

Are the Poor Blessed? *On Happiness and Beatitude*

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Happiness has been so degraded by its identification with “well-feeling” that one can appear spiritually callous in rising to its defense. The prophets who have warned against the pursuit of a subjective happiness have been made welcome, even if their warnings have not been heeded. One only has to draw a line from Augustine through Luther and Pascal, to Kant and Kierkegaard, to Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth to be reminded of how much respect the rejection of happiness has been afforded. Figures such as these are heralded for their tough stance against worldliness, for their unwillingness to conform with the spirit of the age, and for their refusal to compromise with exigencies of temporal fulfillment.

However, the prophetic critique of happiness as an earthly aim can be taken seriously without concluding that what parades under the banner of “the pursuit of happiness” is necessarily self-absorbing. The prophet’s warning can renew our thinking about human happiness by supplying a shift of contexts: from the maintenance of well-feeling to the struggle of forging well-being. Rather than expecting a happy life to offer freedom from suffering and disturbance, we not only accept our vulnerability to misfortune but anticipate the difficulties of seeking order in a disordered world. In short, happiness is seen not primarily as a subjective state of feeling, satisfaction, or consciousness, but an activity of seeking to realize the whole human good. It is the ancient eudaemonistic link of happiness in human

life with the best, or most choiceworthy, that prophets goad us to rediscover.

At the heart of this retrieval of happiness is the willingness to view pain and suffering from a new vantage point. The advocates of subjective well-feeling regard so-called negative affections as destructive of the fragile psychological economy they deem happiness. Those who pursue happiness in its ancient meaning as *eudaimonia* are disposed to accept some obstacles and suffering as constitutive of seeking the good itself. Moral heroism is often met with scorn and misunderstanding. At the same time, moral failure and disappointment can return us to the spiritual sources we have come to ignore. The loss of external goods, even goods of the body, can do the same. Finally, those who seek happiness in human realization also understand that every aspect of the temporal good contains its tragic pitfalls: we can lose wealth, health, friendship, and even moral virtue against our will.

However, to view suffering as constitutive of happiness raises another danger: the danger of pessimism subverting our concern for the *whole* human good. The restoration of happiness as a worthy aim begins by exposing its desire for a bubble of immediacy which protects the self from itself and from suffering of others. But this recommendation, which seems like such good sense, can be distorted. It can result in wishes that run contrary to the fundamental principle of friendship and neighborly love, wishing the good for others.

While it is also obvious to anyone that suffering can and really does cripple us, it is not always instructive or redemptive. Consider the import of the Beatitudes: we are told that the poor, the hungry, and the persecuted are “blessed” (*Matthew* 5:1–11). These passages appear to ratify the connection between suffering and the final end of life. How could such wisdom invite distortion? The reason is that to say “Blessed are the poor” outside the theological context of grace and repentance is to state a maxim with cruel social implications. What results when this principle is applied in the political sphere? Should we be less disturbed by presence of an economic underclass, taking consolation from the fact that their poverty blesses them? Is it one thing to maintain that suffering is constitutive of a happy life, yet quite another to say that all suffering is a blessing, even in view of eternal happiness. This line of reasoning, it will be argued, ignores the distinction between ends of this life and the next, as well as the tragic dimension of both.

II

It seems strange, in the first place, to mention happiness and suffering in the same breath. We all know that suffering comes regardless of what we think about it, or what framework we place it in. Even those possessed of the prophetic spirit about these matters must admit that the idea of happiness naturally aligns itself with pleasure and other states of well-feeling, not pain. This association is not a philosophical or a theological mistake; it does not necessarily lead to hedonism or utilitarianism. The enjoyment of pleasure, as Aristotle has said, is necessary for the virtues to be deeply embedded.¹ Given ordinate desires, pleasure and enjoyment can indicate the possession of something good. The mistake, according to Aristotle, comes when we ignore the object of pleasure and the activities giving rise to pleasure, and treat pleasure as a value in itself.² As Callicles reminded Socrates, enjoyments can arise from the grain of any character: it is getting what one wants that reaps the reward of satisfaction.³

Now although pleasure more quickly comes to mind when we imagine happiness, once we turn our attention to the question of the objects and activities constitutive of a happy life, distress comes into view. Socrates himself left a powerful image of this association with his image of the leaky jars.⁴ A good life holds on to its satisfactions because they share in the durability of virtue; a bad life enjoys its conquests, but not for very long. But it was Augustine who, in the *City of God*, challenges the entire tradition of classical eudaemonism by arguing that pagans sought the happy life as an idol to be worshipped in the place of God.⁵ His own prophetic critique of happiness arises out of a meditation on his life, as he says in the *Confessions*: “I loved the happy life, *but I feared to find it in your abode*, and I fled from it, even as I sought it.”⁶ For him, a basic human infirmity subverts all human attempts to follow the simple and the wise injunction to seek happiness without idolatry.⁷

¹*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a12–21.

²*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1174a14–1174b.

³*Gorgias*, 491e5–492c.

⁴*Gorgias*, 493d5–494a5.

⁵*City of God*, 19.1.

⁶*Confessions*, 6.11 (Ryan translation).

⁷In “The Happy Life” Augustine asks if “Everyone who possesses what he wants is happy?” His mother Monica answers, “If he wishes and possesses good things, he is happy; if he desires

The substance of his critique, then, has two poles: not only are we wrong about the object of our happiness, but we are also naturally disposed, because of original sin, toward embracing something less and treating it as final. Ordinate desire, therefore, requires both an appropriate object and a will to suffer the loss of familiar delectations. While we are in the habit of seeking to satisfy an infinite desire with finite objects, we are cut off from anything that Augustine, or any Christian in the pre-modern tradition, would call true happiness.

Since imperfection is unavoidable, no aspect of our terrestrial journey to that blessedness can be called happy, with the exception of our hope.⁸ The suffering of the present life makes it impossible for any life to fulfill the eudaemonistic criteria of completeness and self-sufficiency. Augustine's religious reconsideration of *beatitudo* and *felicitas* lead him to add spiritual distress to the suffering of misfortune. This is due to four factors: 1) resistance to relinquishing entrenched delights; 2) guilty awareness of falling short, i.e., sin; 3) imperfection attendant even to the most sanctified life; and 4) the "undergoing," or suffering, of divine help. This is a far cry from the happy life free from all regret and repentance found in Cicero.⁹ What these meanings of suffering have in common is a description of disproportion in an individual's being and the self-awareness often belonging to those states. Suffering, therefore, can be for good or ill, depending on the nature of the disproportion. If persons suffer by receiving from another an ability beyond their own power, then the suffering is beneficial. If the suffering evinces a diminished potency, as in blindness or deafness, it is destructive.

Augustine's one qualification in his rejection of earthly happiness—that one can participate in happiness in this world through the virtue of hope—might seem to have foreshadowed the emergence of psychological happiness. Hope, for him, is not simply an unfounded attitude; hope is a belief, is a knowledge of sorts, that good will lie in the future. So, from an Augustinian point of view, subjective adjustment is not enough for happiness. His suggestion that hope is the last vestige of happiness, once its object has been transposed to

evil things—no matter if he possesses them—he is wretched"; see, translation by Ludwig Schopp (St. Louis, Missouri: B. Herder Book Co., 1974), p. 56.

⁸*City of God*, 19.20.

⁹*Tusculan Disputation*, 5.18.

eternity, can be misconstrued as an invitation to pursue happiness as a matter of psychological training. Augustine rejects pagan eudaemonism as idolatry, but he retains its conception of happiness as well-being.

It is easy to see that with the object of happiness, God, being placed out of reach in this life, human self-consciousness would offer itself as the last domain for the possession of a good which could be called happiness.¹⁰ Augustine's critique of happiness has been described as the problem of consciousness and satisfaction, in particular, as the inability to achieve an integration of satisfactions in this life. In short, the inability of terrestrial experience to satisfy the eudaemonistic criterion of wholeness. Thus, Augustine, it can be said, unintentionally set the scene for the dominant value of well-feeling in modernity by eliminating all the other options.

The idea of earthly happiness at the end of the Patristic period was rejected in favor of a belief in a transcendent object and the obstacle of informed desire. Helped by its strong ratification in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, this rejection stood unchallenged until the twelfth-century when discussions of "imperfect happiness" began to appear, probably in response to the earliest Latin translations of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹¹

III

For Aquinas human imperfection became a qualifier of happiness, not a destroyer. This challenge to Augustine's other-worldliness, made possible by the Aristotelian revival, was inspired in Aquinas by his teacher Albertus Magnus who commented on the whole of the *Ethics*. The admittedly modest notion of earthly happiness found in Aquinas's

¹⁰Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought from Augustus to Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 389–92.

¹¹See the series of articles by Antony J. Celano: "The Concept of Worldly Beatitude in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987), pp. 215–226; "Act of the Intellect or Act of the Will: The Critical Reception of Aristotle's Idea of Human Perfection in the 13th and Early 14th Centuries," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen age* 65 (1990), pp. 93–119; "The Understanding of the Concept of Felicitas in the Pre-1250 Commentaries on the *Ethica Nicomachea*," *Medioevo* 12 (1986), pp. 29–53; "Peter of Auvergne's Questions on Books I and II of his *Ethica Nicomachea*: A Study," "The <<Finis Hominis>> in the Thirteenth-Century Commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire de moyen age* (1986), pp. 23–53.

writings comes as a much-needed counterbalance to the Augustinian dualism, especially in the realm of politics. Though in his treatments of happiness Aquinas cites Augustine and Boethius on the lack of earthly happiness, he proceeds in an almost off-handed way with his proposal of a *beatitudo imperfecta*, seemingly unaware of the significance of his distinction.

Fully aware of the tendency to idolize temporal goods, Aquinas nonetheless includes them in earthly happiness, without any of the dramatic warnings typical of Augustine. For Aquinas the wholeness of the human good remains what it is, even in the face of possible idolatry. Aristotelian external goods and bodily goods, the subject of so much controversy among the classical schools, are reinstated as necessary to earthly happiness.¹² Their necessity as instrumental goods, serving the goods of the soul, is not treated as optional. Health, for example, helps secure higher goods in life, such as knowledge. His treatment of temporal happiness as a mixed concept, i.e., different goods, is always carefully subsumed to eternal beatitude. There are not two final ends, but one. Even with an explicit alternative of the true *summum bonum*, Aquinas shapes his account of earthly happiness with an integrity of its own.

It is legitimate to question whether turning the spotlight on this theme accords with Aquinas's intentions. After all, he directly alludes to the Augustinian rejection of pagan eudaemonism. So any reconstruction of *beatitudo imperfecta* must be carried out in the shadow of the prophetic critique, or it ignores Aquinas's own use of Augustine's authority.

To accomplish this it is not enough to interpret just the relevant texts. They must be enriched by related themes in Aquinas's thought itself and in the work of his later interpreters. There are important aspects of Aquinas's view of earthly happiness that are not developed; they must be drawn out. Aquinas thought that he was reserving a place in his ethics for Aristotle's *eudaimonia* while he was obviously superseding it with the beatitude of the beatific vision. It seems that Aquinas' attention was so strongly focused on shaping the immeasurably larger context of happiness that he did not notice the extent to which it was reshaping the Aristotelian nucleus.

¹²ST., I-II, 4, 5 & 7.

Aquinas's use of the concept "imperfect happiness" is a deliberately minimal notion set beneath the maximal conception of the beatific vision. It is minimal in the sense that Aquinas is willing to predicate happiness of a life less than perfectly actualized in the presence of God, a happiness that can be gained and lost. Since pagans are capable of it, imperfect happiness can be acquired through the exercise of natural powers, unaided by divine grace.¹³ It is based mainly on the exercise of practical reason but at its most perfect it is contemplative.¹⁴ The classical primacy of contemplation in happiness remains but in a qualified way.

Most startling, however, is that Aquinas predicates happiness of lives perhaps destined for eternal damnation. This fact reveals the distance that Aquinas has moved away from the theories of the classical eudaemonists and their criteria of completeness, self-sufficiency, and choiceworthiness. Rather than an all-or-nothing state, Aquinas conceives happiness across a sliding scale of act and potency: "a thing is perfect in so far as it is actual."¹⁵ Earthly happiness can be called "the happiness of the journey" toward the human good. The operation or activity which is a happy life exists in tensive relation to the end being sought.

Aquinas considers the ends of human life as twofold. To say that the human end is twofold is not to say that these are separate; they are related as last to proximate. It is crucial to notice that the two types of happiness differ in species: imperfect happiness is an imperfect operation subject to man's natural power taking its species from its object which is an imperfect good.¹⁶ The difference between the perfect good (God) and the imperfect good (the universal good) also distinguishes the ends of human law and divine law.¹⁷ But it remains what Aquinas calls a *participation* in the sovereign good which does not destroy the nature of temporal happiness. The notion

¹³ST., I-II, 5, 5c.

¹⁴ST., I-II, 3, 5c.

¹⁵ST., I-II, 3, 2c. Also, "Since happiness signifies some final perfection; according as various things capable of happiness can attain to various degrees of perfection, so there be various meanings applied to happiness" (ST., I-II, 3, 2, ad 4); "Because when a man begins to make progress in the acts of the virtues and gifts, it is hoped that he will arrive at perfection, both as a wayfarer, and as a citizen of the heavenly kingdom" (ST., I-II, 69, 2c).

¹⁶ST., I-II, 5, ad 3.

¹⁷ST., I-II, 98, 1c.

of participation, therefore, insures the connections of the proximate to the final end.¹⁸

Given these distinctions, temporal happiness can consist of roughly four kinds: the active and contemplative pagan type and the active and contemplative Christian type: the former measured by prudence, the latter by charity. What complicates any kind of division is that any typology can be subdivided in terms of act and potency, as the life of charity can be enriched even further by the infused gifts and beatitudes. The diversity of the happy life on earth resembles the degrees of beatitude of the blessed in heaven.

The most significant aspect of imperfect happiness to be underscored is that it is primarily an act of willing, or love, rather than an act of knowing. The reasons given explicitly by Aquinas for this are two: 1) imperfect happiness consists first and principally as an operation of the practical intellect directing human actions and passion;¹⁹ and 2) in this life the will can gain a closer relation to the good than the intellect.²⁰ Although the presence of the other virtues is necessary to support the activity of contemplation, the summit of imperfect happiness, this role is not solely instrumental. The virtues establish an ordinate relation of all human desires to the good.

Still, there is a tension between loving and knowing in earthly happiness. Aquinas and other medievals addressed this issue under the rubric of whether or not happiness consists in an act of the intellect or of the will. Aquinas uses this debate to show that terrestrial happiness is a kind of loving, but not one that rejects the demands of finality in the name of individual freedom. Aquinas's view of imperfect happiness, in spite of his claims about contemplation, can also explain how the happy life remains *in via* and in a tensive passion toward the final end.

¹⁸ST., I-II, 5, 3, ad 2. For the same reason he calls the act of wisdom is a beginning or participation of future happiness (I-II, 66, 5, ad 2).

¹⁹"Therefore the last and perfect happiness, which we await in the life to come, consists entirely in contemplation. But imperfect happiness, such as can be had here, consists first and principally, in an operation of the practical intellect directing human actions and passions, as stated in *Ethics*. x 7, 8" (ST., I-II, 3, 5c). This argument is to be distinguished from the highest form of imperfect happiness which is contemplation (ST., I-II, 3, 5c).

²⁰"Love ranks above knowledge in moving, but knowledge precedes love in attaining" (ST., I-II, 3, 4, ad 4). The final end is present to us, as in Augustine, through the infused virtue of hope: "But sometimes it is possible to attain it, yet it is raised above the capacity of the attainer, so that he cannot have it forthwith; and this is the relation of one that hopes, to that which he hopes for, and this relation alone causes a search for the end" (ST., I-II, 4, 3c).

There is no doubt, however, that Aquinas would claim the “intellectualism” that is so often laid at his feet. If we look at the insistence of Aquinas on the importance of the intellect in happiness, we notice not only his insistence on a human fulfillment that must somehow satisfy our rational nature as *homo sapiens* but also that the intellect guides the will to a happiness that is true rather than false. The will moves toward an end presented to by the intellect. The intellect is present to the will in all its willing, supplying a vision for the will to love. Aquinas repeatedly argued that the will’s object, as supplied by the intellect, is naturally prior to its act.²¹ Thus, his explanations of happiness usually begin with the particular need of a rational nature to know and moves to a consideration of the relation of the will to the intellect, emphasizing the role of the intellect in discriminating between the will’s choices.

As Thomas argues in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, all forms of happiness from the perspective of the will alone look identical.²² Like Aristotle, Boethius, and Augustine before him, Thomas recognizes that competing forms of happiness bear a strong resemblance when regarded only in respect to the passions and to the delights each elicits. The will moves toward the absent good or rejoices in present, whether the good is apparent or real. But Aquinas holds the intellect responsible for distinguishing between true and false happiness, which the will is not equipped to do. It is precisely the dynamism of the moving toward the “absent good” that gives happiness in this life its special character.

However, the intellect can claim a superior mode of possessing its object, knowledge. The will must go outside itself for what it does not yet have, while the knower contains the known within himself. And, so, for Aquinas this more intimate mode of possession—actual subjective attainment—qualifies intellection as the primary activity of happiness. The will cannot possess anything on its own: in Pascal’s terms it is the power that hunts rather than captures. Thus, when St. Thomas says that “happiness is in the one who is happy,” his intent was not to make happiness wholly subjective, but to stress that only through rationally directed activity can we find a place of happy rest.²³

²¹*ST.*, I-II, 3, 4, ad 3.

²²*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3. 2. 105.

²³*ST.*, I-II, 2, 2, sed contra.

In this life the intellect cannot fully possess the only object that can satisfy its natural desire, God.²⁴

For all his intellectualism Aquinas was extremely careful in not claiming more for human knowledge in this life than could be maintained in the light of sin, grace, and our need for the theological virtues. In fact, it is under the force of these theological considerations that Aquinas gives his account of earthly happiness a strong amorous tinge. Here he diverges significantly with Aristotle because the object of eternal happiness, God Himself, cannot be found within the realization of any human potency but beyond it. The reason for this follows directly from his own dictum that in this life love can attain a closer relation to a higher good than the intellect. Thus, it is in terms of the loving and of the partial realizing of the absent good that the activity of earthly happiness must be described.

IV

With this more dynamic characterization of earthly happiness, Aquinas's turn toward modernity is obvious. He moves beyond the Augustinian happiness in hope. He also moves within range of the prophetic critique. It could now be asked whether Aquinas is tempting the moral fates by reintroducing earthly happiness? In response it can be said that he surely knew its temptations, its utter centrality. After all, he depicted the fall of Lucifer as a willful choice of happiness

²⁴Although intellect is essentially superior to will, it is not superior in relation to God, particularly in this life since we lack the "light of glory" through which we can gain knowledge of God in eternity. Intellectual apprehension of God necessarily scales Him down, while the approach of love working outwardly from our intellectual appetite preserves the nobility of his Being. Thus Aquinas could also argue that the love of God is better than knowledge of God," [*ST.*, I-II, 82, a. 3] explaining that it better to love higher things but better to know the things which are lower.

This does not present a problem in understanding Thomas's repeated insistence on the primacy of the intellect in the Beatific Vision. The emphasis on the intellectual act of seeing God affirms grace meeting the inclination of rational human nature through God's own illumination of the mind by the *lumen gloriae*. By His act of love God relieves human love of its task of outstripping the limited intellect. In making Himself immediately known through His essence, not by any likeness of an intelligible species, God rescinds a portion of the primacy that love enjoys in imperfect happiness. God's accommodation of Himself to the rational creature He has enable the mind to satisfy its hunger for vision and knowledge of the first cause (*ST.*, I, 12, 2 & 5). Love and joy are each perfected as a result of what God has accomplished for the human mind (*ST.*, I-II, 11, 2, ad 3).

before God.²⁵ In the prologue to the *Prima Secundae*, he argued that the deviation from eternal life with God is nothing less than a rejection of the object of happiness.²⁶

From an Augustinian viewpoint Aquinas seems to be setting up an idol with his view of imperfect happiness. Is Aquinas guilty? This question gets us closer to the point of the prophet's critique. We have already seen that Augustine himself would predicate happiness of Christians in terms of their hope. It can be inferred from this that he, and the other prophets, would not object to Aquinas calling Christians "happy" if they participate in God by the bond of charity. After all, Catholics come to the altar at every Mass upon hearing the words "Happy are those who are called to His Supper." It goes without saying, of course, that we are far away from the common parlance of happiness which concerns itself only with measuring the degree of subjective well-feeling.

What about Aquinas's imperfect pagan happiness? At its best it is the Aristotelian life of moral virtue supported by the basic goods of the body and fortune. How could we call a life happy which may never know and love its true final end? At such an assertion the prophet must object that we only encourage the making of idols—whether virtue itself, even worse the infused gift of charity, or the more likely candidates of wealth, power, and pleasure.

And it can be said on behalf of the prophet that the entire history of happiness supports his critique—the gradual elimination of virtue from the equation and, as a consequence, the ordering of goods without reference to the genuine final end. In the place of God various candidates have emerged to claim the title of *summum bonum*: freedom, power, wealth, psychological satisfaction. All of these idols have come to inhabit the American pursuit of happiness and its imitators. Given this historical perspective, perhaps Augustine, not Aquinas, was right.

Jacques Maritain, and other contemporary Thomists like Yves R. Simon, drew upon Aquinas to construct a political theory in which the right to the pursuit of happiness is seen as integral to the political order.

²⁵"But he [Lucifer] desired resemblance with God in this respect,—by desiring, as his last end of beatitude, something which he could attain by the virtue of his own nature, turning his appetite away from supernatural beatitude, which is attained by God's grace" (*ST.*, I, 63, 3c).

²⁶*ST.*, I-II, prologus.

When you know that we are all made for blessedness, death no longer holds any terror; but you cannot become resigned to the oppression and enslavement of your brothers, and you aspire, for the earthly life of humanity, to a state of emancipation consonant with the dignity of this life.²⁷

Is this perspective vulnerable to a powerful rebuttal? Since we are obliged to pursue happiness as the fulfillment of human nature, should it either be banished from the city and saved for what is truly ultimate? From the prophet's perspective any worthy pursuit of happiness entails a life of suffering love, a life that places the well-being of others first, since the word "happiness" has precisely the opposite effect and connotation. Such a life, it is argued, is made possible when people no longer place their sights upon success in this world.

Thus, the prophet here has much in common with conservative religious thinkers who have objected to the political association of Catholicism with democracy and, by implication, with the "pursuit of happiness."²⁸ Happiness, they argue, as total human fulfillment, promises too much in the political order. For example, it stimulates an invasion of privacy and gives government too much power, too much of a mandate, and leads to utopianism. Indeed, the prophet can remind us of how it helped justify a theocracy; now it can lead to different forms of ideological domination, all in the name of promoting human happiness.

So, the prophet and the politician can each denounce happiness: the former because it sets our sights too low; the latter because it sets the sights of government too high. It is thus no surprise that these prophets and these politicians have often been allies and have even belonged to the same church and to the same political party.

Although one can sympathize with elements of both the religious and the political critique, a moderate account of earthly happiness

²⁷Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), pp. 35–36. See also the 1986 San Francisco, Ignatius Press edition of this book, p. 44. Readers of Maritain will recognize this remark as typical of his social thought. See also Yves R. Simon, "The Pursuit of Happiness and the Lust for Power" in *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, Revised edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 288–296.

²⁸For example, critics of Maritain's program of *Integral Humanism* and his political legacy; see Gerry Lessard, "The Critics of Integral Humanism: A Survey" in *Thomistic Papers*, vol. 3, ed. Leonard Kennedy (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1987), pp. 117–140.

must be defended. First, it challenges the dualistic separation of the cities of God and man by viewing human beings, as Aquinas does, as being wayfarers, from the beginning of life on a journey to God. For the *homo viator*, happiness or unhappiness is always in process of becoming. The happiness sought in this life, through the exercise of reason and the guide of virtue, is a participation in perfect happiness. This distinction is not a contemporary twist, nor an attempt to force Aquinas to speak in a more modern idiom. This is Aquinas's own image employed to describe both pagan and Christian happiness in this life, a continuity upheld by the notion of the resurrected body.

Secondly, the love of neighbor or friendship requires our wishing the whole good for others.²⁹ This wish includes goods of the soul, goods of fortune, goods of the body—in short, all aspects of our well-being encompassed by political happiness, i.e., earthly life. To wish someone to lack any aspect of that well-being falls short of love's full obligation. Aquinas's emphasis on the nature of earthly happiness as loving and achieving the real human good opposes the tendency of the well-intentioned prophets to misapply "blessed are the poor" to the political sphere.

However, before moving to the next point, it is necessary to look at an objection from Aquinas himself. He says that we are bound by charity to hate sin;³⁰ that the love of neighbor does not extend to sin and lack of justice; and that hatred of fault is equivalent to desire for good.³¹ Hatred of what is evil is simply the flipside of loving the good; it indicates a desire to remove impediments to a good life. The question then becomes what if those impediments are external goods of various forms: wealth, honor, and so forth.

This issue arises in another context where Aquinas asks, "whether the Church should receive those who revert from heresy?" His answer poses a serious problem. He argues that the Church extends its charity to all, including its enemies, by wishing and working for their good. The good is twofold: spiritual and temporal. According to the spiritual good, the Church can receive them—for their salvation. We are not required by charity to will the temporal goods

²⁹*ST.*, I-II, 26, 4c.

³⁰*ST.*, II-II, 25, 11c.

³¹*ST.*, II-II, 34, 3c.

except in relation to the eternal salvation of them and others. Hence if the presence of one of these goods in one individual might be an obstacle to eternal salvation in many, we are not bound out of charity to wish such a good to that person, rather should we desire him to be without it, both because eternal salvation takes precedence of temporal good, and because the good of the many is to be preferred to the good one.”³²

The only way to meet this objection directly is to point out that this comment, and others like it, are made within a theological context. They belong to judgments made with the benefit of charity. Thus, they are not suitable as recommendations in the political sphere, in the domain of earthly happiness. In other words, Aquinas’s words do not warrant our wishing that the mass of humanity remain in poverty so that they can avoid the temptation to greed.

Such judgments in charity are far too difficult to make, much like judgments about happiness, to be the province of the philosopher and the citizen. They require greater intimacy than that of acquaintances and fellow citizens. Most importantly, employing such a maxim politically ignores the distinction between the end of natural law and the end of divine law.³³ The Beatitudes are instituted, according to Aquinas, for removing the obstacle of “sensual happiness”—excess riches and bodily pleasure, inordinate passions³⁴—but these are blessings that are in part voluntary, not imposed, as a spiritual poverty is voluntary.³⁵

The third reason for defending imperfect happiness is the meaning of political friendship; it demands that we wish for prosperity, not suffering. While we know from experience that suffering may lead to God, we should also remember that it leads to despair and cynicism: suffering can break and cripple as well as redeem. There is no way to say in advance what will cripple any more than we can predict what will redeem. Too often, however, prospective wishes are being made on the basis of a retrospective appraisal. In other words, we see that suffering has reoriented our life in the past, so we wish suffering for someone who we think needs a similar reorientation. Such wishes can

³²*ST.*, II-II, 34, 3c.

³³*ST.*, I-II, 98, 1c.

³⁴*ST.*, I-II, 69, 3, ad 6.

³⁵*ST.*, I-II, 69, 3, ad 6.

become formulated into informal principles about the various lessons that suffering can teach.

Boethius makes this point when Lady Philosophy states that God imparts suffering and joy in the degree that most benefits each.³⁶ The way any individual is going to respond to good or bad fortune is a matter of mystery. Because of this unpredictability, joy must be seen as the better bet for leading people to their proper end. After all, human beings were made for joy, the fruit of the beatific vision. Our wishes should be for a reorientation to what is good, and leave the choice of means to a greater wisdom.

It is easy for those inspired by the religious vision of providentially ordered suffering to assume the place of active agents in the divine economy. The argument that punishment makes a wicked person happier goes back to Socrates.³⁷ The coherence of the position depends upon the identification of the human good, and therefore of happiness, with virtue alone. Boethius employs the same argument but broadens its implications to include the whole of our lives with God, applying the paddle, as it were, when needed.³⁸ Like those of Socrates, his claims are large: the wicked are happier when punished, the victims are happier than the criminals, and the actions of evil people actually made all people better.

Do such theological convictions provide license for any kind of intentional participation at a political level in such an economy? In other words, does a confidence in the outcome of punishment provide us free hand in handing out some of our own to those we think deserving? It is not my intention to address the issue of those sought by society in punishing lawbreakers, in spite of the fact that rehabilitation is still one of those stated outcomes. However, the manifest danger of bringing the weight of religious authority to our attitudes toward punishment as well as suffering must be recognized. Certainly, Lady Philosophy is correct to instruct the despairing Boethius that there is something to be learned from his suffering,³⁹ but to turn this bit of common sense into a generalized attitude toward the material goods

³⁶*The Consolation of Philosophy*, 4, prose 6.

³⁷*Gorgias*, 476–478.

³⁸*The Consolation of Philosophy*, 4, prose 4.

³⁹*The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2, prose 6.

of life is to mistake the political order for the religious, and to mistake human agency for God's.

Thus, fourthly, a revealed knowledge of original and actual sin, or even our common sense knowledge of human weakness, should not make us wish for suffering, e.g., poverty, in order to compensate for the inability of the city to teach virtue. Again, to build one's case on the cases of a few individuals who have responded heroically to misfortune is to ignore the tragedies of ordinary life. Once again, friendship does not counsel short-cuts, especially those based upon the efforts of an extraordinary few.

Neither should such a knowledge narrow the heart against sinners, which, of course, includes ourselves. One prophetic spirit has criticized the increased social involvement of the Church, as reflected in Maritain's *Peasant of the Garonne*, saying that we have "to choose between the politics of our religion or the religion of our politics."⁴⁰ This statement betrays a misunderstanding of the *politics* of his religion which calls for a full recognition of the relation of all goods to their originating source. Indeed, the advantage of the Catholic tradition over the dissenting traditions is legacy of philosophy which provides a way of mediating the claims of the political and spiritual orders while preserving their integrity. Catholics can, therefore, have a philosophy of politics that does not seek its warrant in the spiritual severity of the proof text.

Fifthly, the fundamental danger of viewing earthly happiness—regarding external goods, bodily goods, and acquired virtues—as irrelevant to Christian happiness is an indifference to real suffering and a retreat into subjective well-feeling, whether religious enthusiasms or bourgeois pig-happiness. The happiness of well-feeling is one that many of us can afford to extol precisely because we belong to a class that already claims a good share of the material goods that we think *other* people do not really need because of *our* religious beliefs.

This is the danger of using an ascetic model of spirituality to inform our criticisms of attempts at, for example, financial success, one instance of the struggle to attend to real needs, to the built-in teleologies of human nature. To think the poor blessed in this manner is precisely what Maritain warns against when he says that the Christian

⁴⁰Thomas Molnar, "Seed and Harvest," *Modern Age* (Summer, 1968), p. 319.

must not “take for his pillow the very love which he has received.”⁴¹ The divide separating political happiness and earthly infused happiness is huge compared to that which distinguishes the latter and eternal happiness. Since the difference is one of species, the political realm does not have to be treated as if it were *only* the staging area of eternal salvation.

As Maritain writes, in his own reflections on the eighth beatitude, the saints know why they suffer; “they know that persecution is good for them.”⁴² There are those persons, however, for whom persecution follows in the pursuit of earthly justice. He sees a common purpose uniting them:

The latter threatens to drive a man out of his mind unless it is accompanied by the former; the former requires and awakens and sanctifies the latter. How could men who daily ask that the will of the Father be done on earth as it is in heaven, not thirst after justice on earth and within the human community? So long as abysmal poverty and slavery and injustice exist in the lives of men and in their mortal societies, there will be no rest for the Christian.⁴³

Maritain recognizes that there is some reorienting purpose to suffering of this kind. Turning to the example of the Jewish Holocaust and other atrocities, he writes, “Blessed are they that suffer persecution . . . these words are not for them. . . .”⁴⁴ This is not the suffering, in short, recommended by the Beatitudes; this is blind, inarticulate, and involuntary suffering. Although it can be said in faith that this suffering forecasts God’s mercy, who can say that this experience does not break the spirit?

In the throes of death, in the moment when they pass to the other side of the veil and the soul is on the point of leaving a flesh for which the world had no use, is there not yet time enough to say to them: Thou shalt

⁴¹Jacques Maritain, *Intergal Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), p. 44.

⁴²“That Suffer Persecution,” in *A Maritain Reader*, Donald and Idella Gallagher, eds. (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1966), pp. 315–325. First published in *The Commonweal*, 44:26, October 11, 1946, pp. 619–622.

⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 320–321.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 323. Maritain continues, “They did not give up their lives, their lives were taken from them, and under the shadow of horror. They suffered with having wanted to suffer. They did not know they died. Those who know why they die are greatly privileged.”

be with Me in paradise? For them there are no signs, for them hope is stripped bare as they are themselves, for them, to the bitter end, nothing, even from the direction of God, has shone forth in men's eyes.⁴⁵

The beneficence of suffering love is the innermost gesture of our happiness with God, but it is a gesture that also encompasses our neighbors and their desire for happiness both in this world and the next. Thus to defend an ordinate understanding of earthly happiness is no less spiritually earnest than to prophetically denounce it. When the prophet turns away from the miseries of the world to proclaim the eternal vision of God, heed should be paid to Maritain's warning that God can be seen, or not seen, in the face of their neighbors. Indeed, those who wish the whole happiness of their neighbor may be casting their own net of suffering much wider than those who minister solely to the inner spirit.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 324.