On The Sum Total of Human Happiness

James V. Schall S J

"I (Boswell) mentioned that I was afraid I put into my journal too many little incidents. Johnson. 'There is nothing, Sir, too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible..'"

Boswell, *Life of Johnson, 1763.1*

"The perfection of each individual thing considered in itself is imperfect, being a part of the perfection of the entire universe, which arises from the sum total of the perfections of all individual things. And so, *in order that there might be some remedy for this imperfection*, another kind of perfection is to be found in created things. It consists in this: that the perfection belonging to one thing, is found in another. This is the perfection of the knower insofar as he knows.... Hence, as it is said in *On the Soul* III that the soul is in a certain way all things since its nature is such that it can know all things. In this way it is possible for the perfection of the entire universe to exist in one thing. The ultimate perfection achievable by the soul, then, according to the philosophers, is to have inscribed in it the entire order and causes of the universe. And they also held that this is to be the ultimate end of man. [We, however, hold that it consists in the vision of God, for, as Gregory says, 'What is there that they do not see, who see Him Who sees all things?']"

Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate, 2, 2.*

"Knowing is the creature's best chance to overcome the law of nonbeing, the wretchedness inflicted upon it by the real diversity of 'that which is' and 'to be.' A thing which is not God cannot *be* except at the cost of *not being what it is not.* It cannot be except by being deprived of indefinitely many forms and perfections. To this situation knowledge, according to St. Thomas's words, is a *remedy*, inasmuch as every knowing subject is able to have, over and above its own forms, the form of other things."

Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority.*[2]

I

The most famous book that talks to us of precisely "human" happiness, the proper happiness of man in so far as he is man in this world, is, no doubt, Aristotle's *Ethics*. Here he tells us, as if looking into our own souls in our own time, that everything we do, all the particular, singular things in which our actions exist and which constitute the outlines of our lives, we do because we seek to be happy by the doing of these actions. This seeking to be happy in each particular act is what unites all the things that do exist in so far as they are touched by human minds and hands. All human beings reveal the same curious variety of longings in their origins. The world, in other

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words, is full of things that came to be because someone sought to be happy and did something to attain this purpose, albeit not always the right thing or the best thing..

Aristotle next explains to us that we can have differing ideas of that in which this happiness consists, but even here, the general diversity is not so great when we come to examine it. The great variations that seem at first sight evident in human searchings can be subsumed under four general headings. Some think that happiness is money, some pleasure, some honour or power, and still others think it consists in human contemplation of truth, of knowing the things *that are*. Happiness, Aristotle tells us; is an activity, it is an activity of our highest faculties on the highest objects in a complete life, but it does not exclude any activity's worth nor does it deny the wide diversity of human things, good and bad, that occurs as a result of this seeking.

At first sight, this explanation will sound very exalted, perhaps abstract. Moreover, it seems odd, as the classical writers maintained, to claim that only a few philosophers can, in the proper sense, be happy, since most folks most of the time seem to be off pursuing money, honors, or pleasures, all good things in a way, but not the highest things. But in attributing this more perfect happiness to a few philosophers, the classical writers were merely going by what they observed. Yet, we wonder about ordinary things, the small things in the overall order of things, the things that we attribute to everyone, even philosophers, in their normal lives.

In Tolkien's *The Two Towers*, after the fellowship is broken, the dwarf Gimli complains to Aragorn, the Strider, that the Lady Galadriel had not given them the same magic light that she had given to Frodo. Aragorn replies that it is more needed by Frodo for his is the main Quest concerning the first ring. Then Aragorn adds, "ours is but a small matter in the great deeds of this time."[3] Here, as it were, I am concerned as much about the "small matters" as about "the great deeds." At times, I think the small matters are much more difficult to explain than the great deeds, though the central issue is how we have deeds, great or small, to explain. And though it is implied that by Aragorn that there is a difference between great things and small things, we get the distinct impression that the small things are still of great importance.

The classical reflections on happiness as our highest end seem, at first sight at least, to leave aside much of what actually happens to us, the small things, if you will. Our lives are filled with a myriad of differing activities and deeds. We see, hear, encounter many, many things, strange things. We forget how easily the familiar things once appeared to be strange to us. We tend to forget their strangeness because we have become familiar with them. Even Aristotle said that we can spend little time on the highest things,

though we should spend as much time as we can on them. Many things "have" to be done that we would just as soon, if we could, avoid — from brushing our teeth to mowing our lawns to locking our houses at night. Surely, we do not want to be snobs or elitists, to develop a philosophy of only the "highest things." The Lord told us to "behold the lilies of the field, how they grow." He did not tell us to learn how to use fertilizer or how to irrigate to improve plant growth or yield. Pioneer Hybrids and de Kalb had to figure this latter out by themselves.

This encouragement to pay attention to the beauty of the simple things that grow — we could say the same of apple trees, or little kittens, as we do of the lilies of the field – seems to be part of the purpose of revelation, as if to say, in principle at least, that to miss anything on the way to knowing *all that is* turns out to be a mistake. Chesterton once remarked that "there is no such thing as an uninteresting subject; the only thing that can exist is an uninterested person."[4] He hints here that what is brought out of nothingness, just any particular thing, is itself somehow related to what can cause existence in the first place. All things are unified in this common origin. Sometimes we also hear that we should seek the *unum necessarium*, the one thing necessary, the highest thing, and we should.

But what I want to suggest here is that we should also look to and wonder about the infinity of things that are quite unnecessary, however glorious or interesting they might be. One of the most remarkable things about creation, besides the fact that it is at all, is the number of apparently unnecessary things in it, almost as if our origins are not at all in parsimony but in an abundance that we are almost loathe to admit. We can almost reverse Occam's famous razor which maintained that *entia non sunt multiplicanda nisi per necessitatem* – beings are not to be multiplied unless by necessity. The fact is, things are indeed multiplied almost as if necessity had nothing to do with it. And yet this abundance, even in its incredible particularity, seems to relate to us, to our power of knowing and appreciating. Our mind is called by Aristotle the faculty that is *capax omnium*, a definition about which we do well to reflect with great astonishment. Its very purpose or power relates us to *all that is.*

II

The expression, "the sum total of human happiness," stands in contrast to "the sum total of human misery." We presume that one counterbalances or even overcomes the other. And we are not naive enough, unobservant enough, to deny the reality of human misery, itself something that we can know or know about, something present to us. The "great art of life," Samuel Johnson tells us, is to have as much happiness and as little misery as possible. Johnson recognizes that, very often, our happiness exists,

paradoxically, in the "little" things. And even if he calls man himself "so little a creature," it is because although most lives are unknown to most of the world, still they are lives, still worth living. We are not gods; it is not our destiny to become some other kind of a being besides the specific human being that we are. It is all right, in other words, to be what we are.

In this great art of life, Johnson affirms that small happinesses count, while little miseries hurt. This observation implies that if we be not content in small things, we may likewise miss any contentment in the great ones. No life is composed only of "great things." Small things likewise lead to all things. The explanation of the existence of small things is, be it noted, as mysterious as the existence of the great things — both have their origins in *what is*. The "micro" universe is as difficult to explain as the "macro" universe, though, be it noted, we attempt to do both.

Neither happiness nor misery, moreover, can belong to anyone other than an individual person. We find many existing persons, many kinds of activities in which happiness or misery might be thought to exist. The "greatest happiness to the greatest numbers" is, at first sight, a similar and familiar phrase, yet one fraught with danger. No "greatest" collective being exists to whom we might attribute this "greatest happiness." The universe is so created that happiness is spread out into billions and billions of particular beings who can know it, seek it as properly their own. Happiness does not float around ungrounded outside of particular persons, however much they might be related to one another in justice, love, or friendship. And this "greatest happiness," by some perverse calculations, might be achieved at the expense of the misery of others who do not compose the greatest numbers. The subject that bears happiness or misery is always the individual person in whom the drama of existence is centred.

But no doubt, if we be sane, we want many, not just ourselves, to be happy. Likewise, we want few to be miserable. There is such a thing as sacrificial suffering, but it too is rooted in what, in principle, ought not to be. Yet, part of happiness is in learning how to live through our miseries, or at least to know how misery is related to happiness. In some obscure sense, our miseries also teach us about our happiness. No life will be happiness-guaranteed or misery-free. The "sum total of human happiness" must include little things as well as great things. Human happiness does not simply consist in the "great" things, however much it includes them also. Everything about human life has something of significance attached to it because *all that is* contains something of interest, something the human mind can know. The "sum total of human happiness" is directly related to the fact that all things are good, almost as if that very affirmation is a challenge for us to find it.

But the "sum total of human happiness" remains a curious

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expression none the less. Happiness, we are told by the philosophers, is an activity. Indeed it is an activity of all our capacities on their proper objects. And that about which we are active always reaches to something not ourselves. We are self-insufficient when it comes to our own happiness, as we are self-insufficient when it comes to knowing. While we might want ourselves to be happy, our happiness does not consist in only ourselves. "Man as he is constituted, endowed as he is with a thirst for happiness," Josef Pieper has written,

> cannot have his thirst quenched in the finite realm; and if he thinks or behaves as if that were possible, he is misunderstanding himself, he is acting contrary to his own nature. The whole world would not suffice this "natural" nature of man. If the whole world were given to him, he would have to say, and would say: It is too little. Too little, that is, to "gratify entirely the power of desire," or in other words, too little to make him happy.[5]

This again is the contrast between the one thing necessary and all the other things. In desiring the one thing necessary, the highest things, we do not on that account cease to be interested in the things that in their being are not necessary. They too have a wonder.

One famous definition of hell, indeed, is that hell is to be with ourselves alone with nothing else, forever — a terrifying thought. The highest activity ought not to be, though it can be, in opposition to the lowest activity. There is an order of things. Our being displays or calls forth a harmony of higher and lower that still must be produced in each life. This "calling forth" is indeed what constitutes the drama of each life. Whatever is proper to man belongs to him for what he is. Though there be a diversity of parts and capacities in man, still he is a one, a single being in which this diversity has an order to an end. He is a whole and as such he confronts *all that is*, all that is not himself, all indeed that is himself..

Moreover, as man discovers soon enough, each of his given and proper activities has its own pleasure that is present within the activity, both to encourage us to do the activity and to complete it. The perfection of an activity in a way includes, but is not identical with, its accompanying pleasure. In pleasure there is an abundance and in knowledge there is a superabundance of activity. We can often, at least in intention, separate an activity's purpose from the pleasure that accompanies it. The fact that we can make this separation is one of the reasons why we can err or sin in our activities. We can argue ourselves into following the logic of pleasure and not the logic of the activity's true purpose. But it is not intended to be this way. We are not stoics who think that we must overcome all pleasure or pain in the name of duty. We are rather Aristotelians who think that we must find the purpose of any activity and enjoy the pleasure that naturally

accompanies it when it is done properly. These considerations are important if we are to approach the meaning of the sum total of human happiness.

We can postulate initially that no one will ever experience in himself the "sum total of human happiness," no matter how happy he may be. Yet, we can also postulate that every kind of activity and pleasure is presented in our being. We are a microcosmos in which all levels of being, mineral, vegetative, animal, and sprit exist in us, by nature. Nor does this approach deny the question of what is the highest happiness. Happiness is the activity of the highest faculty on the highest object in a complete life, to repeat Aristotle's definition of it. On the objective side, we need to know as best we can just what is this object to which our highest faculty is ordained. We need to have some estimate about what this object, that is not ourselves, might be. This is why we are given intellect, and with it, philosophy, the quest to know *what is*. This too is why we are given revelation. It is interesting to notice that one of the reasons St. Thomas gives for the possibility that God did in fact reveal things to us is precisely that we might know this highest object in a way much more detailed than we might otherwise know it, though we can know of it in some sense from reason (I-II, 91, 4).

III

"During this interview at Ashbourne, (September 23, 1777)," Boswell wrote, "Johnson and I frequently talked with wonderful pleasure of mere trifles which had occurred in our tour to the Hebrides; for it had left a most agreeable and lasting impression upon his mind."[6] Everything *that is*, that exists, I think, is designed ultimately to leave "a most agreeable and lasting impression" on our minds. Some of the greatest pleasures in things consists in remembering them, almost as if all things have second existences, first what they are, then our recollections of them. Moreover, the limitation of our lives, their time spans of seventy years and "eighty if we are strong," as the Psalm puts it, makes us realize that talking of the "wonderful pleasure of mere trifles" is limited ultimately not by the trifles or by the wonder but because of our own time span, almost as if to say that there is something lacking in our very memories, or perhaps in the expanse of our time, that requires fulfilment.

Those who are familiar with C. S. Lewis' space trilogy are aware, of course, that these novels were not really space fiction but theological considerations on the nature of man in the universe. Several people from Lord Acton to Douglas McArthur and Henry Cardinal Manning are said to have remarked that, "at bottom, all political problems are theological." I suspect that this aphorism is in some sense true also of not only space fiction but of space exploration itself. Stanley Jaki has summed up what

has come to be known as the "anthropomorphic principle": "The physical universe is indeed so lucid in its consistent workings as to suggest that it was tailored from the very start in such a specific way as to call for the eventual rise of man."[7] The shocking thing about the universe is not its size or time but its particularity, its "intelligent design," as it is called. If this be true, reality is rather more "fictitious" than fiction itself. The human race's "purpose" was evidently there from the beginning, as Genesis itself suggests. For it intimates that far from being an "accident," man was indeed "intended" in the very structure of the cosmos. There was a reason for him to exist that not merely added something to the cosmos itself, but explained the universe to itself, as if it were not sufficient for God to have explained it to Himself.

And yet, neither the cosmos nor man was created simply "for itself," but that both might "return" to what brought them forth. When St. Thomas begins the *Prima Secundae* of his *Summa Theologiae*, he talks of how the things that originally proceed from God, of which he spoke in the Prima Pars, return to their origin. He distinguishes those brings that have intelligence and will from those which do not. Only these former can return to God in any proper sense, and hence all other things return through the rational creatures because these latter have the capacity to know being, to know *what is*. Human happiness, then, is no small thing if its very end is the vision of the divine essence and this as a gift. This highest end almost makes it seem superfluous to talk of anything but God. And yet, what we emphasize here are the "small things" – the "other things on the face of the earth," as St. Ignatius called them – in the light of what is indeed the completion of our happiness.

If we read St. Thomas carefully about just what it is that finally defines our happiness, we will be surprised to notice how he describes the human being who in fact can know "whether God exists," even though he may not be fully sure what God is. With the help of revelation, St. Thomas knows that our happiness consists in seeing God "face to face." Stated philosophically, it means that we seek the face of the first cause that explains finite things, including ourselves. Here is how St. Thomas puts it:

> "Intellectus humanus, cognoscens essentiam alicuius effectus creati, non cognoscat de Deo nisi an est; nondum perfectio eius attingit simpliciter ad causam primam, sed remanet ei adhuc naturale desiderium inquirendi causam. Unde nondum est perfecte beatus. Ad perfectam igitur beatitudinem requiritur quod intellectus pertingat ad ipsam essentiam primae causae. Et sic perfectionem suam habebit per unionem ad Deum sicut ad objectum, in quo solo beatitudo hominis consistet...." (I-II, 3, 8).[8]

The human mind, then, does not know God directly. Knowing that created things are limited and not caused by themselves, the human intellect can

know "whether" God exists, that is, that created things cannot cause or explain themselves. Knowing this, however, is perplexing. It is a cause of added unsettlement or intense curiosity. What about the nature of this "first cause?" Once being aware that something is there, it is impossible to rest content simply by knowing that such a cause exists. Yet, how this "union with God" might be possible is not available to the unaided human reason. But nothing is created in vain so that we should expect or anticipate or at least recognized once it is given, a solution, even if it does not arise from our own powers.

"But God does not do things by halves. He wanted to provide his creation with an image of His infinity," Yves Simon has written. He wanted certain creatures at least, in very unequal degrees to be sure but always on an admirable scale, to be infinite in some way, as He is infinite in all ways. But since every creature as it emerges from nothingness is reduced to the measure of its nature, and essentially limited to it, what was left to do was to endow the universe with a certain superabundance that allows privileged creatures to overcome their natural limitations – and even approach a kind of relative infinity – by being able to become in a sense all things. It is this superabundance of creation that makes things spill over into, or, better, radiate ideas. The universe of nature so generously created is at the same time the universe of intentionality, and that is how we are able to know it, and in knowing it imitate the divine infinity.[9]

This passage from Simon is remarkable. What I am interested in here is not so much that man's final end consists in the vision of God face to face, but what is implied by this vision. Some religions or philosophies literally even want to absorb all individual beings into the Godhead, as if there is, in the end, only God. At first sight, it might seem that the knowledge of God absorbs all other interests into itself so that nothing else is needed. And yes, nothing else is needed. *Solus Deus*. Nevertheless, there is something "superabundant" about everything in creation, as if it is made both to be and to be known.

Chesterton, I think, captures the essence of what is at issue here in his book on St. Thomas. The remarkable thing about Christian revelation, Chesterton intimates, is not so much that it is concerned with God, but that God is concerned with everything He creates and so ought we to be. This means that nothing is without interest both in itself and to us. Here is how Chesterton put it:

> He (St. Thomas) was not a person who wanted nothing; and he was a person who was enormously interested in everything. His answer is not so inevitable or simple as some may suppose. As compared with many other saints, and many other philosophers, he was avid in his acceptance of Things; in his hunger and thirst for Things. It was his special spiritual

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> thesis that there really are Things, and not only the Thing; that the many existed as well as the One.[10]

There really are things, and not just "the Thing." It is utterly distorted to want "nothing." We should be "enormously interested in everything." We should hunger and thirst after things. The many things did exist. The sum total of human happiness is located in these principles, in the little things that are there to be known precisely by us.

In this context, let me recall a passage from one of his Sermons, Pope St. Leo the Great observed:

> Dear friends, at every moment *the earth is full of the mercy of God*, and nature itself is a lesson for all the faithful in the worship of God. The heavens, the sea and all that is in them bear witness to the goodness and omnipotence of their Creator, and the marvellous beauty of the elements as they obey him demands from the intelligent creature a fitting expression of its gratitude.[11]

The intelligent creature is to give a "fitting expression of its gratitude." For what? For precisely the reality and the goodness of things according to their manner. The gratitude follows on knowing what they are, on the "naming" of things, as it were.

If we recollect the passage cited in the beginning from St. Thomas' *De Veritate*, we will recall that, in knowledge, the perfection of one thing can be included in the perfection of another without changing the thing known. It is this superabundance of being that almost seems to demand that *what is* be also known. It is even more wondrous. St Thomas describes what might be the highest perfection that a human mind by its own powers might reach. The whole universe in its intelligible order can come to reside in a single intellect. "The entire order and causes of the universe" are inscribed in one soul. But notice that St. Thomas adds a remark from revelation. He does not deny that this exalted end is what the philosophers propose. He does not deny its wonder. But he adds a comment of Gregory the Great. "What do they not see who see Him who sees all things?" The answer, of course, is nothing.

None the less, since we do not yet see Him who sees all things, we still see. The sum total of human happiness includes the seeing and the doing of all things rooted in *what is* that are not God. I will conclude with two instances of what I mean, one from Peanuts and one from Samuel Johnson.

We see Charlie Brown watching Linus near a tree, sitting on the ground, a rather confused look on his face. Linus is piling rocks. Charlie asks, "What are you doing, Linus?" Linus responds, "Nothing." In the second scene, Charlie has come over closer to Linus. Charlie continues, "Nothing? It looks like you're building a rock wall." Linus replies, "What I

meant was nothing important." In the third scene, we see Linus lining up the rock wall, while Charlie inquires, "Do you mind if I watch?" Suddenly, in the final scene, we realize Lucy has been listening to this, to her, idiotic conversation all along. To perplexed and put-down Charlie and Linus, she pronounces her judgment on the scene: "Fascinating ... somebody useless watching somebody doing something unimportant." The amusement here, of course, reminds us of the delight of unimportant and useless things, the many things that just exist, the many actions that include someone watching someone else building stone walls.

On Good Friday, 1775, Boswell records attending St. Clement's Church with Samuel Johnson. In fact, they went to services both in the morning and in the evening. The morning preacher did not choose "a text appropriate for the day," but the afternoon preacher chose the most fitting text, "It is finished." They then return to Johnson's home where they have tea with Mrs. Williams, after which Johnson chats with Boswell for some time. Boswell speaks of his precise attention to what Johnson says. "My wish to hear him was such," Boswell remarks, "that I constantly watched every dawning of communication from that great and illuminated mind." It is as if all things are interesting, all things deserve illumination of mind.

In confirmation of this wonder of paying attention to those little things that, when added together, constituted the sum total of human happiness, Boswell records the following remark of Samuel Johnson:

All knowledge is of itself of some value. There is nothing so minute or inconsiderable, that I would not rather know it than not. In the same manner, all power (capacity), of whatever sort, is of itself desirable. A man would not submit to learn to hem a ruffle, of his wife, or his wife's maid; but if a mere wish could attain it, he would rather wish to be able to hem a ruffle.[12]

Nothing is so minute or inconsiderable that we would not wish to know it. We should like to be able to do all things if we did not have to go out of our way to learn them. The great things and the small things.

How could we not see all things "in Him who sees all things?" "The ultimate perfection achievable by the soul, according to the philosophers, is to have inscribed in it the entire order and causes of the universe." "Fascinating ... somebody useless watching somebody doing something unimportant." "Ours is but a small matter in the great deeds of this time." It was St. Thomas' "special spiritual thesis that there really are Things, and not only the Thing, that the many existed as well as the One." "Sir, there is nothing too little for so little a creature as man." "A thing which is *not* God cannot be *except at the cost of not being what it is not.*" The superabundance of all things enables us both to be ourselves but also to know what we are not. "The marvellous beauty of the elements as they obey Him demands from the intelligent creature a fitting expression of its gratitude."

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1 *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), I, 290.
2 Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, [1962]1980), 152.
3 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: Ace Books, 1965), 25.
4 G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (New York: John Lane, MCMXIV), 38.
5 Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 38-39.
6 Boswell, *ibid.*, II, 150.
7 Stanley L. Jaki, "The Intelligent Christian's Guide to Scientific Cosmology," *Catholic Essays* (Front Royal, VA.: Christendom Press, 1990), 164.
8 "The human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, does not know anything of God except whether He exists; not yet has His perfection attained simply to the first cause, but there remains to him still the natural desire of inquiring about the (first) cause. Hence he is not yet perfectly happy. For perfect happiness, then, it is required that the intellect attain to the very essence of the first cause. And thus he (man) will have his perfection through union to God as to an object, in which alone the happiness of man consists."
9 Yves Simon, *An Introduction to Metaphysics of Knowledge*, trans. by V. Kuic and R. J. Thompson (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 24-25.
10 G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Image, [1933] 1954), 135-36.
11 St. Leo the Great, "Sermo 6 de Quadragesima," 1-2, *Roman Breviary*, Second Reading, Thursday after Ash Wednesday.
12 *Boswell's Life of Johnson, ibid*, I, 590.

Fundamentalism

Michael Dummett

The term "fundamentalism" was originally applied solely to Christians who insisted on interpreting the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, as quite literally true in every word. This was how, until recent times, all Christians interpreted the Bible. True, they also interpreted it figuratively: they took events recorded in the O.T. as symbolically prefiguring events in the life of Our Lord and of the Church. But they nevertheless understood the former events as having actually happened in the way they were described in Scripture. Thus in the *City of God* St. Augustine explained the greater antiquity claimed by Egyptians for their monarchy than what he took to be the age of the world reported by the Bible as due to the vaingloriousness of earthly kingdoms. Catholics, among most other mainstream Christians, have abandoned such a literalistic interpretation of Scripture. But Christian fundamentalism in this sense is still very much with us.