

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

LECTURE X

The Definition of Happiness

Commentary on the NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

TRANSLATED BY

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ANALYTICAL OUTLINE
OF ST. THOMASTEXT OF ARISTOTLE
(*B.1097 b 22*)
Chapter 7

2. HE . . . EXAMINES ITS DEFINITION.
- a. He shows the necessity of this inquiry.
- b. He searches for the definition of happiness.
- i. First he inquires into its genus.*
- X. HE SHOWS THAT HAPPINESS CONSISTS IN AN ACTIVITY OF MAN.

But to say that happiness is the best of goods seems merely to state something already perfectly obvious. However, since we wish to bring out more clearly what it is, we must investigate the matter further. 118

Perhaps this can be done by considering the activity of man. As the good of a flute player or sculptor or any artist, or of anyone who has some special activity, seems to consist in that activity and its skillful performance, so also the good of man who has an activity characteristic of himself precisely as man. 119-120

- Y. HE SHOWS THAT THERE IS AN ACTIVITY PROPER TO MAN.
- aa. First by activities . . . incidental to man.
- bb. Second, . . . by means of the human members.
- Z. HE SHOWS WHICH IS MAN'S PROPER ACTIVITY.

Have a weaver and a tanner a special work and activity while man precisely as man has none? Is he left by nature without a purpose? 121

If the eye, hand, foot, and each member have a proper operation, surely we will not refuse to concede an activity proper to man as man. 122

What therefore will it be? Life belongs even to plants and we *B.1098* are in search of something characteristic of man. The life of nutrition and growth must then be ruled out. Even the life of sense experience, which is a step higher, is shared with the horse,

cow, and other animals. The remaining type of life belongs to the rational part of man and finds its expression in actions. This rational part either follows the dictates of reason, or it possesses and exercises the power of understanding. Of the two functions, the latter seems the more correct, for when we speak of reasoning, we signify the exercise of our rational powers. 123-126

ii. (*He inquires*) into its differences.

X. HE DIVIDES THE INQUIRY INTO TWO PARTS (FIRST)

The function of man, therefore, is activity of the soul according to reason or at least not independent of reason. Now as a rule we classify in the same way the function of an artist and of a skillful artist, of a flute player and of a good flute player. This applies generally where skill is an addition to the function, for a flute player is one who plays the flute and a good flute player one who plays the flute well. If then we place the function of man in a certain kind of life, that is, of an activity of the soul according to reason, it will be proper to a good man to act well and to the best of his ability according to reason. In every case the good of man will consist in action conformable to virtue, and if there are a number of virtues, action conformable to the best and most perfect of them.

127-128

Y. HE BEGINS THE SECOND PART.

Further, it must extend to a complete life. A single swallow or one good day does not mean that spring has come. So one day (of goodness) or a short practice of virtue does not make a man blessed and happy.

129-130

COMMENTARY OF ST. THOMAS

118. After the Philosopher has laid down certain conditions of happiness, he here [2] examines its definition.

Concerning this he does three things. First [2, a] he shows the necessity of this inquiry. Second [2, b], at "Per-

haps this can be done etc.," he searches for the definition of happiness. Third [Lect. XI], at "In this way, therefore etc." (B.1098 a 20), he shows that the definition given is insufficient and further inquiry must be made. He says first that all admit that happiness is the very best of things including the belief that it is the ultimate end and the perfect self-sufficient good. But it is rather obvious that some clarification must be made about happiness to give us a knowledge of its specific nature.

119. Then [2, b], at "Perhaps this," he investigates the definition of happiness in a twofold manner. First [b, i] he inquires into its genus, and second [b, ii], at "The function of man," into its differences. The first point requires a threefold procedure. First [i, x] he shows that happiness consists in an activity of man. Second [i, y], at "Have a weaver etc.," he shows that there is an activity proper to man. Third [i, z], at "What therefore etc.," he shows which is man's proper activity. He says first that the nature of happiness can be made evident by consideration of human activity. When a thing has a proper operation, the good of the thing and its well-being consist in that operation. Thus the good of a flute player consists in his playing, and similarly the good of the sculptor and of every artist in their respective activity. The reason is that the final good of everything is its ultimate perfection, and the form is its first perfection while its operation is the second. If some exterior thing be called an end, this will be only because of an operation by which a man comes in contact with that thing, either by making it as a builder makes a house, or by using or enjoying it. Accordingly, the final good of everything must be found in its operation. If then man has some characteristic activity, his final good which is happiness must consist in this. Consequently, happiness is the proper operation of man.

120. But if happiness is said to consist in something else, either this will be a thing fitting man for an operation of this kind, or it will be something he attains by his operation, as God is said to be the beatitude of man.

121. Then [i, y], at "Have a weaver," he proves in two ways that there is an operation proper to man. He does this first [y, aa] by activities that are incidental to man. It may happen that a man is a weaver, tanner, grammarian, musician, or anything else of the kind. In none of these capacities does he lack a proper operation, for otherwise he would possess them as empty and useless things. Now it is far more unfitting that a thing ordained by divine reason, as is the naturally existent, should be unprofitable and useless than a thing arranged by human reason. Since, therefore, man is a being possessing a natural existence, it is impossible that he should be by nature without a purpose, or a proper operation. There is then a proper operation of man no less than of the abilities that are incidental to him. The reason is that everything, either natural or acquired by art, exists by means of its form which is a principle of some operation. Hence as each thing has a proper existence by its form so also does it have a proper operation.

122. Second [y, bb], at "If the eye," he proves the same truth by means of the human members. We must consider that the same mode of operation is found in the whole and in the parts of man, because, as the soul is the act of the whole body, so certain powers of the soul are acts of certain parts of the body, as sight is of the eye. But each part of man has a proper operation; for example, the operation of the eye is seeing; and of the hand, touching; and of the feet, walking; and so of the other parts. We conclude, therefore, that some operation proper to man as a whole exists.

123. Then [i, z], at "What therefore," he explores the nature of the operation proper to man. Now it is evident that each thing has an operation which belongs to it according to its form. But the form of man is his soul, whose act is life, not indeed life as the mere existence of a living thing, but a special vital operation, for example, understanding or feeling. Hence happiness obviously consists in some vital operation.

124. It cannot be said that man's happiness should arise from any kind of life, for even plants have life. But happiness is sought as a good characteristic of man since it is called a human good. Likewise, happiness must be different from the life of nutrition or growth, which even vegetables possess. From this we take it that happiness does not consist in health, beauty, strength, or great stature, for all these things result from activities of vegetative life.

125. On the step above the life of mere nutrition and growth is the life of sense experience. Again, this is not proper to man but is possessed by horses, oxen, and other animals. In this kind of life, then, happiness does not consist. So we conclude that human happiness is not found in any form of sense perception or pleasure.

126. Beyond the life of assimilation and of sense experience there remains only the life that functions according to reason. This life is proper to man, for he receives his specific classification from the fact that he is rational. Now the rational has two parts. One is rational by participation insofar as it is obedient to and is regulated by reason. The other is rational by nature as it can of itself reason and understand. The rational by nature is more properly called rational because a thing possessed intrinsically is always more proper than a thing received from another. Since, therefore, happiness is the most proper good of man, it more

likely consists in the rational by nature than in the rational by participation. From this we can see that happiness will more properly be found in the life of thought than in a life of activity, and in an act of reason or intellect than in an act of the appetitive power controlled by reason.

127. Then [b, ii], at "The function of man," he inquires into the specific differences of happiness. He divides the inquiry into two parts [ii, x] according to the two specific differences investigated, and he begins the second part [ii, y] at "Further, it must extend etc." First then we know from the premises (126) that the proper function of a man is a psychic activity in accord with reason itself or at least not independent of reason. The latter is mentioned because of the activity of the appetite controlled by reason. Now as a rule we find that the function of a thing generally and the efficient activity of that thing are of the same nature, except that allowance must be made for the part played by skill. For example, the function of a harpist is to play the harp, and the function of a good harpist is to play the harp well. The same is true of all other functions.

128. If, therefore, man's proper role consists in living a certain kind of life, namely, according to the activity of reason, it follows that it is proper to a good man to act well according to reason, and to the very good man or the happy man to do this in superlative fashion. But this belongs to the nature of virtue that everyone who has virtue should act well according to it, as a horse with good training or "virtue" should run well. If, then, the activity of the very good man or the happy man is to act well, in fact to act to the best of his ability according to reason, it follows that the good of man, which is happiness, is activity according to virtue. If there is only one

virtue for man, his activity according to that virtue will be happiness. If there are a number of such virtues for man, happiness will be the activity according to the best of them. The reason is that happiness is not only the good of man but the best good.

129. Then [ii, y], at "Further, it must extend," he inquires into the other specific difference of happiness. Continuity and perpetuity, to some extent, are also required for happiness. These qualities are naturally desired by the appetite of a person endowed with reason, who apprehends not a particular being, as our senses do, but also being in itself. Now being is of itself desirable. It follows then that, as an animal which apprehends a particular being by its senses desires that particular being, so also man appre-

hending being in itself desires it as always existing and not this particular being alone. So continuity and perpetuity, which are not found in the present life, belong to the nature of perfect happiness. Hence perfect happiness cannot be had in this life. However, the happiness attainable here must extend to a complete life, that is through the whole life of man. As the sight of a single swallow or one clear day does not prove that spring is here, so a single good deed is not enough to make a man happy. It arises rather from the continued performance of good deeds throughout his whole life.

130. From this discussion, therefore, it is clear that happiness is a virtue-oriented activity proper to man in a complete life.