far less elevated and far less enjoyable, imperfect happiness nonetheless shares the same underlying structure as perfect happiness. Imperfect happiness is also a matter of engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities. Unlike the perfect happiness of heaven, however, which consists in only one kind of activity, all manner of activities can conduce to imperfect happiness. For example, in principle, the activities of a nurse, a teacher, a parent, a researcher, a scientist, a priest, a plumber, or a landscaper could conduce to imperfect happiness. What is required is that the person in question engage in and enjoy genuinely good activities.

Perfect and imperfect happiness share very little over and above this underlying structure. For example, Aquinas thinks that one can be perfectly happy without a body, without external goods, and without friends, because the activity of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence is possible without them. On the other hand, because of the ways in which things like a (somewhat) healthy body, external goods, and friends are connected to engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities on earth, an imperfectly happy person needs them. The differences between these two kinds of happiness do not stop there. Aquinas thinks, for example, that perfect happiness cannot be

lost and that it is impossible to be perfectly happy without God's special intervention. But imperfect happiness can be lost and is possible without special help from God. So these two kinds of happiness have not just different features, but a number of *contrary* features. What binds them together as kinds of *happiness* is, again, that they both involve engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities.

So, I will argue that, according to Aquinas, a person is happy if and only if and because she is engaged in and enjoying a genuinely good activity. As will become clearer as I go, the genuine goodness of one's activities and their being enjoyed are independently necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a person's being happy. So, according to his account, a person who is enjoying some bad activity is not happy; for example, a person who is enjoying the fact that he is causing his family unnecessary grief is not truly happy while so engaged. So too a person who does not enjoy the genuinely good activity she is engaged in is not happy; for example, a person who visits the Louvre, but enjoys nothing about the experience is not happy during the visit.

Notice that one of these independently necessary elements is objective in nature and the other subjective. In particular, what counts as a genuinely good activity is an objective matter and not simply a matter of one's volitional states (e.g. what one loves, or desires, or enjoys); for example, the level of goodness of the activity of contemplating artwork in the Louvre is set independently of what you like or dislike. But what you enjoy is fixed by your underlying volitional states; whether you enjoy any of the artwork in the Louvre depends on you, what you like, and what you desire to see. So being happy requires a *hybrid* of the objectively good activity *and* the subjectively-grounded enjoyment of the actor. Since they involve the splicing of objective and subjective considerations, accounts like this are now known as "hybrid theories."<sup>9</sup> On my reading, then, Aquinas is a

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of contemporary hybrid theories of well-being, see Christopher Woodard, "Hybrid Theories," in Guy Fletcher (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 161-174.



forerunner of this increasingly popular sort of view.<sup>10</sup>

I note this connection because I think that it is helpful in orienting us as we think about the general sort of view that Aquinas has in mind, many nuances of which will become clearer over the course of the present study. This connection also provides an easy access point to what one might find attractive or interesting in a theory broadly like Aquinas's. Hybrid theories are attractive to some because they seem to have advantages over both theories that are entirely objective in nature and theories that are entirely subjective. Entirely objective theories, according to which what is good for you is fixed entirely outside of your volitional states, allow that you might be very well off without being at all moved or pleased by your life or the things in it.<sup>11</sup> For example, if knowledge in and of itself makes a life better for the one living it, then a very knowledgeable person who doesn't care at all about what she knows is still directly made far better off by her great knowledge. But it seems very odd to think that you might be very well off without being at all moved or pleased by your life and the things in it.<sup>12</sup> So it seems that something has gone wrong with these theories.

On the other hand, entirely subjective theories, according to which what is good for you is fixed entirely by your desire set or some subjective state, like pleasure, allow that someone may be very well off indeed while living what seems to be a most unfortunate life.<sup>13</sup> For example, a trust fund kid with money to burn, gladly addicted to heroin, but having no other serious interests might,

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<sup>10</sup> Hybrid views have been recently suggested or defended by, e.g., Robert Adams, Stephen Darwall, and Susan Wolf (as a theory of meaning in life). (Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).)

<sup>11</sup> I have in mind what are known as "Objective List" theories of welfare, according to which having whatever is on the list is intrinsically good for you, regardless of how you feel about it (e.g. health).

<sup>12</sup> This is often called "The Resonance Constraint" on theories of welfare. It was proposed by Peter Railton in his "Facts and Values" in *Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays Toward a Morality of Consequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). He says, "It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him" (47).

<sup>13</sup> I have in mind versions of actual desire satisfactionism, such as Chris Heathwood's, and most versions of hedonism (except those akin to the Desert Adjusted sort proposed, but not endorsed, by Fred Feldman in *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausibility of Hedonism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006). For Heathwood, see, e.g., "The Problem of Defective Desires," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 83, No. 4 (December 2005): 487-504.

on this sort of approach, have a splendidly good life. It seems that lives of this sort aren't actually very good for those living them. So it seems that something has gone wrong with these theories as well.

Aquinas's theory can readily explain what these theories can't. A knowledgeable person who truly doesn't care about what she knows is not made better off thereby because she must enjoy or be pleased by the good things in her life, if they are to make her happier. Our contented drug addict cannot be extremely well off because, although he greatly enjoys what he is doing, what he is enjoying is not an objectively good activity. So Aquinas can readily explain cases that present very real challenges to defenders of wholly objective and wholly subjective theories.

Now, Aquinas's account of happiness is interesting not only because it has a well-worked out story to tell about who counts as happy, but also because it gives fairly refined explanations as to why some happy people are happier than other happy people. In broad strokes, the explanations fall into three camps: (1) how genuinely good the activity in question is; (2) how much one enjoys the activity in question; and (3) how long one engages in and enjoys the genuinely good activity.

Aquinas thinks that some human activities are better in themselves than others and that, all else being equal, the better an activity is in itself, the happier a person will be while engaged in that activity. So, for example, Aquinas would accept that, all else being equal, a person who is conversing with a friend is happier than a person who is counting blades of grass.<sup>14</sup> As Aquinas thinks about it, the two elements that are most relevant to how genuinely good an activity is and so how happiness conducive that activity is are: (1) that with respect to which one is acting, and (2) how intimately connected one is to that thing. The importance of the things with respect to which individuals are acting for determining levels of happiness is one reason that Aquinas believes that perfect happiness

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<sup>14</sup> The example of grass counting is taken from John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 379.

is so much better than imperfect happiness: the perfectly happy are in touch with an infinite good (i.e. God in God's essence) whereas the imperfectly happy are only in touch with some finite good or other. But so too how intimately one is connected to that with respect to which one is acting is relevant to one's level of happiness. For example, all else being equal, the more intimately one is connected (as it were) to van Gogh's *Two Figures in the Undergrowth* while admiring it, the happier one is while engaged in admiring it.

Aquinas also treats how much one is enjoying a genuinely good activity as relevant to how happy a person is while so engaged. The more one enjoys a genuinely good activity, the better off one is. Aquinas tells us that the more the saints in heaven enjoy God, the happier they are. And so too the enjoyment of various earthly activities plays an important role in determining who is happier than whom.

Finally, Aquinas suggests that, when one is enjoying a genuinely good activity, all else being equal, one is happier the longer one is so engaged. Of course, Aquinas recognizes that on earth, due to fatigue or boredom or one's responsibilities, all else is seldom equal and so, as a matter of fact, we are very often better off ceasing to do certain activities and moving on to others. But, unsurprisingly, according to Aquinas, continuing to do something happiness conducive, rather than no longer doing something happiness conducive, is a recipe for greater happiness.

With this sketch of some of the elements of Aquinas's theory of happiness in view, it should be clear that there is good reason to consider Aquinas's account of happiness, even for those who ordinarily don't study Aquinas's views: Aquinas defends a unique and interesting version of a hybrid account of happiness. For those who *do* seriously study Aquinas's views and, in particular, for those who study his account of happiness and his broader ethical views, this sketch provides another reason to take this study of Aquinas's account of happiness seriously: very many of the claims that I have made about Aquinas's account are controversial. What I am proposing in this study is, in

fundamental respects, a novel reading of Aquinas's theory. If my interpretation is correct, not only will we need to rethink much of what is commonly believed about Aquinas's account of happiness, but we will also need to rethink other elements of Aquinas's thought. This is so because happiness occupies a central place in Aquinas's work, as I will now explain.

#### §4: *The central place of human happiness in Aquinas's work*

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of human happiness in Aquinas's work.<sup>15</sup> This is so because of the foundational role that happiness plays in Aquinas's ethics as well as the important roles that it plays in Aquinas's theory of human action and in his theology.

As Aquinas thinks about it, happiness is the foundation of the systematic study of ethics. It is not by accident that Aquinas begins his treatment of ethics in the *Summa Theologiae* with a discussion of happiness and only then moves on to discussions of virtue, law, and grace. In justifying that order, Aquinas makes it clear that, by his lights, it is only when we understand happiness that we can adequately treat “the means by which a person can advance to this end [i.e. happiness] or stray from it, for it is necessary to take the character of those things ordered to the end from the end.”<sup>16</sup> The things ordered to the end of happiness whose character depends on what happiness is are the other elements of Aquinas's ethical theory, including virtue, law, and grace. So, according to Aquinas, we must first grasp the nature of happiness before we can adequately treat the other key elements of his ethics because, you might say, we have to know where we're going before we can fully understand how to get there. Given that happiness is foundational in this way, how we think

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<sup>15</sup> Servais Pinckaers calls the Treatise on Happiness “the centerpiece in the construction of the *Summa Theologiae*.” (“Beatitude and the Beatitudes in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*,” in John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (eds.), *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 117. Aquinas also thinks that God is all-happy (see, e.g., ST Ia q.26) and that angels can be happy (see, e.g., ST Ia q.62). In the dissertation, I have chosen to concentrate on human happiness; I will, however, occasionally mention angelic happiness in order to make various points about human happiness.

<sup>16</sup> ST IaIIae q.1.

about Aquinas's account of happiness should affect how we think about these other important elements of Aquinas's ethics. So it is absolutely crucial that those interested in Aquinas's ethical views have a deep and accurate understanding of Aquinas's account of happiness, since, according to Aquinas, that account, which lies at the foundation of Aquinas's ethics, ought to shape how we think about the character of the other elements of his ethical views.

But, for Aquinas, happiness does more than serve as the foundation of the systematic study of ethics. It also plays a fundamental role in his theory of human action. Aquinas believes that all deliberate human action is ultimately motivated by an innate desire for happiness; we desire everything we desire ultimately on account of happiness – whether we realize it or not, whether we're thinking about happiness or not. This is so because, according to Aquinas, everything we desire is desired either because, at least implicitly, we think happiness is found therein or because we think the thing desired helps us on our way to happiness – at the very least, by warding off misery. So the desire for happiness is the motor that gets all genuine human volition moving. One would expect, then, that a deep understanding of Aquinas's account of happiness would be extremely useful in approaching Aquinas's action theory and not only his ethics.

Finally, according to Aquinas, happiness, at least in part, justifies our concern with a systematic study of theology.<sup>17</sup> The reason for this shouldn't strike us as far-fetched, particularly given the state of the debate over happiness today: it is very hard to know what true happiness is and how to become truly happy. Aquinas thinks that it is so difficult and so important that God chose to reveal the true nature of perfect happiness to us and to reveal that whereby we might become perfectly happy. Indeed, Aquinas thinks that without God's self-revelation, human beings could not have come to grasp the nature of perfect happiness at all and so could not have pursued it well in

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Porter discusses this persuasively in her "Happiness," which is forthcoming in Denys Turner and Philip McCosker (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Summa Theologiae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

action.<sup>18</sup> And, further, he thinks that without God’s activity, human beings could never become perfectly happy. We need theology, then, built upon God’s self-revelation and reflection on God’s actions, because we need to be well informed about the way in which we are “ordained to God” as human beings so that we might reach the perfect happiness that Aquinas believes consists in “the perfect knowledge of God.”<sup>19</sup> But the importance of happiness for theology extends even further. One can see Aquinas’s discussions of happiness as “a veritable keystone” that guides Aquinas’s treatments of, e.g., “the theological virtues; sin, chiefly mortal sin; law; and the grace of the Spirit in the New Law.”<sup>20</sup>

And so in theology as well as ethics and action theory, happiness plays a vital role. Again, it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of happiness in Aquinas’s work. And consequently it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of having the correct interpretation of Aquinas’s views on happiness for those who want to get Aquinas right.

So for those interested in getting Aquinas right and for those independently interested in thinking deeply about happiness there is good reason to try to understand Aquinas’s work on happiness.

#### *§5: The structure of the study*

With the topic’s independent interest in mind as well as its importance for understanding Aquinas’s views more broadly, I will now give a clearer sense of what this study includes by very briefly describing what it covers, chapter by chapter. As I do so, I will assert the central theses that I defend in the study.

In Chapter 1, I offer a largely uncontroversial portrait of much of Aquinas’s account of

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<sup>18</sup> ST Ia q.1. a.1.

<sup>19</sup> ST Ia q.1 a.1, a.4.

<sup>20</sup> Pinckaers, “Beatitude and the Beatitudes...,” 117.

happiness. It is an account of the story that Aquinas tells about happiness, as he tells it, in the order he tells it, and using the terminology in which he tells it. That portrait serves both to introduce a whole array of important claims that Aquinas makes concerning happiness and helps us to see where difficult, but vital matters of interpretation lie. In my view, anyone hoping to give a systematic account of Aquinas's theory of happiness must face those interpretive matters head on. In particular, the interpretive questions that need answers are: What is Aquinas's method? According to Aquinas, what is perfect happiness fundamentally? What is imperfect happiness really? And what fundamentally explains degrees of perfect and imperfect happiness? I address each of these questions, in this order, in chapters two through five.

Chapter 2 takes up the question, "What is Aquinas's method?" Aquinas's method has received little sustained attention among commentators. But it seems to me important to address, since it is Aquinas's method that sets the basic parameters of his treatment of happiness. It is Aquinas's method that sets for his treatment of happiness a beginning and end as well as a mode for moving from start to finish. In Chapter 2, I attempt to show that Aquinas sets up the conceptual foundation of his theory of happiness by committing to a characterization of the general concept of perfect happiness. That conceptual foundation is the starting point of his method inasmuch as it acts as a fairly neutral initial characterization of perfect happiness that makes possible inquiry into its deep nature and ultimately its essence. According to that general concept, perfect happiness is the "complete good" for a human being, which he takes to be equivalent to its being "the perfectly good state" for a human being (whatever such a state might be like).<sup>21</sup> Aquinas hopes to build from this foundation all the way to an account of the inner-workings of the very essence of happiness. He wants an account of what perfect happiness really *is*, or – in other words – an account of what, fundamentally, a perfectly good state for a human being involves. As one might expect, there are a

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<sup>21</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

number of steps that one must take to get from the general concept of perfect happiness to an account of the very essence of perfect happiness. Aquinas makes progress by, first, connecting the general concept of perfect happiness to a pair of general characteristics that he believes follows from the fully general characterization of perfect happiness. Then on the basis of those general characteristics, he proceeds to identify increasingly particular characteristics of the perfect state for a human being, or – in other words – increasingly particular characteristics of perfect happiness, until arriving at the inner-workings of the very essence of perfect happiness. Or so I argue in Chapter 2.

Although Aquinas is clearly after an account of the essence of perfect happiness, it isn't immediately obvious what his settled view on the essence of perfect happiness amounts to. Many characterizations that Aquinas gives of perfect happiness seem to have some claim to being identified with *the* essence of perfect happiness. And so one must tread with care. In Chapter 3, then, I turn to the task of identifying Aquinas's conception of the essence of perfect happiness. After rejecting two common readings on these matters, I defend the claim that, according to Aquinas, the essence of perfect happiness is one's activity of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence. On this reading, Aquinas defends a kind of hybrid theory of perfect happiness, according to which perfect happiness is constituted by two interlocking strands that non-instrumentally benefit the perfectly happy person: the very activity of knowing God in God's essence and one's affective response to that activity blossoming in enjoyment.

But, as we've seen, Aquinas is interested not only in giving an account of perfect heavenly happiness, but also imperfect earthly happiness. Chapter 4 turns to determining what imperfect happiness fundamentally is. As in the case of perfect happiness, here too I first reject two common misreadings. Interestingly, each of these interpretations of imperfect happiness are connected to what I take to be misreadings of Aquinas's account of the essence of perfect happiness. With my reading of the essence of perfect happiness in hand, I argue that we should think that, according to



Aquinas, imperfect happiness – like perfect happiness – is a hybrid of two elements. In particular, it seems that, according to Aquinas, imperfect happiness is a matter of engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities.

There is, however, more to Aquinas's theory than an account concerning what qualifies as perfect happiness and what qualifies as imperfect happiness. Aquinas believes that some perfectly happy people are happier than other perfectly happy people; that all perfectly happy people are happier than all imperfectly happy people; and that some imperfectly happy people are happier than other imperfectly happy people. Chapter 5 concludes my systematic treatment of Aquinas's theory of happiness with an account of what, according to Aquinas, fundamentally explains these comparative judgments. As I noted above, in broad strokes, the explanations fall into three camps: how genuinely good the activity in question is; how much one enjoys the activity in question; and how long one engages in and enjoys the genuinely good activity. With all of these elements in hand, I then conclude my systematic philosophical study of Thomas Aquinas's theory of human happiness.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Confronting Aquinas on Happiness*

There is no better way to begin to confront Thomas Aquinas's account of happiness than through a careful study of The Treatise on Happiness in his *Summa Theologiae*. From that Treatise, we can get a sense of the story that Aquinas tells about happiness, as Aquinas tells it, in the order he tells it, and using the terminology in which he tells it. And so I begin my treatment of Aquinas's account of happiness with a thorough, largely uncontroversial, and – hopefully – insightful summary of that Treatise. This treatment will serve as the foundation of the study moving forward. Without it, we cannot hope to address or, indeed, even recognize the most important questions that a systematic interpretation of Aquinas's account of happiness must answer.

#### *§1: The Treatise on Happiness in brief*

The Treatise on Happiness is a mature and comprehensive treatment of Aquinas's basic account of happiness.<sup>22</sup> It is broken into five questions: one on the ultimate end and four on happiness. To even understand why the question about the ultimate end is asked in this context, it is important to know that Aquinas's views are situated in a broadly teleological framework, according to which human beings have – apart from their choosing – an orientation towards an ultimate end, or ultimate goal or purpose.<sup>23</sup> Aquinas connects happiness with that unchosen human ultimate end.<sup>24</sup> It is because of this connection that, in Question 1 at the beginning of the Treatise, Aquinas examines the ultimate end in general. He then by successive stages treats happiness itself. Aquinas first considers what happiness consists in, or – in other words – what thing (or collection of things),

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<sup>22</sup> He leaves unaddressed, e.g., quite a few details about the mechanics of perfect happiness. He addresses them elsewhere – see, e.g., Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.2 and SCG l.3 c.51-57. I will draw on these further discussions as necessary.

<sup>23</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 pro.

<sup>24</sup> In the prologue of Question 1, e.g., Aquinas says, “the ultimate end of a human life is posited to be happiness.”

fundamentally, is capable of making a person happy, when attained (Question 2). For example, under this heading, he considers whether, fundamentally, wealth is capable of making a person happy. Now, it turns out that Aquinas thinks that happiness *just is* a particular sort of attainment of the thing out there in the world capable of making a person happy. So, in Question 3, he examines under the heading, ‘what happiness is,’ the *nature of the attainment* of the thing in which happiness consists. In other words, in this question, Aquinas elaborates on *what happiness is* by detailing what the relevant sort of attainment of the happiness-conducting thing(s) is like. Questions 4 and 5 concern how we can attain happiness. In particular, Question 4 details those things that are required for happiness, and Question 5 concerns aspects of the very attainment of happiness.

In the next five sub-sections, I will outline the core claims made in each of these five questions.

### §1: *The Last End in General*

It is with good reason that Aquinas calls this an examination of the last end in general (*ultimo fine in communi*).<sup>25</sup> Aquinas accepts a teleological view of all natural things, according to which all things necessarily act for the sake of an end.<sup>26</sup> In other words, all things act to achieve goals or aims, even things like rocks and plants. Each thing in its own characteristic way pursues various ends either through some non-cognitive processes implanted in it by God (as in the case of rocks and plants) or through some cognitive processes (as in the case of animals).<sup>27</sup> But not only do all things act for the sake of ends, all things act for the sake of ultimate ends.<sup>28</sup> This is so because all things, in their own characteristic way, are oriented towards their own characteristic perfection (e.g. acorns are oriented towards becoming flourishing oaks) and, since being entirely perfected is the *ratio* or nature

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<sup>25</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 pro.

<sup>26</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.2.

<sup>27</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.2.

<sup>28</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.8.

of the ultimate end, all things are oriented towards the ultimate end fit for things of their kind.<sup>29</sup>

Humans are just a variation on this underlying theme. We too act for the sake of ends.<sup>30</sup> But we are able to do so in a special way that Aquinas thinks that non-human animals are incapable of, to say nothing of rocks or plants. In particular, unlike other creatures, human beings very frequently “move themselves to an end because they have control (*dominium*) of their own acts through free will (*liberum arbitrium*).”<sup>31</sup> Unlike other animals, we direct ourselves to ends that we conceive of *as ends* and so we act deliberately in a way that non-human animals do not, according to Aquinas.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, like everything else, we too have an ultimate end.<sup>33</sup> We must have some ultimate end as we act, according to Aquinas, because a desire for some ultimate end fundamentally explains why we do anything at all; that ultimate end or aim gets all other desires moving.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, according to Aquinas, ultimately, whatever we desire, we desire on account of the ultimate end.<sup>35</sup> And it turns out that it is *the* ultimate end (singular) on any particular occasion that gets desire moving because Aquinas also thinks that it’s impossible for a person to be oriented towards several ultimate ends at once.<sup>36</sup> One reason he gives for thinking this is that a desire for an *ultimate* end is, by its very nature, a desire for a good that is complete. But one cannot desire two distinct goods as complete.<sup>37</sup> Aquinas further argues that it’s not only the case that, on any particular occasion, a person only has a single ultimate end. In a sense, every human being at every point has precisely the same ultimate end:

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<sup>29</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.7.

<sup>30</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.2.

<sup>31</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.2.

Aquinas recognizes that sometimes we don’t, in fact, exercise this sort of control over our actions, such as when we reflexively scratch an itch (ST IaIIae q.1 a.1.). And so he distinguishes between the actions of human beings (*hominis actiones*), which don’t involve exercising that sort of control over our actions, and human actions (*actiones humanae*), which do (ST IaIIae q.1 a.1 co.). In both cases we act for the sake of an end, but human actions mark us off from non-human animals (ST IaIIae q.1 a.1 ad 3. And ST IaIIae q.1 a.2.).

<sup>32</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.2 co.

<sup>33</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.8.

<sup>34</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.4.

<sup>35</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.6.

<sup>36</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.5.

<sup>37</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.5.

namely, the characteristic perfection of a human being.<sup>38</sup> All humans share an ultimate end in that sense.

There is, however, another sense in which two people, or even the same person from one time to another, may not have the same ultimate end. In that sense, the ultimate end of a human being is “that in which the character of the ultimate end is found.”<sup>39</sup> Some people think that their complete good is to be found in riches, others in pleasure, or what have you.<sup>40</sup> So in this sense different people take different things as their ultimate ends. But Aquinas thinks that, as a matter of fact, the character of the ultimate end is found only in one thing. In particular, with little fanfare, he tells us that it is found only in “knowing and loving God.”<sup>41</sup> This is something of a teaser – the introduction of a theme that only resurfaces at the end of Question 2 where it is more fully justified. It is the thought that we must find “that in which the character of ultimate end is found” that provides the transition from the core of Question 1 to Question 2.

§1.2: *That in which happiness consists*

This transition is accomplished in the prologue of Question 2. Aquinas says, “‘happiness’ names the attainment of the ultimate end.”<sup>42</sup> Since happiness is the attainment of the ultimate end, what we need is an account of that “in which the character of the ultimate end is found.”<sup>43</sup> Or, putting the point in terms of happiness, we need to discover the thing (or collection of things) capable of making a person happy, when possessed. This is what Aquinas is after under the heading *that in which happiness consists*. There are many candidates for that in which happiness consists, many of which Aquinas considers in turn. Aquinas’s list is as germane in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as ever: wealth,

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<sup>38</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.7 co.

<sup>39</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.7 co.

<sup>40</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.7 co.

<sup>41</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.8.

<sup>42</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 pro.

<sup>43</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.7.

honor, fame, glory, power, bodily goods, pleasure, or goods of the soul.

As one would expect, Aquinas finds fault with thinking that happiness consists in wealth, honor, fame, glory, and power. The reasons are manifold. Some reasons are specific to the item in question (e.g. wealth is sought on account of further things so it can't be the ultimate end), but Aquinas also gives four general arguments for rejecting all of these candidates.<sup>44</sup> These general arguments are especially telling for those trying to understand Aquinas's account of happiness because in them Aquinas makes a series of general claims about the nature of happiness, many of which are connected to features of the ultimate end we've already seen. He tells us, for example, that "happiness is the highest good (*summum bonum*) for a human being"; that happiness is satisfying in such a way that, "when happiness [is] possessed, the individual lacks no good necessary for a human being"; and that happiness is the "complete good" (*perfectum bonum*) for a human being.<sup>45</sup> None of the external goods identified could ever plausibly be thought to reach those lofty heights.

It may now be coming into clear focus just how demanding Aquinas's conception of happiness is. A happy person must have the complete good for a human being – a good so wonderful that it would satisfy and perfect her completely.<sup>46</sup> What could possibly fit this characterization?

Certainly not bodily goods, like health.<sup>47</sup> But what about great pleasure or enjoyment? Here we begin to consider what Aquinas seems to treat as serious contenders. Upon closer examination, however, Aquinas thinks that enjoyment too falls short. It falls short because, by its very nature, pleasure and enjoyment follow from obtaining some fitting good.<sup>48</sup> We enjoy things that we think

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<sup>44</sup> For the example of wealth, see ST IaIIae q.2 a.1. For honors, see a.2. For fame and glory, see a.3. For power, see a.4.

<sup>45</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.4 co.

<sup>46</sup> See also, e.g., ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co.

<sup>47</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.5.

<sup>48</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.6. The story is worked out further in ST IaIIae q.31.

are, in some way or other, good for us.<sup>49</sup> So enjoyment is a consequence of our obtaining some fitting good and thus enjoyment alone can't be the complete good for a human being. But Aquinas goes on. He says that, "if [that fitting good enjoyed] is perfect, it is itself human happiness."<sup>50</sup> Or, put perhaps more carefully, Aquinas says that that perfect fitting good "is the very essence of happiness" and the enjoyment that follows upon that good, as we'd expect given the nature of enjoyment, is "something resulting from it – like a *per se* accident."<sup>51</sup> Here he compares the enjoyment to a special property of a thing (i.e. a *per se* accident). Properties of that kind (1) depend on a thing's essence and (2) follow necessarily from its essence, which make this a fit comparison, since in the same general sort of way enjoyment depends on a fitting good and follows necessarily from being aware of having attained such a good.

It seems that we are left with only one option from the list, then: happiness must consist in some good of the soul. According to Aquinas, this is true in one sense, but false in another.<sup>52</sup> Here, Aquinas makes a crucial distinction that allows us to understand more fully why Aquinas distinguishes between *that in which happiness consists*, on the one hand, and *what happiness is*, on the other. So it is only here that Aquinas becomes entirely forthcoming as to what is at issue in Questions 2 and 3 respectively. The distinction is between, on the one hand, a *thing* which we desire to obtain out there in the world (as it were) and the *very attainment* of that thing, on the other.<sup>53</sup> Question 2 is about "the *thing* in which happiness consists," or the *thing* "which makes a person happy."<sup>54</sup> Returning to the immediate question at hand, the *thing* in which happiness consists must be something other than a good of the soul – whether some power, disposition, or act of the soul.

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<sup>49</sup> For Aquinas's discussion of enjoyment and pleasure more broadly, see ST IaIIae q.31.

<sup>50</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.6 co.

<sup>51</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.6 co.

<sup>52</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co.

<sup>53</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co.

<sup>54</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co.

After all, “the good which is the ultimate end is a complete good, [which] satisfies desire,” and “human desire is for a universal good.”<sup>55</sup> Goods of the soul are all “particular,” not universal.<sup>56</sup> So the thing in which happiness consists must be “something outside the soul.”<sup>57</sup> And now we return to a variation on the theme first raised at the end of Question 1: it is impossible that happiness consists in any created good – it must consist in God.<sup>58</sup> God alone is the universal good and so God alone can “entirely quiet [human] desire.”<sup>59</sup> God, it turns out, is the only *thing* capable of making a person happy. This is the crucial result of Question 2.

The other side of the distinction – namely, the *very attainment* of the relevant thing – provides Aquinas with his transition into Question 3. The *thing* out in the world that makes us happy (i.e. God) isn’t human happiness itself; that’s not what human happiness *is*.<sup>60</sup> Rather, according to Aquinas, “the *attainment* of this thing is called ‘happiness.’”<sup>61</sup> And so, returning to the immediate question at hand, happiness is, in part, a good of the soul “because a human being attains happiness through the soul.” But only in Question 3 does Aquinas turn to a careful examination of the nature of that attainment and so to an examination of the nature of happiness.

### §1.3: *What happiness is*

Given the importance of the distinction for clarifying how the topic of Question 2 differs from the topic of Question 3, it is unsurprising that Aquinas opens Question 3 by rehearsing again the very distinction we’ve just been examining. But at the very beginning of Question 3, Aquinas wants to leave no doubt that he thinks that happiness *just is* a particular sort of attainment of the

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<sup>55</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co. The same point is made, e.g., at SCG I.1 c.100 n.5.

<sup>56</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co.

<sup>57</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co.

<sup>58</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.8.

<sup>59</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.8 co.

<sup>60</sup> Although it turns out that thing (i.e. God) is itself maximally happy – indeed, it is identical to its happiness – according to Aquinas. See, e.g., ST Ia q.26. But it is not in and of itself identical to human happiness.

<sup>61</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co. Emphasis added.



thing out there in the world capable of making a person happy (i.e. God). And so he tells us that “the very essence of happiness” is “the attainment or enjoyment of the ultimate end [i.e. God].”<sup>62</sup> Question 3 is his chance to elaborate on *what happiness* is, then, by detailing what this relevant sort of attainment of the happiness-conducting thing is like.

He begins by establishing that the relevant sort of attainment is an activity. It must be because “happiness is the ultimate perfection of a human being” and the relevant sort of perfection occurs, in part, through activity.<sup>63</sup> There are two levels at which a human being is perfected.<sup>64</sup> First, there is the level of the agent herself with her characteristic faculties. This occurs principally through the virtues, which attach to her peculiarly rational faculties and, in addition to perfecting the agent, make it possible for those faculties to function optimally.<sup>65</sup> The second level is the level of the agent’s activities. According to Aquinas, a human being using her perfected faculties is more perfect in the relevant sense than one not using them, and one using them to perform better activities is more perfect than one using them to perform worse activities.<sup>66</sup> So, of course, happiness as the ultimate perfection of a person involves an activity. And so the relevant sort of attainment of the happiness-conducting thing, which just is happiness, must be an activity.

But it is not just any activity. It can’t be the activity of any of our sensory powers, since our sensory powers can’t unite us to “the uncreated good” in which “human happiness consists.”<sup>67</sup> We cannot be united to God through our five senses or through the sorts of mental content those

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<sup>62</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.1.

<sup>63</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2. See also, e.g., SCG I.1 c.100 n.3-4.

<sup>64</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2.

<sup>65</sup> It is clear that, according to Aquinas, virtue is a component of one’s perfection. See, for example, ST IaIIae q. 55 a. 1-3. At the beginning of each of those articles, Aquinas says some variant of, “‘virtue’ names a certain perfection of a power.”

The rational faculties in question are both those that are rational in themselves (intellect and will) as well as those that participate in reason (the concupiscible and irascible appetites).

<sup>66</sup> The complete perfection of a capacity requires “that it attain to that in which is found the fullness of its formal object” (ST IaIIae q. 3 a. 7 ad 3).

<sup>67</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.3.

senses can give rise to. The connection must be forged through the work of far less limited powers, namely, intellect or will, which – at least in principle – can grasp the universal true and the universal good, respectively.<sup>68</sup> Between these two, however, it is the intellect that predominates, since it is the intellect that unites us in the first place to God.<sup>69</sup> Only when the intellect is so united is enjoyment even possible for the will. So Aquinas concludes, “the essence of happiness consists in an act of the intellect, but the delight [i.e. enjoyment] following along with happiness pertains to the will.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, the relevant sort of attainment of the happiness-conducting thing is forged predominately by the intellect and complemented by enjoyment in the will.

But so too not just any intellectual activity will suffice for forging this connection to the happiness-conducting thing (i.e. God): it must be an operation of the speculative intellect, rather than the practical intellect.<sup>71</sup> In other words, our happiness must consist in some sort of contemplation of truth, rather than in our trying to figure out how we ought to act in some particular situation. One reason Aquinas gives for thinking this is that happiness must be the “best human activity.”<sup>72</sup> “The best human activity is that which is [an activity] of the best power with respect to the best object.”<sup>73</sup> The best power is the intellect and its best object is “the divine good,” which is an object of the speculative intellect to be contemplated, rather than an object of the practical intellect to be deliberated about.<sup>74</sup> And if that weren’t enough, contemplation – as “most proper to a human being” – is “maximally delightful,” or maximally enjoyable.<sup>75</sup> So happiness – or the relevant sort of attainment of the happiness-conducting thing – must be some intensely enjoyable, elevated contemplative activity.

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<sup>68</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.8 co.

<sup>69</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.4 co. See also, e.g., SCG I.3 c.26.

<sup>70</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.4 co.

<sup>71</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.5.

<sup>72</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.5 co.

<sup>73</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.5 co.

<sup>74</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.5 co.

<sup>75</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.5 co.

And, it turns out, that Aquinas is quite serious when he says that contemplation of the “divine good” is required. Happiness is not a matter of contemplating the “the speculative sciences” – in other words, we are not truly happy in contemplating the truths of, say, biology or geology or even metaphysics.<sup>76</sup> Contemplating such things would not result in “the ultimate perfection of a human being,” since – as it were – our minds are capable of so much more.<sup>77</sup> For the same reason, nor is happiness a contemplative activity centered around “the knowledge of separated substances [i.e. angels].”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, according to Aquinas, not just any contemplation of the “divine good” will suffice for happiness – contemplating God under the guise of postulated First Cause is also not enough.<sup>79</sup>

What is left then to be contemplated that can meet the lofty standards of happiness? Only one thing: the divine essence. It is only when one is contemplating God’s essence that nothing “remains for a person to desire and seek,” since it is only then that one knows the true nature of the cause of all things and thereby has one’s desire for truth (or Truth) sated.<sup>80</sup> So too it is only then that one will be perfected, since God’s essence alone marks the limits of the intellect.<sup>81</sup> So happiness is had only “in the vision of the divine essence.”<sup>82</sup> Question 3, then, leads us to a deeper understanding of *what happiness is* by detailing for us what the relevant sort of attainment of the happiness-conducting thing is like: the relevant sort of attainment involves the speculative intellect’s grasping and the will’s enjoying the very essence of God. And so we come to see that happiness is the ever-

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<sup>76</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.6 co.

<sup>77</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.6 co.

<sup>78</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.7.

<sup>79</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.8 co. In SCG, after establishing that ultimate happiness must consist in the contemplation of God (SCG I.3 c.37), Aquinas then goes on to eliminate various modes of contemplating God, as it were, that are insufficient for ultimate happiness before landing on having to contemplate God in God’s essence. In particular, he rejects as insufficient the “common and confused understanding of God which is as if present to all human beings” is not enough (c.38); the kind had through a demonstration of God’s existence (c.39); and the kind had through faith (c.40).

<sup>80</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.8 co. One might wonder about this satisfying *all* of a person’s desires, since it seems that knowing things is only one human desire among many. Aquinas later tells us that the goodness of whatever we might desire in addition to the truth will be possessed “in the supreme fount of [all] good things [i.e. God]” (ST IaIIae q.4 a.7 ad 2).

<sup>81</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.8 co.

<sup>82</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.8 co.

so-enjoyable contemplation of God in God's essence. Lofty indeed!

Near the end of Question 3, however, Aquinas adds a less lofty theme. To that point, he more or less unabashedly claims that what it takes to count as happy is extraordinarily demanding. Only the complete good that satisfies entirely, the best and most enjoyable activity possible, the absolute perfection of a human being counts as happiness. It is on this basis that we have progressed to this point. In this Question, he begins to interweave a less demanding conception of happiness by distinguishing between "perfect happiness" (*perfecta beatitudo*), on the one hand, and "imperfect happiness" (*beatitudo imperfecta*), on the other.<sup>83</sup> At this stage, the preceding discussion is thus recast as having almost exclusively to do with perfect happiness. It is only perfect happiness that must be a complete good that satisfies entirely; it is only perfect happiness that is the best and most enjoyable activity possible; and perfect happiness alone completely perfects a person. So too it is perfect happiness that is the ever-so-enjoyable contemplation of God in God's essence. Imperfect happiness is not so lofty or unyielding. It merely "shares (*participat*) in some particular likeness of [perfect] happiness."<sup>84</sup>

Although Aquinas treats imperfect happiness as a likeness to perfect happiness, Aquinas also holds that imperfect happiness is, in important ways, very different from perfect happiness. Whereas perfect happiness cannot be had by contemplating aspects of the speculative sciences, imperfect happiness can, since in "the consideration of the speculative sciences there is a certain participation in true and perfect happiness."<sup>85</sup> And, whereas perfect happiness cannot be had by contemplating the angels, "a certain imperfect happiness" can be found there.<sup>86</sup> From here forward, then, we see

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<sup>83</sup> In allowing for imperfect, earthly happiness as a genuine sort of happiness, Aquinas is departing from Augustine, who held that all are bound to be miserable in this life (*De Civitate Dei* 9.5).

<sup>84</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.6 co.

<sup>85</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.6 co.

<sup>86</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.7.

Aquinas interweaving discussions of these importantly similar and importantly different kinds of happiness.

§1.4: *The things required for happiness*

With a clearer sense of what perfect happiness is, in particular, Aquinas turns to determining what things are required for happiness, many of which are the rejected candidates we saw in Question 2 – pleasure, virtue (a good of the soul), bodily goods, and external goods. Here he attempts to explain what place, if any, these things ordinarily sought have in a happy life – whether a perfectly happy life or an imperfectly happy one.

As we have already seen, enjoyment has something of a special place in a perfectly happy life. Here, Aquinas tells us more about how to think of the place it occupies. He tells us to think of enjoyment “as a concomitant” to happiness.<sup>87</sup> In other words, according to Aquinas, where there is perfect happiness, there is enjoyment as well, since enjoyment is caused by “the appetite [i.e. the will] resting in a good possessed” and “[perfect] happiness is nothing other than the possession of the highest good.”<sup>88</sup> Even though there is no happiness without enjoyment, Aquinas very clearly maintains that, in perfect happiness, the vision – i.e., the speculative intellect’s grasp on God – is “the more principal good.”<sup>89</sup> This is so for roughly familiar reasons having to do with the nature of enjoyment. Enjoyment is caused when “the will rests in something...on account of the goodness of the thing in which it rests.”<sup>90</sup> So the very existence of any particular enjoyment is thought to be parasitic on the (apparent) goodness of the activity being enjoyed.<sup>91</sup> Thus the enjoyment taken in the vision of God depends upon and presupposes the goodness of the vision in a way that the goodness of the vision does not depend upon or presuppose the goodness of the enjoyment. And so the

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<sup>87</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.1.

<sup>88</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.1 co.

<sup>89</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.2 co.

<sup>90</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.2 co.

<sup>91</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.2 co.

vision, as causally fundamental, is the more principal good.

Perfect happiness thus involves the intimate vision of God and the immense enjoyment of God through that intellectual vision.<sup>92</sup> But what else is required for perfect happiness? In most ways, it turns out, not much. One does need “uprightness of will,” or – in other words – one needs to have the right sort of love governing one’s desires.<sup>93</sup> But this comes fairly easily for those enjoying the intimate vision of God, since “the will of one seeing the essence of God out of necessity loves whatever he loves as ordered to God” and “that is what makes a will upright.”<sup>94</sup> Beyond this, according to Aquinas, very little is needed to be perfectly happy. First of all, a person doesn’t need a body; a soul separated from a body can be perfectly happy, since a separated soul can enjoy the intimate intellectual vision of God.<sup>95</sup> Of course, as a matter of fact, Aquinas believes that eventually all separated souls will have bodies again.<sup>96</sup> But, again, bodies are not necessary for perfect happiness.

Now, it is unsurprising that, if one *does* have a body while engaged in the intellectual vision of God in God’s essence, being perfectly happy requires that the body in question be perfectly disposed for that activity (e.g. it must never become fatigued).<sup>97</sup> Otherwise, one would be impeded in the vision of God.<sup>98</sup> So, assuming one has a body, a perfect body is required for perfect happiness – one that in no way interferes with the continual vision of God. Those superior bodies, which are

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<sup>92</sup> I add “intimate” to capture the comprehension constraint at ST IaIIae q.4 a.3 (i.e. that one lay hold of a thing present and possessed).

<sup>93</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.4.

<sup>94</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.4 co.

<sup>95</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.5.

<sup>96</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.5 co. In particular, he thought this would occur on the Day of Judgment.

<sup>97</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.6 co. In SCG, Aquinas details some of the characteristics of these perfected bodies. They are immortal (SCG I.4 c.82); they will not need (or be used) to eat or have sex (SCG I.4 c.83); they will, nevertheless, be of the same nature as our bodies now (SCG I.4 c.84); they will, however, be disposed differently (SCG I.4 c.85); and, in particular, they will be brighter, impassible, more agile, and with a more perfect dignity of nature (SCG I.4 c.86). For a discussion of these traits, see Christina Van Dyke’s “Aquinas’s Shiny Happy People: Perfect Happiness and the Limits of Human Nature,” *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* 6 (2014): 269-291.

<sup>98</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.6 ad 2.

completely disposed for the vision of God, require neither food nor drink nor rest.<sup>99</sup> And so, unsurprisingly, exterior goods (such as food and drink) are not required for perfect happiness.<sup>100</sup> But not only exterior goods of the vulgar sort are unnecessary for perfect happiness, so too are friends.<sup>101</sup> According to Aquinas, “if there were only one soul enjoying God – not having a neighbor to love – it would be happy.”<sup>102</sup> In the vision of God all on its own, “a human being has the total fullness of his perfection.”<sup>103</sup>

Imperfect happiness is another story. By comparison, the imperfectly happy are extremely needy. For starters, they need bodies.<sup>104</sup> The main reason given is that it is ultimately because of our bodies that here and now we are capable of performing all manner of intellectual activities, whether contemplating the truth or, e.g., trying to figure out what career to pursue.<sup>105</sup> And, since our imperfect happiness is to be had in such activities, bodies are required for imperfect happiness.<sup>106</sup> Now, our bodies don’t need to be absolutely perfect in order to be imperfectly happy. They do, however, need to be well disposed overall; that is, we have to be reasonably healthy.<sup>107</sup> The reason is that imperfect happiness “consists...in ‘an activity of complete virtue’ (*operatione virtutis perfectae*)” and “in every activity of virtue a human being can be impeded” by “the indisposition of the body.”<sup>108</sup> Illness or severe disability, for example, can make even the simplest activities extraordinarily difficult. This all makes it quite unsurprising that at least some external goods are required for imperfect happiness, since it is through them that we sustain ourselves.<sup>109</sup> But Aquinas distinguishes between

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<sup>99</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7.

<sup>100</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7.

<sup>101</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.8.

<sup>102</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.8 ad 3.

<sup>103</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.8 co.

<sup>104</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.5.

<sup>105</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.5.

<sup>106</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.5.

<sup>107</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.6.

<sup>108</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.6 co.

<sup>109</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7.

two kinds of lives and two kinds of happiness that require different amounts of external goods; the distinction is also put to use moving forward. On the one hand, there is the contemplative life, which is centered around the pursuit of truth, with its associated contemplative happiness. That sort of life requires only a small set of bare essential external goods; think, for example, of the philosopher on sabbatical. On the other hand, there is the active life, which is centered around securing various goods for one's self and others through all manner of activities; here we might think of elementary school teachers, doctors, and landscapers. That kind of life too has an associated happiness, namely, active happiness.<sup>110</sup> But in comparison to lives characterized principally by the exercise of contemplative virtues, lives centered around "the works of active virtue," at least in general, require "very many more" external goods.<sup>111</sup> The doctor, for example, often needs medicine or various implements in order to help others, whereas the philosopher can, at least in principle, get by with very little. That said, there is something beyond the most basic of necessities that even a contemplative needs in order to be imperfectly happy, according to Aquinas: friends.<sup>112</sup> Aquinas says, "A human being needs the help of friends in order to do activities well (*ad bene operandum*), as much in the activities of the active life as in the activities of the contemplative life."<sup>113</sup> So an imperfectly happy person is reasonably healthy, has sufficient external goods to live and work, and she spends her time doing good and enjoyable activities, often in the company of friends. This portrait makes it quite clear that imperfect happiness, as Aquinas thinks of it, is not foreign to our way of thinking about what makes for a good and appealing life.

### §1.5: *The very attainment of happiness*

Having detailed what perfect happiness is and having said a fair amount about what is

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<sup>110</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7 co. The explicit distinction between these lives is made here, but the fully explicit distinction between these associated kinds of happiness is made explicit elsewhere (e.g. ST IaIIae q.5 a.4 co.).

<sup>111</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7 co.

<sup>112</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.8.

<sup>113</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.8 co.



required for it as well as for imperfect happiness, Aquinas turns his attention to the very attainment of happiness. It is perhaps unsurprising that the first thing that Aquinas addresses in this connection is whether it's even possible for a human being to attain perfect happiness. After all, perfect happiness under every description is lofty indeed. It is the perfection of a human being. It is the very best and most enjoyable activity possible for a human being. It would satisfy us entirely. It involves grasping the very essence of God. How could this sort of thing even be possible for a human being?

Aquinas takes this question very seriously.<sup>114</sup> He answers it in stages. First, he tries to establish the bare possibility of achieving this kind of state by appealing to the nature of the intellect and will.<sup>115</sup> A human being's "intellect can apprehend the universal and perfect good and her will desire it" and so she is capable of attaining such a perfect good. And, since "'happiness' names the attainment of the perfect good," in virtue of these capacities, she can – at least in principle – become perfectly happy.<sup>116</sup>

Aquinas then turns to explaining in more detail how a person can move from the bare possibility of obtaining perfect happiness to actually obtaining it. He first rejects two options: one can't obtain it either through one's own unaided efforts or through the efforts of some higher creature (such as an angel).<sup>117</sup> This is so because God is so much greater than any created intellect that the vision of God's essence "infinitely exceeds all created substance."<sup>118</sup> And, since all creatures are thus limited, "it is impossible that [happiness] be conferred through the action of any creature."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> The seriousness with which he takes this question does not even fully come through in the Treatise on Happiness. For example, in his *Sentences* commentary, Aquinas works through the cognitive mechanics through which Aquinas believes we are capable of having God in God's essence as the object of our intellects and will (see *Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.2*). It is likely that a similar discussion would have been included in the *Tertia Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* had Aquinas finished it before his death.

<sup>115</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.1 co.

<sup>116</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.1 co.

<sup>117</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 and a.6.

<sup>118</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 co.

<sup>119</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.6 co.

This leaves one possible avenue for reaching perfect happiness: God’s acting on our behalf. After all, “if something must be done that is above nature, it is done directly by God.”<sup>120</sup> It turns out, then, that we need “divine help” to become perfectly happy.<sup>121</sup> So not only does perfect happiness require that God be the object of our activities, it also requires that God do various things for us (e.g. providing the requisite virtues). So for a second time and for a second reason Aquinas tells us that “a human being is made [perfectly] happy by God alone.”<sup>122</sup>

Now, this makes it sound like human beings have no role whatsoever to play in attaining their own perfect happiness. Aquinas denies this. Although, in principle, God could make any person – whatever her current condition – perfectly happy, “the order of divine wisdom demands that it not be so.”<sup>123</sup> Instead, God has decided that human beings should cooperate with God in attaining their own perfect happiness by acting in accord with the virtue of charity – or, in other words, by living out friendship with God here and now.<sup>124</sup> So, although it is not possible for a human being to reach perfect happiness on her own, “it is possible to be turned towards God” and to become, as it were, friends with God. And then, through our Friend’s efforts on our behalf, become perfectly happy.<sup>125</sup>

Beyond explaining how it’s possible to attain perfect happiness, this question also fills out our picture of what attaining perfect happiness looks like and what it involves. For starters, Aquinas tells us that, although all the perfectly happy are enjoying God, not all of them enjoy God equally, since some of them are “better disposed...towards the enjoyment [of God].”<sup>126</sup> As a result, “one person can be happier than another, since the more one enjoys this good [i.e. God], the happier one

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<sup>120</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.6 co.

<sup>121</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 ad 2.

<sup>122</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.6 co.

<sup>123</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.7 co.

<sup>124</sup> That is what the reference to merit at ST IaIIae q.5 a.7 co. amounts to. For a discussion of charity, see ST IIaIIae q.23-27.

<sup>125</sup> Aquinas uses this very analogy at ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 ad 1.

<sup>126</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.2 co.

is.”<sup>127</sup> So, though it sounds odd, there are degrees of perfect happiness. Aquinas also tells us what the reader likely suspected all along: perfect happiness is impossible in this life.<sup>128</sup> It must wait for the afterlife, when the stringent conditions for perfect happiness could at least conceivably be met. Aquinas brings up not the least of these stringent conditions right after arguing that perfect happiness is impossible in this life, namely, that perfect happiness, once had, cannot be lost.<sup>129</sup> It is striking, once again, just how lofty the standard is for perfect happiness.

But, as in the previous question, that lofty standard fades in and out of focus in this question as Aquinas intermingles remarks on imperfect happiness with those on perfect. And, as in the previous question, when these two kinds of happiness are discussed together, Aquinas generally maintains that the two kinds of happiness have very different features – indeed, often even contrary features. Unlike perfect happiness, imperfect happiness can be had in this life by people like you and me.<sup>130</sup> Unlike perfect happiness, imperfect happiness can also be lost.<sup>131</sup> In the case of the “contemplative happiness” of a contemplative life, it can “be lost either through forgetfulness (for instance, when knowledge is lost as the result of some illness), or even through certain occupations that entirely take one away from contemplation.”<sup>132</sup> On the other hand, “active happiness” too can be lost, e.g., when a person falls from virtue to vice.<sup>133</sup> What is more, “the imperfect happiness which can be had in this life can be acquired by a human being through her natural powers (*per sua naturalia*) in the same way as virtue, in the activity of which [imperfect happiness] consists.”<sup>134</sup> So, at least in principle, a human being without special divine aid can become imperfectly happy, which is outright impossible in the case of perfect happiness. And so a far more ordinary, familiar, and

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<sup>127</sup> ST IaIIae q. 5 a.2 co.

<sup>128</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.3. See also, e.g., SCG I.3 c.48.

<sup>129</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.4.

<sup>130</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.3.

<sup>131</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.4.

<sup>132</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.4 co.

<sup>133</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.4 co.

<sup>134</sup> ST IIaIIae q.5 a.5 co.

human-seeming happiness is not lost from view.

Aquinas ends the *Treatise on Happiness* with an article that simultaneously looks back to Question 1 and forward to his subsequent treatment of human actions. It is, in effect, a translation into the language of happiness his distinction between the concept (*ratio*) of the ultimate end and that in which the character of the ultimate end is found.<sup>135</sup> Translating that distinction into the language of happiness, he says there is a difference between “the general concept (*rationem*) of happiness,” – namely, its being “a complete good” – and “that in which happiness consists,” or that which is sought as the complete good.<sup>136</sup> He makes these two distinctions to make virtually the same point in these two contexts: all human beings, at least implicitly, share a desire for the first item in these distinctions (the ultimate end/happiness as complete good), but not for the second item in these distinctions (some particular thing in which one believes the ultimate end or happiness is found). Since, as the fundamental human desire, happiness functions as the motor of all human actions, this brings the discussion of happiness to a fitting end, in anticipation of the treatment of human actions that follows.

## §2: *Recognizing unanswered questions*

We now have completed what I hope is a clear rendition of the basic story that Aquinas tells about happiness, as Aquinas tells it, in the order he tells it, and using the terminology in which he tells it. I hope that my treatment strikes even the most seasoned reader of the *Treatise on Happiness* as thorough, largely uncontroversial, and at least somewhat insightful. With this treatment in hand, as promised, we are now in a position to recognize what I take to be the most important questions that a systematic and detailed interpretation of Aquinas’s account of happiness must answer. They are four fundamental and quite difficult questions that a summary of Aquinas’s text must largely

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<sup>135</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.7 co.

<sup>136</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.8 co.

gloss over, but that cannot be ignored by those who hope to understand Aquinas's account of happiness in a truly deep way. I raise each briefly in turn.

§2.1: *What is Aquinas's method?*

As we've seen, Aquinas makes a whole host of claims about happiness. Some of these claims appear infrequently – for example, the claim that perfect happiness, once had, cannot be lost. Many are frequently repeated, such as the claim that perfect happiness involves the satisfaction of all of our desires. We've also seen that Aquinas makes a whole host of arguments based on many of those claims, taking us – for example – from the claim that perfect happiness is the perfection of a human being to the claim that perfect happiness is an activity. A mere list of such claims, however, leaves us with no clear sense of how Aquinas himself conceives of the internal progression of his theory. Of course, the order in which he *presents* various claims and arguments is there for all to see. What isn't there for all to see, in large part as a result of the Question-Article structure of his writing, is – again – the internal progression or logical order of his various claims. Where does he take himself to be begin his study of happiness, as a theoretical matter? In other words, what is treated as bedrock in his analysis of happiness? Where does he hope to end up? And how does he take himself to be getting from that beginning to that end? Taken together, then, what we don't get in this summary telling of the story is an answer to the question: what is Aquinas's *method* as he approaches happiness?

Understanding Aquinas's method seems vital for a thorough understanding of his treatment of happiness, since the method itself sets the basic parameters of that treatment. It is Aquinas's method that sets for his treatment of happiness a beginning and end as well as a mode for moving from that beginning to end. Understanding the method also puts us in better position to appreciate how the various claims that Aquinas makes are connected. In the typical sort of portrait, it is often difficult to appreciate *that* the claims Aquinas makes are connected, much less *how* they're connected.

And so giving a characterization of that method is important for understanding Aquinas.

Since his method sets the basic parameters of his account of happiness, it is a good place to start a detailed and systematic treatment of Aquinas's theory of happiness. Thus, I take up this issue in the next chapter.

## §2.2: *What is perfect happiness fundamentally?*

A striking feature of Aquinas's treatment of happiness is that he is very willing to say, "Perfect happiness' names *this*," or "Perfect happiness' names *that*," where *this* and *that* are not obviously connected. In other words, Aquinas seems to define 'perfect happiness' repeatedly and differently. In one way or another, I have drawn attention to all of these claims in the above portrait, although – as is customary in this sort of summary telling of the story – I haven't drawn special attention to this fact. There are three such definitions. In order of appearance, he says, first, "by the name 'happiness' is understood the ultimate perfection of a rational or of an intellectual nature."<sup>137</sup> Second, he tells us that "happiness' names the attainment of the ultimate end."<sup>138</sup> Given even the above summary of the Treatise, it shouldn't be particularly surprising that I take this definition to refer, ultimately, to knowing and enjoying God in God's essence. Finally, Aquinas gives a third definition of happiness, which he believes, when rightly understood, is "good and adequate": "Happy is the one who has all that he desires"<sup>139</sup> What is generally given superficial treatment, if any treatment at all, is the question of what perfect happiness fundamentally is. In other words, which of these definitions really gets at what perfect happiness *is*?

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<sup>137</sup> ST Ia q.62 a.1 co. This comes before the Treatise on Happiness itself, but it clearly looks ahead to Aquinas's repeated claims in the Treatise that perfect happiness involves the perfection of a human being. Within the Treatise on Happiness itself, see, e.g., ST IaIIae q.3 a.2.; ST IaIIae q.3 a.6 co.; and ST IaIIae q.3 a.8 co. It is also a passage that is often quoted by commentators as they reflect on Aquinas's account of happiness.

<sup>138</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 pro. There is what I take to be another version of this definition at ST IaIIae q.5 a.1 co. There Aquinas says, "happiness' names the attainment of the perfect good." It seems clear that 'ultimate end' and 'perfect good' in these contexts are both references to God – the Ultimate End and the Perfect Good.

<sup>139</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.8 ad 3.

Without answers to these questions, we are left without a clear sense of what perfect happiness is ultimately about. Depending on which of these definitions gets at what perfect happiness really is, perfect happiness might fundamentally be about (1) having achieved perfection; (2) knowing and enjoying God in God's essence; or (3) having all of one's desires satisfied. These are very different accounts of what happiness is really about! If we want a systematic understanding of Aquinas's treatment of happiness, we need to adjudicate between them.

In addition to deciding among these seemingly competing accounts, a systematic understanding of Aquinas's treatment of happiness requires that we explain the relationship between the definition that tells us what happiness really is and those that don't. After all, if Aquinas is willing to give multiple definitions of happiness, presumably he thinks that the content of those definitions is important, each in its own way. Understanding the relationships between the various definitions will hopefully help us to see why. At stake, then, is what is fundamental in Aquinas's account of heavenly happiness and how what is fundamental is filled out by the other elements.

### *§2.3: What is imperfect happiness really?*

It's difficult to tell what perfect happiness is really about because Aquinas says almost too much about it. We have the opposite problem in trying to discern what imperfect happiness is fundamentally about. It isn't that Aquinas doesn't make claims about imperfect happiness. As we've seen, he does – indeed, he makes enough claims about imperfect happiness to make possible a fairly rich, though general, portrait of an imperfectly happy life. What Aquinas doesn't give us, at least on the surface, is an account of what imperfect happiness is ultimately about: the satisfaction of desire? the contemplation of the truth? the mere possession of a variety of good things, like external goods and friends? or what? Now, of course, a systematic understanding of Aquinas's treatment of happiness requires that – if possible, at least – we give an account of what imperfect happiness fundamentally is.

Giving such an account is complicated somewhat by Aquinas's treating imperfect happiness as a "likeness to" or "participation in" perfect happiness, as we saw in Section 1.3.<sup>140</sup> As a result of that structural element of the theory, any account of what imperfect happiness *is* must be recognizable as an account of the way in which the imperfectly happy on earth relevantly resemble the perfectly happy in heaven. This adds still another reason to take especially seriously the task of determining what, according to Aquinas, perfect happiness fundamentally *is* (outlined in Section 2.2). After all, how we conceive of perfect happiness is likely to find its way into how we conceive of imperfect happiness – for good or ill. Thus even for those who are not independently interested in how one might conceive of heavenly happiness, there is reason to be concerned with the project laid out in Section 2.2.

The need to provide some account of what imperfect happiness fundamentally is has not been entirely ignored by commentators. However, as I hope to make clear in Chapter 4, the issue has received too little sustained attention. When subjected to scrutiny, the accounts that have been proposed are unworkable as readings of Aquinas. But, I will argue, the correct reading is not only attainable, but rich and interesting.

#### *§2.4: What fundamentally explains degrees of perfect and imperfect happiness?*

With an account of perfect and imperfect happiness in hand, we would be well on our way to understanding Aquinas's theory of happiness proper. However, it is clear that Aquinas himself thinks that there is more to his theory than an account of perfect happiness and an account of imperfect happiness. He thinks that the theory involves more fine-grained distinctions than "He's imperfectly happy" and "She's perfectly happy." According to Aquinas, both perfect and imperfect happiness come in degrees; in other words, some perfectly happy people are happier than other

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<sup>140</sup> See, for example, ST IaIIae q.3 a.6 co.; ST IaIIae q. 5 a. 3 co.; Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.1 qc.4 co.; Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.2 qc.2 ad 5; and ST IaIIae q. 2 a. 6 co.



perfectly happy people and some imperfectly happy people are happier than other imperfectly happy people. This requires explanation. So a systematic treatment of Aquinas's theory requires that we grapple with what, according to Aquinas, fundamentally explains degrees of happiness of whatever sort. This issue has received no systematic, detailed treatment by commentators.

This is an important issue to treat, however, not only for the sake of comprehensiveness, but also because there is something important to untangle in thinking about degrees of perfect happiness in isolation and in thinking about degrees of imperfect happiness in isolation. In the case of degrees of perfect happiness, what it is important to untangle is right on the surface: how could anything rightly described as *perfect* happiness come in degrees? One would think that, if Person A is perfectly happy and Person B is less happy than Person A, then Person B couldn't possibly be perfectly happy. Not so, according to Aquinas. In the case of degrees of imperfect happiness, what is important to untangle comes not from the side of the text, but from the side of experience, as it were. It is commonplace to believe with Aquinas that not all people happy in this life are equally happy, nor that any particular happy person need be equally happy from one time to another. Thus, whether for theoretical or practical reasons, one may be apt to wonder, what explains these facts? And so as a matter of general theoretical and practical interest, it is important to untangle what it is that, according to Aquinas, explains degrees of happiness here and now on earth.

### *Conclusion*

There is no better way to begin to confront Thomas Aquinas's account of happiness than through a careful study of The Treatise on Happiness in his *Summa Theologiae*. But, for all a summary of that Treatise can teach, even the best summary can do little more than help us to see where the most important and fundamental interpretive questions lie, especially if that summary is to remain largely uncontroversial. We are now in a position to see that a rich, systematic treatment of Aquinas's theory of happiness must address the following: What is Aquinas's method? What is

perfect happiness fundamentally? What is imperfect happiness really? And what fundamentally explains degrees of perfect and imperfect happiness? If we want to understand Aquinas's account of happiness in anything like a systematic fashion, we must treat these questions with due care and sustained attention. Since it is just such a systematic treatment of Aquinas's theory that I undertake to give in this dissertation, in each of the four subsequent chapters, I take up these questions in turn.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Happiness Idealized: On Aquinas's Method*

I now begin what I hope will be a rich as well as systematic treatment of Aquinas's theory of happiness that goes well beyond typical portraits of that theory. In this case, since the question has received little sustained attention, I hope to make progress in giving such a treatment simply by attempting a fairly complete answer to the question: What is Aquinas's method?

In what follows, I focus in particular on Aquinas's method as it comes through in his mature treatment of happiness in the *Summa Theologiae's* Treatise on Happiness. As I show in detail below, his method, roughly, is as follows: Aquinas sets up the conceptual foundation of his theory of happiness by committing to a characterization of the general concept of perfect happiness. This conceptual foundation is the starting point of his method inasmuch as this general concept acts as a fairly neutral initial characterization of perfect happiness that makes possible inquiry into its deep nature and ultimately its essence. According to that general concept, perfect happiness is the "complete good" for a human being, which he takes to be equivalent to its being "the perfectly good state" for a human being (whatever such a state might be like).<sup>141</sup> Aquinas hopes to build from this foundation all the way to an account of the inner-workings of the very essence of happiness. He wants an account of what perfect happiness really *is*, or – in other words – an account of what, fundamentally, a perfectly good state for a human being involves. His inquiry into the deep nature of perfect happiness will stop at nothing less than a thoroughgoing grasp of its essence. His method is after nothing less.

It is worth noting that there is nothing unusual about aiming for an account of the deep nature of something, but beginning one's inquiry with a fairly neutral initial characterization of the

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<sup>141</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

concept under consideration. We might see this sort of thing, for example, among those interested in giving an account of the deep nature of justice. They may begin their inquiry with a fairly neutral initial characterization of *justice* – for example, that it is a matter of *giving each her due*. They may then move from that initial characterization to, say, a well-worked out Marxist theory of justice or a well-worked out Libertarian theory of justice in an attempt to capture the deep nature of justice, or in an attempt to capture what giving each her due fundamentally amounts to. Aquinas’s approach is broadly similar: Aquinas is after an account of the deep nature of perfect happiness, but – as a conceptual matter – he begins his inquiry with a fairly neutral initial characterization of perfect happiness.

As one might expect, there are a number of steps that one must take to get from the general concept of perfect happiness to an account of the very essence of perfect happiness. Aquinas makes progress by, first, connecting the general concept of perfect happiness to a pair of general characteristics that he believes follow from the fully general characterization of perfect happiness. Then, on the basis of those general characteristics, he proceeds to identify increasingly particular characteristics of the perfect state for a human being, or – in other words – increasingly particular characteristics of perfect happiness, until arriving at the inner-workings of the very essence of perfect happiness. Since it is centered around reflection on a perfect or ideal state, I will call this general approach an “idealizing method.”<sup>142</sup>

In what follows, in order to illuminate this idealizing method underlying Aquinas’s treatment of happiness, I begin, in Section 1, by making a textual case for and then analyzing the conceptual foundation that serves as the method’s starting point. In Section 2, I then turn my attention to the

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<sup>142</sup> This use of an ideal in the domain of wellbeing is similar to one of the two main uses of ideals in political theory identified by Charles Mills in “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology” (*Hypatia*, Vol. 20, Issue 3 (Aug. 2005): 165-183). Mills distinguishes between an ideal (1) as a simplified model and (2) as a normative goal. The ideal that this idealizing method strives to articulate is a kind of normative goal, rather than a simplified model; it is something that outlines what, ultimately, we ought to strive for insofar as we are to pursue our own happiness.

way in which Aquinas builds on that foundation by successive steps. Finally, in Section 3, I reflect on the resulting edifice that constitutes the end or principal goal of the method.

§1: *The Conceptual and Methodological Foundation: Identifying Perfect Happiness with the Complete Good*

As is likely clear from the combination of Chapter 1 and these introductory remarks, I do not believe that Aquinas's method can easily be discerned by attending to the surface of the text. Indeed, I think that, in some important respects, the textual narrative obscures Aquinas's underlying method as he approaches the topic of happiness. This might seem puzzling. One might think that Aquinas's "method" just is however he, in fact, proceeds in the text. In which case, how can the textual narrative come apart from the method?

In a work like the *Summa Theologiae*, it doesn't seem to me strange to think that the textual narrative might in some ways reveal and in some ways obscure the underlying method that Aquinas is employing in approaching some particular topic. This would not be particularly surprising for a number of reasons. Two seem especially relevant. First, the *Summa Theologiae* is structured around a series of questions and articles that do not always lend themselves to the most natural development of the relevant ideas nor to long and clear statements of how Aquinas takes himself to be proceeding. So in turning to his account of happiness, for example, it is not obvious that Aquinas takes himself to be laying out what he thinks of as the underlying conceptual progression of his account of happiness. Second, and perhaps more importantly, although the predominant focus on issues related to happiness warrants us designating the first five questions of the *prima secundae* the "Treatise on Happiness," those five questions actually play at least two more important roles in the overall narrative of the *Summa Theologiae*, unrelated to happiness proper. First, the discussion in Question 1 on the ultimate end in general is a kind of transitional question that connects the end of the first part of the *Summa*, where Aquinas had discussed God's governance of all things to Aquinas's discussion of elements of that government peculiar to human beings, starting with the

possibility of human happiness.<sup>143</sup> Second, portions of Question 5, which concerns the very attainment of happiness, serve as a transition from the discussion of human happiness to a wide-ranging discussion of human action. So given the strategic needs of the *Treatise on Happiness*, as a bridge between disparate topics within the *Summa*, we might expect that simply following the textual narrative would lead us to misunderstand the underlying conceptual progression of his account of happiness proper – that is, we might expect that following the textual narrative would mislead us in thinking about Aquinas’s method as he approaches happiness.

It is worth noting that, if one were to follow the textual narrative and read an account of Aquinas’s method off its surface, it is likely that one would think that the conceptual starting point for Aquinas’s inquiry into the deep nature of happiness is his identification of happiness with the ultimate end of a human being. This is so because at the very outset of the *Treatise on Happiness*, Aquinas says, “because the ultimate end of a human life is posited to be happiness, it is necessary, first, to consider the ultimate end in general [and] then [to consider] happiness.”<sup>144</sup> This in turn might very naturally lead one to think that, as Aquinas thinks about it, happiness is fundamentally a matter of being perfected, since “being filled to one’s perfection...is the nature (*ratio*) of the ultimate end.”<sup>145</sup> In Chapters 3 and 4, I make a sustained case that perfection does not play this sort of fundamental role in Aquinas’s thinking about perfect and imperfect happiness respectively and, in so doing, I also thereby cast doubt on the claim that the identification of the ultimate end with happiness is the conceptual starting point for Aquinas’s inquiry into the deep nature of happiness. So part of the case for thinking of Aquinas’s method in the way I suggest must be deferred.

Before turning to the positive case for my alternative reading, however, it seems worth

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<sup>143</sup> Aquinas’s *Treatise on Divine Government* runs from ST Ia q.103-q.119. The role of ultimate ends in the divine government in Aquinas’s thought is established immediately in ST Ia q.103 a.1.

<sup>144</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 pro.

<sup>145</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.7 co.

noting that Aquinas's treatment of the ultimate end in general is a bridging discussion *par excellence*. In particular, in the immediate context, it bridges Aquinas's discussion of God's governance of all things with Aquinas's discussion of human happiness. Without this treatment of the ultimate end in general, in important respects, the picture that Aquinas gives of the divine government in general (at ST Ia q. 103) would be incomplete. That discussion establishes, for example, that God directs things towards ends and that, in some sense, the end of all things is God.<sup>146</sup> But it isn't until the discussion of the ultimate end in general that we really see what these claims amount to. For example, it is only in the discussion of the ultimate end in general we're told that, although "God is the ultimate end of a human being and of all other things," "a human being and other rational creatures attain to [their] ultimate end by knowing and loving God," whereas non-rational things "obtain [their] ultimate end inasmuch as they participate in some likeness to God insofar as they exist, or live, or even cognize."<sup>147</sup> So it is clear that Aquinas's discussion of the ultimate end in general is doing double-duty as adding to the preceding discussion of divine government and kicking off the discussion of happiness. This suggests that Aquinas may have included this discussion at the very end of his treatment of divine government and the very start of his treatment of happiness, even if he thinks that happiness's being our ultimate end does not lie at the conceptual foundation of his account of happiness. Broader narrative considerations may have played an important role in this choice.

Now, none of this is meant to suggest that Aquinas's connecting happiness with being perfected is anything short of vital to Aquinas's method or his broader theory. But, as will become clear, I think that it is vital not because that connection establishes the conceptual starting point of his thinking, but because it provides a path from the actual conceptual starting point in Aquinas's thinking all the way to the very essence of perfect happiness.

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<sup>146</sup> ST Ia q.103 a.1 and a.2.

<sup>147</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.8 co.

In my view, the conceptual foundation of Aquinas’s account of happiness and so the actual starting point for his underlying method is the general concept of perfect happiness, which he identifies, in the first place, with the “complete good” (*bonum perfectum*) for a human being.<sup>148</sup> In my view, this identification is the unargued-for conceptual starting point that allows him to get his inquiry moving. Or, more particularly, it serves as Aquinas’s fairly neutral, largely unspecified initial characterization of perfect happiness that makes inquiry into perfect happiness possible without immediately deciding the question, “What is the essence of perfect happiness?”<sup>149</sup> It makes it clear what is being examined under the title, ‘perfect happiness.’

As one would expect if Aquinas were to treat the complete-good characterization of perfect happiness as the conceptual foundation of his account of happiness, it makes its first appearance quite early on in the textual narrative of the Treatise on Happiness – in particular, in Question 1, Article 5. Given the textual narrative, it would have been somewhat odd to insert that complete-good characterization into the text any sooner. The first four articles of Question 1 concern various points connected to acting for the sake of ends.<sup>150</sup> It is only in Article 5 that Aquinas attempts to establish that a person cannot simultaneously be directed to multiple ultimate ends. And since happiness is the one, underlying, unchosen ultimate end for a human being that grounds the claim that one cannot be directed to multiple ultimate ends, it is here that one might expect to find for the

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<sup>148</sup> That explicit identification occurs at ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

<sup>149</sup> Aquinas uses ‘*communem rationem*’ in a similar way in other contexts. For example, he thinks that at the level of the ‘*rationem communem*’ we can know what God wills that we do in this life (namely, what is good), but most of the time we do not know what God wants “in particular” (ST IaIIae q.19 a.10 ad 1); in this case too, the ‘*communem rationem*’ is serving as a suitable general placeholder concerning what God wills in this instance, but it is a placeholder that leaves unspecified the more precise nature of what God desires. Aquinas also uses ‘*communem rationem*,’ for example, to refer to what is shared by all instances of good and bad (see, e.g., *Super Sent.*, lib.2 d.1 q.1 a.1 ad 1), all instances of corruption (see, e.g., *Super Sent.*, lib.2 d.19 q.1 a.1 ad 2), and all instances of temperance (see, e.g., ST IaIIae q.141 a.2 ad 3). What seems common across all uses is that the concept referred to by this designation is susceptible of further specifications of one sort or other.

<sup>150</sup> In particular, Article 1 concerns whether human beings act for the sake of ends; Article 2 concerns whether only human beings act for the sake of ends; Article 3 concerns whether human acts are put into kinds on the basis of their ends; and Article 4 concerns whether there is some ultimate end of human life. Although the fourth article sounds as though it might involve considerations relevant to happiness, Aquinas treats it at a quite abstract conceptual level, having to do with the impossibility of an infinite series of ends.



first time some reference to happiness in the discussion of the ultimate end in general. It is telling, then, that on this first occasion on which a characterization of happiness might naturally appear, Aquinas discusses the “complete good” and its characteristics.<sup>151</sup> Now, Aquinas does not call “the complete good” a characterization of happiness at this stage, but that is unsurprising, since he is committed to delaying any explicit discussion of happiness until later questions.

This first occurrence of “the complete good” is not an isolated occurrence. This is also precisely what one would expect if the characterization of perfect happiness as complete good is supposed to play a foundational role. Aquinas brings up the complete good by name again in the very next article of Question 1.<sup>152</sup> And in both articles five and six, for reasons I will detail in the next section, Aquinas is eager to connect “the complete good” to “the ultimate end.” That connection that Aquinas forges between the complete good and the ultimate end allows us to see that, when the term ‘complete good’ does not appear, but ‘ultimate end’ does, Aquinas may still take himself to be making progress in thinking about the deep nature of the complete good for a human being.<sup>153</sup>

Question 2 retains a significant place for the complete-good characterization of perfect happiness as Aquinas’s discussion shifts from focusing principally on the ultimate end to focusing principally on discovering the “the *thing* in which happiness consists,” or the *thing* “which makes a person happy.”<sup>154</sup> As in Question 1, Question 2, at times, implicitly continues to draw upon this complete-good characterization of perfect happiness inasmuch as Question 2 continues to draw attention to the ultimate end and its characteristics.<sup>155</sup> But, as we’d expect if Aquinas thought that the

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<sup>151</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.5 co.

<sup>152</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.6 co.

<sup>153</sup> The term, ‘complete good,’ doesn’t appear, e.g., in the final two articles of Question 1, but – for reasons I give below – one may still see those discussions as helping us to make progress in thinking about the deep nature of the complete good for a human being.

<sup>154</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co.

<sup>155</sup> See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.2 a.1.

general concept of perfect happiness conceived of as the complete good is absolutely foundational to his project, in Question 2, we find Aquinas frequently and explicitly claiming that happiness is the complete good for a human being. In no less than four of the eight articles, Aquinas explicitly claims that “happiness...is the complete good for a human being” (*hominis bonum perfectum*).<sup>156</sup>

The first two questions, then, give us some good reason to think that what is foundational in Aquinas’s thinking about perfect happiness is his treating perfect happiness as the complete good for a human being. The impression that this characterization is foundational in Aquinas’s thought is solidified in Question 3. Given the textual narrative, it is unsurprising that a fully explicit statement of just how foundational this element is waits for near the beginning of Question 3, since it is only in Question 3 that Aquinas turns to examining what happiness is and, in effect, what I am proposing is that Aquinas believes that, at its most general, *what perfect happiness is* is the complete good for a human being.<sup>157</sup> So it is to be expected that near the beginning of Question 3 Aquinas would tell us for the first time that the complete good is the “general concept of happiness.”<sup>158</sup> This is precisely what he does.<sup>159</sup> He has already been assuming as much in the preceding discussions, but here – at the beginning of the question in which it makes the most sense – he finally makes it explicit.

Having come this far through the textual narrative, it should already be clear that, when searching the textual narrative for the conceptual foundation of Aquinas’s account of happiness and thus for the starting point of his method, it is quite natural to treat as the conceptual foundation of his treatment this general concept of happiness as the complete good. As I have highlighted, Aquinas calls upon the *complete good* consistently and at telling junctures in the textual narrative in ways that make it seem very fundamental indeed for Aquinas’s thinking about happiness. At this

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<sup>156</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.2 co. For other explicit references to happiness as complete good in Question 2, see ST IaIIae q.2 a.4 co.; ST IaIIae q.2 a.6; and ST IaIIae q.2 a.8 co.

<sup>157</sup> ST IaIIae q.3.

<sup>158</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

<sup>159</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

stage, then, we already have good reason to treat the general concept of happiness as the conceptual foundation of his account of happiness and thus as the starting point of his method. Further support for the contention that this is the conceptual foundation of Aquinas's account of happiness will come to light when I turn to the way in which this characterization of happiness relates to other central claims that Aquinas makes about happiness.

Now, before turning to those connections, it is important to look in a more detailed way at what this "general concept of happiness" is supposed to amount to, according to Aquinas. The first thing to notice is that, although in the relevant passage Aquinas speaks of "the general concept of *happiness*," he is clearly talking about the general concept of *perfect happiness*; his characterization of the "general concept of happiness" does not at all fit the character of imperfect happiness. Imperfect happiness is not the complete good of a human being. That Aquinas doesn't say explicitly that he takes himself to putting forward the general concept of *perfect* happiness is not at all surprising, since the distinction between perfect and imperfect happiness has not yet been made in the textual narrative.<sup>160</sup> So we ought not take this to mean that Aquinas doesn't think that imperfect happiness is a kind of happiness, but only that as he approaches the more general topic of happiness he tries to get leverage in thinking about the imperfect case by starting with the perfect case and, ultimately, by starting with the general concept of perfect happiness.

From here, in order to understand this general concept of perfect happiness more deeply, it is important to get a grip on what Aquinas means by "the complete good for a human being." We are helped in this endeavor by Aquinas as he is perfectly willing to gloss this claim in two helpful ways. He does so immediately after explicitly identifying "the general concept of [perfect] happiness" with "the complete good" for a human being for the first time.<sup>161</sup> With reference to the claim that

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<sup>160</sup> The distinction is drawn for the first time shortly after this passage – in particular, at ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 4.

<sup>161</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

perfect happiness is the complete good he says, “this is what is signified when [Boethius] said that [perfect happiness] is ‘a state perfected by the aggregation of all goods.’”<sup>162</sup> Here, then we have a gloss on what the complete good amounts to, put in terms of possessing all objective goods appropriate for human beings. Aquinas then immediately gives a second gloss on that characterization of the general concept of perfect happiness, saying that “nothing else is meant by [Boethius’s claim] except that a [perfectly] happy person is in a perfectly good state.”<sup>163</sup> It isn’t particularly surprising that Aquinas treats these three as equivalent, since presumably the complete good for a human being is *complete* in virtue of including all objective goods fitting for a human being to possess and it seems that a state that includes all fitting objective goods just is a perfectly good state for a human being. Following Aquinas, I will treat these three characterizations as equivalent moving forward. However, because I think that, in many ways, it’s the clearest, I will generally use the perfect- or ideal-state characterization of the general concept of perfect happiness in the remaining examination of Aquinas’s method.

We can now delve even deeper into what the general concept of perfect happiness amounts to for Aquinas. In principle, the notion of an ideal or perfect state for a human being could be linked to various sorts of limiting conditions. For example, one might consider what the ideal state for a human being is, given the natural course of things in our universe with its laws of nature and its present state. When Aquinas sets the ideal state for a human being as the conceptual foundation of his account of happiness and so the starting point of his method, he is interested in the ideal state given far more relaxed limiting conditions. It seems that he is interested in determining what the ideal state for a human being is within the limits of metaphysical possibility – or, given his more precise interests, within the limits of what God could do for a human being so as to put her in an

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<sup>162</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2. Boethius makes this claim in *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Book 3, Prose 2.

<sup>163</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

ideal state without making it the case that the individual in question is no longer a human being. This comes through, for example, when Aquinas makes clear that no human being can be perfectly happy apart from God's intervening on her behalf.<sup>164</sup> So Aquinas is after the ideal or perfect state for a human being in a very strong sense of "ideal."

A final clarification, which will be important later, is that Aquinas treats the ideal state as a state *type*, rather than a state *token*. In other words, he is interested in an account of the best *kind* of state a human being could reach, rather than an account of the very best possible particular concrete *instance* of that best kind of state. In the present context, perhaps the most important reason to focus on state types rather than state tokens is that it is plausible to think that a particular state, however grand, could always be improved upon. That suggests that there simply is no very best concrete instance of the ideal state type. Aquinas seems committed to the claim that any particular concrete state could be better for the individual in it. He seems committed to this claim inasmuch as he says, first, that one perfectly happy person is happier than another when one person enjoys the relevant elements of the perfect state more than another<sup>165</sup>; second, that degrees of enjoyment (ultimately) follow degrees of love for a thing<sup>166</sup>; and, finally, that, at least in principle, one could always love the relevant elements of the perfect state more than one in fact does.<sup>167</sup> And so it is quite natural that Aquinas would focus on an ideal state type, rather than an ideal state token.

## §2: *From the General Concept of Perfect Happiness to Two General, Fruitful Characteristics of the Ideal State*

We have now seen that Aquinas apparently takes as the conceptual foundation of his account of happiness the identification of the general concept of perfect happiness with the ideal or

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<sup>164</sup> See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 co. This point is often discussed under the heading of a human being's "obediential potency" for God's help – see, e.g., Steven Long, "On the Possibility of a Purely Natural End for Man," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 211-237, 214.

<sup>165</sup> See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.5 a.2 co.

<sup>166</sup> See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.32 a.8 co. See also SCG I.1 c.102 n.3.

<sup>167</sup> See, e.g., ST IIaIIae q.27 a.6.

perfect state for a human being, understood as a state type rather than token, and limited only by the boundaries of metaphysical possibility. This, then, seems to be Aquinas's fairly neutral, largely unspecified characterization of perfect happiness that serves as the conceptual point of departure for Aquinas's method. We get further confirmation that this serves as Aquinas's conceptual point of departure when we see that Aquinas, in one way or other, moves from this fully general characterization of perfect happiness to two of the most fruitful general characteristics that he ascribes to perfect happiness: (1) its satisfying all desires; and (2) its involving the perfection of a human being.<sup>168</sup> One might think of the fully general characterization of perfect happiness as a common root supporting these two branches of reflection on perfect happiness. And, as we will see in the next section, each of these two branches bears much fruit right on the surface of the text. But first, I intend to show *that* Aquinas takes himself to get from the fully general characterization of perfect happiness to these more particular, though still quite general, characteristics and *how* he takes himself to do so, since this step is so vital to his method.

In the case of the first general characterization, the satisfaction of all desires, Aquinas makes it absolutely clear that he thinks that we can see that this must be a characteristic of perfect happiness precisely because it follows from the fully general characterization of perfect happiness, that is, its being the complete good or the ideal state. Indeed, on at least four separate occasions, Aquinas tells us explicitly that it is because perfect happiness is the complete good that it must entirely satisfy a human being.<sup>169</sup> Aquinas explicitly connects this to his view about the human will's directedness towards such a good on one of these occasions.<sup>170</sup> But the point seems fairly intuitive: A state of the truly best kind would not include frustrated desires, and so, if there is still something

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<sup>168</sup> Of course, Aquinas draws attention to these characteristics of happiness throughout the corpus. See, e.g., SCG I.1 c.100 n.3-5, 7.

<sup>169</sup> See ST IaIIae q.2 a.8 co; q.5 a.3 co; q.5 a.4 co.; and q.5 a.8 co. These are also linked at, e.g., SCG I.3 c.29 n.6.

<sup>170</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.8 co.

that one goes on desiring, unpossessed, then one has not yet reached a state of the best kind.

However, it is a text in which the connection between the general concept of perfect happiness and the complete good for a human being remains implicit that may do the most to bolster the case that Aquinas himself sees that connection as fundamental to his method. We return again to the first occurrence of Aquinas's appealing to the "complete good" in the Treatise on Happiness, which – as I noted above – is in the first article in which a characterization of happiness might naturally appear.<sup>171</sup> There, the complete good is linked to two further general characteristics. The first is the one currently under consideration: that the complete good must "so satisfy all human desire that nothing beyond it remains to be desired."<sup>172</sup> From its very first appearance, then, the complete good is connected to the satisfaction of all desires. And thereby, without yet saying as much, from the very first moment in the narrative in which it makes sense, Aquinas connects perfect happiness to the satisfaction of all desires through the general concept of happiness.

The other characteristic to which the complete good and so thereby the general concept of happiness is linked at this vital juncture is its involving the perfection of a human being.<sup>173</sup> So at the very moment at which the complete good is introduced, it is connected to the two general characteristics that I've identified above. In connecting the complete good to human perfection at this important juncture, Aquinas says, "since each thing desires its perfection, someone desires that as ultimate end which she desires as the complete good and complete of herself."<sup>174</sup> The move in this claim from *perfection* to the *ultimate end* is warranted, according to Aquinas, since he believes that the nature (*ratio*) of the ultimate end is being "filled to one's perfection."<sup>175</sup> So the ultimate end in the relevant sense is simply a reference to one's being perfected as a thing of one's kind. After making

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<sup>171</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.5 co.

<sup>172</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.5 co.

<sup>173</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.5 co.

<sup>174</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.5 co.

<sup>175</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.7 co.

this remark, Aquinas is willing to substitute *complete good* for *ultimate end* in the argument and takes himself to have shown that a human being can't simultaneously have multiple ultimate ends by showing that "it cannot be that the appetite tends towards two things as though each is its complete good."<sup>176</sup> The fact that Aquinas thinks that this substitution is warranted means that Aquinas must think, at least, that a person is perfected if and only if she has attained the complete good. So upon its first appearance, the general concept of perfect happiness is tightly wound together with the perfection of a human being (through the relevant sense of 'ultimate end'). It does not seem to be a stretch then to claim that Aquinas takes himself to treat the general concept of happiness as the conceptual foundation of his account of happiness and then builds on that foundation by connecting other general characteristics to happiness through his understanding of that general concept: the satisfaction of desire in the first case and the perfection of a human being in the second.

Now, I am not claiming that the "real" or "hidden" reason that Aquinas includes this article at this point in the *Treatise on Happiness*, which has as its topic *whether a human will can have several different ultimate ends at the same time*, is to make these connections. Rather, I am suggesting that it is revelatory of how Aquinas is thinking about what underlies much of the *Treatise on Happiness* that he would connect *having one's desires satisfied* and *being perfected* to *the complete good* at the first point he can do so naturally.

Although there should be no doubt that Aquinas connects the general concept of perfect happiness with perfection, in the context of the *Treatise on Happiness* itself it may not be clear why Aquinas thinks that connecting the complete good and perfection in this way is justified. He makes the above claim, but doesn't explain it. It seems to me that Aquinas doesn't go to the trouble of justifying this step in the *Treatise* because he has already done the work of connecting goodness and

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<sup>176</sup> ST IaIIae q.1 a.5 co.



perfection elsewhere, back in Question 5 of the first part of the *Summa*. That earlier treatment explains why, for Aquinas, reaching the complete good for a human being, or the ideal state for a human being, by its very nature must involve the perfection of a human being. Very briefly, this is so, fundamentally, because, according to Aquinas, “everything is said to be good insofar as it is perfect.”<sup>177</sup> This holds, according to Aquinas, because *being good* and *being perfect* differ only conceptually and not in reality; in other words, according to Aquinas, these concepts have precisely the same extension and differ only intensionally.<sup>178</sup> Now, if Aquinas is right about this, as a conceptual matter, achieving the complete good for a human being involves achieving the complete perfection of a human being. After all, if Aquinas is right, *achieving the complete good* and *achieving complete perfection* pick out precisely the same underlying realities and differ only conceptually. So it seems to me that Aquinas would have expected his reader to understand that the connection between the general concept of perfect happiness and the perfection of a human being is deep.

So on the very first occasion in the textual narrative of the Treatise on Happiness in which it makes good sense, Aquinas connects the complete good with (1) the satisfaction of all desires, and (2) the perfection of a human being. Of course, even at this stage in the narrative, as a conceptual matter, Aquinas knows that he is treating the complete good as the general concept of perfect happiness. And so at this early stage in the Treatise, Aquinas has – as a conceptual matter – already connected perfect happiness to *satisfying all desires* and *being perfected* through a common conceptual root: the general concept of happiness conceived of as the complete good. It does not seem to be farfetched, then, to claim that Aquinas treats the general concept of perfect happiness as a common root that branches into these further characteristics which then, as we’ll now see, bear much fruit.

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<sup>177</sup> ST Ia q.5 a.5 co.

<sup>178</sup> ST Ia q.5 a.1. According to Aquinas, the intension of *good* is connected in the first place to desirability whereas the intension of *perfect* is connected in the first place to actuality (in the Aristotelian sense).

§3: *From These Two General Characteristics of the Ideal State to More Particular Characteristics of that State*

Up to this point, I have suggested that there are three key conceptual moves that, due to a variety of reasons related to the textual narrative, receive no special treatment in separate articles of the *Treatise on Happiness*. The first move is connecting the complete good to having all of one's desires satisfied. The second is connecting the complete good to being perfected as a human being. The final move is identifying the complete good with the general concept of perfect happiness and thereby conceptually prioritizing the complete good over the other two characteristics in how we think about the nature of perfect happiness. Once these key conceptual moves are identified, we are in a position to appreciate the questions and articles of the *Treatise on Happiness* in a new, profounder light. In particular, we are able to appreciate how the relationships that I've identified between these critical conceptual elements put Aquinas in a position to yield as fruit an account of the very essence of perfect happiness in the course of his discussion. He does so by following the third step of the method that I identified at the outset: he tries to determine what more particular characteristics would be required to satisfy all our desires and to perfect us as human beings. This involves two sorts of tasks: (1) rejecting errant hypotheses regarding purported more particular characteristics of the ideal state, and (2) advancing hypotheses regarding the more particular characteristics of the ideal state.<sup>179</sup> I now consider the fruit produced by the desire satisfaction branch and the perfection branch respectively. All of this fruit lies on the surface of the text.

On the basis of the claim that perfect happiness involves the satisfaction of all desire, which – as we've seen – finds its roots in the general concept of perfect happiness and is connected to that concept as soon as is reasonable in the textual narrative, Aquinas takes himself to prove a number of

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<sup>179</sup> That Aquinas rejects a string of errant hypotheses about happiness is perhaps the most commonly noted feature of Aquinas's method. See, e.g., Christopher Brown, "Friendship in Heaven: Aquinas on Supremely Perfect Happiness and the Communion of the Saints," in Kevin Timpe (ed), *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 229; and Brian Davies, "Happiness," in Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 228, 231.

claims concerning perfect happiness. The impossibility of satisfying all of our desires in this life forms the basis for Aquinas’s rejection of the hypothesis that perfect happiness is possible in this life.<sup>180</sup> The all-satisfying nature of perfect happiness also forms the basis for showing that, once had, perfect happiness cannot be lost<sup>181</sup>; that perfect happiness does not consist in wealth, honors, fame, glory, or power<sup>182</sup>; that the thing that makes one perfectly happy is not a good of the soul<sup>183</sup> nor any created good.<sup>184</sup> And, on several occasions, this characteristic is used to support one of the most important claims in Aquinas’s theory of happiness: the thing out there in the world that makes one perfectly happy is God (i.e. God is the object of the activity of the perfectly happy).<sup>185</sup> In doing so, this desire satisfaction branch also gives life and support to another frequently mentioned and extremely important characteristic of perfect happiness: its being the attainment of or the enjoyment of the Ultimate End or the Perfect Good (i.e. God).<sup>186</sup> The desire satisfaction branch also provides absolutely central content to this further characterization inasmuch as Aquinas uses the claim that a perfectly happy person will have all of her desires satisfied to show that this attainment of God must take the form of intellectually perceiving God in God’s essence.<sup>187</sup> Roughly, the argument goes as follows. We desire to understand causes when we observe effects. From various effects in the world, we know *that* God exists, but we don’t really understand God – that is, we are ignorant of God’s *essence*. So our desire to understand causes will not be satisfied until we grasp the essence of God. The perfectly happy state involves the satisfaction of all of our desires. Therefore, the perfectly

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<sup>180</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.3 co.

<sup>181</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.4 co. Of course, Aquinas thinks that, in principle, God *could* take it away, but that, since God is just, God would never do so.

<sup>182</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.4 co.

<sup>183</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.7 co.

<sup>184</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.8 co.

<sup>185</sup> He makes this sort of argument at ST IaIIae q.2 a.8 co.; q.3 a.1 co.; and q.3 a.8 co.

<sup>186</sup> This is mentioned at ST IaIIae q.2 pro; q.3 a.1 co.; q.3 a.4 co.; q.4 a.1 co.; q.4 a.3 co.; q.5 a.1 co.; and q.5 a.3 ad 2. This also provides the occasion to note that, very infrequently, Aquinas uses ‘*perfectum bonum*’ to refer to God, rather than as expressing the *communem rationem beatitudinis*, which obviously isn’t identical to God – Aquinas does so, e.g., at ST IaIIae q.5 a.1 co. The central clue in this passage is that he says “happiness names *the attainment* of the perfect good.”

<sup>187</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.7 co.

happy state will involve our grasping the essence of God. So the desire satisfaction branch takes us all the way to the view that perfect happiness is the afterworldly, ongoing enjoyment of the intellectual vision of God in God's essence. Fruitful for Aquinas's purposes indeed!

The claim that perfect happiness involves the perfection of a human being, which – as we've seen – also finds its roots in the general concept of perfect happiness and is also connected to that concept as soon as is reasonable in the textual narrative, is also put to fruitful use by Aquinas. The claim, put in one way or other, that perfect happiness is the ultimate perfection of a human being<sup>188</sup> is used to show that perfect happiness is, in one sense, a good inhering in the soul<sup>189</sup>; that perfect happiness is an activity<sup>190</sup>; that it is the best activity of a human being and so involves the “contemplation of divine things” and maximal enjoyment<sup>191</sup>; that it does not require friends<sup>192</sup>; that it does not consist in wealth<sup>193</sup> or power<sup>194</sup> or bodily goods<sup>195</sup>; and that contemplating the speculative sciences is insufficient for perfect happiness.<sup>196</sup> It is also the foundation of another route to showing that perfect happiness must involve knowing and enjoying God in God's essence. According to Aquinas, the complete perfection of a capability requires “that it attain to that in which is found the fullness of its formal object.”<sup>197</sup> The formal object of the intellect is “the universal true,” and the formal object of the will is “the universal good.”<sup>198</sup> So, in order to be completely perfected as a human being, the intellect and will must attain to an object that is the universal true and the universal good. According to Aquinas, there is only one such object: God, who is not true, but

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<sup>188</sup> See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.2 a.4 co.; q.2 a.5 co.; q.2 a.8 ad 3; q.3 a.2; q.3 a.6 co.; q.5 a.4 co.

<sup>189</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.8 ad 3.

<sup>190</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 co.

<sup>191</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.5 co.

<sup>192</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.8 co.

<sup>193</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.1 co.

<sup>194</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.4 co.

<sup>195</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.5 co.

<sup>196</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.6 co.

<sup>197</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.7 ad 3.

<sup>198</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.8 co.

Truth, who is not good, but Goodness. In order for the intellect to have God as its object *qua* Truth, it is not enough that we have some mediated grasp of God – say, mediated by the effects of God’s activity in the world. In order for God to be the object of intellect *qua* Truth, which is necessary for one’s complete perfection, God must be grasped in God’s essence directly. So, on the basis of perfect happiness’s involving the perfection of a human being as well, Aquinas is able to show that perfect happiness is the enjoyment of the intellectual vision of God in God’s essence. Also quite fruitful!

§4: *From the Characteristics of the Ideal State to the Essence of Perfect Happiness*

We have now moved from the root of Aquinas’s account, namely, the general concept of happiness, through the two central branches issuing from that root to their finest fruit. One might suppose that there is nothing more to be done in an examination of Aquinas’s method. But Aquinas, at least, thinks there is another step: identifying and understanding the inner-workings of the essence of perfect happiness, and distinguishing that essence from the other features of a perfectly happy state. It is not enough, as Aquinas thinks about it, to identify all the various properties or features of perfect happiness and then to say no more. This is so because Aquinas is very clear that not all properties or features of perfect happiness are themselves parts of the essence of perfect happiness. He says, for example, that “[Perfect] happiness brings together (*colligit*) all goods, not as if [all were] parts of the essence of happiness, but as if in some way ordered to happiness.”<sup>199</sup> Aquinas, then, seems concerned with identifying the essence of perfect happiness and distinguishing it from other features of the perfectly happy state.

This concern can readily be seen in the Treatise on Happiness. Indeed, it is written into the very structure of that Treatise. Questions 1 and 2, it seems to me, are the necessary precursor to the

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<sup>199</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.4 a.2 ad 5. Here, Aquinas is making the point that the heavenly gifts (*doles*), although necessarily a part of the ideal state, are not part of the essence of happiness, but something ordered to it.

most important task that Aquinas sets himself – the task to which he turns in Question 3: identifying and analyzing the essence of perfect happiness. That this is the task of Question 3 can hardly be doubted. Aquinas signals as much immediately by saying that the question concerns what happiness is (*quid est beatitudo*).<sup>200</sup> In Aquinas’s work, *quid est* is often a technical notion associated with capturing the very essences of things – i.e. what a thing really is.<sup>201</sup> And that Aquinas has this technical notion in mind is confirmed in the very first article of Question 3, which declares that “the very essence of happiness” is “the attainment or enjoyment of the ultimate end.”<sup>202</sup> So it seems clear that, at the outset of Question 3, Aquinas is concerned with giving us an account of the very essence of perfect happiness; an account that can scarcely be understood apart from Questions 1 and 2. The rest of Question 3 is then concerned with explaining the inner-workings of the essence of happiness so understood: fully spelled out, “the attainment or enjoyment of the ultimate end” is the activity of contemplating God in God’s essence, which is predominately an activity of the speculative intellect, but accompanied by an act of the will in enjoyment.<sup>203</sup> So it seems clear that Aquinas takes seriously the task of identifying and understanding the inner-workings of the essence of perfect happiness. And Question 4, which is on what is required for happiness, can be read as, in large part, Aquinas’s attempt to show which properties or features of a perfectly happy state are themselves parts of the essence of perfect happiness and which are not. For example, one might take the first three articles of Question 4 as Aquinas’s statement of what is strictly required for perfect happiness as a result of

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<sup>200</sup> I change *quid sit beatitudo* to *quid est beatitudo* because I want the connection to be clear between this sentence and the next. This is warranted, since *sit* is the subjunctive form of *est*.

<sup>201</sup> For Aquinas’s discussion of *quid est* definitions as well as other sorts of definitions, see In Post. Anal. lib.2, l.8. I discuss Aquinas’s views on definitions in more detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>202</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.1 co.

<sup>203</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2-8. I have put things this way to try to make this statement of the essence of perfect happiness as neutral as possible. In the next chapter, I take a stand on how precisely we should think about the essence of perfect happiness in Aquinas’s theory.

being a part of the essence of perfect happiness.<sup>204</sup> Or, as another example, in Question 4, Aquinas shows that having a perfected body is not part of the essence of perfect happiness, since one can be perfectly happy without having a body at all, but – after Judgment Day – having a perfected body is, nonetheless, a part of the experience of the perfectly happy.<sup>205</sup>

As Aquinas thinks of his own method, then, merely identifying the features of the perfectly happy state is not enough. Aquinas wants a clear account of the essence of perfect happiness and its inner-workings as well as to distinguish the essence of perfect happiness from other features of the perfectly happy state. This is not the final step in the textual narrative, since there is still Question 5, which deals with a host of questions and worries that one may still have about perfect happiness – chief among them, whether it’s attainable and how. But it is the final step in the method inasmuch as the method seems fundamentally directed towards achieving a deep understanding of the essence of perfect happiness. Questions 1 and 2 build to it. Question 3 takes it up. And Questions 4 and 5 sort out various details and questions that arise from treating the essence of perfect happiness as Aquinas does.

But one might wonder, why does Aquinas include this step at all? After all, especially since Aquinas initially identifies the general concept of happiness, under one gloss, with “a state perfected by the aggregation of all goods,”<sup>206</sup> he could quite easily have held that perfect happiness *just is* that aggregation and there is no need to distinguish between, on the one hand, what in that state is a part of the essence of perfect happiness and, on the other, what in that state isn’t a part of the essence of

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<sup>204</sup> Taking these three articles in this way would be controversial because, as I explain in the next chapter, many people think that enjoyment is not a part of the essence of perfect happiness. But, for reasons I outline in Chapter 3, I believe that that *is* how we should, in fact, take those three articles.

<sup>205</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.5 and a.6. As I noted in Footnote 76 of Chapter 1, in SCG, Aquinas details some of the characteristics of these perfected bodies. They are immortal (SCG I.4 c.82); they will not need (or be used) to eat or have sex (SCG I.4 c.83); they will, nevertheless, be of the same nature as our bodies now (SCG I.4 c.84); they will, however, be disposed differently (SCG I.4 c.85); and, in particular, they will be brighter, impassible, more agile, and with a more perfect dignity of nature (SCG I.4 c.86). For a discussion of these traits, see Christina Van Dyke’s “Aquinas’s Shiny Happy People.”

<sup>206</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

perfect happiness. I think that there are two main reasons that Aquinas would have found separating the essence of perfect happiness from other features of a perfectly happy state attractive.

First, as a general matter, Aquinas is typically concerned with determining what is more fundamental than what, or – relatedly – what explains what. For example, Aquinas is at pains to argue that the human soul is more fundamental than the powers of the human soul and so, in some sense, the soul explains the existence of those powers.<sup>207</sup> Furthermore, essences often play a special role in these discussions because they are taken to be particularly fundamental and explanatory.<sup>208</sup> So it is not surprising that in this instance too, since, by Aquinas’s lights, there are relations of fundamentality and explanation to be had, Aquinas is interested in uncovering them and particularly concerned with uncovering the *essence* of perfect happiness.

Second, with respect to Aquinas’s view of happiness in particular this sort of task seems important because, if one were to treat all of the characteristics of the ideal state that Aquinas identifies as equally fundamental to perfect happiness, the resulting view would be muddled, at least by Aquinas’s lights. To see why this is so, consider even just four of the characteristics of the perfectly happy state that Aquinas identifies: (1) it satisfies all a person’s desires; (2) it involves the perfection of a human being; (3) it is maximally enjoyable; and (4) it involves the afterworldly, ongoing enjoyment of the intellectual vision of God in God’s essence. Notice that three of these characteristics are treated as *complete theories* of wellbeing today. Roughly, the first maps onto desire satisfactionism (or the view that a person is doing well to the extent that she has her desires satisfied<sup>209</sup>); the second maps onto perfectionism (or the view that a person is doing well to the

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<sup>207</sup> See, e.g., ST Ia q.77 a.6.

<sup>208</sup> It is no mistake, for example, that the Treatise on Human Nature begins with an examination of the *essence* of the soul (ST Ia q.75).

<sup>209</sup> See, for example, Heathwood’s “The Problem of Defective Desires” for a defense of what is known as an actualist desire-satisfaction theory, which holds that the desires relevant to wellbeing are one’s actual desires, rather than one’s hypothetical desires of one kind or other.



extent that she develops and exercises her natural or essential capacities<sup>210</sup>); and the third maps onto a version of hedonism (or the view that a person is doing well to the extent to which she enjoys things).<sup>211</sup> It is an interesting and potentially illuminating feature of Aquinas's theory that all of these views converge in the perfectly happy state. However, this very convergence also makes it natural to wonder: What is perfect happiness *fundamentally*? In other words, according to Aquinas, which of these in itself, non-instrumentally makes one perfectly happy? Is our happiness really about having our desires satisfied? Or our perfection? Or our enjoyment? Or our having this special connection to God? Of course, in principle, someone like Aquinas could insist that perfect happiness is really about *all* of these things – each in itself, non-instrumentally contributes to one's perfect happiness in precisely the same way and at precisely the same level of explanation. But it is natural to worry somewhat about such a move in the case of Aquinas's view, at least, since, as he well knows and as we've seen, many of the characteristics he identifies can quite plausibly be construed as complete theories of happiness.<sup>212</sup>

So it is not particularly surprising that Aquinas so readily distinguishes between the essence of perfect happiness and other features of the perfectly happy state, and so not particularly surprising that his method includes this final step. What may come as a surprise, especially given the apparent ease with which I made claims about the essence of perfect happiness, is that what Aquinas identifies as the essence of perfect happiness is a matter of dispute among commentators. In the next chapter, I sort through various interpretive options in order to determine what, according to Aquinas, the essence of perfect happiness is. I thereby give an answer to the question: What,

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<sup>210</sup> See, for example, Dale Dorsey, "Three Arguments for Perfectionism," *Noûs* 44 (1) (2010): 59-79.

<sup>211</sup> In particular, this maps on to what is now called, "an attitudinal version" of hedonism, since it focuses fundamentally on enjoyment rather than bodily pleasure. For various version of this general sort of view, see Feldman's *Pleasure and the Good Life*.

<sup>212</sup> For example, Aquinas was aware of Epicurus's view that happiness consists entirely in pleasure (see, e.g., SCG I.3 c.27 n.11).

according to Aquinas, is perfect happiness *fundamentally*? Only there are the fruits of Aquinas's method fully realized.

Even without that account in hand, we are still in a position to see that Aquinas uses the idealizing method that I set out at the beginning of this chapter. Aquinas sets up the conceptual foundation of his theory of happiness by committing to a characterization of the general concept of perfect happiness.<sup>213</sup> This conceptual foundation is the starting point of his method inasmuch as this general concept acts as a fairly neutral initial characterization of perfect happiness that makes possible inquiry into its deep nature and ultimately its essence. According to that general concept, perfect happiness is the “complete good” for a human being, which he takes to be equivalent to its being “the perfectly good state” for a human being, understood as a state type rather than token, and limited only by the boundaries of metaphysical possibility.<sup>214</sup> Aquinas builds on this foundation by immediately and irrevocably connecting the general concept of perfect happiness to the two most methodologically fruitful general characteristics that would be a part of an ideal state for a human being so understood – in particular, he connects the general concept of perfect happiness to the satisfaction of all desires and to complete human perfection. Then, he tries to determine what more particular characteristics would be required to realize those general characteristics, until arriving at the set of characteristics – more and less general – that an ideal or perfectly happy state for a human being would include. Finally, Aquinas connects only some of those characteristics to the essence of perfect happiness and thereby takes a stand on what is fundamental in perfect happiness (but, again, I haven't yet clearly and fully argued for what I take to be Aquinas's account of that essence, since it is a matter of dispute).

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<sup>213</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

<sup>214</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2.

## *Conclusion*

Aquinas's idealizing method is interesting and, at least when wielded in conjunction with other of Aquinas's philosophical commitments, powerful. However, in Aquinas's work, at least, it is not without its limitations, two of which will play a role in the shape of the study moving forward. First, since "the general concept of happiness" is actually only the general concept of *perfect happiness*, the method doesn't, at least directly, help us to delve more deeply into the nature of imperfect happiness, or happiness in non-ideal cases. Of course, insofar as one is successful in identifying the essence of perfect happiness and so identifying what is fundamental in perfect happiness, one might be guided in thinking about cases involving imperfect happiness. This is especially likely to be so in the case of Aquinas's theory of happiness since he says that imperfect happiness is a "likeness to" or "participation in" perfect happiness.<sup>215</sup> But we should not take for granted that making progress in understanding perfect happiness will thereby immediately make it clear how we should think about imperfect happiness. The method simply doesn't speak directly to imperfect happiness.

The second limitation of the method as actually practiced by Aquinas is one we've already seen: Aquinas doesn't make it immediately obvious which characteristic or characteristics constitute the essence of perfect happiness. As used by Aquinas, the method sets *the essence of perfect happiness* as its principal goal. But the method generates all manner of characteristics, many of which might be thought to have claim to being included in the essence of perfect happiness. And so one must tread with care in identifying the essence of perfect happiness. It is that task that takes us to the true goal of Aquinas's method and it is to that task that I now turn in Chapter 3.

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<sup>215</sup> See, for example, ST IaIIae q.3 a.6 co.; ST IaIIae q. 5 a. 3 co.; Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.1 qc.4 co.; Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.2 qc.2 ad 5; and ST IaIIae q. 2 a. 6 co.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Aquinas on the Essence of Perfect Happiness*

As we saw at the close of the last chapter, Aquinas is keen to distinguish between the essence of perfect happiness and other features of the perfectly happy state. He wants to identify what perfect happiness fundamentally *is*. This is particularly important for Aquinas because he has given at least four importantly different characterizations of perfect happiness that, for reasons I detail below, seem to have some claim on the title: the essence of perfect happiness. But, even before delving into those reasons, none of the following options should seem particularly surprising, given what we've seen in Chapters 1 and 2. First, one might identify the essence of perfect happiness with having all of one's desires satisfied. Second, one might identify it with being completely perfected as a human being. Third, one might identify it with knowing God in God's essence. Finally, one might identify it with knowing *and* enjoying God in God's essence. Depending on which of these characterizations one takes to capture the essence of perfect happiness, one might conceive of what perfect happiness fundamentally *is* very differently indeed! And so, if we want a deep understanding of Aquinas's account of perfect happiness, we need to adjudicate between them.

But this is an important task for other reasons as well. First of all, identifying the essence of perfect happiness is the end or goal of Aquinas's method. And so without an account of the essence of happiness we are left without a full accounting of that method as Aquinas actually uses it. Second, and more importantly, whichever account of the essence of perfect happiness we settle on, it will almost certainly have significant downstream interpretive effects. After all, Aquinas treats imperfect happiness as a "likeness to" or "participation in" perfect happiness.<sup>216</sup> So, if we conceive of perfect

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<sup>216</sup> See, for example, ST IaIIae q.3 a.6 co.; ST IaIIae q. 5 a. 3 co.; Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.1 qc.4 co.; Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.2 qc.2 ad 5; and ST IaIIae q. 2 a. 6 co.

happiness incorrectly, we are likely to be misled in thinking about Aquinas's account of earthly, imperfect happiness. And, indeed, as I argue in Chapter 4, this is precisely what I think has actually happened: we have misunderstood Aquinas's account of perfect happiness and have then misunderstood imperfect happiness in large part because we are anxious to expand our (mis)understanding of perfect happiness into the domain of imperfect happiness.

Determining Aquinas's account of the essence of perfect happiness has waited until now because, as I have mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, it is difficult to adjudicate between the aforementioned accounts. There are two main reasons that this is so. First, all four of those accounts have some *prima facie* claim to capturing the essence of perfect happiness. This is so because three of them are treated as definitions of 'happiness' and Aquinas thinks that some definitions (what he calls "*quid est* definitions," as I explain below) capture the very essences of things.<sup>217</sup> In particular, Aquinas gives definitions of 'happiness' in terms of desire satisfaction, being perfected, and – when fully worked out – knowing and enjoying God in God's essence. So it is at least possible that any of those three definitions could capture Aquinas's understanding of the very essence of perfect happiness. But, not to be outdone in *prima facie* plausibility, the intellectual act of knowing God in God's essence on its own is explicitly called "the essence of happiness" by Aquinas.<sup>218</sup> So we are not without serious competitors.

The second reason that it is difficult to adjudicate between these accounts is that all four of them are extensionally equivalent. In other words, given various commitments that Aquinas has, a person has all of her desires satisfied *just in case* she is completely perfected *just in case* she is engaged in the intellectual act of knowing God in God's essence *just in case* she is not only engaged in that act,

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<sup>217</sup> For Aquinas's discussion of *quid est* definitions as well as other sorts of definitions, see In Post. Anal. lib.2, l.8. I discuss Aquinas's view of definitions below in Section 1.

<sup>218</sup> See ST IaIIae q.3 a.4 co.

but also enjoying it profoundly.<sup>219</sup> Given the way that all of these claims were shown to issue from the common root of the general concept of happiness in Chapter 2, this should not be particularly surprising. But it does make matters more difficult as one tries to determine the essence of perfect happiness because none of the competing accounts can be rejected on the grounds that it doesn't capture the correct extension of perfect happiness.

In this chapter, I attempt to adjudicate between these competing accounts and settle on what Aquinas actually treats as the essence of perfect happiness. In other words, I attempt to discern what perfect happiness fundamentally *is*, by Aquinas's lights. I ultimately endorse the reading of Aquinas according to which the essence of perfect happiness is knowing *and* enjoying God in God's essence. I proceed as follows. First, I explain briefly why one should reject the idea that, according to Aquinas, having all of one's desires satisfied is the essence of perfect happiness. Next, I argue that one should also reject the idea that Aquinas treats being perfected as a human being as the essence of perfect happiness. Finally, I make the case that Aquinas is better read as treating knowledge of God *and* enjoyment of God as the essence of perfect happiness, rather than knowledge of God alone. In its essence, perfect happiness fundamentally includes both knowing God and enjoying God, as one engages in an ongoing friendship with God in heaven.

§1: *Having all one's desires satisfied: the essence of perfect happiness?*

On only one occasion does Aquinas explicitly use the word 'definition' (*definitio*) in connection with happiness. He says, when rightly understood, the following "definition of 'happiness'" is "good and adequate": "Happy is the one who has all that he desires."<sup>220</sup> This definition, taken from Augustine, makes it seem like happiness is ultimately a matter of having all of

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<sup>219</sup> I demonstrate this step-by-step in "*Considerandum quid sit beatitudo: Aquinas on what happiness really is.*" *Res Philosophica*. January, 2016.

<sup>220</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.8 ad 3.

one's desires satisfied.<sup>221</sup> And so, since, according to Aquinas, some definitions capture the essences of the things defined and this is the only characterization of perfect happiness explicitly called a "definition," this might naturally lead one to think that the essence of perfect happiness is having one's desires satisfied. In other words, one might conclude that, according to Aquinas, perfect happiness is fundamentally a matter of having all of one's desires satisfied.

However, this would be a mistake. It is clear that it would be a mistake when one reflects on the reason that Aquinas gives for thinking that this definition is good and adequate, namely, that "nothing satisfies man's natural desire, except the complete good, which is happiness."<sup>222</sup> In other words, the reason that the definition is good and adequate is that, as a matter of fact, a person won't be fully satisfied, unless she becomes perfectly happy. It isn't that having her desires satisfied fundamentally explains her being perfectly happy. It is *that which satisfies all of her desires* that fundamentally explains her being perfectly happy. This is made all the clearer by the fact that, for Aquinas, a desire is, by its very nature, akin to a movement towards something; strictly speaking, one only desires what one doesn't have.<sup>223</sup> So a desire ceases to be precisely when the thing desired is had.<sup>224</sup> As a result, strictly speaking, a perfectly happy person has no desires, and so it can't be that having one's desires satisfied is what fundamentally explains a person's being perfectly happy, since, strictly speaking, a perfectly happy person has no desires satisfied. It is best, then, to think of this definition as a kind of test that can tell us whether someone is, in fact, perfectly happy.

But all of this makes it natural to wonder: why call this a 'definition?' In what sense is it a definition? Answering this question requires a brief excursus into Aquinas's understanding of definitions; this excursus will simultaneously help us understand how to think about this desire

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<sup>221</sup> Augustine gives this characterization of the happy person in *De Trinitate*, xiii, 5.

<sup>222</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.8 ad 3.

<sup>223</sup> See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.23 a.4 co.

<sup>224</sup> And known to be had.

satisfaction definition of ‘happiness’ and set the parameters for thinking about the other definitions of ‘happiness’ I consider below. Aquinas, following Aristotle, countenances the possibility that there are, at least in a sense, multiple definitions of one and the same thing. Aquinas distinguishes between three such definition-like statements found in Aristotle: what we might call (1) a nominal definition,<sup>225</sup> (2) a *propter quid* definition,<sup>226</sup> and (3) a *quid est* definition.<sup>227</sup>

All three of these types of definition have a role to play. Nominal definitions play the role of explaining “the signification of a name, or a notion of the very thing named” without signifying what a thing really is (*quid est*).<sup>228</sup> Nominal definitions may only “signify...some accident [i.e. some feature distinct from what the thing really is],” but they are useful since, for example, if extensionally adequate (i.e. if they pick out all and only things belonging to some kind of thing out in the world), they fix a referent allowing us to then conduct future inquiry.<sup>229</sup> For example, “a potable, clear liquid found in rivers and lakes” might be a helpful nominal definition of ‘water’ because it fixes a referent, until such a time as we can really say what water is.<sup>230</sup>

A *propter quid* definition captures, at least part of, why something is as it is. In other words, it captures a true cause of something. It seems that Aquinas is willing to countenance the possibility that a *propter quid* or causal definition of something can be given in terms of each of the four causes: material, formal, efficient, and final.<sup>231</sup> To get a sense of what a definition of this sort looks like, I return to the example of ‘water.’ We might say that *stuff composed of hydrogen and oxygen* is a *propter quid*

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<sup>225</sup> In Post. Anal. lib.2 l.8,n.6.

<sup>226</sup> In Post. Anal. lib.2 l.8 n.7, 9.

<sup>227</sup> In Post. Anal. lib. 2 l.8 n.6. I say “definition-like statements,” because, although he explicitly says the *propter quid* and *quid est* varieties are definitions, strictly speaking, in the text in question, Aquinas does not call this nominal sort of definition a ‘definition’ (*definitio*), but rather “a notion (*ratio*) which explains the signification of a name.”

<sup>228</sup> In Post. Anal. lib.2 l.8 n.6.

<sup>229</sup> In Post. Anal. lib.2 l.8 n.6.

<sup>230</sup> I think that the example of water is illuminating and so I use it throughout this discussion. The same points could be made with Aquinas’s (and, ultimately, Aristotle’s) example of thunder.

<sup>231</sup> In Post. Anal. lib.2 l.7 n. 2-3



definition of ‘water.’<sup>232</sup>

Now, depending on how it goes, a *propter quid* definition might give some of the content of the essence of a thing and so be a kind of partial true definition of that thing. For example, an adequate *quid est* definition of water will include the (material) causal definition *composed of hydrogen and oxygen* as a part. What sets a *propter quid* definition apart from a *quid est* definition, then, in many cases will not be that the *propter quid* definition is in any sense superfluous, but rather that it is incomplete; it will only capture a part of what it is to be a thing of a certain kind.

A *quid est* definition, however, is a statement of what something truly is.<sup>233</sup> It captures the very essence of the thing defined.<sup>234</sup> That is why a *quid est* definition is the gold standard of definitions: although it is helpful to fix a well-circumscribed referent (as a nominal definition does) and it is even more helpful to capture why, at least partially, something is as it is (as a *propter quid* definition does), ideally a definition would capture the whole essence of the thing defined (as a *quid est* definition does). Returning again to water, we might think of H<sub>2</sub>O as the *quid est* definition of ‘water’; it captures water’s essence – what water truly is. So, if one of the definitions of ‘happiness’ is going to lead us to the essence of happiness, it must be a definition in this *quid est* sense.

Before this discussion of kinds of definition, since, strictly speaking, a person who is perfectly happy has *no* desires satisfied, one might have found it unbelievable that the only characterization of perfect happiness that Aquinas explicitly calls a “definition” involves having one’s desires satisfied: “Happy is the one who has all that he desires.”<sup>235</sup> However, we can now see that Aquinas is well within his conceptual rights to treat this as something other than a *quid est*

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<sup>232</sup> For those interested in Aquinas’s example, he says: “[O]ne is giving a *propter quid* when he asserts thunder to be due to the fact that fire is quenched in a cloud.” In Post. Anal. lib.2 l.8 n.9.

<sup>233</sup> In Post. Anal. lib.2 l.8 n.6.

<sup>234</sup> The notions of essence and *quid est* are virtually synonymous in Aquinas. Aquinas often glosses “*quod quid est*” with “*idest essentia rei*” (see, e.g., ST IaIIae q.3 a.7 co).

<sup>235</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.8 ad 3.

definition, or a definition that captures the essence of perfect happiness. It seems best to regard this definition as a *nominal* definition, in particular. After all, at least from Aquinas's perspective, this definition fixes the right class of people about whom to enquire, since all and only perfectly happy people will have all of their desires satisfied. But it seems to do so without telling us what ultimately (even partially) explains what it is to be happy, since – strictly speaking – a desire's being satisfied doesn't directly contribute to one's perfect happiness, since, strictly speaking, the perfectly happy have no desires at all.

§2: *Being perfected: fundamental in perfect happiness?*

Commentators often suggest that Aquinas gives us his fundamental account of what happiness is when he tells us that “by the name ‘happiness’ is understood the ultimate perfection of a rational or of an intellectual nature.”<sup>236</sup> In other words, many commentators believe that happiness fundamentally has to do with being a completely perfected human being. For example, Jean Porter calls this sort of view “the cornerstone of [Aquinas’s] analysis of happiness” and says that, for Aquinas, “happiness is equivalent to the perfection proper to a rational or intellectual creature.”<sup>237</sup> Terence Irwin also tells us that Aquinas “identifies [perfect happiness] with ‘the ultimate perfection of a rational or intellectual nature.’”<sup>238</sup> Indeed, Georg Wieland goes so far as to explicitly say that, for Aquinas, self-perfection is “the essence of happiness.”<sup>239</sup> All of these commentators, then, seem to

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<sup>236</sup> ST Ia q.62 a.1 co.

<sup>237</sup> Porter, “Happiness,” (Forthcoming) and Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 156.

<sup>238</sup> Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study. Volume 1: From Socrates to the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 497.

<sup>239</sup> More broadly, Georg Wieland claims that, in the late medieval period, philosophers shared with Aristotle the view that happiness consisted in “the perfection of human nature” (673). And, about Aquinas in particular, Wieland suggests that Aquinas, like Aristotle, believes that “the essence of happiness is to be found in perfection [or actualization]” and that Aquinas differs from Aristotle “only in that he takes the concept of perfection in the very strict sense familiar from theology.” (“Happiness: The Perfection of Man,” in Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).)

P.S. Eardley also sees the identification of happiness with self-perfection as a hallmark of the medieval period. He takes issue only with Wieland’s claim that *all* medieval authors thought that happiness is identified with self-perfection. He thinks that, although it’s true for the most part (and certainly of Aquinas), a pair of late thirteenth century authors, Henry

treat this perfection definition of ‘perfect happiness’ as Aquinas’s *quid est* definition of ‘perfect happiness.’ In other words, they all seem to treat it as capturing the essence of perfect happiness.<sup>240</sup>

It is not without reason that this reading is popular. One reason seems particularly important.<sup>241</sup> As we saw in Chapter 1, Aquinas accepts a broadly Aristotelian metaphysical framework and philosophy of nature. According to that framework, all creatures strive for their own perfection, or fulfillment, or actualization.<sup>242</sup> Acorns strive to be mature, flourishing oak trees. Fawns strive to be mature, flourishing deer. And humans strive after their own characteristic fulfillment as well. Each creature in the manner appropriate to its nature strives to be perfect. There is, then, as Porter puts it, “a universal desire for fulfillment, understood as the complete development and expression of the proper capabilities of a specific kind of creature.”<sup>243</sup>

Now, according to Aquinas, the end at which striving of whatever sort aims is a good.<sup>244</sup> And so, since this universal desire for complete fulfillment is the most comprehensive end aimed at, the complete fulfillment of a creature is also the most comprehensive good that can be obtained by a creature of a particular kind. So the full development and expression of a creature’s characteristic capabilities is the most comprehensive good that can be obtained by a creature of a particular kind.

This line of thought applies to all creatures, including human beings. The full development

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of Ghent and Giles of Rome, thought that happiness isn’t really self-perfection, but self-transcendence. (“Conceptions of Happiness and Human Destiny in the Late Thirteenth Century,” *Vivarium: An International Journal for the Philosophy and Intellectual Life of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* 44 (2-3) (2006): 276-304.)

<sup>240</sup> In what follows, I will not focus on this point or use this language, since among these commentators only Wieland explicitly calls this sort of perfection definition an account of the “essence” of perfect happiness. Furthermore, all of these commentators, including Wieland, claim that knowing God is the essence of happiness, in some sense. I will instead focus on the claim that they all clearly do seem to endorse: that this definition captures what is *fundamental* in Aquinas’s account of perfect happiness.

<sup>241</sup> I give the reason that follows and address others, which seem to me less central, in “*Considerandum est quid sit beatitudo.*” In particular, there I also address the ability of this view to explain (1) the fittingness of the other elements of Aquinas’s theory of happiness, including the other definitions of ‘happiness’ mentioned above; and (2) how it can be that Aquinas argues from this definition to conclusions about happiness. These seem less central because it’s quite clear that Aquinas does the same thing with the other definitions of happiness he puts forward.

<sup>242</sup> ST Ia q.62 a.1.

<sup>243</sup> Porter, “Happiness,” (Forthcoming). See also Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 159-160.

<sup>244</sup> Or at least an apparent good.

and expression of a human being's characteristic capabilities, then, is the most comprehensive good that can be obtained by a human being. The most comprehensive good that can be obtained by a human being is the complete good of a human being, which is perfect happiness. And since 'happy' applies only to human beings (and angels), it is natural to think that 'perfect happiness' names the distinctively human (and angelic) realization of their comprehensive good – that is, it is the name used to pick out the full development and expression of the distinctively human (and angelic) capacities, particularly of intellect and will.<sup>245</sup> Thus Aquinas's acceptance of this broadly Aristotelian framework seems to give us good reason to accept an interpretation according to which perfect human happiness fundamentally is the complete perfection of a rational nature.

There are, however, good reasons to doubt that these commentators are right to think that Aquinas gives us his fundamental account of what perfect happiness is when he appeals to its being the ultimate perfection of a human being. In this section, I focus on one such reason, namely, that the text that speaks most directly to this issue weighs heavily against treating being perfected in the sense of developing and expressing one's characteristic faculties as fundamental to perfect happiness.<sup>246</sup> The text in question is in Aquinas's *Sentence Commentary*.<sup>247</sup> There, Aquinas notes that

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<sup>245</sup> Of course, as I've noted in passing before, Aquinas also thinks that God is happy. But to simplify matters, given Aquinas's view that predicates hold analogically when used in reference to God, I focus here on only the human and angelic cases.

<sup>246</sup> In the next section, I indirectly give further reasons for rejecting this account. The following argument, as well as additional reasons for rejecting this reading of Aquinas, appear in my article, "*Considerandum quid sit beatitudo*."

<sup>247</sup> This section focuses on Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.2 qc.2 co., which because of its significance for my argument, I will quote in full in the original Latin:

Ad secundam quaestionem dicendum, quod sicut ex dictis patet, ultimus finis rei in ipsa re acceptus, est id per quod conjungitur res suo fini exteriori, qui est principium suae perfectionis. Deo autem, qui est ultimus finis rerum, res dupliciter conjungi possunt. Uno modo per modum assimilationis, ut sic dicatur illa res esse Deo conjunctissima quae est Deo simillima; et secundum hoc oportet illud in unaquaque re esse ultimum ejus finem, secundum quod maxime Deo assimilatur. Unumquodque autem secundum hoc ad Dei similitudinem accedit quod est actu, recedit vero secundum quod est in potentia; et illud per quod res maxime est in actu, est ejus ultimus finis. Alio modo pertingendo ad ipsum Deum: quae quidem conjunctio soli creaturae rationali est possibilis, quae potest ipsi Deo conjungi per cognitionem et amorem, eo quod Deus est objectum operationis ejus, non autem operationis alicujus alterius creaturae. Quocumque autem modo consideretur ultima perfectio hominis, quae est ejus finis, oportet eam ponere in genere actus. Si enim consideremus modum conjunctionis ad Deum, quae est communis omnibus creaturis, cum res magis sit in actu secundum quod est operans, quam secundum quod est potens operari; erit ultima perfectio uniuscujusque rei sua operatio perfecta: unde res esse dicitur propter suam operationem. Similiter si consideremus conjunctionem quae est propria rationalis creaturae, ultima perfectio hominis in operatione consistit: habitus enim non conjungitur objecto nisi

there are two ways in which “the ultimate perfection of a human being may be considered.” First, in the way common to all things, a human may be regarded as attaining her ultimate perfection by becoming fully actualized (*maxime in actu*) and so becoming like God, who is pure act; becoming fully actualized in this way is intimately connected to the development and exercise of a thing’s characteristic faculties. Second, in the way common only to things with a rational nature, a human being may be regarded as attaining her ultimate perfection in being joined to God through knowledge and love (*Deo conjungi per cognitionem et amorem*).

Aquinas then says something extremely important for the issue at hand: “this second consideration [about love and knowledge of God] leads closer to a consideration of happiness than the first [about becoming fully actualized]” (*haec secunda consideratio propinquius inducit in considerationem beatitudinis quam prima*). In this passage we have clear support for thinking that being perfected in the sense of developing and expressing one’s characteristic faculties is not fundamental to perfect happiness, as Aquinas understands it. That sense of ‘the ultimate perfection of a human being,’ which – again – is connected to being fully actualized through the development and exercise of one’s characteristic faculties, leads us *farther* from a consideration of perfect happiness than does thinking of perfect happiness as having to do with knowing and loving God. In other words, it seems quite clear that here Aquinas is distancing himself from the idea that *what happiness is* fundamentally has to do with developing and exercising distinctively human capacities. Yes, we can consider the perfection of a human being under that aspect. But in doing so we are not considering the perfection of a human being in the way that is closest to a consideration of *happiness*. So it seems that perfect happiness is more fundamentally connected with attaining to God as the object of knowledge and love than to developing and exercising our faculties. As a result, the two remaining

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mediante actu; et ideo oportet quod beatitudo in genere actus ponatur. Tamen haec secunda consideratio propinquius, inducit in considerationem beatitudinis quam prima, quia beatitudo non est nisi rationalis creaturae.

characterizations of what is fundamental in perfect happiness, both of which appeal directly to knowing God, should already seem more promising.

However, before turning to those remaining characterizations, it is important to note that this passage gives us still more reason to think that it is a mistake to think of the perfection definition as picking out what is fundamental in perfect happiness. Immediately after the important passage quoted above, Aquinas gives us his *reason* for thinking that we are closer to a consideration of happiness when we think in terms of knowing and loving God than when we think in terms of becoming fully actualized by developing and exercising our capacities. He says, “this second consideration [referring to knowing and loving God] leads closer to a consideration of happiness than the first [becoming fully actualized] *because there is no happiness except in a rational creature.*”<sup>248</sup> In other words, as an initial gloss, the reason that knowing and loving God is closer to a consideration of happiness is that all things are capable of becoming completely actualized as members of their kinds by developing and exercising their characteristic capacities, but not all things are capable of attaining happiness. So, for example, a fox could become completely actualized, but it could never be happy. So it is clear that the complete actualization of just any nature is not the same thing as happiness.

Of course, no serious reader would deny that Aquinas believes as much. For this reason, someone inclined to ascribe this sort of reading to Aquinas may stress that ‘happiness’ is defined as the complete perfection *of a rational or intellectual nature*. Since sub-rational creatures, like foxes, do not have rational or intellectual natures, they cannot be happy. However, the problem Aquinas raises cannot be avoided so readily. Aquinas has appealed to precisely the sort of reason on which one might build a dilemma for adherents of this sort of view. The dilemma goes as follows: Say we

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<sup>248</sup> “...*haec secunda consideratio propinquius, inducit in considerationem beatitudinis quam prima, quia beatitudo non est nisi rationalis creaturae.*” (Emphasis added)

follow this view and specify that perfect happiness fundamentally has to do with the complete perfection or actualization of only *this* nature (a rational, human nature) or *that* nature (an intellectual, angelic nature). There will be a nagging question: is there a *reason* that only things with perfected versions of those natures are perfectly happy?<sup>249</sup>

Here the advocate of the actualization view has two options. First, she can say, “No, there is no reason that only things with perfected versions of those natures are perfectly happy.” She may explain as follows: “Perfect happiness is *defined* as the perfection (or complete actualization) of a *rational* or *intellectual* nature. And that is why only things with those natures are capable of being perfectly happy.” But I take it that no serious interpreter would take this option both because it seems like there should be a reason that only things with those natures can be perfectly happy and because Aquinas seems to give a perfectly good reason for thinking perfect happiness is restricted to things with such natures.

Which leads us to the second option: she may say, “Yes, there is a reason.” What might that reason be? It seems clear that, if she follows Aquinas, she will appeal to the sorts of activities that things with those natures can engage in that things with other natures cannot. In particular, she will appeal to the fact that things with some natures can, with God’s help, know and love God as the immediate object of their activities and things with other natures can’t. Humans and angels are able to attain to knowledge and love of God because they have the requisite hardware that things like foxes lack: intellects that make possible the apprehension of God and wills that make possible the desire for and enjoyment of God (with God’s help).<sup>250</sup> Again, giving this reason is a very attractive option because this is how Aquinas himself explains the fact that human beings can attain happiness

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<sup>249</sup> Interestingly, this question somewhat resembles a question that Plotinus raises at *Enneads* 1.4.1 about Aristotle’s view of *eudaimonia*. (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, John Dillon (ed.), Stephen MacKenna (trans.). London: Penguin Books, 1991.)

<sup>250</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.1 co.

and non-human animals can't.<sup>251</sup> And so this seems to be the line of thought Aquinas himself has in mind when he says, "there is no happiness except in a rational creature."

Now, if a defender of the sort of reading under consideration appeals to the fact that human beings (and angels) can attain to God as an object of their activity in order to explain why they alone among God's creatures can be perfectly happy, then Aquinas has given a good reason to look elsewhere for what is fundamental in perfect happiness. For it seems natural to think that, if one admits that the fundamental explanation for why human beings and angels *can* be perfectly happy is that they can attain to God as the object of their knowledge and love (with God's help), then one should also admit that the fundamental explanation for why one of them is *in fact* perfectly happy has more to do with the fact that she has attained to God as the object of their knowledge and love than that she is completely actualized while so engaged.<sup>252</sup> If we want to capture what is fundamental to perfect happiness, then, we would do well to consider an account that directly appeals to our knowing and/or loving God. And it is to two accounts of that kind to which I now turn.

§3: *Knowing God or knowing and enjoying God? The essence of perfect happiness.*

There is a long-standing tradition according to which Aquinas holds that knowing God in God's essence alone is the genuine essence of perfect happiness and that enjoyment merely follows along after that happiness – knowing God intimately in this way is metaphorically called "the vision of God."<sup>253</sup> For example, the Coimbran Commentators, around the turn of the seventeenth century,

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<sup>251</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.1 ad 1.

<sup>252</sup> Notice that this line of thought is present in both the *Sentence Commentary* and the *Summa Theologiae*. This gives us reason to think that Thomas never changed his mind on this matter. For in the *Summa*, as in *Sentence Commentary*, Thomas claims that all creatures "attain the ultimate end [which is God] inasmuch as they participate in some similitude of God" and it is only rational creatures that "attain to the ultimate end by knowing and loving God" (ST IaIIae q.1 a.8 co.). And, of course, he continues to hold onto the view that only rational (or intellectual) things can be happy (this clearly follows from what Aquinas says at, e.g., ST IaIIae q.1 a.8 and ST IaIIae q.3 a.3 and is clearly seen, e.g., SCG lib.3 c.27 n.4; and SCG l.3 c.35 n.5). And if he holds onto these views, it seems likely that he would hold onto what he formerly believed was supported by these views: that a consideration of happiness is more closely connected to the beatific vision than to complete actualization.

<sup>253</sup> The main thrust of this section can also be seen in my forthcoming article, "Aquinas on the relationship between the vision and delight in perfect happiness," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*.



held that “the position of St. Thomas Aquinas” is that “the clear vision of God...alone is happiness” (*beatitudo*) and defended that position vigorously.<sup>254</sup> Still today, Aquinas is thought to fall squarely in this camp.<sup>255</sup> Georg Wieland, for example, says that, for Aquinas, “happiness can only consist essentially in an act of reason [namely, our knowing God in God’s essence]. The activity of the will, which expresses itself in delight, is an immediate consequence of happiness.”<sup>256</sup> Moving forward, I will call this the “vision-alone reading.”

In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that this long-standing reading is incorrect. In my view, Aquinas treats intimately knowing *and* profoundly enjoying God as the genuine essence of perfect happiness. Perfect happiness is fundamentally about both of these things. Nevertheless, on my reading, Aquinas unequivocally affirms that knowing God is more important to one’s perfect happiness than is the enjoyment of God. I will call this the “combined reading,” since according to this reading it is the combination of the vision of God and the enjoyment of God that fundamentally constitute one’s perfect happiness.

What is not at issue in deciding between these readings is whether, according to Aquinas, perfectly happy people will be enjoying themselves in heaven. They will. What is at issue is how we should regard what Aquinas thinks of as the fundamental *reason* that the people in question are

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<sup>254</sup> Coimbra Commentators, *Commentary on The Nicomachean Ethics*, Disputation III, Question 3.

Interestingly, in his commentary on *Summa Theologiae* (abbreviated: ST) IaIIae q. 3 a.4, Cajetan doesn’t seem to commit himself to this vision-alone account; he focuses on dispelling Scotus’s arguments for thinking that the act of will is central to happiness. (Cajetan doesn’t seem to comment on ST IaIIae q.2 a.6.)

<sup>255</sup> See, e.g., Porter, “Happiness” (Forthcoming); T.J. López, “Trichotomizing the Standard Twofold Model of Thomistic Eudaimonism: A Solution to a Logical Problem,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86 (1): 23-46), 25-26; Terrence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics* (Vol. 1), 513; P.S. Eardley, “Conceptions of Happiness and Human Destiny in the Late Thirteenth Century,” 278-9; and Christopher Brown, “Friendship in Heaven,” 235.

It should not be lost on us that the vast majority of these commentators were also cited as defenders of the claim that perfect happiness fundamentally has to do with being perfected as a human being. This, again, is part of why I focused on dispelling the claim that perfect happiness is what is fundamental to perfect happiness, rather than the claim that self-perfection is the *essence* of perfect happiness. To be charitable, it seems likely that many of these authors, at least, hold that perfect happiness is fundamentally a matter of complete perfection (that’s what perfect happiness is really about), but the essence causally underlying that perfection is the knowledge of God.

<sup>256</sup> Georg Wieland, “Happiness (Ia IIae, qq. 1-5),” in Stephen Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 62-63.

perfectly happy. Is it just that they are engaged in the activity of knowing God in God's essence? Or is it that they are engaged in *and enjoying* the activity of knowing God in God's essence? This is akin to an exercise in which we bring together a diverse group of wellbeing theorists, present the group with a case in which a person is obviously faring well, and ask each to explain and defend an account concerning *why* the person in question is faring well. So, depending on which of these interpretations is correct, Aquinas may have two importantly different views about the fundamental nature of perfect happiness.

This is an extremely important issue. Much is at stake in how we should understand Aquinas's account of perfect happiness. To begin with, the combined reading has a place for treating one's affective response to the vision of God – namely, one's enjoyment of the vision – as itself contributing to one's happiness, whereas the vision-alone reading doesn't. So here we are left to decide whether, according to Aquinas, perfect happiness is fundamentally constituted solely by *one* very special intellectual activity that non-instrumentally benefits the perfectly happy person, or by *two* interlocking strands that non-instrumentally benefit the perfectly happy person: the very special intellectual activity of knowing God in God's essence *and* one's affective response to that activity blossoming in enjoyment. Depending on which of these characterizations one takes to capture the essence of perfect happiness, one will conceive of what perfect happiness fundamentally *is* very differently indeed. And, again, depending on the interpretive road that one follows here, one may well end up thinking rightly or wrongly about imperfect, or earthly, happiness as a result. After all, again, Aquinas treats imperfect happiness as a likeness to or participation in perfect happiness.

I make the case for reading Aquinas as a defender of the combined account in four subsections. First, I draw attention to what seems to be unappreciated textual tension in the *Summa Theologiae* concerning this question. In the next three sections, I give three main reasons for thinking that the best way to resolve this textual tension is by reading Aquinas as a defender of the combined

view, rather than the vision-alone view. Roughly, the first main reason is that we should regard the main textual evidence in favor of the vision-alone view as more likely to mislead because in those texts Aquinas is giving us a model for thinking about the relationship between the vision and enjoyment in happiness and not his literal account of their relationship. The second main reason is that, read as a participant in the discussion taking place at his own time, it seems more plausible to read him as a defender of a version of the combined view, rather than a defender of the vision-alone view. Finally, we have good reason to read Aquinas as a defender of the combined view because Aquinas's statement of the genuine essence of happiness (*its quid est*) seems to commit him to the combined view. So there is a strong cumulative case to be made in favor of reading Aquinas as an adamant defender of the view that the vision of God is the far more important constituent in perfect happiness, but that perfect happiness is constituted by both the vision of God *and* the enjoyment of God.

### §3.1: *The textual tension*

I begin with the main textual evidence in favor of the vision-alone reading of Aquinas. Given its dominance, it is unsurprising that there is good evidence in its favor. The main evidence comes from two articles in The Treatise on Happiness in the First Part of the Second Part of the *Summa Theologiae*. In these articles and throughout the remainder of the chapter, it is important to keep in mind that, as Aquinas thinks about it, “enjoyment (*gaudium*)...is a kind of delight (*delectatio*)” and it is the kind of delight experienced by all the perfectly happy.<sup>257</sup>

The first of these articles asks whether happiness consists in pleasure (*voluptate*).<sup>258</sup> In the main reply, Aquinas says that “all delight is a certain proper accident (*proprium accidens*) that follows upon (*consequitur*) happiness, or some part of happiness. For someone delights as a result of this: that

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<sup>257</sup> ST IaIIae q.31 a.3 co.

<sup>258</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.6.

he has some good fitting for him.” He goes on, “Now, certainly if the fitting good is perfect, it is human happiness itself.” He concludes, “Thus it is clear that that very delight which follows upon the perfect good is not the very essence of happiness, but a certain consequence of it, like a *per se* accident.” In this passage, it certainly seems that Aquinas is committing himself to the vision-alone reading. After all, he says that delight is a consequence or effect of happiness and not part of the essence of happiness. And so it seems that happiness can’t partially be constituted by delight, or enjoyment.

The second article, which shares many similarities with the first, asks whether happiness consists in an act of the will or an act of the intellect.<sup>259</sup> In the main reply, Aquinas repeats the claim that delight is “like a *per se* accident,” which is “adjoined” (*adiuncta*) to “the essence of happiness.” He argues that, “as to that which is essentially happiness itself, it is impossible that it consists in an act of will,” like enjoyment. Rather, he tells us that “the essence of happiness consists in an intellectual act, but to the will pertains the delight following upon happiness.” Here again, Aquinas certainly seems to be committing himself to the vision-alone reading. Delight again seems to be treated both as something apart from the essence of happiness and as a kind of effect of happiness. So it seems that happiness could not possibly even partially be constituted by delight or enjoyment, according to Aquinas.

But things aren’t quite so clear once we notice passages in the *Summa Theologiae* that seem to affirm or entail that perfect happiness does, in fact, partially consist in enjoyment. Consider three such passages.

First, in the body of the first passage cited above, about whether happiness consists in pleasure, Aquinas apparently straightforwardly commits himself to the claim that happiness is

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<sup>259</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.4.

partially constituted by enjoyment.<sup>260</sup> He begins his answer by saying, “It ought to be said that, ‘because bodily delights are familiar to the many, they have assumed for themselves the name, “pleasure” (*voluptatum*), as is said in *Ethics*, Book 7, although – nevertheless – there are other greater (*potiores*) delights.” The greater delights Aquinas is referring to are enjoyments, or the intellectual delight that the will takes in intelligible goods. He goes on and says something very important: “Nevertheless, happiness does not *principally* (*principaliter*) consist in these [enjoyments].”<sup>261</sup> This is an extremely misleading thing to say if one’s view is that happiness does not consist *at all* in delights of any kind. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Aquinas intended to convey anything other than that, on his view, happiness partially, although not principally, is constituted by enjoyment. In other words, he seems to be affirming the combined account.

Aquinas also seems to commit to the combined view when he asks himself whether “the delight is more principal (*principalius*) in happiness than the vision.”<sup>262</sup> In this article, first of all, what Aquinas doesn’t say is telling. This article comes after both of the passages that favor the vision-alone reading considered above. If happiness didn’t consist in delight at all, but merely followed upon happiness as a kind of effect, then one would expect that Aquinas’s answer to this question would be quite snappy. He might say something like: It is clear that the vision is more principal in happiness than delight, since, as was said above, delight is an effect of happiness and so not strictly a part of happiness itself. If something is not strictly a part of something else, then it cannot be more principal in that thing than something else that is strictly a part of that thing. Therefore, the vision is more principal in happiness than delight. But Aquinas doesn’t say anything like that. Aquinas does not deny that delight is in or a part of perfect happiness.

On the contrary, from what Aquinas does say, it seems clear that he feels that it is right to

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<sup>260</sup> ST IaIIae q.2 a.6

<sup>261</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>262</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.2.

describe the enjoyment of God as something “in happiness,” just as the vision is something “in happiness.” This at the very least suggests that Aquinas thinks that perfect happiness partially consists in enjoyment.

Most of this article is spent trying to make a case for thinking that, although both are goods in perfect happiness, the vision is the more principal good in perfect happiness. The case depends on the causal relationship between the goodness of the vision and the goodness of the enjoyment. The enjoyment, which just is the rest of the will in some good thing, “proceeds from the goodness of the activity.” The goodness of the enjoyment is caused by the goodness of the vision of God, since the will “seeks rest in the activity [i.e., the vision] because the activity is its good.” Aquinas concludes, “Thus it is clear that the more principal good is the very activity in which the will rests [i.e., the vision] than the rest of the will in it [i.e. the enjoyment].” This article suggests that there are two constituent goods in happiness: the vision and the enjoyment. But the vision is more important because the goodness of the enjoyment is caused by the goodness of the vision. What is more, the goodness of the enjoyment radically depends on the goodness of the vision, whereas the goodness of the vision in no way depends on the goodness of the enjoyment, so the principal good here is the vision. This certainly suggests that Aquinas accepts the combined reading I’ve ascribed to him.

Finally, Aquinas’s explanation concerning how it is possible that one person could be happier in heaven than another apparently entails that he is committed to thinking that perfect happiness partially consists in enjoyment.<sup>263</sup> He says that, “One person can be happier than another because however much more one enjoys [*fruitur*] this good [namely, God], he is that much happier.”<sup>264</sup> Aquinas seems to be committing himself to the view that, simply by taking more enjoyment in God in heaven, one can thereby be made happier. If enjoyment is merely an effect of

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<sup>263</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.2 co.

<sup>264</sup> As one would expect, enjoyment in the relevant sense is delight of the will in an end possessed. (See ST IaIIae q.11, especially, a.3.)

perfect happiness, then an increase in enjoyment could not itself explain an increase in perfect happiness. But, of course, if perfect happiness partially consists in enjoyment, then an increase in enjoyment could all by itself explain an increase in perfect happiness – as Aquinas apparently thinks is possible. So, yet again, Aquinas at least seems to commit himself to the view that happiness partially consists in enjoyment.

It should now be clear that there are texts that suggest that Aquinas holds inconsistent views regarding the relationship between the vision and enjoyment in happiness. Some seem to suggest that Aquinas holds the vision-alone view of perfect happiness. Others suggest that he holds the combined view. In what follows, I make the case that we ought to resolve this textual tension by affirming that Aquinas holds the combined view.

### §3.2: *On Models and Inconsistencies*

I begin by calling attention to the fact that the passages that most strongly favor the vision-alone reading depend on Aquinas's treating delight as "like a *per se* accident" relative to the vision of God, which is called an "essence." But what does Aquinas mean to commit himself to here when he says that delight is *like a per se* accident in relation to the vision? Does Aquinas want to convey his commitment to the view that the vision of God is the literal essence of perfect happiness? Does he want to commit himself to the vision-alone account of happiness, according to which delight is an effect of happiness, rather than a constituent of happiness?

I think not. I think that Aquinas is trying to give us a model – couched in terms of a familiar sort of Aristotelian dependency – for thinking about the relationship between the vision and delight *within* the genuine essence of perfect happiness. He does not intend to treat the vision as the genuine essence of perfect happiness. On my view, he likens the vision to an essence and the delight to a *per se* accident because, given his view of the relationship between the vision and delight in perfect happiness, it is the best model in the Aristotelian conceptual toolbox for thinking about that

relationship. This, it seems to me, is why when Aquinas discusses the relationship between the vision and the delight he consistently says that the delight is “like” (*sicut*) a *per se* accident or “as if” (*quasi*) a *per se* accident.<sup>265</sup> And it would not be particularly surprising if Aquinas were to take a model for thinking about their relationship out of the Aristotelian metaphysical toolbox. His teacher, Albert the Great, did likewise; in particular, Albert likened the vision of God to matter and the delight to form.<sup>266</sup>

There can be no question that, in very many respects, the essence-*per-se* accident model is an excellent model for Aquinas’s purposes. In order to see this, we should remind ourselves how Aquinas thinks of the relationship between essences and *per se* accidents in general. An essence makes a thing what it is. It is also fully responsible for the emergence of some further properties. A very special kind of further property that an essence is fully responsible for is a *per se* accident. A *per se* accident is a property that emerges from the essence necessarily, but is not identical to that essence or some part of it. Essences, then, are more fundamental and in that sense far more important than their *per se* accidents. As an example of a *per se* accident, Aquinas frequently gives the example of risibility (or the ability to laugh) in human beings, as he does in Question 2, Article 6 considered above. It pertains to the essence of a human being, Aquinas thinks, to be “a mortal rational animal” whereas it is a *per se* accident of a human being that she is “risible,” or capable of laughing.

In likening the vision of God to an essence and delight to a *per se* accident, I think that Aquinas succeeds in conveying quite a lot that he intends to convey. First, he conveys that the vision is ultimately responsible for making perfect happiness what it is. Second, he conveys that the vision in no way depends upon delight, but the delight radically depends on the vision. Third, he conveys a

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<sup>265</sup> In the body of ST IaIIae q.2 a.6 he uses ‘*sicut*,’ and in the body of ST IaIIae q.3 a.4 he uses ‘*quasi*.’

<sup>266</sup> Albert the Great. *Sentence Commentary*, lib.4 d.48 a.4. I will have more to say about the importance of this fact in Section 3.3 in which I discuss the context in which Aquinas is writing.



necessary relationship between the vision and delight, such that, if one has the vision, then one necessarily has the delight as well. Finally and in my view most importantly, Aquinas successfully conveys that the vision is far more important than the delight in perfect happiness.

His models for thinking about the relationship between the vision and delight in perfect happiness were not always so successful, at least by his lights. This is clear since Aquinas introduced and later abandoned an importantly different model for conceiving of the relationship between the vision and delight in happiness. In his *Sentence Commentary*, Aquinas says that “Delight is not the perfection of the activity from which the activity has its species, but rather [it is a perfection] which adds to it in the mode of a secondary perfection, like health is related to man and not as the soul [is related to man].”<sup>267</sup> One can see how attractive that model was to Aquinas when he wrote his *Commentary* by comparing the model to his more literal discussions of the relationship between the vision and delight in happiness. Concerning the vision and delight, Aquinas says, “Those two are not to be thought of as two goods, but as one good. For just as *from a perfection and a perfectible thing is made one perfect thing*, so too *from one delight and one activity is made one perfect activity, which is happiness* – since delight is the perfection of an activity, as is said in *Ethics*, Book 10.”<sup>268</sup>

Aquinas ultimately rejects this model, presumably because it is misleading in too many important respects. Chief among the problems with the model is that it leaves open thinking that the delight is more important than the vision. This is so because Aquinas thinks that, as a general matter among creatures, goodness tracks accidental perfection (i.e. properties over and above those that explain one’s simply being a thing of some kind) more than substantial goodness (i.e. properties associated with simply being a thing of some kind).<sup>269</sup> As a result, the model leaves open the possibility – if it doesn’t downright suggest it – that, when it comes to the goodness of perfect

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<sup>267</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.3 a.4 qc.3 ad 2.

<sup>268</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.3 a.4 qc.3 co. Emphasis added.

<sup>269</sup> ST Ia q.5 a.1 ad 1.

happiness, the delight is more important than the vision. That is absolutely unacceptable from Aquinas's point of view, particularly, as we'll see, given the context in which he's writing. This model also misleads on another front: the relationship between a substance and a perfecting accident is not necessary. Returning to Aquinas's example, a human being can exist without being healthy. But, according to Aquinas, one cannot be engaged in the vision of God and not enjoy it.<sup>270</sup> To avoid these obvious and serious problems, Aquinas moves on to his new model: the essence-*per-se*-accident model.

So, again, I think that Aquinas is trying to give us a model for thinking about the relationship between the vision and delight *within* the genuine essence of perfect happiness, and not for thinking about the genuine essence of perfect happiness itself. I think Aquinas does not literally mean that delight stands to the vision of God as a *per se* accident to a literal essence. The best he can do is offer a rough model. He and others before him offered other models. But, if one confines one's self to well-worked out Aristotelian models, the essence-*per-se*-accident model seems to be the best for Aquinas's purposes. And so we shouldn't be surprised that in his mature work Aquinas exploits it.

The first reason, then, to prefer reading Aquinas as a defender of the combined view rather than a defender of the vision-alone view is straightforward. As a completely general matter, it seems that, if an implication of a model is inconsistent with a claim not involving a model, we ought to reject the implication of the model. After all, it is a feature of models that they both illuminate and fall short of capturing every element of the thing they are drawn on to help explain. So, in the spirit of charity, it is best to assume that an author is expressing his or her own considered view when not employing a model and that, insofar as an implication of a model contradicts what is expressed elsewhere without employing a model, the author did not intend readers to accept those contradictory implications.

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<sup>270</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.1 co.

As we have seen, an implication of Aquinas's essence-*per-se*-accident model is that happiness does not at all consist in enjoyment, even though elsewhere, he seems to claim that happiness partially consists in enjoyment. Thus, taken with the hermeneutical principle, I think we ought to reject the implication that happiness does not at all consist in enjoyment.

### §3.3: *Context and Aquinas's Concerns*

This raises a question, however. Why didn't Aquinas do more to flag that he didn't want his reader to take the model so literally? Why wasn't Aquinas more concerned that he would be read as a defender of the vision-alone view, rather than of the combined view?

One reason we've already seen is that Aquinas seems to explicitly commit himself to the claim that perfect happiness is partially constituted by enjoyment. He presumably thought that would go some way towards mitigating the temptation to read him as something other than a defender of the combined view.

But there is another reason Aquinas may not have been overly concerned about misleading his readers: the context in which he was writing. Aquinas didn't have the benefit of the Coimbran Commentators' lucid attempt to defend the vision-alone account in his name. He had the likes of Albert the Great and John Pecham among his interlocutors, both of whom defended an importantly different version of the combined view. According to that version of the combined view, perfect happiness is constituted by the vision of God and delight in God, but the contribution of the will in love and delight is considered more important than the contribution of the vision. In expressing this view, John Pecham says, for example, that "happiness consists more principally in an act of will."<sup>271</sup> And, as I noted above, in his model, Albert the Great compares the vision to matter and delight to form.<sup>272</sup> Given the relative importance of matter and form in his hylomorphic metaphysics, in

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<sup>271</sup> John Pecham. *Quodlibet* I, q.5.

<sup>272</sup> Albert the Great. *Sentence Commentary* lib.4 d.48 a.4.

likening it to form, Albert too seems to treat the contribution of will in delight as more important than the contribution of intellect in the vision. It would not be at all surprising, then, if Aquinas were more concerned with giving a model for thinking about the vision and delight that unequivocally secures the higher place for the vision than he is with making absolutely certain that he is not read as a defender of the vision-alone view.

The context provides still another clue that Aquinas is not abandoning a version of the combined view. Indeed, the context of the debate suggests that, far from doing something radical like giving up any role for delight in happiness, Aquinas is concerned with resurrecting and defending an old line of thought that justifies the claim that the vision is more important than the delight in happiness. It is an old line of thought of which Aquinas's contemporaries were aware. Bonaventure, for example, tells us that, in "the words of the Saints," the heavenly reward "is attributed more to the vision" than to the delight born of love.<sup>273</sup> The reason that the Saints emphasize the vision, according to Bonaventure, is "that in the vision, the state of heaven (*status patriae*) is distinguished from the state of earth (*status viae*). Not so in love because both [the heavenly state and the earthly state] involve love. But in heaven there is the vision, [although] not on earth, but [on earth there is only] belief in what is not seen." This should cast a new light on what Aquinas is actually up to, in particular in Question 3, Article 4 quoted above. In emphasizing that it is through a change in the intellect (in its coming to behold God) that one comes to be perfectly happy and not a change in the will, Aquinas is reasserting an old reason for attributing perfect happiness "more to the vision" than to the delight. Aquinas may have thought that rigorously setting out an old reason for attributing happiness more to the vision than to delight in the very article in which he

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<sup>273</sup> Bonaventure. *Sentence Commentary* lib.4 d.49 q.5.

gives his essence-*per-se*-accident model would garner further protection against being misread as a defender of a vision-alone account.

§3.4: *Aquinas on the genuine essence of happiness*

There is another textual element we have not yet discussed that Aquinas may have thought would prevent people from misreading him in this way: his positive account of the genuine essence of happiness. And this is the last and perhaps most important piece of the cumulative case for thinking that, in those essence-*per-se*-accident passages, Aquinas is trying to give us a model for thinking about the relationship between the vision and delight *within* the genuine essence of perfect happiness, and not telling us how to think about the genuine essence of perfect happiness itself. There are various clues that Aquinas wants to treat enjoyment as a part of his account of the genuine essence of perfect happiness. Here, I will focus on what I take to be the most important such clue.

At the very beginning of Question 3 in the First Part of the Second Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas tells us that, “Next it ought to be considered what happiness is” (*quid est beatitudo*).<sup>274</sup> I take it that Aquinas intends the “*quid est*” to carry its full force; Aquinas wants to give us a *quid est* definition of perfect happiness. Aquinas is after an account of the genuine essence of perfect happiness.<sup>275</sup> We shouldn’t be surprised, then, when in the body of the first article of Question 3, Aquinas tells us something about “the very essence of happiness” (*ipsam essentiam beatitudinis*).

Here’s what he tells us there about “the very essence of happiness.” It is “something created.” What is more, in the sense in which “the ultimate end is called ‘happiness,’” it is “something created, existing in one.” So when Aquinas gives his account of the ultimate end in the

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<sup>274</sup> I change *quid sit beatitudo* to *quid est beatitudo* because I want the connection to be clear between this sentence and the next. This is warranted, since *sit* is the subjunctive form of *est*.

<sup>275</sup> The notions of essence and *quid est* are virtually synonymous in Aquinas. Aquinas will gloss “*quod quid est*” with “*id est essentia rei*” (see, e.g., ST IaIIae q.3 a.7 co).

sense in which the ultimate end is something created, Aquinas is thereby giving us his account of the very essence of happiness. So what is the ultimate end in this sense? It is “nothing other than the attainment (*adeptio*) or enjoyment (*fruitio*) of the Ultimate End [namely, God].”

Notice that at the very outset of a question on the *quid est* or essence of happiness, Aquinas gives an account of “the very essence of happiness” that includes reference to enjoyment (*fruitio*). The word for ‘enjoyment’ here is different. But, as one might expect, enjoyment in the sense relevant to ‘*fruitio*’ involves enjoyment in the sense relevant to ‘*gaudium*’; the difference between the two is that, properly speaking, *fruitio* only applies to enjoyment of the Ultimate End whereas ‘*gaudium*’ is the general term for enjoyment of anything whatsoever (i.e. the will’s resting in anything whatsoever).<sup>276</sup> So Aquinas’s account of “the very essence of happiness” at the outset of a question on the *quid est* of happiness invokes the enjoyment of God and not merely the vision of God. If Aquinas is a defender of the combined view, as I suggest, then it isn’t at all surprising that he says that “the very essence of happiness” is the *fruitio* of God, since, strictly speaking, *fruitio* requires the combination of an intimate vision of God and great enjoyment of God. This is so because, as I’ve said, *fruitio* is enjoyment of the Ultimate End and also because “perfect enjoyment (*fruitio*) is of an end already, really possessed.”<sup>277</sup> And it can only be the case that we already, really possess God in God’s essence and thus enjoy God in God’s essence if we are seeing God in God’s essence in the vision.

Aquinas’s willingness to call enjoyment of God “the very essence of happiness” is another reason to favor the combined reading of Aquinas. It also deals another blow to the vision-alone reading, since it strongly suggests that when Aquinas calls the vision of God alone the “essence” of happiness he really is trying to give us a model for thinking about the relationship between the vision

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<sup>276</sup> ST IaIIae q.11 a.3.

<sup>277</sup> ST IaIIae q.11 a.4.

and the delight *within* the actual essence of perfect happiness. After all, when he introduces that model, he has already told us his view about “the very essence of happiness,” so it would be surprising if he intended to give us another account later on that contradicts the first. Far better, it seems to me, to read him as offering the essence-*per-se*-accident relationship as a rough model for the relationship between the two elements *within* perfect happiness that together constitute the genuine essence of perfect happiness.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter is about the central element in Aquinas’s theory of happiness as he understood it: his account of perfect happiness. That this is the central element is born out by the fact that his method is aimed at uncovering the essence of perfect happiness, that he spends far more time talking about perfect happiness than imperfect, and that imperfect happiness is treated as a kind of happiness only insofar as it is a likeness to or participation in perfect happiness. I have argued that, according to Aquinas, the essence of perfect happiness is one’s activity of knowing and enjoying God in God’s essence. On this reading, Aquinas defended a kind of hybrid theory of perfect happiness, according to which perfect happiness is constituted by two interlocking strands that non-instrumentally benefit the perfectly happy person: the very activity of knowing God in God’s essence and one’s affective response to that activity blossoming in enjoyment.

With this account, then, we have arrived at the end of Aquinas’s basic method. But due to the limitations of that method, as outlined in Chapter 2, Aquinas still owes us some answers. We now have an account of essence of perfect happiness. What we lack is an account of what it takes for activities that fall short of perfect happiness to reach the level of imperfect happiness. In other words, we have no account of the way in which the imperfectly happy relevantly resemble the perfectly happy. We now turn in Chapter 4 to determining in what way the activities of the imperfectly happy resemble the activity of the perfectly happy. And we will see my warning born

out: a misstep at the level of perfect happiness will lead us to misunderstand Aquinas's account of imperfect happiness. In particular, thinking of the essence of perfect happiness as knowing God alone (apart from enjoyment), or thinking of the foundation of the view as perfection understood as actualization, make errors nigh inevitable. It is only in the light of the correct account of the essence of perfect happiness – the account given in this chapter – that the nature of imperfect happiness can be fully appreciated.



## CHAPTER 4

### *Aquinas on imperfect happiness*

Unlike the perfectly happy person, the imperfectly happy person as Aquinas thinks of her sounds in many respects like an ordinary, though enviable, person. She has access to food, water, clothing, and other external goods.<sup>278</sup> She is in reasonably good health.<sup>279</sup> She spends time with good friends, thinking together, eating together, working together.<sup>280</sup> She enjoys at least much that she does, whether as a scientist (or in whatever occupation), as a parent, spouse, friend, community member, and in whatever other roles she fills.<sup>281</sup> Her life is harmonious and integrated.<sup>282</sup> She is also realistic about her life. She knows, for example, that the good things in her life, including her happiness itself, are fragile, but she still manages to value them neither too much nor too little.<sup>283</sup> Much of this is explained by the fact that, fundamentally, she lives a life in accord with virtue.<sup>284</sup>

This sketch of the ordinary, enviable, imperfectly happy person captures much of what is obvious and uncontroversial in Aquinas's account of imperfect happiness. What it neglects to convey is an answer to the question of fundamental theoretical importance: what *is* imperfect happiness really? It turns out that there is another way that one can ask this question, in the context of Aquinas's theory. In particular, one can ask, "How do the imperfectly happy on earth relevantly resemble the perfectly happy in heaven?" This is so because, as we've seen, Aquinas thinks of imperfect happiness as a "likeness to" or "participation in" perfect happiness.<sup>285</sup> Aquinas, it seems, is

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<sup>278</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7 co.

<sup>279</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.6.

<sup>280</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.8 co.

<sup>281</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.8 co.

<sup>282</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 4.

<sup>283</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.4.

<sup>284</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7. See also ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 co and ST IaIIae q.5 a.6 co.

Porter speaks quite beautifully about the character of the life of virtue on earth as understood by Aquinas. See her "Happiness" (Forthcoming).

<sup>285</sup> This comes through in Aquinas's repeated assertions that imperfect happiness is a *likeness to* or *participation in* perfect happiness.

For examples of Aquinas calling imperfect happiness a likeness (*similitudinem*) to perfect happiness, see: ST IaIIae q. 3 a.

thinking of perfect happiness as a kind of exemplar or paradigm, and thinking that some sub-optimal states or activities relevantly resemble perfect happiness and as a result involve imperfect happiness. So, moving forward in this chapter, we can ask, “What is imperfect happiness really?” or, equivalently, “How do the imperfectly happy relevantly resemble the perfectly happy?”

These questions are not easy to answer, not least because Aquinas never directly tells us what he takes the relevant resemblance between perfect and imperfect happiness to be. Because Aquinas never explicitly addresses these issues, on Aquinas’s behalf, commentators often try to extend their understanding of perfect happiness into the domain of imperfect happiness in order to try to identify what, according to Aquinas, imperfect happiness really is. Take the two dominant views of perfect happiness I considered at the end of Chapter 3. If one thinks that happiness is really just a matter of knowing God in God’s essence and nothing more, it is natural to think that imperfect happiness is also simply a matter of having God, in some sense, as the object of one’s contemplative activities on earth. This is the most common understanding of the relevant likeness between perfect and imperfect happiness. I will call it “the same-object reading.”<sup>286</sup> On the other hand, if one thinks that happiness is really a matter of being perfected or actualized, then it is natural to think that imperfect happiness is also simply a matter of being perfected or actualized – although, not wholly as with perfect happiness, but to a significant degree that falls short of complete perfection or complete actualization. This is an important minority reading, which I will call “the actualization

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6 co and ST IaIIae q. 5 a. 3 ad 3. For an example of Aquinas calling imperfect happiness a participation in (*participatio in*) perfect happiness see: ST IaIIae q. 5 a. 3 co. For more examples of Aquinas calling imperfect happiness a likeness to or participation in perfect happiness, see: Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.1 qc.4 co.; Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.2 qc.2 ad 5. And ST IaIIae q. 2 a. 6 co.

<sup>286</sup> For examples of individuals who hold this view, see, e.g., Anthony Celano, “Happiness,” in Henrik Lagerlund (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy Between 500 and 1500* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 452; Jörn Müller, “*Duplex Beatitudo*: Aristotle’s Legacy and Aquinas’s Conception of Human Happiness,” in Tobias Hoffmann, Jörn Müller, and Matthias Perkams (eds.), *Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 67; Colleen McCluskey, “Happiness and Freedom in Aquinas’s Theory of Action,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 9 (1) (2000): 69-90; and Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Colleen McCluskey, and Christian Van Dyke, *Aquinas’s Ethics: Metaphysical Foundations, Moral Theory, and Theological Context* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 76-77.

reading.”<sup>287</sup> These two views provide very different answers to the above questions. One suggests that being imperfectly happy just is a matter of being engaged in a contemplative activity and the other suggests that it is a matter of being doubly perfected – at the level of the agent herself and at the level of her actions.

In this chapter, I offer a third and importantly different reading of Aquinas’s fundamental account of imperfect happiness. I also think of myself as trying to extend the way that I understand perfect happiness into the domain of imperfect happiness so as to identify what, according to Aquinas, imperfect happiness really *is*. But, unfortunately, it isn’t simply a matter of reading the relevant likeness off of my characterization of the essence of perfect happiness. There are just too many ways in which non-ideal activities might resemble the activity of knowing and enjoying God in God’s essence to make this a simple matter. Note that even the two accounts of imperfect happiness that follow naturally from what I take to be the wrong fundamental characterizations of perfect happiness are not immediately excluded by my characterization of the essence of perfect happiness. After all, knowing God is also a part of my characterization and, as we have seen in Chapter 2, anyone engaged in the activity of knowing and enjoying God in God’s essence will be completely perfected, or completely actualized. So, at least in principle, either the same-object reading or the actualization reading could still identify the relevant way in which, according to Aquinas, imperfect happiness resembles perfect happiness. Fortunately, Aquinas offers us more resources for working out how he thinks about what the relevant resemblance between perfect and imperfect happiness actually consists in and so more resources for discovering the heart of his account of imperfect happiness.

In this chapter, I build to my own reading of the relevant resemblance that holds between

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<sup>287</sup> For the most developed version of this reading, see Porter “Happiness” and *Nature as Reason*. Kevin Staley hinted at this sort of view in “Happiness: The Natural End of Man?” *The Thomist* (53.2 (1989): 215-234), 228, 230.

perfect and imperfect happiness or, in other words, I build to my own account of what, according to Aquinas, imperfect happiness fundamentally amounts to. I do so, first, by doing a bit of ground clearing. I have suggested that we should be thinking about ways in which *activities* here and now may relevantly resemble the activity of the perfectly happy. But it is not immediately clear that we should be thinking of imperfect happiness as an episodic activity rather than, say, as a matter concerning a whole earthly life. After establishing that Aquinas thinks of imperfect happiness as, in an important sense, episodic, I show how further textual resources at our disposal make it clear that Aquinas intended neither the same-object reading, nor the actualization reading of the relevant resemblance between perfect and imperfect happiness. Put briefly, the central problem with each is that they get the extension of imperfect happiness wrong – that is, they include people Aquinas would judge unhappy among the imperfectly happy or exclude people Aquinas would judge happy from among the imperfectly happy. As a result, this discussion is somewhat more straightforward than the discussion of the previous chapter, which concerned the essence of perfect happiness; this is importantly different from the case of adjudicating between accounts of the essence of perfect happiness because all of the accounts I considered in that context got the extension of perfect happiness right. Finally, I argue that a convergence of factors, including the extension of imperfect happiness, should lead us to reject the other two readings, and ought to lead us to the conclusion that, for Aquinas, a person is imperfectly happy if and only if and because she is engaged in and enjoying a genuinely good activity. With respect to both perfect and imperfect happiness, then, I believe Aquinas is best read as a defender of a hybrid view: both objective considerations (i.e. the activity's being *genuinely good*) and subjective considerations (*enjoyment*) come together to determine a person's level of happiness.

Indeed, in an important sense, I think it is only here that we see the heart of Aquinas's understanding of happiness. What binds perfect and imperfect happiness together as kinds of

happiness is that they share an underlying structure. In particular, they both involve engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities. Perfect happiness, which has as its essence knowing and enjoying God in God's essence, involves engaging in and enjoying the very best and most enjoyable activity. Imperfect happiness is a matter of engaging in and enjoying some sub-optimal activity. So it is here that we can finally see what these two kinds of happiness univocally share and thus, in an important sense, what lies at the heart of Aquinas's understanding of happiness.

The heart of Aquinas's view should be of interest even to those who reject Aquinas's account of perfect happiness and to those who believe happiness does not have an exemplar-likeness structure. Even today, although the details vary, there is an important family of views according to which wellbeing is a matter of enjoying the good.<sup>288</sup> Aquinas's account of happiness, on my interpretation, falls into that family. And it seems to me to be a unique and interesting version of such a view.

### §1: *Episodic happiness in Aquinas*

Aquinas is committed to the idea that imperfect happiness can be had during an episode of a life – an episode, in this sense, is some proper part of a life (or some segment of the life that is shorter than the whole).<sup>289</sup> His commitment to the episodic nature of imperfect happiness stems

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<sup>288</sup> Robert Adams and Shelly Kagan are both important representatives of that family. (See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Kagan, "Well-being as enjoying the good," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (1) (2009): 253-272.)

<sup>289</sup> I know of no commentator who directly broaches the topic of whether Aquinas thinks of imperfect happiness as something had primarily during episodes of a life (like at a birthday party) or something had primarily in a life taken as a whole. Nor do I know of anyone who tries to relate these two possibilities to one another – for example, who argues that we should think that, according to Aquinas, a whole earthly life is happy just in case the preponderance of episodes in that life is happy. That said, commentators have implied that one or the other of these two senses is primary in Aquinas, even when these particular terms are absent.

The only person I know of who seems to be on the whole-life side is Brian Davies, who says, "[Aquinas] takes happiness to be the perfection of the totality of a well-lived human life." ("Happiness," 231.) It is unclear to me where this characterization of happiness is coming from.

As may already be clear, defenders of both the actualization reading and the same-object reading I consider in detail below seem to implicitly accept that imperfect happiness is had primarily during episodes of a life.

fundamentally from his belief that happiness is an activity<sup>290</sup>; among his most frequent refrains about imperfect happiness is that it “consists in an *activity* of virtue.”<sup>291</sup> It should not be surprising, then, that it is precisely at the level of activities, which are episodes in a life, that one finds the relevant resemblance between perfect and imperfect happiness.

But the point can be shown more rigorously. For the sorts of activities that people engage in on earth are all broken up by periods of inactivity – paradigmatically, by sleep.<sup>292</sup> And, according to Aquinas, “The sleeping person cannot be called ‘happy’ as to what he has then [as he sleeps].”<sup>293</sup> In other words, according to Aquinas, no matter who is asleep, while she remains asleep she is not *actually* happy. So, according to Aquinas, a person can actually be imperfectly happy between two sleeps, but she cannot actually be happy while asleep. The period of time between two sleeps is a discrete period of time during which a person can be happy. The period of time between two sleeps just is a discrete episode of a life. Thus, Aquinas clearly recognizes that imperfect happiness can be had during discrete episodes of a life.

There is further evidence that Aquinas treats imperfect happiness as an episodic phenomenon in what he has to say about imperfect happiness being lost. Aquinas tells us that imperfect happiness can be had and then lost, whether through forgetfulness or illness or a fall from virtue to vice.<sup>294</sup> But if one can be imperfectly happy at one point during one’s life and then at some later point no longer be happy, a person must be able to be imperfectly happy during proper parts of her life. So Aquinas must acknowledge that a person’s happiness can rightly be understood episodically and not only, say, as applying to whole lives.

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<sup>290</sup> See, for example, ST IaIIae q.3 a.2.

<sup>291</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7 (emphasis added). See also ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 co and ST IaIIae q.5 a.6 co.

<sup>292</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 4.

<sup>293</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.2 qc.2 ad 5. He goes on to say that the activity of happiness is in the sleeping person habitually in the same way effects are in their causes.

<sup>294</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.4 co.

It should now be clear that Aquinas thinks that imperfect happiness can properly be understood as being had during episodes of a life. So it is not at all problematic that all three of the readings considered in this chapter treat the relevant resemblance between perfect and imperfect happiness as a resemblance at the level of episodic activities.

§2: *The same-object and actualization accounts of the relevant resemblance and their central problems*

In this section, I take the same-object and actualization readings in turn. First, I explain in more detail what these readings amount to. Then I draw attention to what I take to be the central problems with each.

§2.1: *The same-object account of the relevant resemblance*

According to the same-object account, imperfect happiness is relevantly like perfect happiness inasmuch as the object of the activity of the perfectly happy in heaven, namely, God, is in some way the object of the imperfectly happy on earth, in particular in their intellectual activities. In articulating this view, Anthony Celano, for example, says, “The participation of which [Aquinas] speaks is most likely the similarity between the intellectual processes of beatitude [heavenly happiness] and [earthly] happiness. On earth one may attain a fleeting and partial understanding of the first cause [i.e. God] through contemplation; after death this understanding is made complete and eternal.”<sup>295</sup> Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Colleen McCluskey,<sup>296</sup> and Christian Van Dyke articulate the same type of view as follows: “Aquinas thinks that we can approximate ultimate

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<sup>295</sup> Celano, “Happiness.” He expresses roughly the same view in “The Concept of Worldly Beatitude in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas,” 222, 224.

<sup>296</sup> McCluskey has also defended a similar view in “Happiness and Freedom in Aquinas’s Theory of Action”: “There are connections between perfect and imperfect happiness. Perfect happiness involves the activity of the speculative intellect rather than the practical intellect. But the contemplation that brings with it imperfect happiness also involves the activity of the speculative intellect. Furthermore, Aquinas describes the beatific vision as a single, continuous, everlasting activity and argues that the contemplative life resembles this aspect of the beatific vision in several respects. First, it involves a single activity, the contemplation of truth. Secondly, even though contemplation in this life is periodically interrupted (by sleep and other natural activities), still it resembles a continuous activity more than what Aquinas calls the active life. To that extent then, it participates in a particular respect in perfect happiness” (72-73).

happiness in this life through contemplation – the human activity that most closely resembles what he thinks is going on in the beatific vision... In a life of contemplation, one engages in the deliberation of the eternal truth and the Supreme Good. On Aquinas’s account, that just *is* God. As a result, whether one is conscious of it or not, when one considers eternal truth and the Supreme Good, one is directing one’s attention to God. Thus, a life of contemplation bears a resemblance to ultimate happiness.”<sup>297</sup>

The same-object reading, then, explains the relevant resemblance between perfect and imperfect happiness as follows: perfect happiness involves intellectually grasping God in God’s essence during an episode (in heaven, a sempiternal episode). Imperfect happiness involves a partial grasp of God (as Truth), though not in God’s essence, during an episode of contemplative activity. (And, indeed, God can be partially grasped in this way even if the contemplative does not realize that it is God being grasped.) So what is relevantly similar in perfect and imperfect happiness is the object of one’s activity, God, as well as the contemplative nature of the activity itself. What differs is how fully and intimately God is grasped by the one contemplating and the how long one contemplates without interruption.

§2.2: *Too exclusive and too inclusive a club: the two main problems with the same-object account*

Despite its prominence, the same-object reading is ill-suited to secure a likeness between perfect happiness and imperfect happiness *tout court* for two main reasons. First, it makes imperfect happiness too exclusive a club by excluding some people that Aquinas would judge imperfectly happy. And, second, it makes imperfect happiness too inclusive a club by including some people

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<sup>297</sup> DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke, *Aquinas’s Ethics*, 76-77.

For an approach similar to that of DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke, see Denis Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 376-7. Antonio Donato also endorses this kind of view. See “Aquinas’ Theory of Happiness and its Greek, Byzantine, Latin, and Arabic Sources,” *Al-Masaq: Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean* (18 (September 2006): 161-189), 170. As do Müller, “*Duplex Beatitudo*,” 67, and Lawrence Dewan, “Truth and Happiness,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* (67 (1993): 1-20), 6 and 9.



that Aquinas would judge unhappy.

That this account makes imperfect happiness too exclusive a club can be seen by turning to the two primary ways of life that Aquinas discusses: a contemplative way of life and an active way of life. A contemplative way of life is one in which one's principal activity is the pursuit of the truth, and that activity and the desire to do it well frames the rest of one's life – devoted researchers would (hopefully) be an example.<sup>298</sup> An active way of life is one in which one's principal activity is external action of one kind or another geared towards doing good for one's close connections, and/or one's community.<sup>299</sup> A wide variety of modern occupations would fall under the active category, such as being a nurse, a stay-at-home parent, a businessperson, or a government worker. Aquinas also thinks that there are mixed lives, that is, lives in which elements of the contemplative way of life and elements of the active way of life are combined; Aquinas's own Dominican order, which afforded opportunities for contemplation and teaching, seems to be a paradigm of the kind of mixed life he has in mind.

Aquinas thinks that all three of these patterns of life – contemplative, active, and mixed – can, in principle, conduce to imperfect happiness.<sup>300</sup> This is clear, since, with the contemplative and

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<sup>298</sup> ST IIaIIae q.179 a.1 co, and q. 180.

<sup>299</sup> ST IIaIIae q.181.

<sup>300</sup> Some commentators deny this. The paradigm case is Irwin, who explicitly denies not only that a purely *active* life can be imperfectly happy, but also that a purely *contemplative* life can be imperfectly happy. He says, “Aquinas relies on two features of his interpretation of Aristotle: (1) Contemplation is the supreme element in human happiness, and so a purely contemplative life is better than a life of moral virtue without contemplation. (2) Neither of these lives constitutes human happiness, and the life that combines both elements is superior to each of these lives. In following these two threads from Aristotle, Aquinas tries to reconcile the legitimate claims of each type of life, *without granting that either of them by itself is sufficient for human happiness.*” (Irwin, *The Development of Ethics* (Vol. 1), 513 – emphasis added.)

I reject this interpretation for three main reasons. First and most importantly, it unnecessarily requires the denial of the plain meaning of a number of texts. As I've noted in the main text and the footnotes, Aquinas talks frequently about active happiness and contemplative happiness as just that: two different kinds of *imperfect happiness*. He does not raise doubts as to their genuineness as kinds of imperfect happiness. What is more, there seems to be a perfectly natural way to incorporate the plain meaning of these texts without having to deny what Irwin is after, namely, that the happiest kind of life on earth is one that includes elements of a contemplative life and an active life. We can hold that Aquinas multiplies kinds of imperfect happiness and ranks them relative to one another: active is lowest, then contemplative, then a mixed life. That, after all, is what he seems to be up to, since he never denies that any of the sorts of earthly happiness are genuinely kinds of imperfect happiness, but he does compare them. (Notice, that this suggests that we might think of imperfect happiness as a genus with various species; if it isn't perfectly clear, in this chapter, I am interested in giving an account of the nature of that genus.)

active patterns of life in mind, Aquinas explicitly distinguishes between two kinds of imperfect happiness: active imperfect happiness and contemplative imperfect happiness.<sup>301</sup> And, as a combination of those two lives, a mixed life can also conduce to happiness; indeed, Aquinas says

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Second, it isn't even entirely clear that the texts that Irwin cites in defense of his claims are concerned with happiness. In defense of the idea that "a contemplative life that also includes the activity of moral virtue as a component" is better than either a contemplative life or an active life, he cites two passages, ST IIaIIae qq. 184 a.7 ad 1-3 and ST IIaIIae qq. 188 a.6. In both cases, the subject is whether one sort of religious life is more perfect than another. Both passages do come down on the side that the most perfect religious life includes both contemplation and the sharing of the fruits of contemplation in teaching and preaching (which falls under the active life). But it isn't obvious that a life's being more perfect (or a state of life's being more perfect) in the sense under discussion is relevant to who is happier than whom while on earth. For starters, the term 'happiness' (either *beatitudo* or *felicitas*) and its cognates do not appear in either of these passages. So whatever evidence we have must be indirect. Furthermore, it seems like the sorts of reasons cited in these passages for thinking that the best life includes contemplation and teaching aren't obviously connected with what sort of life is happiest. For example, after telling us that the contemplation-plus-teaching life is better than a life of contemplation alone, Aquinas says, "For just as it is greater (*maius*) to give light (*illuminare*) than only to get light (*lucere*), so too it is greater to hand things contemplated on to others than only to contemplate them" (ST IIaIIae qq. 188 a.6). This makes it sound like the reason it is better doesn't have to do with what is best for the person contemplating, but what is best when the interests of others are also considered. That is not to say that, as is often thought in connection with the philosopher's return to the cave in Plato's allegory, one is giving up some measure of one's happiness for the greater good. Indeed, Aquinas suggests a reason for thinking that he would agree that, in general at least, those who teach others in addition to spending time in contemplation are happier, particularly in the afterlife: "Now this is a sign of greater love (*dilectionis*): that a man serves others [besides his friend] for the sake of a friend, than if he be willing only to serve his friend" (ST IIaIIae qq. 184 a.7 ad 2). Aquinas thinks that the greater one's love for God is, the higher the quality of perfect happiness one will enjoy (I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 5). So there is reason to think that those who both contemplate and teach at least will be happier in the afterlife. But notice that the reason for this doesn't seem to be that there is something fuller or more fulfilling about a life that includes both, as Irwin suggests, but rather that such a life is an expression of deeper love for God and thus an expression of the underlying disposition that produces greater happiness in heaven.

Finally, the passage that most favors this view, as far as I can tell, says, "Now, imperfect happiness, which can be had in this life, first and principally consists in contemplation, but secondarily in an activity of the practical intellect in directing human actions and passions" (ST IaIIae q.3 a.5). Immediately after this quotation, Aquinas refers to Aristotle's discussion of a similar issue in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the corresponding passage, Aquinas comments on Aristotle, saying, "The person devoted to the contemplation of truth is the happiest of all; but happy in a secondary manner is the person who lives in accordance with the other virtue, namely, wisdom, which is the guide of all the moral virtues" (In NE 10.12). Given both that it is clear that Aquinas understands the "secondary" claim as referring to a second *kind* of imperfect happiness in the corresponding passage in Aristotle and – in my view, more importantly – that Aquinas goes on to explicitly distinguish active happiness and contemplative happiness, it seems best to read even this passage that most favors a view of the general sort that Irwin defends as distinguishing between two kinds of imperfect happiness.

Other commentators agree that active imperfect happiness and contemplative imperfect happiness are genuine kinds of happiness for Aquinas. See, e.g., Müller, "*Duplex beatitudo*," 60, 70.

<sup>301</sup> Aquinas explicitly discusses this distinction at ST IIaIIae q.5 a.4 co; ST IIaIIae q.180 a.2; and SCG I.1 c.102 n.8. The distinction is also implied in other places, e.g., ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 4, ST Ia q.26 a.4 co. Aquinas does not raise doubts about the genuineness of active happiness in any of these texts. Rather than raising doubts, he explains various features that it has. For example, he tells us that active happiness has to do with the exercise of moral virtues, like prudence and justice, in external activity (ST IIaIIae q.181 a.1 co). (In addition to the texts listed above, Aquinas talks about active happiness by name at QDM q.16 a.6 ad 6; ST IaIIae q.69 a.4 co (these are occurrences involving *beatitudo*, and those that follow involve *felicitas*); ST IIaIIae q.181 a.1 co, ST IIaIIae q. 181 a.2 s.c.; Super Sent. lib.2 d.19 q.1 a.1 s.c. 2; and SLE lib.10 l.12 a.1.)

For reasons that aren't entirely clear to me, Celano seems to deny that Aquinas held that there are distinct contemplative and active imperfect happinesses – see, "Happiness," 451. But, of course, other commentators recognize that Aquinas makes this distinction. See, e.g., López, "Trichotomizing...", 29.

that at least some versions of the mixed life are greater than either of the two pure patterns of life.<sup>302</sup> The diversity of sorts of lives that conduce to imperfect happiness seems still wider, however, because there are apparently, according to Aquinas, natural and supernatural versions of each of these sorts of imperfect happiness.<sup>303</sup> By “natural,” I mean lives animated by the sorts of virtues that a human being can obtain through her own repeated activities and, by “supernatural,” I mean lives animated, at least in part, by the sorts of virtues that a human being can obtain only as a special gift of God (e.g. faith, hope, and charity).

The first problem for the same-object reading should now be clear: on the same-object reading, those living active lives are, in principle, excluded from the ranks of the imperfectly happy, even though Aquinas explicitly claims that active imperfect happiness is possible. This is so because

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<sup>302</sup> See, e.g., ST IIaIIae q.184 a.7 ad 1-3 and ST IIaIIae q.188 a.6.

<sup>303</sup> I, in fact, think that Aquinas holds that there are both natural and supernatural versions of each of these types of happiness. Defending that claim here is unnecessary, since my account of imperfect happiness is consistent with more or less any view in this regard (e.g. that imperfect happiness is only natural, or that it is only supernatural, or that it both). It is also an undesirable undertaking in a chapter of this sort because a thorough defense would be cumbersome. I intend to undertake such a defense elsewhere.

In defense of the claim that Aquinas at least seems to think that there is such a thing as natural imperfect happiness, consider the following: It seems implausible to deny this since Aquinas says that “imperfect happiness, which can be had in this life, can be acquired by a man through his natural powers (*sua naturalia*) in the same way as virtue, in the activity of which [imperfect happiness] consists” (ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 co.). Now, something that can be acquired by a human being through the powers that he has by nature can be acquired without any direct help from God (i.e. without grace). If something can be acquired without direct help from God, then a pagan can acquire it, since what separates the pagan and the Christian does not have to do with natural endowments, but supernatural aid. So a pagan can acquire imperfect happiness on his own and thus be imperfectly happy.

In defense of the claim that Aquinas at least seems to think that there is such a thing as supernatural imperfect happiness, consider the following:

Aquinas seems to allow that the Christian living out her days in active, joyful service to others can be imperfectly happy. This seems clear from Aquinas’s discussion of the active life in ST 2a2ae q.179, 181-182. The active happiness of a Christian on earth is most visible in these questions in the objections and replies sections. Furthermore, Aquinas seems to think that the Christian contemplative on earth may be imperfectly happy. This seems clear from Aquinas’s discussion of contemplative life in ST 2a2ae q.179-180, 182. For an illustrative example from this discussion about earthly Christian contemplative happiness, see ST q. 180 a.4.

Other commentators also believe that Aquinas makes room both for graced and natural versions of imperfect happiness. See, e.g., Jean Porter, “Happiness” (Forthcoming); López, “Trichotomizing...,” 30, 31, 42.

A number of commentators appear to defend the view that, according to Aquinas, happiness is divided into the imperfect happiness of acquired virtue and the perfect supernatural happiness of heaven. That is, many don’t seem to make room for the possibility of imperfect happiness resulting from living life in accord with *infused* virtue. See, e.g., Bonnie Kent, “The Moral Life,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, A.S. McGrade (ed.) (New York: Cambridge University Press), 238, 248; Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good*, 397, 488; Brown, “Friendship in Heaven,” 235; Christopher Kaczor and Thomas Sherman, *Thomas Aquinas on the Cardinal Virtues: Edited and Explained for Everyone* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009), xxii; and Staley, “Happiness: The Natural End of Man?,” 227.

a person living an active life is concerned with external action and pursuing the good for herself and others, rather than on contemplating the truth (or the Truth). If imperfect happiness is a sort of happiness at all only because it resembles perfect happiness's intellectual grasp of God, then someone living this sort of life cannot be imperfectly happy. After all, those living an active way of life do not, or at least need not, engage in this sort of contemplation.<sup>304</sup> So the very possibility of active happiness, that is, happiness in a life characterized by a focus on external acts rather than contemplation, speaks strongly against a same-object reading of the relevant likeness between perfect and imperfect happiness.<sup>305</sup>

But not only does this reading make imperfect happiness too *exclusive* a club, it also makes imperfect happiness too *inclusive* a club by including some people that Aquinas would judge unhappy. In particular, the same-object reading seems to allow that the vicious and the continent might be imperfectly happy. But Aquinas doesn't think either the vicious or the continent could, even in principle, attain to imperfect happiness (without first becoming virtuous). So the same-object reading of imperfect happiness ought to be rejected.

It seems clear that Aquinas believes the vicious, that is, those who enjoy various bad

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<sup>304</sup> One might suggest that, although God is not intellectually grasped by the Christian living an active way of life, she nonetheless has God as the ultimate aim of her activity, since the true Christian will (at least almost always) act with an ultimate view towards friendship with God.

Now, notice that this is a very different view than the one expressed above. In a typical activity of an active way of life, God or friendship with God is – at best – the ultimate *end* of one's activity – never the *object* of one's activity. In other words, *what* is being done (the object) has nothing immediately to do with God; only *that for the sake of which it is ultimately done* (the ultimate end) has anything to do with God. So this way of going would involve abandoning the idea that God must be the *object* of one's activity in order for that activity to be relevantly similar to the activity in which perfect happiness consists. This, then, is no longer the view defended by various commentators, since they focused solely on God as the *object* of one's contemplative activities.

Both because a view modified in line with the suggestion at the beginning of this footnote has never been pursued and, I think, for good reason, I will not pursue the issue any further here. (The reason, roughly, is that there is no way to plausibly construe what it means to have God as the end of one's activity such that all and only the imperfectly happy active human beings will have God as the end of their activities, particularly because Aquinas apparently allows that some pagans living active lives are imperfectly happy.)

<sup>305</sup> This is so as long as that account is understood as an attempt to explain the entirety of the relevant likeness. It seems to me that some of the commentators who have apparently embraced the same-object reading may in fact regard it as a partial account – one that captures a way in which some ways of life are like a life lived in heaven. (For example, DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke's claims in *Aquinas's Ethics* might be read in this way.)

activities, are unhappy.<sup>306</sup> It also seems clear that the continent, that is, those who act in accord with right reason while fighting against strong desires that pull against right reason, are unhappy, according to Aquinas.<sup>307</sup> So obviously an account of imperfect happiness that suggests that their ilk could be even imperfectly happy is mistaken.

But the same-object reading seems to allow for precisely that. After all, according to Aquinas, it is entirely compatible with being a vicious or continent person to have the intellectual virtues of wisdom, knowledge, understanding and art (all of the intellectual virtues except prudence).<sup>308</sup> Although they would be freed from certain sorts of distractions by the moral virtues, it is also compatible with being vicious or continent that one might contemplate deep, eternal truths – in which case, as we’ve seen above, God is ultimately the object of one’s contemplation.<sup>309</sup> So it seems that, according to the same-object reading, the vicious and continent might be imperfectly happy. For this reason also, that reading seems unacceptable as an interpretation of Aquinas.

And so we would do well to look elsewhere for an account of how imperfect happiness is relevantly like perfect happiness.

### §2.3: *The actualization account of the relevant resemblance*

Perhaps the actualization account will have better luck securing the correct extension for imperfect happiness. According to that account, roughly, imperfect happiness is like perfect happiness inasmuch as imperfect happiness involves the significant, though not complete,

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<sup>306</sup> It is clear that the vicious person is not happy because, if a person has vicious desires, then getting and enjoying what he wants “does not belong to happiness, but instead to misery.” (ST IaIIae q.5 a.8 ad 3)

<sup>307</sup> That the continent person acts in accord with right reason, see, e.g., ST IIaIIae q.155 a.1 ad 2, “He, then, is well and truly continent who abstains from perverse lust and steadily holds to right reason...” See also SLE lib.7 l.9 n.18; ST IIaIIae q.53 a.5 ad 3; and ST IIaIIae q.155 a.1, 3.

It is clear that continent person is not happy from the fact that happiness is activity in accord with perfect virtue and acting in accord with mere continence is not compatible with acting in accord with perfect or complete virtue, since mere continence is not a virtue (see, e.g., ST IIIa q.7 a.2 ad 3), but only a stepping-stone on the way to virtue.

<sup>308</sup> Aquinas believes that “the other intellectual virtues can exist without moral virtue, but prudence cannot exist without moral virtue.” (ST IaIIae qq.58 a.5 co)

<sup>309</sup> ST IIaIIae q.180 a.2.

actualization of a rational nature. Again, this is not ruled out by my characterization of the essence of perfect happiness, since any one engaged in the activity of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence will be completely perfected, or completely actualized. And so it is at least possible that the imperfectly happy relevantly resemble the perfectly happy only insofar as they too are significantly actualized or perfected.

Jean Porter has most fully articulated and most clearly defended this sort of account of the relevant resemblance.<sup>310</sup> In talking about the relation between the “diverse kinds of happiness” in Aquinas, Porter suggests that what unites them as kinds of happiness is their being “diverse levels of perfection.”<sup>311</sup> What motivates this account in Porter's case is the fact that she thinks of perfect happiness as fundamentally having to do with being perfected – “that is to say, [having achieved] the fullest possible development of one's potentialities in accordance with one's specific form.”<sup>312</sup> She goes on to suggest that “[t]his implies that different senses of happiness represent diverse levels or modalities of perfection.”<sup>313</sup> In other words, since perfect happiness is understood in terms of the full or complete actualization of a rational nature on her view, it would make sense if different sorts of imperfect happiness are also understood in terms of different levels of actualization that are significant, but that fall short of full or complete actualization.

Porter briefly discusses what she seems to take as two levels of imperfect happiness that correspond to two important levels of actualization or perfection that fall short of the complete actualization or perfection of perfect happiness. The first is the imperfect happiness of a Christian life that includes grace, or God's supernatural aid that elevates our capacities and activities. That sort of happiness “would be regarded as imperfect in the sense of incomplete, even though oriented and

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<sup>310</sup> See Porter “Happiness” and *Nature as Reason*. See also Staley, who only briefly suggests this account in “Happiness: the natural end of man?” 228, 230.

<sup>311</sup> Porter, “Happiness” (Forthcoming).

<sup>312</sup> Porter, “Happiness” (Forthcoming).

<sup>313</sup> Porter, “Happiness” (Forthcoming).

actively moving towards the complete perfection of the Beatific Vision.”<sup>314</sup> In other words, although a Christian helped by grace in this life is able to secure a level of actualization that is beyond her natural ability to perfect herself and her activities, such a person still falls short of the complete actualization of the saints in heaven insofar as her intellectual grasp of God is woefully incomplete.

The second and lower level of imperfect happiness is the imperfect happiness of a pagan that can be attained through the development and use of her natural powers without special divine assistance.<sup>315</sup> According to Porter, this sort of happiness “is imperfect by contrast to the greater possibility revealed to us, yet considered on its own level it represents (at least ideally) the complete perfection of the human creature in accordance with its natural principles of operation.”<sup>316</sup> In other words, although this sort of happiness is an entirely natural sort and thus lower than the kind enjoyed by the Christian wayfarer endowed with grace, it still involves a significant degree of actualization: ideally, the most complete actualization available to a human being without special divine aid.

I take it that Porter adds the parenthetical remark, “at least ideally,” in order to register that Aquinas actually seems to allow that even pagans who fall short of the complete actualization available to a human being without special divine aid can be imperfectly happy. After all, as noted above, Aquinas treats active happiness as a genuine kind of happiness. But external action cannot actualize a human being as completely as is possible without divine aid – only the best sort of contemplation can do that (or perhaps the best sort of contemplation mixed with elements of the active life). So, although there is an ideal level of actualization available to human beings without special divine aid, a pagan can be imperfectly happy before reaching it, according to Aquinas.

Taken together, this suggests that Porter is in a far better position to explain the full

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<sup>314</sup> Porter, “Happiness” (Forthcoming).

<sup>315</sup> Of course, according to Aquinas, all things, ultimately, depend upon God for their existence.

<sup>316</sup> Porter, “Happiness” (Forthcoming).

extension of imperfect happiness than the same-object reading, since she can explain why all of the different kinds of imperfect happiness count as imperfect happiness, even active imperfect happiness.<sup>317</sup> All of them involve significant, though not complete actualization.

§2.4: *Too inclusive a club: the central problems with the actualization account*

However, the actualization reading also has problems securing the correct extension for imperfect happiness. In this case, both problems have to do with the reading's being too inclusive. If this reading were correct, it seems that Aquinas would have to allow that the vicious and continent could be imperfectly happy *and* that non-human animals could be imperfectly happy – two things that he denies.<sup>318</sup> So this account too fails as a reading of Aquinas. I take each of these troubling inclusions in turn.

As we've seen, Aquinas doesn't think either the vicious or the continent could, even in principle, be even imperfectly happy.<sup>319</sup> However, the actualization reading seems to allow that the vicious and continent at least might be imperfectly happy, since it is entirely compatible with being a vicious or continent person that one be actualized to a significant degree in body and mind. Imagine, for example, a vicious man and a continent man, both of whom are excellent physical specimens. Furthermore, imagine that they have all of the perfections that are compatible with being less than

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<sup>317</sup> This account may well be attractive for other reasons as well. For example, this view can explain why Aquinas stresses that imperfect happiness consists in activity in accordance with virtue. According to Aquinas, virtue perfects or actualizes the powers of human beings that in some way participate in reason, such as will, intellect, and one's sensitive appetite. So, all else being equal, a person who is virtuous is more fully actualized than a person who is not virtuous. Furthermore, according to Aquinas, an activity is "the ultimate act of an operator" (ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 co.). In other words, the fullest actuality of an agent requires the use of one's powers in activity. And for the very fullest sort of actuality one's powers must be perfected or actualized through virtue and then those perfected powers must be used in one's activities. So, if an imperfectly happy person just is a person who is actualized to a significant degree, it would make sense that the importance of virtuous activity would be stressed since virtuous activities involve what it seems reasonable to think of as a significant degree of actualization.

Or take a second additional reason this view may be attractive: it can make sense of why Aquinas thinks that a sleeping person is not actually happy as she sleeps. For, although a sleeping virtuous person has perfected powers, she does not have the actuality attendant on activity. As such, it seems reasonable to suppose that, as she sleeps, the virtuous person falls below the level of actuality necessary to be actually imperfectly happy.

<sup>318</sup> Brian Davies, in "Happiness," claims that, according to Aquinas, non-human animals can be happy, but Aquinas explicitly denies this. See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.5 a.1 ad 1; SCG lib.3 c.27 n.4; and SCG l.3 c.35 n.5.

<sup>319</sup> See Footnotes 29 and 30 above.



fully morally virtuous, namely, all of the intellectual perfections except prudence (i.e. wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and art).<sup>320</sup> The continent man may also be supposed to have character traits closing in on the moral virtues, but not yet there. Furthermore, suppose that the perfections that they do have are used regularly both by our vicious man and our continent man with respect to many of the highest objects of intellect; they contemplate deep, eternal truths. Of course, both of them would be aided in these endeavors by also possessing the moral virtues, since they are more prone to distraction and such.<sup>321</sup> Nonetheless, what we have are two individuals who have a whole host of bodily perfections and intellectual perfections (primary actualization) as well as elevated activities in accord with that limited set of perfections (secondary actualization). They, of course, seem quite actualized.

We might then compare them to someone who it seems could, according to Aquinas, be imperfectly happy: a physically unassuming, morally virtuous simpleton.<sup>322</sup> According to Aquinas, being completely morally virtuous requires temperance, fortitude, justice, prudence, and understanding, but it does not require the virtues of wisdom, knowledge, or art.<sup>323</sup> So we can imagine that our unimpressive physical specimen has just these requisite virtues. We can also imagine that he has opportunities to exercise them in ordinary external activity, such as by taking care of his ailing parents.

Now, who is more fully actualized: the continent man and the vicious man or the simpleton? If one is merely counting virtues, then the simpleton has them by one. But, of course, actualization

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<sup>320</sup> I use the more neutral term ‘perfections’ rather than ‘virtues’ so as to avoid any grounds for objecting that the traits I have identified aren’t *really* virtues, according to Aquinas.

<sup>321</sup> ST IIaIIae q.180 a.2.

<sup>322</sup> I see no reason to deny that Aquinas would think that such a person could enjoy imperfect active happiness since he could act in accord with complete virtue (this will be further defended below, when I discuss what is required for complete virtue, according to Aquinas) and so meet Aquinas’s repeated condition for attaining to imperfect happiness. As such, the case seems entirely fair. And, as will be clear below, I think there are good reasons to think that Aquinas would accept that such a person is imperfectly happy.

<sup>323</sup> ST IaIIae q.58 a.4 co.

is more complicated than that. The perfection and use of our intellectual powers results in higher levels of actualization than the perfection and use of our other powers. So it seems that the vicious man and the continent man are both at least as actualized as their simpleton counterpart. If that's right, then, according to the actualization reading of imperfect happiness, they should be at least as happy as the simpleton. But Aquinas has already told us that the vicious and the incontinent cannot be happy whereas the simpleton so described apparently could be happy. So the actualization reading of imperfect happiness is incorrect.

If one responds to this line of thought by insisting that the morally virtuous simpleton *is* more actualized, then it isn't clear how to get a grip on what determines degrees of actualization. One would have thought that it has to do with the number and status of primary perfections and the objects with respect to which they are used. But if that is what determines degrees of actualization, then it seems to me we get the above result: the vicious and continent contemplatives are *at least* as actualized as the simpleton. So if one insists that the morally virtuous simpleton is more actualized, it feels like we've lost touch with the principles that Aquinas seems to treat as underlying judgments concerning degrees of actualization.

So it seems that the actualization reading of imperfect happiness doesn't get the extension of imperfect happiness correct, since it apparently can't, in principle, rule out the happiness of the continent and even the vicious. The problem here is that, although there are different paths that lead to (at least apparently) significant degrees of actualization, only some of those paths will lead to happiness. The actualization reading can't explain why only some of those paths will lead to happiness. We need some further account to do that – one that appeals to something more specific than bare actualization.

The second central problem with the actualization reading of imperfect happiness is that it apparently should allow that non-human animals could be happy, even though Aquinas thinks that

non-human animals could never be even imperfectly happy.<sup>324</sup> After all, if – as Porter suggests – “different senses of happiness represent diverse levels or modalities of perfection,” then why shouldn’t the modality of perfection appropriate for a non-human animal, such as a fox, represent another sort of happiness?<sup>325</sup>

Here, a defender of the actualization reading is left with two options: First, she may suggest that imperfect happiness just is the significant, though not complete, actualization *of a rational or intellectual nature*, and so exclude non-human animals by definition. Second, she may appeal to some feature or features of human activities, as engaged in by the imperfectly happy, that mark those activities out as importantly and necessarily different from the activities of non-human animals, such that only perfection associated with activities of *that* sort can rise to the level of happiness. However, for a defender of the actualization reading, both of these options should be unappealing.

The first option should be unappealing because it seems like there should be an explanation as to why non-human animals cannot be even imperfectly happy. And, indeed, it seems that Aquinas has an explanation for this fact, since he holds that imperfect happiness “consists in the operation of virtue.”<sup>326</sup> According to Aquinas, non-human animals lack the rational powers to which virtues attach and so, of course, they cannot act in accord with virtue and, as a result, cannot be even imperfectly happy.

The second option, although appealing as a textual matter, seems to lead one away from thinking that, ultimately, imperfect happiness is a matter of being actualized to a significant degree. After all, if some set of features of the activities of imperfectly happy human beings that cannot be had by non-human animals is ultimately what explains why human beings can be imperfectly happy and non-human animals cannot be, then it seems *those features* are at the heart of what it is to be

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<sup>324</sup> See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.5 a.1 ad 1 and SCG I.3 c.35 n.5.

<sup>325</sup> Porter, “Happiness” (Forthcoming).

<sup>326</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7. See also ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 co and ST IaIIae q.5 a.6 co.

imperfectly happy (and some significant actualization of a rational nature merely follows along with an activity with those features). So, if someone takes the second option, there will be pressure to reject the actualization reading.

So, despite its initial promise, the actualization reading of the relevant resemblance between perfect and imperfect happiness is not without serious problems. Both of these problems seem to stem from suggesting that the relevant resemblance between perfect and imperfect happiness is extremely general and so that account ends up being overly inclusive.

### §3: *The Enjoying-Good-Activities Reading*

I turn now to my own reading of the way in which the imperfectly happy relevantly resemble the perfectly happy. On my reading, the relevant resemblance is neither so specific as the same-object reading, nor so general as the actualization reading, but instead is found at the level of features of concrete human activities defined in general terms: the *enjoyment* of *genuinely good* activities. Put briefly, I think that, for Aquinas, a person is imperfectly happy if and only if and because she is engaged in and enjoying a genuinely good activity. In this section, I argue for this reading in two ways. First, I argue that this reading does an excellent job of fitting Aquinas's view of perfect happiness together with what I take to be Aquinas's central claim about imperfect happiness – namely, that it consists in activity in accord with virtue. Second, I argue that this reading gets the extension of imperfect happiness right. Since Aquinas never explicitly tells us how he thinks about the relevant resemblance that holds between perfect and imperfect happiness, I think that this is the best sort of evidence we can hope for.

#### §3.1: *Enjoying Genuinely Good Activities: the crossroads of perfect happiness and activity in accord with virtue*

In looking at Aquinas's claims about imperfect happiness, one such claim seems especially promising as one tries to make progress in understanding the nature of the way in which imperfect

happiness relevantly resembles perfect happiness and thereby to make progress in understanding the nature of imperfect happiness – namely, that imperfect happiness consists in virtuous activity.<sup>327</sup>

That basic claim is oft repeated, with only slight variation. Aquinas tells us, for example, that “this [imperfect] happiness consists, following the Philosopher [i.e. Aristotle], in ‘the operation of complete virtue’” (ST IaIIae q.4 a.6 co.); “imperfect happiness...consists in the operation of virtue” (ST IaIIae q.4 a.7 co.); “the imperfect happiness, which can be had in this life, can be acquired by a human being through her natural powers (*per sua naturalia*) in the same way as virtue, in the activity of which it [imperfect happiness] consists” (ST IaIIae q.5 a.5 co.); and he says “if we are talking about imperfect happiness, then the same account is [given] of it and of the virtue, in the act of which it consists” (ST IaIIae q.5 a.6 co.).<sup>328</sup>

This seems a promising claim to treat as foundational to Aquinas’s understanding of imperfect happiness for a variety of reasons that go beyond how frequently he repeats it in his mature, explicit discussion of happiness in the *Summa Theologiae*. First, it is a claim that Aquinas appeals to in explaining why other things are necessary for imperfect happiness; for example, Aquinas appeals to this claim that imperfect happiness consists in virtuous activity in order to justify the claim that some exterior goods are necessary for imperfect happiness and that bodily health is necessary for imperfect happiness.<sup>329</sup> This suggests that Aquinas thinks that it is more fundamental to the nature of imperfect happiness than, e.g., exterior goods and bodily health. Second, it is a claim that can make sense of the variety of kinds of imperfect happiness, including its active and contemplative varieties – a fact to which Aquinas himself draws our attention.<sup>330</sup> Third, although

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<sup>327</sup> Celano draws attention to the importance of virtuous activity in Aquinas’s account of imperfect happiness. See “The Concept of Worldly Beatitude in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas,” 217, 219. He also does so in “Happiness,” 452.

<sup>328</sup> Aquinas also quotes Aristotle at ST IaIIae q. 3 a. 2 s. co; ST IaIIae q. 4 a. 6 co; ST IaIIae q. 4 a. 7 co; ST IaIIae q. 5 a. 6 co.

<sup>329</sup> Exterior goods: ST IaIIae q.4 a.7 co; Bodily health: ST IaIIae q.4 a.6 co.

<sup>330</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7 co.

ultimately Aquinas moves beyond such a description of perfect happiness, it is true of perfect happiness that it consists in an activity in accord with virtue as well. Of course, the heavenly virtues in question are granted to us by God and equip us for a far more elevated activity, but it is still true of perfect happiness that it consists in a virtuous activity.<sup>331</sup> This makes the claim that imperfect happiness consists in virtuous activity an especially promising one, since it makes clear that there is an obvious likeness here between the perfectly and imperfectly happy.

Indeed, all of this is so promising that one might be inclined to suggest that we have already arrived at the relevant likeness between perfect and imperfect happiness: imperfect happiness is relevantly like perfect happiness inasmuch as imperfect happiness, like perfect happiness, involves being engaged in a virtuous activity. End of story.

I, however, think that we ought to be skeptical of stopping at that level of description. Although Aquinas thinks that virtue is metaphysically necessary for perfect happiness, in my view, he thinks that only because apart from such virtue it is impossible to engage in the activity of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence.<sup>332</sup> The essence of perfect happiness includes no reference to virtue or virtuous activity. So at the level of perfect happiness, at least, if we were to describe such happiness as activity in accord with the greatest conceivable virtue(s), our description would capture the extension of perfect happiness, but it would mislead us in thinking about the true nature or the essence of perfect happiness. It seems to me that we should think of describing imperfect happiness as activity in accord with (sub-optimal) virtue(s) similarly: it gets the extension of imperfect happiness right, but it does so without revealing the true nature of imperfect happiness. I think this in part because the structure of Aquinas's view is founded upon treating perfect and

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<sup>331</sup> He refers to the virtues in question as '*dots*.' See my essay, "Entirely necessary, but not a part: Aquinas on virtue and perfect happiness."

<sup>332</sup> For a defense of this claim, see my essay, "Entirely necessary, but not a part: Aquinas on virtue and perfect happiness." Some commentators think that Aquinas treats virtues as integral parts of happiness. See, e.g., Porter's "Happiness" (Forthcoming) and Ralph McInerney, *Aquinas* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2003), 113.

imperfect happiness in parallel and so it seems to me that there should be a presumption in favor of thinking that the relationship between virtue and happiness is the same in both cases. And I think this in part because it seems to me that, as in the case of perfect happiness, we can fruitfully move beyond such a description to something more fundamental.

The fruitful, more fundamental account I have in mind just is the one that I advocate: a person is imperfectly happy if and only if and because she is engaged in and enjoying a genuinely good activity. I think of this as an analysis of *activity in accord with complete virtue (operatione virtutis perfectae)* that matches the general features of the essence of perfect happiness.<sup>333</sup> Perfect happiness involves knowing God in God's essence, which just is the best of all genuinely good activities.<sup>334</sup> Perfect happiness also involves enjoying God in God's essence, which just is the most enjoyable of all activities. So perfect happiness involves engaging in and enjoying a genuinely good activity. So too, as I will explain below, all and only virtuous activities, as Aquinas understands them, involve engaging in and enjoying a genuinely good activity. So, given this understanding of imperfect happiness, imperfect happiness is clearly a likeness to perfect happiness – and a likeness at what seems to be the closest level of description possible (or at the very least, closer than thinking of the likeness as having to do with unanalyzed virtuous activity).

§3.1.1: *What, again, is enjoyment? And what is a genuinely good activity?*

Of course, to fully understand this view and its justification, one must have a clear sense of what it is for an activity to be genuinely good and what enjoyment amounts to. As we saw in Chapter 3, as Aquinas understands it, enjoyment (*gaudium*) is the intellectual state of continuing to be drawn to a fitting good that one is aware that one, in some sense, already possesses.<sup>335</sup> As applied to

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<sup>333</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.6 co.

<sup>334</sup> I explain why the perfectly happy *must* be engaging in a genuinely good activity below.

<sup>335</sup> Aquinas gives this characterization at, e.g., ST IaIIae q.31 a.1 ad 2.

the case of imperfect happiness, if a person is going to be imperfectly happy as the result of engaging in some genuinely good activity, then she must enjoy either her genuinely good activity or some constitutive element(s) of that genuinely good activity – for example, instead of, or in addition to, the activity itself, she might enjoy that towards which the activity is directed.<sup>336</sup> For example, one might enjoy van Gogh’s *Starry night* itself rather than, or in addition to, enjoying the very activity of contemplating *Starry night*.

The genuine goodness condition is more complicated and more demanding. Before going any further, it is important to clarify the kind of activities that Aquinas has in mind, when thinking about imperfect happiness. Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of actions undertaken by human beings: what he calls human actions (*actiones humanae*) and the actions of a human being (*actiones hominis*).<sup>337</sup> Human actions are those actions that “proceed from a deliberate will.”<sup>338</sup> The mere actions of a human being do not proceed from a deliberate will, but rather are done without thought or intention, like the reflexive scratching of an itch.<sup>339</sup> The only kind of action or activity that constitutes a person’s happiness is a human action, an activity undertaken deliberately.<sup>340</sup>

Now, a number of elements bear on the genuine goodness of human activities. Activities undertaken deliberately in every case, though unified events in the world, can be conceptually divided into at least four elements relevant to the appraisal of that activity: (a) the end(s) or purpose(s) for which the activity is done; (b) the circumstances (broadly conceived) in which the activity is done (including when, where, and – crucially – how it is done as well as who is acting and

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<sup>336</sup> He points out that both activities themselves and objects of activities can be the objects of enjoyment at, e.g., ST IaIIae q.31 a.5 co.

<sup>337</sup> Davies has a nice, brief discussion on the distinction between *actus hominis* and *actus humanus*, what an *actus humanus* amounts to, and what role happiness plays in Aquinas’s action theory. (Davies, “Happiness,” 228-229.)

<sup>338</sup> ST IaIIae q.1, a.1, co.

<sup>339</sup> ST IaIIae q.1, a.1, co.

<sup>340</sup> See, for example, ST IaIIae q. 1 a. 1 ad 2.



by what aids)<sup>341</sup>; (c) whether the person engaged in it believes the activity is good; and (d) the object of the activity (or the immediate course of action being pursued).<sup>342</sup>

An activity is genuinely good if and only if it is done for a good end or ends, it is done in fitting circumstances, it is believed to be good by the actor, and it has a good object.<sup>343</sup> If it falls short in any of these respects, the activity is not genuinely good.<sup>344</sup> For, Aquinas says, “An action is not good *simpliciter* unless it is good in every way (*nisi omnes bonitates concurrant*).”<sup>345</sup>

We now better understand what it amounts to when I say that, according to Aquinas, both the perfectly and imperfectly happy are engaged in and enjoying genuinely good activities. But we have yet to see in any rigorous sort of way that, according to Aquinas, the activities of the perfectly happy in heaven or the imperfectly happy on earth are, in fact, genuinely good and enjoyed in this sense. To showing as much I now turn.

### §3.1.2: *Enjoying Good Activities and Perfect Happiness*

It seems clear that engaging in a genuinely good activity is necessary, if one is to be perfectly happy, according to Aquinas. This is clear because the perfectly happy know and love God in God’s essence. And that activity is necessarily a genuinely good activity in the sense outlined. It must be a genuinely good activity, according to Aquinas, because it is not possible to do *anything* bad or wrong once one attains that state.<sup>346</sup> This is so because attaining to that vision of God requires rectitude of the will and rectitude of the will, at least in the context of heaven, guarantees acting in perfect

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<sup>341</sup> For a discussion of the circumstances of human acts, see ST IaIIae qq.7 a.3. For their place in the evaluation of human acts as good or bad, see ST IaIIae qq. 18 a.3.

<sup>342</sup> For the full discussion, see ST IaIIae qq. 6-21.

<sup>343</sup> See ST IaIIae qq. 18-21.

<sup>344</sup> If it falls short in any of these respects, then it will not be a good action, but a bad one, as Aquinas explains at ST IaIIae q. 18 a. 4 ad 3; see also, Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.3 a.4 qc.2 ad 3.

<sup>345</sup> ST IaIIae qq. 18 a.4 ad 3.

<sup>346</sup> Aquinas makes clear that this is his view at ST IaIIae q. 5 a. 4 co.

conformity to God’s law.<sup>347</sup> If one acts in perfect conformity to God’s law, then one acts for a good end or ends, in fitting circumstances, in accord with one’s conscience, and with respect to a good object. Thus, if a person is perfectly happy, she will be engaged in a genuinely good activity.

It is also clear that, if a person is perfectly happy, then she is enjoying the activity in which she is engaged. After all, as we’ve seen, Aquinas says as much. For example, with reference to perfect happiness, he says, “There cannot be happiness without concomitant pleasure (*delectatio*).”<sup>348</sup> And it is clear that Aquinas is here using the generic term to refer to the pleasure of the will, namely, enjoyment.<sup>349</sup> Aquinas doesn’t think this is any old enjoyment either. Perfect happiness, as enjoyment of the divine, is “maximally enjoyable” (*maxime delectabilis*).<sup>350</sup> So perfect happiness has the structure that I ascribed to it: it involves being engaged in and enjoying a genuinely good activity. Indeed, it involves engaging in and enjoying the very best and most enjoyable activity.

### §3.1.3: Enjoying Good Activities, Virtuous Activities, and Imperfect Happiness

Now, it might not be immediately clear that this story works as well at the level of imperfect happiness. Why think that all activities done in accord with complete virtue involve engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities? Before we can satisfactorily answer that question, we need to have a clearer sense of what it is to act in accord with *complete virtue* (*perfecta virtus*).

I take it that, in the relevant contexts, Aquinas has in mind ‘complete virtue’ (*virtus perfecta*) as he uses it when he says of “complete virtue” that it (1) “inclines [one] to that which is according to right reason” and (2) it does so “with [the participation of] right reason.”<sup>351</sup> In other words, to count

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<sup>347</sup> ST IaIIae q. 5 a. 4 co. For discussions of rectitude of will and happiness see, for example, ST IaIIae q. 4 a. 4 co and ST IaIIae q. 5 a. 7 co. See also SCG I.4 c.92.

<sup>348</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.1 co. There are similar passages at, e.g., Super Sent., lib. 4 d. 49 q. 2 a. 7 co, and Super Sent., lib. 4 d. 49 q. 4 a. 5 qc. 1 co.

<sup>349</sup> It becomes perfectly clear that Aquinas is thinking of the relevant sort of pleasure as enjoyment when, in the very next article, Aquinas makes explicit that the relevant sort of *delectatio* “consists in a certain repose of the will” (ST IaIIae q.4 a.2 co).

<sup>350</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.5 co.

<sup>351</sup> ST IaIIae q.58 a.4 ad 3.

as having complete virtue, in the relevant sense, one must both be aware of what ought to be done and be inclined towards that which ought to be done because it's the thing that ought to be done. This requires, at a minimum, that one have the virtues of temperance, fortitude, justice, prudence, and understanding, since it is that collection of virtues that secures the relevant inclinations and the relevant participation in right reason.<sup>352</sup>

Now, it can be clearly shown that, given Aquinas understanding of complete virtue, if a person is engaging in activity in accord with complete virtue, she must be enjoying the activity, in some sense. Indeed, the guarantee that an activity in accord with complete virtue will be enjoyable is built into the very idea of complete virtue. After all, the requisite collection of virtues are all *habitus*, or settled dispositions. The *habitus* attaching to our capacities for desire, in particular, will make activities in keeping with what we ought to do seem fitting, good, and lovable to us. Now, enjoyment is the pleasure (*delectatio*) that results from the will coming to rest in some loved (apparent) good presented to it by the intellect. And so when a virtuous person is engaged in a good activity, she will enjoy her activity because she is thereby at rest in a loved good presented to it by the intellect, namely a good activity. So it is not surprising that Aquinas tells us that the virtuous person “possesses perfect delight in the operation of virtue.”<sup>353</sup> It is also not surprising that he tells us that what marks off a virtuous person from the continent person and the vicious person is that the virtuous person “takes pleasure in the works of virtue.”<sup>354</sup> So, if a person is exercising the virtues in a virtuous activity, she will be enjoying that activity.<sup>355</sup>

Now, consider the genuine goodness of the activities. It is clear that an activity done in

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<sup>352</sup> ST IaIIae qq.58 a.4 co.

<sup>353</sup> ST IaIIae, q.4 a.8 co.

<sup>354</sup> ST IaIIae q.34 a.4 co.

<sup>355</sup> This is not to say that the virtuous person always feels pleasant sensations as she acts. What is more, it isn't even to say that she is cognizant of the intellectual delight she takes in the activity, as her attention may be drawn from it by bodily pain – as in extreme cases of courage. But intellectual delight “properly follows upon the acts of virtue,” and so is present even when a person virtuously faces death. (ST 2a2ae q.123, a.8)

accord with complete virtue will be genuinely good in the sense outlined above because the two accounts of virtue that Aquinas frequently quotes obviously agree on this point: an action performed in accord with complete virtue is a *good* action. The first such account is Aristotle's, according to which a virtue is "that which makes its possessor good and makes *his action[s]* good."<sup>356</sup> The second is Augustine's, according to which "virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which *no one can make bad use*, which God works in us without us."<sup>357</sup> So the one who has virtue and acts in accord with it will only perform good actions. Now, when coupled with Aquinas's account of what it is for an action to be good, we have the result that an action done in accord with virtue will be one done with a good aim, in appropriate circumstances, in accord with one's conscience, and the action will center around a good object and thus be of a good kind.<sup>358</sup> So, given Aquinas's understanding of virtue, if a person acts in accord with complete virtue, her activity will be genuinely good.

We can now see that a powerful case can be made for holding that, according to Aquinas, the nature of imperfect happiness or, more precisely, the nature of the relevant resemblance between the perfectly happy and the imperfectly happy, is a matter of engaging in and enjoying a genuinely good activity. That characterization holds as an analysis of *activity in accord with complete virtue*, which itself seems to be Aquinas's go-to gloss on what is fundamental in imperfect happiness. It is an analysis that translates *activity in accord with complete virtue* into the sorts of terms one finds in Aquinas's characterization of the essence of perfect happiness. Perfect happiness involves engaging in and enjoying a genuinely good activity (the best!). Imperfect happiness is completely like perfect

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<sup>356</sup> Quoted at, e.g., De Regno, 8; ST IaIIae q.55 a.3. Emphasis added.

<sup>357</sup> Quote at, e.g., ST IaIIae q.55 a.4. Emphasis added.

<sup>358</sup> That a good action has a good aim, see ST IaIIae q. 18 a. 4 co. Done in appropriate circumstances, see ST IaIIae q. 18 a. 3 co. Done in accord with one's conscience, see ST IaIIae q.19 a. 5. And centered around a good object and thus be of a good kind, see ST IaIIae q. 18 a. 2 co.

Strictly speaking, the action may either be of a good kind or a neutral kind, when considered in itself. But when an action of a neutral kind in itself is undertaken in good circumstances with a good aim in accord with conscience, the action considered as a whole is good. See ST I<sup>a</sup>-IIae q. 18 a. 9 co.

happiness at that level of description, although – of course – not at a more determinate level (namely, the level of the activity itself). And it is a likeness at what seems to be the closest level of description possible without sacrificing the proper extension of imperfect happiness – to which I turn in Section 3.2.

But, before turning there, for those who might think that, although it may be true that it is an *implication* of Aquinas’s views that imperfect and perfect happiness share this structure, Aquinas himself gives us no reason to think that he ever had this structure in mind in thinking about the relationship between perfect and imperfect happiness, it is important to note that Aquinas *does* give us reason, at least on occasion, to believe that he explicitly thought about happiness as having this structure. For example, in his *Sentence Commentary*, apparently speaking generally about any sort of happiness whatsoever, Aquinas tells us that happiness just is the “perfect activity” made “from one delight and one activity.”<sup>359</sup> In this passage, he seems to be thinking that the ingredients of happiness, as it were, are delight and activity, and so drawing attention to the very same underlying structure of happiness put forward in the Enjoying-Good-Activities reading. Also, in the *Summa Theologiae*, here discussing perfect happiness, Aquinas says that two things are required for happiness: activity and delight.<sup>360</sup> It seems exceedingly likely that the kinds of activities Aquinas has in mind in these passages must be genuinely good.<sup>361</sup> So, although Aquinas is not explicitly addressing the way in which imperfect happiness is like perfect happiness in these passages, the fact that Aquinas explicitly draws our attention to the sort of structure of happiness outlined in the Enjoying-Good-

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<sup>359</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.3 a.4 qc.3 co.

<sup>360</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.4 co. ST IaIIae q.4 a.3 co.

<sup>361</sup> One reason for thinking this is that, as noted above, Aquinas tells us that the vicious person who enjoys his sinful activities is not happy, even though he enjoys his vicious activities. It is clear that the vicious person is not happy because, if a person has vicious desires, then getting and enjoying what he wants “does not belong to happiness, but instead to misery.” (ST IaIIae q.5 a.8 ad 3)

Activities reading makes it clear that it will not do to dismiss this account on the grounds that it is entirely foreign to Aquinas's way of thinking.

§3.2: *The Enjoying-Good-Activities reading and the extension of imperfect happiness*

But perhaps, like the same-object and actualization readings, we ought to dismiss it because it cannot make sense of the extension of imperfect happiness. Can the Enjoying-Good-Activities reading make sense of contemplative *and* active happiness? Can it make sense of why the virtuous simpleton can rise to the level of imperfect happiness, but not the intellectually savvy continent or vicious person? Can it explain why imperfect happiness cannot be achieved by non-human animals? I believe that the answer to each of these questions is, "yes." And so for this reason as well, I think that we ought to embrace the Enjoying-Good-Activities reading.

§3.2.1: *Contemplative and active happiness: enjoying different kinds of genuinely good activities*

Here there is no great mystery or surprise. Activities of a contemplative nature or an active nature could, at least in principle, be activities in accord with complete virtue. And so the activities found in both sorts of lives and so in both sorts of happiness could, at least in principle, be genuinely good and enjoyed. Put more practically, in principle a devoted scientific researcher could engage in and enjoy genuinely good activities throughout the day and so too could a nurse or climbing instructor or landscaper or a practitioner of nearly any other profession (except those that by their very natures involve engaging in activities that aren't genuinely good). So there is no problem making sense of the extension of imperfect happiness here.

§3.2.2: *The virtuous simpleton versus the vicious or continent intellectual*

Matters are also fairly straightforward with our virtuous simpleton and the vicious or continent intellectual. On the Enjoying-Good-Activities reading, a morally virtuous simpleton could, of course, be engaged in and enjoying a genuinely good activity and so be imperfectly happy.

However, vicious and continent intellectuals, even while contemplating some elevated truth, cannot achieve the stringent requirements that Aquinas sets for an activity's counting as *genuinely good*. It isn't merely that what is being done, considered in itself, has to be good in kind – which contemplating a truth certainly is, according to Aquinas. Recall that Aquinas says, “An action is not good *simpliciter* unless it is good in every way (*nisi omnes bonitates concurrant*).”<sup>362</sup> Though they may be good in many ways, the activities of the vicious and the continent cannot be good in *every way* because they lack the proper settled dispositions, namely, the moral virtues, which are necessary for the complete perfection of human activities. Simply put, because of, on Aquinas's account, the important role of dispositions in shaping activities and, perhaps more importantly, the relevance of quite remote aspects of one's activities to their goodness (e.g. whether one is shirking one's duties by engaging in the activity), the activities of the non-virtuous of whatever stripe will not be good *simpliciter* in the robust way that the activities of the virtuous can be, and the robust way required on Aquinas's account of imperfect happiness. So this account can explain why, according to Aquinas, the vicious and the continent cannot be imperfectly happy no matter the activity they're engaged in.<sup>363</sup> So here too it seems that the Enjoying-Good-Activities reading can capture the correct extension of imperfect happiness where other readings fail.

§3.2.3: *Non-human animal? No genuinely good activities enjoyed.*

Unlike on the actualization reading, on the Enjoying-Good-Activities reading, Aquinas also seems to have a straightforward answer to the question of why non-human animals can't be

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<sup>362</sup> ST IaIIae qq. 18 a.4 ad 3.

<sup>363</sup> It doesn't seem to me that this line of thought will be of use to those who want to defend an actualization account of imperfect happiness. The problem again is that, if bare actualization is all that is required, it isn't clear why deficits in one facet of an activity's actuality couldn't be compensated for in high levels in other facets of one's activities. For example, perhaps the non-morally-virtuous cannot contemplate as the virtuous do (and thus fall short in the category of circumstances), but surely the non-morally-virtuous while contemplating have a high degree of actuality in virtue of, e.g., exercising his intellect with respect to an elevated truth, and it seems like the degree may be higher than a virtuous simpleton working around the house, for example. At the very least, nothing seems to rule that out.

imperfectly happy. That answer is that non-human animals can't engage in genuinely good activities of the relevant sort, namely, the fully deliberate sort, nor can they enjoy their activities in the relevant sense. This is clear because Aquinas treats deliberate acts as those relevant to happiness, rather than the mere acts of human beings, but it is the latter that are akin to the acts of non-human animals.<sup>364</sup> And it is also clear that non-human animals can't enjoy their activities in the sense relevant to happiness because enjoyment (*gaudium*) necessarily involves the use of the will (or the rational appetite), and non-human animals don't have wills, according to Aquinas.<sup>365</sup> So, on the Enjoying-Good-Activities reading of Aquinas, of course non-human animals can't be even imperfectly happy.

So it seems that the Enjoying-Good-Activities reading, unlike its competitors, can secure the extension for imperfect happiness that Aquinas envisioned. That gives us some further good reason to think that this was, in fact, what Aquinas had in mind in thinking about imperfect happiness.

### *Conclusion*

So what is happiness on earth ultimately about, according to Aquinas? If I am correct, it is neither about having God as the object of one's activities, nor – ultimately – about being actualized to a significant degree. Rather, according to Aquinas, imperfect happiness is about engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities. The place of food, water, clothing, and other external goods as well as of health, friends, and virtue in an imperfectly happy life are ultimately found in their various relations to engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities as a human being living out her days on earth.

We can now see with this account of imperfect happiness at hand how precisely Aquinas thinks about both the difference in kind between perfect and imperfect happiness *and* the unity of the two kinds of happiness. We can now see how Aquinas walks the narrow road between collapsing

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<sup>364</sup> ST IaIIae q.6 pro.

<sup>365</sup> ST IaIIae q. 31 a.3 co.



heaven into earth and collapsing earth into heaven. There is a radical dissimilarity between perfect and imperfect happiness insofar as *what perfect happiness is* (namely, knowing and enjoying God in God's essence forever) just isn't the same thing as any other activity, whatever one is up to. And, since perfect happiness is identified with that particular activity and activities are put into their kinds on the basis of their objects (in this case, God in God's essence), there is a difference in kind between perfect happiness and imperfect happiness, which might involve having all manner of things as the objects of one's activities, but never God in God's essence. Thereby, the happiness of the saints in heaven is preserved in all its enviable glory and all its distinctness of kind. But this way of proceeding also allows for a kind of genuinely unified account of happiness across both kinds of happiness, since perfect and imperfect happiness are relevantly, unequivocally the same inasmuch as the perfectly happy and the imperfectly happy all engage in and enjoy genuinely good activities. This, then, seems to be the heart of Aquinas's understanding of happiness. The underlying structure of engaging and enjoying genuinely good activities is what happiness of every kind shares.

With Aquinas's account of perfect and imperfect happiness in hand, I now turn to the explanations that Aquinas gives as to why, on both of these levels, one person is happier than another.

## CHAPTER 5

### *From Happy to Happier: Aquinas on who is happier than whom and why*

We now have a careful, detailed analysis of perfect and imperfect happiness in hand. That analysis has shown us that, according to Aquinas, the essence of perfect happiness is one's activity of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence. And imperfect happiness is a matter of relevantly resembling that activity by engaging in and enjoying a genuinely good activity of some sub-optimal kind or other. However, Aquinas wants his theory to be capable of making more fine-grained determinations than *she* counts as perfectly happy and *he* counts as imperfectly happy. He wants his theory to allow for comparative judgments about who is happier than whom. In particular, Aquinas wants to tell a story about why some perfectly happy people are happier than other perfectly happy people; why all perfectly happy people are happier than all imperfectly happy people; and why some imperfectly happy people are happier than other imperfectly happy people. This chapter concludes my systematic treatment of Aquinas's theory of happiness with an account of what, according to Aquinas, fundamentally explains these comparative judgments.

That judgments of this kind need to be explained in the case of imperfect happiness is not particularly surprising. It is commonplace to believe, as Aquinas does, that not all people happy in this life are equally happy, nor that any particular happy person is always equally happy from one time to another. For example, Aquinas thinks, as we do, that difficulties arising in one's life may decrease one's level of happiness without making it the case that one is no longer happy.<sup>366</sup> And for those who are naturally concerned not only with meeting the basic threshold of happiness, but with living as well as possible, understanding what fundamentally explains how one becomes happier is a vital theoretical and practical matter. So it is unsurprising that Aquinas would want to tell a story

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<sup>366</sup> See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.5 a.4 co.

about what explains degrees of imperfect happiness here and now on earth.

It may be more surprising to learn that Aquinas thinks that there are degrees of perfect happiness in heaven. The reasons that he accepts that there are degrees of perfect happiness are primarily theological, as one might expect. Two reasons seem especially important. The first is that the perfect happiness of heaven is conceived of as a kind of reward. And as a reward, it is connected to what is merited. But some people merit a greater reward than others. So, God – the just, all-knowing judge – will reward some people with greater perfect happiness than others, in accordance with their differing merits.<sup>367</sup> It is for this sort of reason that Aquinas thinks that Peter, the first Pope, is happier in heaven than Linus, the second Pope – Peter merits a greater reward and so God obliges.<sup>368</sup> The second reason is related not to comparisons between *this person* and *that person*, but to comparisons concerning the same person from one time to another. Aquinas thinks that some people who are perfectly happy right now will be happier in the future, first, as a result of resuming a (perfected) body and, second, as a result of being surrounded by a greater company of fellow saints, all of whom are as friends.<sup>369</sup> So degrees of perfect happiness are required both to explain, for example, why someone like Peter is happier than someone like Linus and how it is possible that Peter can be more perfectly happy later than he is now.

But one might think that talking about degrees of perfect happiness is nonsense. How could anything rightly described as *perfect* happiness come in degrees? One would think that, if Person A is perfectly happy and Person B is less happy than Person A, then Person B couldn't possibly be perfectly happy. Not so, according to Aquinas.

We have already seen the first element that Aquinas brings to bear to begin to explain how

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<sup>367</sup> This line of thought is discernable, e.g., at ST IaIIae q.5 a.1.

<sup>368</sup> See, e.g., Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 pro.

<sup>369</sup> See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.4 a.5 on the resumption of the body and, e.g., ST IaIIae q.4 a.8 on the fellowship of friends in heaven.

this is possible.<sup>370</sup> Aquinas thinks of his account of perfect happiness as an account of a state *type*, rather than a state *token* – or, better (at this juncture), an *activity* type, rather than an *activity* token.<sup>371</sup> In other words, his account of perfect happiness is an account of the best *kind* of activity a human being could engage in, rather than an account of the very best possible particular concrete *instance* of that best kind of activity. That activity type, as we’ve now seen, is the activity of knowing and enjoying God in God’s essence. This already allows us to see, as a very general matter, how Aquinas is able to countenance the possibility of degrees of perfect happiness: since perfect happiness is identified with an activity *type*, Aquinas can maintain that some perfectly happy people are happier than other perfectly happy people so long as he can explain why some *tokens* of the perfect happiness activity type are better for people than others. In other words, if he can explain why sometimes the activity of knowing and enjoying God in God’s essence is better for a person, then he can explain why some *perfectly* happy people are happier than other *perfectly* happy people. Of course, Aquinas still owes us a great deal more in order to explain how one perfectly happy person could be better off than another, but this is a start.

It should now be clear *that* Aquinas believes that some happy people are happier than others. If Aquinas’s theory of happiness is to be complete, then, it must be able to explain *why* some people are happier than others. Otherwise, the theory leaves us without an explanation for something that clearly cries out for explanation. I believe that Aquinas does explain what underlies these judgments. And so, in what follows, I put forward an account of what, according to Aquinas, fundamentally explains why one person is happier than another and, relatedly, how a single person can be happier or less happy from one time to another.

I organize my account around the hard-won account of the relevant resemblance that binds

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<sup>370</sup> See Chapter 2, Section 1.

<sup>371</sup> Aquinas says that “it is through a certain activity” that “a human being is in this sort of [perfect] state.” (ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 2)

perfect and imperfect happiness, namely, that both are a matter of engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities. As we've seen, perfect happiness involves continuously and indefinitely engaging in and enjoying the very best and most enjoyable activity, namely, the activity of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence. Imperfect happiness, on the other hand, is a matter of engaging in and enjoying some sub-optimal activity – activities that are all broken up, at the very least, by the need for rest. So happiness of whatever kind involves engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities for some stretch of time. In addition to the support this way of organizing the account draws from the broader theory, proceeding in this way is also justified in part because it suggests a natural way to divide up considerations relevant to degrees of happiness that fits well with Aquinas's discussions of these issues. In particular, it suggests that we can divide considerations that are relevant to degrees of happiness into three major groups: (1) those related to the level of genuine goodness of the activities in question; (2) the level of enjoyment one takes in the activities in question; and (3) how long one is engaged in and enjoying those activities. We can further sub-divide considerations that Aquinas treats as particularly relevant at the level of the genuine goodness of activities into two main sub-groups, namely, (1.1) what the activity in question is, and (1.2) how well one is doing the activity in question. It seems to me that, together, these considerations exhaust what is fundamental in Aquinas's explanations concerning why one happy person is happier than another. In this chapter, I explicate these considerations one by one and show which sorts of comparative judgments about happiness Aquinas explains by means of them.

*§1: Levels of genuine goodness and who is happier than whom*

In Chapter 4, I noted that there is a whole host of considerations that Aquinas treats as relevant to whether an activity counts as genuinely good. In contexts concerning who is happier than whom, from that whole host of considerations, Aquinas draws our attention to a sub-set of considerations that he treats as especially important for understanding why some happy people are

happier than others. So, although a whole host of considerations are relevant to an activity's being genuinely good, Aquinas seems to think that some of those considerations have more work to do than others in explaining why the activities of some happy people are better in themselves than the activities of other happy people and thus why the activities of some happy people are more happiness-conducive than the activities of others. The first and the most fundamental consideration that Aquinas draws special attention to is *what the activity in question is*. He also treats *how well one is doing the activity in question* as especially important in understanding why some happy people are happier than others. I treat each of these considerations in turn.

However, before turning to the first of those elements that Aquinas treats as particularly important for understanding why some happy people are happier than others, it should be noted that it isn't particularly surprising that someone might treat the genuine goodness of activities as relevant to degrees of happiness. After all, some human activities seem to be better in themselves than others. For example, all else being equal, it seems like the activity of conversing with a friend is a better activity in itself than is the activity of counting blades of grass.<sup>372</sup> It also seems that, all else being equal, engaging in a better activity is *better for us* than engaging in a worse activity.<sup>373</sup> So, for example, all else being equal, it seems the person who is conversing with a friend is better off than the person who is counting blades of grass. It shouldn't strike us as odd, then, that Aquinas accepts both that some human activities are better in themselves than others and that, all else being equal, the better an activity is in itself, the happier a person will be while engaged in that activity. As we will see, this is precisely how he reasons.

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<sup>372</sup> The example of grass counting is taken from John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 432.

<sup>373</sup> Of course, one might deny this claim. See, e.g. Fred Feldman's *What is this thing called 'happiness'?* His considered view is that considerations about the quality of what is being done are irrelevant to how happy a person is.

§1.1: *What the activity in question is*

For someone who accepts that how happiness-conducive an activity is partially tracks how good that activity is in itself, it is no surprise that *what it is that you're doing* plays an important role in determining how happiness-conducive an activity is. Now, what it is that you're doing, on Aquinas's analysis, is conceptually separable into a number of elements, including that with respect to which one is acting, the immediate course of action being pursued, and the more and less remote reason(s) that one is following that immediate course of action.<sup>374</sup> So, for example, the activity of reading this chapter is conceptually divisible into the chapter (as that with respect to which one is acting), the reading of the chapter (as immediate course of action), and the sacred duty of commenting on a dissertation (as the reason for following that course of action).

Now, in his discussions of happiness, Aquinas often treats *that with respect to which one is acting* as the most important conceptual element of *what an activity is* for determining how happiness conducive an activity is. That central role seems to be rooted largely in the belief that one of the most important roles our activities play is, as it were, getting us in touch with things that are independently valuable.<sup>375</sup> The role of *that with respect to which one is acting* is so important in determining who is happier than whom that Aquinas draws attention to that role even in cases in which he thinks it cannot be used to explain who is happier than whom – as is the case among the perfectly happy. He says, “with respect to... the object of happiness, one person's [perfect]

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<sup>374</sup> For the full discussion of various conceptual elements, see ST IaIIae qq. 6-21.

It is clear that what Aquinas occasionally calls the “object of an activity” is what I mean by “that with respect to which one is acting.” For example, he does so at Super Sent., lib. 4 d. 49 q. 3 a. 5 qc. 4 co. in treating God in God's essence as the object of the activity of the perfectly happy and again at SCG l.1 c.100 n.4. I refrain from calling “that with respect to which one is acting” an *object*, however, because Aquinas uses that term in a variety of ways, some of which, if one had them in mind, would be very misleading in the present discussion. In particular, Aquinas often treats the object of an activity as a course of action – see, e.g., ST IaIIae q.18 a.2 co. where he gives as an example of an object of an action “taking things that belong to another.”

<sup>375</sup> Irwin has a nice discussion of a related point in considering Aquinas's account of intellectual love – in particular, Irwin is discussing reasons for thinking that “Aquinas recognizes external reasons for preferring one set of ends to another” (500). See the first volume of his work, *The Development of Ethics*, Chapter 19.

happiness cannot be greater than another's.<sup>376</sup> In other words, that with respect to which they are acting does not at all explain why some perfectly happy people are happier than others. This is so because the perfectly happy all act with respect to the very same thing, namely, God in God's essence. They are all in touch with precisely the same thing through their activities. So differences in degrees of perfect happiness cannot be explained by appeal to a difference in the value or intrinsic goodness of the thing the perfectly happy are in touch with through their activities – it's the same in every case.

When we turn to comparing the perfectly happy as a class with the imperfectly happy, however, *that with respect to which they are acting* does have a vital role to play. Indeed, it is clear that Aquinas thinks that what fundamentally explains why the perfectly happy are happier – and why perfect happiness is a greater *kind* of happiness – has to do with that with respect to which the perfectly and imperfectly happy act. This begins to come through when he tells us that “since [perfect] happiness is a certain activity..., the true nature of [perfect] happiness is taken from the object, which gives the species to the activity.”<sup>377</sup> In other words, what makes perfect happiness perfect happiness is its being an activity that gets us in touch with one particular thing, namely, God in God's essence.<sup>378</sup> That is what fundamentally explains the very nature of perfect happiness and sets it apart from imperfect happiness.

This makes good sense especially when we keep in mind what Aquinas believes about the difference between that with respect to which the perfectly happy act and the sorts of things with respect to which the imperfectly happy act. The gap between the two is the gap between an infinite good (i.e. God in God's essence) and finite goods (e.g. pizzas, friends, and walks on the beach).<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.2 co. See also, e.g., Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.4 qc.2 co.

<sup>377</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.3 ad 2.

<sup>378</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.3 ad 2.

<sup>379</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.2 ad 3.



What is more, according to Aquinas, God, as Goodness Itself, includes in God's self what is good about every finitely good object and infinitely more; "whatever of the good is found in these [finite goods] will be possessed entirely in the supreme font of good things [i.e. God]."<sup>380</sup> And, not only is that which is good about those things present in God, but also "whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-exists in God and in a more excellent and higher way."<sup>381</sup> So what one is in touch with as a perfectly happy person is infinitely greater than what one is in touch with as an imperfectly happy person, no matter how elevated one's activity may be in other respects. So, in virtue of this difference at the level of *that with respect to which one is acting*, it makes good sense that Aquinas establishes an immense gap between the perfectly happy and the imperfectly happy. It is, in a way, that gap that grounds a difference of kind between perfect and imperfect happiness. It is also that gap that guarantees that the most imperfectly happy person could never even come close to being as happy as the least well off among the perfectly happy; it guarantees that, at best, she could merely resemble a perfectly happy person in some meager fashion.

In Aquinas's work, those things with respect to which individuals are acting also have a role to play in explaining why some imperfectly happy people are happier than other imperfectly happy people. They can play this role in the case of imperfect happiness because the things with respect to which the imperfectly happy act are not identical and not equally good. So in the case of imperfectly happy people, Aquinas can appeal to differences in the intrinsic goodness of the things with respect to which they are acting in order to explain differences in degrees of goodness in those activities and, ultimately, to explain in part the degree of imperfect happiness that each enjoys.

When we keep in mind that imperfect happiness is conceived of as a likeness to perfect

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<sup>380</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.7 ad 2.

<sup>381</sup> ST Ia q.13 a.2 co. It is also worth noting that, according to Aquinas, by seeing God in God's essence one also thereby understands "the genera and species and powers of all things and the whole order of the universe" (SCG 1.3 c.59 n.1). And, what is more, the person in question grasps all of this at the same time (SCG 1.3 c.60).

happiness, it makes good sense that Aquinas would think that, all else being equal, people acting with respect to better things are happier than those acting with respect to worse things. After all, as we've seen, the perfectly happy act with respect to God in God's essence – the Good Thing *par excellence*. So, since those who act with respect to better things resemble more closely the perfectly happy in heaven, at least in one respect, it is unsurprising that, according to Aquinas, those who act with respect to better finite goods are happier than those who act with respect to worse finite goods, all else being equal. We can put the same point at the level of the activities themselves, since that with respect to which one is acting plays an important role in determining how good that activity is. We can also say, then, that people acting with respect to better things are, at least in that respect, engaged in better activities and so more closely resemble the perfectly happy, who are engaged in the very best activity.

Aquinas naturally doesn't attempt to give an exhaustive list of the value of all finite goods, but he does give us some helpful hints about how he thinks about the relative value of various finite goods. For example, he thinks that an angel is something greater to be contemplated than a truth of the speculative sciences and so he claims that a greater happiness is achieved in contemplating the former than the latter, all else being equal.<sup>382</sup> He also gives us hints about how he thinks about certain classes of goods. For example, Aquinas believes that external goods (like food and shelter) are less valuable than bodily goods (like health and bodily pleasure), which in turn are less valuable than spiritual goods (like knowledge of truths). So, for example, assuming that both rise to the level of engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities, all else being equal, if one were to enjoy proving some mathematical conjecture, that would conduce to greater happiness than enjoying a solitary meal.

Aquinas explicitly moves from this sort of classification of finite goods to determinations

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<sup>382</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.7 co.

about imperfect happiness, in at least one context, namely, while discussing contemplative and active happiness. Aquinas thinks that, all else being equal, a contemplative life is more happiness-conducive than an active life.<sup>383</sup> That is not to say that, according to Aquinas, all contemplative lives are happier than all active lives. Aquinas seems to think that some *particular* active life could conduce to greater happiness than some *particular* contemplative life.<sup>384</sup> In those cases, the explanation for why that particular active life is better than that particular contemplative life would presumably run through some other feature(s) of the activities in question besides its object. That said, according to Aquinas, as a kind of life, contemplative lives conduce to greater happiness than active lives in part because of the sorts of finite goods they tend to revolve around. People living active lives, with the possible exception of teachers, pursue goods that are less noble or valuable than the truth pursued by those living contemplative lives.<sup>385</sup> And so, all else being equal, those living contemplative lives are happier than those living active lives.

So Aquinas is eager to treat what it is that one is doing and, in particular, one conceptual component of what it is that one is doing – namely, that with respect to which one is acting – as especially relevant to understanding who is happier than whom.

### §1.2: *How Well We're Doing What We're Doing*

The second consideration related to how genuinely good some activity is that Aquinas explicitly treats as relevant to understanding who is happier than whom is *how well the activity in question is being done*.<sup>386</sup> In most cases and especially the case in which Aquinas is most interested, the basic idea here seems to be that, depending on how well we're engaging in various activities, we can,

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<sup>383</sup> It is clear that, all else being equal, Aquinas thinks that a person enjoying contemplative happiness is happier than a person enjoying active happiness. See, e.g., ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 co.

<sup>384</sup> See, e.g. ST IaIIae q.182 a.1.

<sup>385</sup> For an invocation of the objects of their respective activities in explaining why the contemplative life is happier than the active, see, e.g., ST IaIIae q.3 a.5 co. See also, e.g., SCG I.3 c.35 n.3.

<sup>386</sup> This is suggested in a general sort of way at SCG I.1 c.100 n.4.

as it were, be in touch with the various goods with respect to which we're acting to varying extents or with varying degrees of intimacy. And, all else being equal, the more in touch that one is with the good in question, the happier one is.

Now, compared to the case of *what is being done* and the role given to *the things with respect to which individuals are acting*, Aquinas explicitly appeals far less often to *how well an activity is being done* in giving explanations of who is happier than whom. Indeed, as far as I know, for example, Aquinas never explicitly appeals to how well an activity is being done in order to explain why one imperfectly happy person is happier than another imperfectly happy person. Of course, one might extrapolate from the paradigm case he does offer and suggest, for example, that among those enjoying contemplative happiness, if two people are grasping the same cognizable thing (a truth of mathematics, say) and one is grasping it more firmly, all else being equal, the person grasping that truth more firmly is happier than the one grasping it less firmly. But Aquinas never says as much.

One might suppose that this consideration would have a role to play in explaining why perfectly happy people are happier than at least some imperfectly happy people. After all, Aquinas thinks that we can at least in some sense contemplate God in this life and, of course, the perfectly happy in heaven contemplate God forever. So one might think that what explains why the perfectly happy people contemplating God are happier than the imperfectly happy people contemplating God is that the perfectly happy people are doing the same activity better. But Aquinas is clear about this: the “vision of the [perfectly] happy is distinguished from the vision of the person on earth” not in that the one sees “more perfectly” and the other “less perfectly, but through this: that the one sees and the other does not see.”<sup>387</sup> In other words, the difference between the perfectly happy person contemplating God and the imperfectly happy person contemplating God isn't a matter of doing the same activity better and worse, but it's a matter of doing different activities. This is so because, as

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<sup>387</sup> QDV q.18 a.1 co.

we've seen, the perfectly happy are contemplating *God in God's essence* and the imperfectly happy aren't, and – as a result – they aren't acting with respect to the same thing in the relevant sense.

And so we come to the paradigm case and the case in which Aquinas does explicitly appeal to how well an activity is being done to explain degrees of happiness: the case of the intellectual contact with God being made by the perfectly happy. As a general matter, Aquinas thinks that “one person is able to intellectually grasp something (*intelligere*) better inasmuch as his cognition of one and the same cognizable thing is clearer (*limpidior*).”<sup>388</sup> He thinks that such variation occurs in heaven, inasmuch as all perfectly happy people intellectually grasp one and the same thing (i.e. God in God's essence), but not all of them grasp that same thing equally. Using sight as a metaphor for the relevant intellectual grasp, he claims that “some will more clearly see [God in God's essence] than others.”<sup>389</sup> Now, according to Aquinas, this difference in the clarity of the grasp of God in God's essence affects how good the activity is or, as Aquinas puts it, it affects “the amount of perfection in the activity.”<sup>390</sup> And since Aquinas accepts that the “more perfect” the heavenly activity, the happier a perfectly happy person is while so engaged, some perfectly happy people are happier than other perfectly happy people because they grasp God in God's essence more clearly and so are in closer touch or union with the very best thing there is.<sup>391</sup>

Here then is one way in which Aquinas thinks he can explain how Peter can be more perfectly happy in heaven than Linus, or – more generally – how he can explain degrees of perfect happiness, at least in part. He thinks that he can explain why sometimes the activity of knowing and

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<sup>388</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.2 a.4 ad 1.

<sup>389</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.2 a.4 co. He repeats this claim, e.g., at Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.3 a.5 qc.4 co. Aquinas's explanation for this involves God's granting different people different amounts of what he calls “the light of glory” (*lumen gloriae*), which plays a similar role to “the natural light” in ordinary human cognition. (See, e.g., Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.2 a.4 co.)

<sup>390</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.2 a.4 co.

<sup>391</sup> It is clear that Aquinas accepts the principle that the more perfect the happiness-conducive activity in question is, the happier one is while so engaged. See, e.g., Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.4 qc.1 co. For another discussion of this degrees of clarity in the heavenly vision case, see SCG I.3 c.58.

enjoying God in God's essence is better for a person by appealing to the clarity of the vision because when God is seen more clearly that activity of knowing God is itself better. And when that activity is itself better, the degree of perfect happiness thereby possessed is greater.

Early in his career, Aquinas also thought that he could explain why a perfectly happy person becomes happier upon the resumption of a body fundamentally by appeal to the soul's being able to perform its activity better as a part of a soul-body composite than on its own. The core of the argument is that "the more perfect something is in being (*in esse*), the more perfectly is it able to perform [its] activity."<sup>392</sup> And "the soul is more perfect in its natural being (*esse*) when it is in the whole, namely, in the human being (composed of a soul and body), than when it is separated in itself."<sup>393</sup> And "thus, since [perfect] happiness consists in an activity, the soul's happiness will be more perfect after the resumption of the body than before."<sup>394</sup> It should be clear that, if this reasoning were to hold up, this would straightforwardly be a case of one's doing the activity in question better and thereby being made happier. However, later in his career, Aquinas comes to believe that the core of this argument doesn't hold up. This is so because he comes to reject the idea that the separated soul is less perfect in being (*in esse*) than is the composite formed of the soul and perfected body. This is so because he comes to believe that "the being (*esse*) of the composite remains in the human soul after the destruction of the body... because the being (*esse*) of the form and matter is the same and that is the being (*esse*) of the composite."<sup>395</sup> In other words, when the body is destroyed, no being (*esse*) is lost because, as it were, whatever being (*esse*) the body had comes to reside entirely in the soul; one might think of the being that was in the body and soul as contracting entirely into the soul, when the body is destroyed. And so, when the body is destroyed,

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<sup>392</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.4 qc.1 co.

<sup>393</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.4 qc.1 co.

<sup>394</sup> Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.4 qc.1 co.

<sup>395</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.5 ad 2.

what had been the being (*esse*) of the soul and body is all retained by the separated soul. And so the separated soul is no less perfect in being (*esse*) than is the soul-body composite. Or so Aquinas comes to believe.

By way of brief summary, it should now be clear that Aquinas appeals both to *what is being done* and to *how well it is being done* to explain degrees of genuine goodness found in various happiness conducive activities. And it should further be clear that Aquinas treats how genuinely good an activity is as relevant to how happy a person is while so engaged. Indeed, in one way or other, he appeals to considerations connected to how genuinely good an activity is in order to explain why some perfectly happy people are happier than others, why all perfectly happy people are happier than all imperfectly happy people, and why some imperfectly happy people are happier than other imperfectly happy people.

#### §2: *How Much We're Enjoying What We're Doing*

In explaining who is happier than whom, Aquinas does not confine his explanations to appeals to the degrees of genuine goodness to be found in their various activities. At key junctures, he also appeals to the level of enjoyment that different people are experiencing.<sup>396</sup> As in the case of levels of genuine goodness, or perhaps even more so, it should seem quite natural to think that how much a person is enjoying something is relevant to how happy she is.

The most important juncture at which Aquinas appeals to levels of enjoyment is related to perfect happiness. Aquinas tells us that, with respect to perfect happiness, “one person can be happier than another because the more this good [i.e. God in God’s essence] is enjoyed, the happier one is.”<sup>397</sup> By all appearances, this is a straightforward affirmation that, at least in the case of perfect

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<sup>396</sup> This is suggested in a general sort of way at SCG I.1 c.100 n.4.

<sup>397</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.3 co. The same sort of point is made at SCG I.1 c.102 n.3.

happiness, the more one is enjoying one's self, the happier that one is. Given the view of perfect happiness I laid out in Chapter 3, this isn't at all surprising; according to that view, again, enjoyment is one of two elements that is a part of the very essence of perfect happiness and one of two elements that non-instrumentally benefits the perfectly happy person.<sup>398</sup>

It is worth noting that Aquinas suggests that there are at least two explanations as to why a particular perfectly happy person experiences more enjoyment than another.<sup>399</sup> First, her activity may be better (i.e. she may be seeing God in God's essence more clearly) and so, as it were, have more to enjoy. Second, the person may be better disposed volitionally, inasmuch as she loves God more through charity, and so have a greater capacity for enjoying God in God's essence when God is so grasped by the intellect. These are clearly independent explanations inasmuch as one runs fundamentally through a difference in the (divinely-aided) strength of the intellect and the other a difference in the (divinely-aided) strength of the will's loving inclination towards God in charity. However, Aquinas apparently thinks that, as a matter of fact, a person sees God in God's essence more clearly in heaven if and only if she is better disposed volitionally to enjoy God. This is suggested, for example, by the fact that Aquinas appeals to God's gift of the "light of glory" (*lumen gloriae*) as the explanation both for why a person is more fit volitionally to enjoy God,<sup>400</sup> and why a person is more fit intellectually to see God clearly.<sup>401</sup> And, perhaps even more tellingly, he says, "The intellect which participates more in the light of glory will see God more perfectly; and the one who will participate more in the light of glory is the one who has more charity."<sup>402</sup> Truly, then, "Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance."<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> The other, of course, is knowing God.

<sup>399</sup> See, e.g., Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.3 a.5 qc.4 co.

<sup>400</sup> See, e.g., Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.3 a.5 qc.4 co.

<sup>401</sup> See, e.g., Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.2 a.4 co.

<sup>402</sup> ST Ia q.12 a.6 co.

<sup>403</sup> Matthew 13:12 (NIV).



Here, then, is another way in which Aquinas thinks he can partially explain degrees of perfect happiness, or – in other words – why sometimes the activity of knowing and enjoying God in God’s essence is better for a person: sometimes a person enjoys that activity more than another and, in that case, the activity is better for the one who enjoys it more.

Enjoyment also explains who is happier than whom in other cases involving perfect happiness. It makes appearances in explaining, first, why the perfectly happy separated soul is made better off by the resumption of a body on Judgment Day and, second, why those in heaven are made better off by the fellowship of friends there. Of the separated soul, Aquinas says, such a “soul desires to enjoy God in such a way that that very enjoyment overflows to the body, as much as possible.”<sup>404</sup> And so, upon the resumption of a body, the soul experiences more enjoyment and so is happier.<sup>405</sup> And concerning the fellowship of friends in heaven, Aquinas says, “it will be very delightful... For each loves the other as himself and so will enjoy the good of the other as his own, which will bring it about that the gladness and enjoyment of each person will increase inasmuch as it is the enjoyment of all the others.”<sup>406</sup> It makes sense that it is precisely in the fact that “one delights in seeing [one’s friends] doing well” that one is made better off by the fellowship of friends in heaven, since that is the only happiness-conducive role that Aquinas assigns to friends on earth that could plausibly be said to endure into Aquinas’s conception of heaven.<sup>407</sup> So the resumed body and

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<sup>404</sup> ST IaIIae q.4 a.5 ad 4. Since, as noted earlier, Aquinas clearly changes his mind on why exactly the resumption of a body yields an increase in happiness, with respect to this issue it seemed best to confine the main text to quotations from the later *Summa Theologiae*. But Aquinas also appeals to increasing enjoyment as a reason for a soul’s becoming happier upon the resumption of a body earlier in his career. See Super Sent. lib.4 d.49 q.1 a.4 qc.1 co.

<sup>405</sup> For a more detailed treatment of what, according to Aquinas, the body might be doing (or not doing) in heaven, see Christina Van Dyke’s “Aquinas’s Shiny Happy People: Perfect Happiness and the Limits of Human Nature,” *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* 6 (2015): 269-291. See also Marilyn McCord Adams, “Why Bodies as Well as Souls in the Life to Come?” in Gregory Doolan (ed.), *The Science of Being as Being: Metaphysical Investigations* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 264-297.

<sup>406</sup> ISA a.12. See also his approving citation of Augustine on a similar point at ST IaIIae q.4 a.8 co.

<sup>407</sup> The other two are doing good for one’s friends and helping them as they do good. (ST IaIIae q.4 a.8 co.) For a longer treatment of friendship’s role in perfect happiness, which also touches on how the resumption of the body might make us better off in heaven, see Christopher Brown’s “Friendship in Heaven.” I think helpfully, Brown offers communal worship as an image for what friends add in heaven – the basic idea being that, as in communal worship, in

the presence of friends give the perfectly happy, as it were, more to enjoy as they engage in the (shared) activity of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence.

Enjoyment also provides Aquinas with a second, less central explanation as to why all of the perfectly happy are better off than all of the imperfectly happy. Aquinas thinks that the perfectly happy are engaged in an activity that is “*maximally* delightful.”<sup>408</sup> Given human nature, he thinks that nothing is more fitting for us than the activity in which perfect happiness consists and so, when properly disposed (as the perfectly happy are), nothing could possibly be more enjoyable for us than that activity.<sup>409</sup> So not only are the perfectly happy all happier than the imperfectly happy because the perfectly happy have an Infinite Good as the object of their activities and the imperfectly happy only have various finite goods as the objects of their activities, but also they are all happier because, in every case, the perfectly happy person enjoys what she is doing more than the imperfectly happy person does.

Now, when we turn to Aquinas's treatment of enjoyment and imperfect happiness, things become more complicated. It does seem that Aquinas thinks that, at least sometimes, a genuinely good activity's being more enjoyable is part of the explanation as to why it is more happiness-conducive than another genuinely good activity. For example, in justifying the claim that “the contemplative life is better than the active [life] *simpliciter*,” among other things, Aquinas appeals to

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heaven there is a common focus or joint attention on God that those in heaven are aware of and that enriches their experience.

I should note, however, that I think that one of Brown's central claims is misguided. He suggests that Aquinas wants to distinguish between (1) perfect human happiness and (2) *supremely* perfect human happiness. Not only is this distinction never explicitly made by Aquinas, but it also seems to me to be entirely unnecessary. In giving us a fairly sophisticated way of making sense of *degrees* of perfect happiness, Aquinas gives us all of the conceptual resources necessary for understanding his claims about friendship in heaven, without making yet another distinction between different kinds of happiness. I am also skeptical of Brown's suggestion that, according to Aquinas, the other people in heaven play a cognitive role that increases the happiness of the saints in heaven. In particular, that, e.g., “St. Paul can see God's essence not only through his own experience of God – naturally colored by his own life's journey, but also through the eyes of friends in Christ who saw a different aspect of God because of their own distinctive vocations, stories, and crosses.”

<sup>408</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.5 co. Emphasis added.

<sup>409</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.5 co.

the fact that “there is greater delight in the contemplative life than the active.”<sup>410</sup> This makes perfectly good sense if Aquinas thinks that its being more enjoyable makes the contemplative life more happiness-conducive than the active life.

However, it is clear that, overall, things aren’t as simple in the case of imperfect happiness as in the case of perfect happiness. In particular, unlike in the case of perfect happiness where every increase in enjoyment yields an increase in one’s degree of perfect happiness, an increase in enjoyment does not always lead to an increase in one’s degree of imperfect happiness.

This complication stems, ultimately, from the very different objects that the perfectly happy and imperfectly happy enjoy. God, the object of the activities of the perfectly happy, is infinitely worthy of love. So the perfectly happy cannot love God too much and, since enjoyment is the blossoming of love, so too they cannot enjoy God too much.<sup>411</sup> However, one can love *any* finite good too much and so one can enjoy any finite good too much.<sup>412</sup> More specifically, an activity that has a finite good as its object can cease to be genuinely good when one’s love, desire, or enjoyment in that object becomes “inordinate” (*inordinatae*).<sup>413</sup> Such inordinate love would undermine the genuine goodness of the activity and thereby undermine the possibility of the activity’s making a person imperfectly happy, since imperfect happiness requires that the activity being enjoyed be genuinely good. So, according to Aquinas, it would be possible for an imperfectly happy person to fall below the level of imperfect happiness by coming to love and thus enjoy some finite good too much. That said, Aquinas gives us very few details about how all of this works in particular cases. It isn’t clear, for example, how he conceives of how much one might permissibly love and thus enjoy various finite goods before doing so counts as inordinate.

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<sup>410</sup> ST IIaIIae q.182 a.1 co.

<sup>411</sup> This is clear, e.g., from his discussion of the order of charity in ST IaIIae q.26.

<sup>412</sup> ST IaIIae q.26.

<sup>413</sup> ST IaIIae q.35 a.5 ad 3.

What should be clear is that Aquinas treats levels of enjoyment as relevant to explaining who is happier than whom. Furthermore, it should be clear that levels of enjoyment seem to enter into Aquinas's explanations of who is happier than whom in comparing the perfectly happy to one another, in comparing the perfectly happy to the imperfectly happy, and in comparing the imperfectly happy to one another.

§3: *How Long We're Doing and Enjoying Our Activities.*

The final consideration that Aquinas treats as fundamental to explaining who is happier than whom is how long the individuals in question are engaged in and enjoying their genuinely good activities.<sup>414</sup> This final consideration is somewhat different than the first two inasmuch as the first two concern how happiness-conducive an activity is at an instant, as it were, whereas this final consideration concerns how happiness-conducive an activity is over the whole course of its existence. In light of the fact that – as we saw in Chapter 4 – Aquinas understands happiness episodically, we may well have expected that he would treat the length of a happy episode as relevant to how much it contributes to one's overall happiness. We may have also expected how he would think of that contribution: all else being equal, when one is enjoying a genuinely good activity, one is happier the longer one is so engaged. It seems that Aquinas believes as much primarily for the quite obvious reason that, all else being equal, the continuation of something good for you is better for you than its cessation.<sup>415</sup> Of course, it should be noted that, on earth, due to fatigue or boredom or one's responsibilities, Aquinas recognizes that all else is seldom equal and so, as a matter of fact, we are very often better off ceasing to do certain activities and moving on to others.<sup>416</sup>

After a lifetime spent on earth marred by having to stop and start activities over and over,

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<sup>414</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 4. Müller draws attention to this general feature of Aquinas's view in "*Duplex Beatitudo*," 61.

<sup>415</sup> ST IaIIae q.5 a.4 co. See also, e.g., SCG I.3 c.29 n.7.

<sup>416</sup> ST IaIIae q.32 a.2.

according to Aquinas, all perfectly happy people move beyond that sort of herky-jerky, stop-and-start existence. Upon entering heaven, the perfectly happy no longer have happy episodes of some definite length, but instead they begin an indefinitely long or perpetual happy episode.<sup>417</sup> This is so because, in heaven, the perfectly happy engage in “one continuous and sempiternal activity.”<sup>418</sup> So, since they all enjoy a continuous and indefinite activity, this consideration can scarcely be appealed to in explaining why some perfectly happy people are happier than others.<sup>419</sup> However, it does provide yet another partial explanation as to why all perfectly happy people are happier than all imperfectly happy people. After all, people engaged in even the least strenuous deliberate activities on earth cannot do them continuously; eventually, everyone needs to take a break or sleep. However, everyone enjoying perfect happiness in heaven, with their perfected bodies, can engage in their activities without ceasing.<sup>420</sup> And so, in that respect too, the perfectly happy are better off than the imperfectly happy.

Aquinas also explicitly appeals to this consideration in explaining why some imperfectly happy people are happier than others.<sup>421</sup> While doing so, Aquinas reveals that, at least as a general matter, he does in fact think of degrees of imperfect happiness as degrees of relevant resemblance to perfect happiness. After denying that perfect happiness is possible in this life, he says, “There is, nevertheless, some participation of [perfect] happiness [in this life], and [there is] a greater [participation] the more an activity can be more continuous and one.”<sup>422</sup> On this basis, he says “there is less of the character of happiness in the active life, which is occupied with many things, than in the contemplative life, which is centered around (*versatur circa*) one thing – that is, around the

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<sup>417</sup> SCG I.3 c.62.

<sup>418</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 4. Aquinas also describes this as “a participation in eternity” (SCG I.3 c.61 n.2).

<sup>419</sup> One might think that it makes some slight difference inasmuch as those who died earlier in time may enjoy a slightly longer indefinite episode than those who died later.

<sup>420</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 4.

<sup>421</sup> Celano draws attention to this in “The Concept of Worldly Beatitude in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas,” 223. As does López, “Trichotomizing...,” 29.

<sup>422</sup> ST IaIIae q.3 a.2 ad 4.

contemplation of the truth.” Here it seems that Aquinas is appealing to the fact that, as a general matter at least, contemplation can be done in a more continuous and unbroken way than the wide array of activities called for in an active life in order to argue that we have still more reason to think that the contemplative life is more conducive to happiness than is the active life. So how long one is able to engage in an unbroken activity also plays a role in explaining both why all of the perfectly happy are happier than the imperfectly happy and why some imperfectly happy people are happier than others.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have shown that Aquinas has a fairly sophisticated way of explaining who is happier than whom. He appeals to a set of fundamental factors in explaining these determinations. First, he appeals to degrees of genuine goodness to be found in various activities. In making determinations about degrees of genuine goodness, he appeals in particular to what the activity in question is – and there, above all, to that with respect to which one is acting – as well as to how well one is doing the activity in question. Second, he appeals to degrees of enjoyment. And, finally, he appeals to how long one is continuously engaged in and enjoying the activity in question.

With this account of what, according to Aquinas, fundamentally explains who is happier than whom in hand, we have a better sense of just how fine-grained that account actually is. Aquinas provides all the conceptual tools necessary to explain not only why a person counts as perfectly happy or imperfectly happy in the first place, but also why some perfectly happy people are better off than other perfectly happy people, why all perfectly happy people are happier than all imperfectly happy people, and why some imperfectly happy people are happier than other imperfectly happy people. And he does so by appealing to a cogent set of fundamental factors that fit well with his treatment of perfect and imperfect happiness.

With this account in hand, we also have reached the last step in providing a systematic,

detailed treatment of Aquinas's theory of happiness. And so I now turn to the conclusion of the present study.

## CONCLUSION

### *A New Portrait of Aquinas on Happiness*

With the benefit of having in view all of the elements of a systematic and detailed study of Aquinas's account of happiness, I want to conclude with a broad brush portrait that connects those elements, start to finish.

Aquinas's account of happiness proper is founded upon the general concept of perfect happiness, or the happiness of the saints in heaven. It is the general concept of perfect happiness that serves as the unargued-for starting point of his inquiry into the very essence of perfect happiness. According to that general concept, perfect happiness is the complete good for a human being, or – equivalently – the perfectly good state for a human being. Aquinas then reasons from the character of such a complete good, or perfect state, all the way to an account of the very essence of perfect happiness, or – in other words – to an account of what perfect happiness fundamentally is.

Two traits that Aquinas believes he can read off of the general concept of perfect happiness so understood play especially important roles in uncovering the essence of perfect happiness. The first trait is perfect happiness's satisfying all human desires. The second is perfect happiness's involving the complete perfection of a human being. Each of these traits provides an independent route to uncovering the very essence of perfect happiness, as Aquinas thinks of it.

In the case of perfect happiness's satisfying all human desires, Aquinas uncovers the essence of perfect happiness as follows. A human being's desires are all satisfied if and only if the desiring capacity – i.e. the will – is satisfied. The will is oriented towards the universal good and so will only be satisfied when it is enjoying a universal good. The only universal good is God. So a human being will have all of her desires satisfied just in case she is enjoying God. From here, this trait can even show us more precisely *how* we must be related to God in order to be fully satisfied. According to



Aquinas, we desire to understand causes when we observe effects. From various effects in the world, we know *that* God exists, but we don't really understand God – that is, we are ignorant of God's *essence*. So our desire to understand causes will not be satisfied until we intellectually grasp the essence of God. The perfectly happy state involves the satisfaction of all of our desires. Therefore, the perfectly happy state will involve our intellectually grasping the essence of God – nothing short will fully satisfy. So, given various other theses that Aquinas endorses, perfect happiness's trait of satisfying all human desires can show us that perfect happiness, ultimately, is a matter of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence. And that just *is* the essence of perfect happiness. Notice that, by endorsing this account of the essence of perfect happiness, Aquinas endorses a hybrid theory of perfect happiness, according to which perfect happiness is constituted by two interlocking strands that non-instrumentally benefit the perfectly happy person: the very activity of knowing God in God's essence and one's affective response to that activity blossoming in enjoyment.

Aquinas arrives at the same view by a different route, which depends upon perfect happiness's involving the complete perfection of a human being. That route runs as follows. A human being has as her characteristic capacities intellect and will. So in order to be completely perfected, a human being must be fully perfected with respect to intellect and will. The complete perfection of a capacity requires that it attain to that in which the fullness of its formal object is found. The formal object of the intellect is the universal true, and the formal object of the will is the universal good. So, in order to be perfectly happy, the intellect and will must respectively attain to the universal true and the universal good. According to Aquinas, there is only one object that satisfies either of these descriptions: God, who is not true, but Truth, who is not good, but Goodness. So, in order to be perfectly happy, the intellect and will must have God as their object. Now, in order for the intellect to have God as its object *qua* Truth, it is not enough that we have some mediated grasp of God – say, mediated by the effects of God's activity in the world. Instead,

in order to be completely perfected by having God as the object of intellect *qua* Truth, the agent must know God in God's essence. And following along with this knowledge of God in every case is the enjoyment of God. So perfect happiness's involving the complete perfection of a human being provides another way of showing that the essence of perfect happiness is knowing and enjoying God in God's essence.

Aquinas's account of happiness moves from heaven to earth, since he treats imperfect earthly happiness as a likeness to perfect heavenly happiness. As we've seen, perfect heavenly happiness is fundamentally a matter of knowing and enjoying God in God's essence. According to Aquinas, imperfect happiness is like perfect heavenly happiness inasmuch as both the perfectly happy and imperfectly happy are engaged in and enjoying genuinely good activities. And so *engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities* is at the heart of Aquinas's broader view of happiness, since it best captures what is common to happiness of every sort. The perfectly happy in heaven are engaged in and enjoying the very best and the most enjoyable activity that divinely elevated human nature can perform. The imperfectly happy are engaged in and enjoying all manner of often ordinary, though still genuinely good, activities. The imperfectly happy may be carpenters or scientists or caretakers or garbage collectors. The key to their imperfect happiness – that is, the key to their engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities – is virtue. It is virtue that fundamentally explains their ability to both do what is genuinely good and to enjoy doing it. But, given our fragility and the many ways in which we can be impeded from acting in accord with virtue, the pursuit of happiness on earth requires more than virtue alone. It requires things like health, friends, food, shelter, money, and so on.

These sorts of things that are ordinarily sought in human life can enter into explanations not only of why a person counts as imperfectly happy, but why one imperfectly happy person is happier than another. They do so, ultimately, by influencing either how genuinely good an activity; or how

much one enjoys that activity; or how long one is able to engage in and enjoy that genuinely good activity. It is these three factors that fundamentally explain why one person is happier than another. This is so because Aquinas thinks that some human activities are better in themselves than others and that, all else being equal, the better an activity is in itself, the happier a person will be while engaged in that activity. He also thinks that the more one enjoys a genuinely good activity, the better off one is. And finally he believes that when one is enjoying a genuinely good activity, all else being equal, one is happier the longer one is so engaged.

With these factors in view, it is easy to appreciate why Aquinas thinks there is such an immense divide between perfect happiness and imperfect happiness – a divide so immense that it warrants a distinction in kind. Perfect happiness is the very best activity – one that puts us in direct contact with an infinite good. It is the most enjoyable activity. And it is done continuously and indefinitely. Imperfect happiness is far from the best activity, since it does not involve being in direct contact with an infinite good, but instead with some finite good or other. It is far, far less enjoyable than perfect happiness. And it is broken up over and over again by the need for rest. A meagre likeness indeed!

I believe that this broad brush portrait, though rough, is accurate. It is also my belief that this portrait should entirely replace the only other reading currently on offer with any claim to being a comprehensive portrait of Aquinas's view, according to which *perfection* is the key to Aquinas's account of happiness. Given the intimacy with which Aquinas connects human perfection and perfect human happiness, it is unsurprising that many commentators have read Aquinas as giving a larger role to the notion of human perfection than he actually does. However, when properly understood, perfect happiness's involving complete perfection is the key to understanding only one part of Aquinas's account, namely, the key to understanding the basis for one of two main routes from the general concept of perfect happiness to the essence of perfect happiness. Complete

perfection is not the starting point of Aquinas's understanding of perfect happiness – the general concept of perfect happiness is. Complete perfection does not capture the essence of perfect human happiness – its essence is knowing and enjoying God in God's essence. So too being perfected (in some sense or other) does not capture what is relevantly shared by the perfectly and imperfectly happy – the account put in terms of engaging in and enjoying genuinely good activities does. In one way or other, perfection accompanies happiness whether considered at the level of the general concept of happiness, or at the level of perfect happiness, or at the level of imperfect happiness. In one way or other, it accompanies happiness at all of these levels because Aquinas believes that there is a conceptual connection between goodness and perfection. But for Aquinas happiness is more fundamentally connected to *the human good* than to *human perfection*. The difference is subtle, but – as we've seen – extremely important.

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