

Aquinas on Human Happiness and the Natural Desire for God

Stephen Wang

1. Happiness

Aquinas's study of human action leads him to draw two conclusions about the goal of human life. First, human beings, *by their very nature* as creatures of intellect and will, desire a perfect happiness which cannot be found in this life and can only be found in union with God. Second, union with God *surpasses the very nature* of every creature including the human being. These two conclusions create a paradox. The perfect and crowning good, to which we naturally tend, cannot be reached naturally. We have a natural desire for God which cannot be naturally fulfilled. Aquinas goes on to argue that there must be another way, provided by God, which can lead to our perfect happiness. Although Aquinas's work is thoroughly theological, he gives philosophical reasons for these conclusions, which do not depend on any appeal to revelation. In this article I will examine his understanding of happiness and show how it leads to these conclusions. Towards the end I will draw out some of the implications of this paradox, and point out the risks involved in trying to resolve it.

Happiness, *beatitudo*, is the satisfaction we hope to find when we reach our final goal and attain the perfection we have longed for. We can want many different things at the same time, large and small, yet at any one moment there must be a deepest desire which motivates us, an overriding goal that functions as an organising principle to our actions, one which we long for as our 'perfect and fulfilling good [*bonum perfectum et completivum*]'.¹ Happiness is the perfect good, 'which satisfies the appetite altogether, else it would not be the last end, if something yet remained to be desired'.² If we find the ultimate good we are seeking and fulfil our desire, then we will be happy.

¹ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae* I-II.1:5c; hereafter referred to without title. The Latin text is from the Leonine edition of Aquinas's complete works, that is, *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici Opera Omnia* (Rome, 1882-), Volumes 4-11. I have based my English translation on that found in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1948), 5 volumes.

² I-II.2:8c.

Aquinas makes three important distinctions as he writes about happiness.³ The first is between the general meaning of the last end (the *ratio* of the last end, the last end as such) and the particular object we are seeking as our last end ('the thing in which the last end is found [*id in quo finis ultimi ratio invenitur*]').⁴ We all seek our last end as such, we all want to be happy and to find fulfilment in our perfect good. Yet we don't all agree on how to be happy, on where we will find that fulfilment. The second distinction is between *beatitudo imperfecta* and *beatitudo perfecta*.⁵ Imperfect or incomplete happiness is simply happiness to the extent that we can find it in this life: it is 'that which is had in this life [*quae habetur in hac vita*]'. Perfect or complete happiness 'consists in the vision of God'.⁶ Only perfect happiness 'attains to the true notion of happiness', while imperfect happiness 'does not attain thereto, but partakes of some particular likeness of happiness [*participat quandam particularem beatitudinis similitudinem*]'.⁷ The third distinction is between possessing an end imperfectly, 'only in intention', and possessing an end perfectly, 'not only in intention but also in reality [*in re*]'.⁸ The will can thus have a true but imperfect enjoyment of the last end even before it reaches it, through its active striving towards this goal.

Aquinas writes with great simplicity in I-II.5:3 that 'perfect and true happiness cannot be had in this life [*perfecta autem et vera beatitudo non potest haberi in hac vita*]'.⁹ This statement alone should puzzle us. On the one hand, the whole point of human life is happiness. On the other hand, Aquinas now insists, we can never find true happiness in this life. Aquinas believes that human beings *by their very nature* cannot find perfect happiness in this life – the 'rest' we can achieve

³ For the historical background to Aquinas's discussion of happiness and for an account of some of the influences on him, see Georg Wieland, "Happiness: The Perfection of Man," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁴ See the discussion of the indetermination of ends in Article 6 above. I-II.1:7c.

⁵ The theological distinction goes back to William of Auxerre, died 1231. See Wieland, "Happiness: The Perfection of Man," 679. Aquinas uses it to develop some unresolved themes in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where, for example, worldly happiness is subject to fortune, and contemplation, although the best activity of the human being, is also something beyond human attainment. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 10:7, 1177b26 to 1178a6 and Anthony Kenny, "Aquinas on Aristotelian Happiness," in *Aquinas's Moral Theory: Essays in Honour of Norman Kretzmann*, ed. Scott MacDonald and Eleonore Stump (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 24. Anthony Celano argues convincingly that in formalizing these distinctions Aquinas draws out the implications of Aristotle's ethics without betraying his thought. See Anthony J. Celano, "The Concept of Worldly Beatitude in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987).

⁶ I-II.4:5c.

⁷ I-II.3:6c.

⁸ I-II.11:4c.

⁹ I-II.5:3c.

is never total. As bodily creatures who exist in time and who have an infinite desire to understand and be fulfilled, we can never find the final rest we are searching for in this life. This is not because of some circumstantial difficulty or personal weakness, it is because of our nature as temporal creatures with intellect and will. The perfection human beings naturally desire is a synthesis that cannot be attained in this life. Whether it is possible for us to attain it in another kind of life, beyond time, is a separate question to which we will return later. We can now look more closely at the texts that support this interpretation.

Before launching into the texts I want to make a point about Aquinas's method. Aquinas is a theologian through and through.¹⁰ Yet he is also able to make *philosophical arguments* that make sense in their own right without the need for theological convictions or faith in revelation. His analyses of intellect and will, of human action, and of the desire for happiness, do not depend on faith in God. The *argument* about happiness in the first questions of Part I-II is philosophical, even though the conclusion is also a theological conviction that would stand without the appeal to reason. So when Aquinas concludes that human beings cannot be perfectly happy in this life the impasse he reaches is *philosophical*. When Aquinas goes on to argue that we must be able to find happiness beyond this life in God, he is using the desire for happiness as an argument to lead one to God (even though he already believes in God). Aquinas does not use theology to plug a philosophical gap, he uses philosophy to open up a theological horizon.

2. The impossibility of perfect happiness in this life

In I-II.5:3 Aquinas asks whether one can be happy in this life. Happiness is the perfect and sufficient good which 'excludes every ill and fulfils every desire'.¹¹ He concludes that 'in this life every ill cannot be excluded' and 'the desire for good in this life cannot be satisfied'.¹² These are extraordinarily bold statements. Aquinas believes that human desire, in this life, never ends. As long as we are living we are unsatisfied with what we have. The desire for a good always reflects a desire to become what we are not, because in every good we seek we are always seeking *our own good*, that is, *the being that*

¹⁰ The Prologue to Part II, for example, sets the whole question of the nature of the human being in a theological context: The human being 'is made in God's image', and Aquinas only treats of God's *image* here because he has already spent the 119 questions of Part I treating, broadly speaking, of *God himself*. I-II Prol, 'factus ad imaginem Dei'.

¹¹ I-II.5:3c.

¹² I-II.5:3c.

we do not yet have.¹³ So Aquinas is arguing that as long as we are living we are seeking to go beyond the present to a future perfection which we do not yet possess. It is an essential part of our nature as creatures in time to be incomplete and looking beyond. To be human is to lack the fullness of being which we could attain, which is to lack ourselves. Human beings, as far as the life we know is concerned, are an essential insufficiency.

The examples given in I-II.5:3 may seem too weak to support these sweeping ontological conclusions. Aquinas writes that this present life is subject 'to ignorance on the part of the intellect, to inordinate affection on the part of the appetite, and to many penalties on the part of the body'.¹⁴ One could argue that these ills might be removed in a utopian society, at least in theory. Yet for Aquinas they are identified with temporal, bodily life as such, and not just with the shortcomings of a particular culture or society. Ignorance, for example, is far more than the consequence of a bad education. Aquinas demonstrates in I-II.3:8 that the human intellect has a natural desire to know the causes of things. We *wonder* (*admirari*). This desire cannot be fully satisfied until we know the first cause of all created things through union with God. Even without the reference to God, Aquinas is saying something quite radical about human desire. It is part of our nature as intellectual creatures to question things, and as long as we are alive we will be questioning things and seeking more fundamental explanations, therefore our desire for understanding (and so for happiness) can never be fully satisfied in this life. The intellect takes us beyond to what we do not yet know, and there is no end to what we can discover. One proof of the endlessness of human desire is thus our incessant curiosity.

Human longing concerns much more than the desire for understanding. Question I-II.2 deals with a range of human goods which appear to promise happiness, such as riches, honour, fame, power, etc. Hidden in one of the replies Aquinas makes a kind of phenomenological observation that points to a larger truth. In the desire for riches 'and for whatsoever temporal goods', we find that 'when we already possess them, we despise them, and seek others'. This is because 'we realise more their insufficiency when we possess them [*eorum insufficientia magis cognoscitur cum habentur*], and this very fact shows that they are imperfect, and the sovereign good does not consist therein'.¹⁵ Notice that this is not because some goods disappoint us with their inferior quality, it is because *all* temporal goods, *when possessed*, cause us to despise them and seek beyond them. We want to leave, as it were, as soon as we have arrived. *Whichever* goods

¹³ See I-II.18:1. Cf. I.5:1.

¹⁴ I-II.5:3c, referring to Augustine's *De civitate dei*, 19:4.

¹⁵ I-II.2:1ad3.

we seek in time, the provisional happiness we might attain through them is *always* accompanied by a deepening appreciation of their insufficiency. However great the good we achieve, however secure the happiness we find, it is always threatened by the possibility that we will move on and desire something else. We can never force ourselves to continue to want in the future what we want in the present. To do so would be to abandon our freedom – which is impossible as long as we are creatures of intellect and will living in time. Our identity is never absolutely secure, and the most stable goals imaginable are always threatened, at least implicitly, by the possibility of appreciating their insufficiency and freely choosing something else.

The more our desire is fulfilled, the greater our desire becomes, since it inevitably carries us beyond the momentary fulfilment of the present towards a deeper fulfilment. In the final article of this question about the nature of the good that constitutes our happiness (I-II.2), Aquinas goes so far as to say that the good of which we are capable is *infinitem*, ‘infinite’. The good that intrinsically and inherently belongs to us in virtue of our existence is of course created and finite, since we are only creatures. But the good to which we are open, ‘as an object’ (of our intellect and will), is nevertheless infinite.¹⁶ In other words, our understanding and desire are quite literally *without limits*, *never ending*, in-finite.

In a later article about *enjoyment* Aquinas admits that we find a kind of temporary delight in reaching certain goals, but this is never perfect enjoyment. He cites Augustine: ‘We enjoy what we know, when the delighted will is at rest therein.’¹⁷ He then concludes that the will never rests completely [*simpliciter*] ‘save in the last end: for as long as something is waited for, the movement of the will remains in suspense, although it has reached something’.¹⁸ Aquinas thus believes that we must *always* be looking for something in this life. The desire to find rest and perfection necessarily brings with it a movement beyond any fleeting rest we might find in the goods of this world. The movement of the will ‘remains in suspense [*remanet in suspenso*]’ despite the fact that it has found rest in a provisional object of delight.¹⁹ We always desire *more* even though we have attained what we previously desired.

Temporal goods are not only *insufficient*, they are also *unstable*. Aquinas writes in Article I-II.5:3:

Human beings naturally desire the good, which they have, to be permanent. Now the goods of the present life pass away, since life itself

¹⁶ I-II.2:8ad3.

¹⁷ I-II.11:3c, referring to *De Trinitate*, 10:10.

¹⁸ I-II.11:3c.

¹⁹ I-II.11:3c.

passes away, which we naturally desire, and would wish to endure unceasingly, for we naturally shrink from death. Wherefore it is impossible to have true happiness in this life.²⁰

This is an uncontroversial but nevertheless shattering point. Everything we attain will pass. It is not just the fact that particular goods may be lost, it is the deeper principle that all goods will be lost, and all meaning and happiness will thus be undermined. We cannot hold on to anything. There is no point in trying to suggest that we are indifferent to this loss. The starting point of Aquinas's anthropology is that human beings are seeking their own fulfilment through the pursuit of particular goods. It is our nature to seek happiness. Now we find that we will ultimately be denied happiness by the transitory nature of life as a whole and of all the particular goods of life. Aquinas returns to this need for stability in the following article.

Now human beings naturally desire to hold onto the good that they have, and to gain the security holding of onto it, else they must of necessity be afflicted with the fear of losing it, or with the sorrow of being certain to lose it. Therefore it is necessary for true happiness that human beings have the opinion of never losing the good that they have.²¹

This lack of stability, and the anxiety which follows with it, are a necessary part of temporal existence. Aquinas writes that vicissitudes such as these are 'for such things as are subject to time and movement'.²²

Even if we could somehow reach an infinite good in this life, and possess it without fear of ever losing it, there is still a final reason why perfect happiness would be beyond us. Aquinas writes in I-II.3:2 that insofar as happiness is a created reality in us it must involve our own activity (*operatio*). Happiness, in other words, is not just something which happens to us. Part of our fulfilment is to be actively involved in that fulfilment.²³ It is not enough for us to be alive, we want to be actively living.²⁴ But in this present life human activity can never be unified or continual.²⁵ We have to act in time, in the present, moment by moment, and therefore our activity is necessarily fragmented. Even though contemplation of the truth is an activity which has more unity than an active life occupied with many things, Aquinas is realistic about the fact that even this has to be interrupted by sleeping and

²⁰ I-II.5:3c.

²¹ I-II.5:4c.

²² I-II.5:4c.

²³ I-II.3:2c.

²⁴ Life involves the being of the living thing (*esse viventis*) and also the activity of the living thing (*operatio viventis*). I-II.3:2ad1.

²⁵ I-II.3:2ad4.

doing other things. So we can never act *now* in a way that ensures that all our future activity will be part of (or even consistent with) this present act. We cannot collapse the future into the present and take possession of a total, everlasting happiness. This is another example of how our failure to be happy relates to our nature and not to certain unfortunate circumstances. We are beings who operate progressively in time, and we cannot unify this activity and bring it to completion in one integrated movement.

For the many reasons outlined in this section, Aquinas is convinced that human beings cannot find perfect happiness in this life. We should not lose sight of the force of this conclusion. Aquinas does not say that perfect happiness in this life is a difficult achievement, one that is too much for us *in practice*, and that we therefore need God's help to find it. Instead he says that perfect happiness in this life is *in principle* an impossible idea. It would contradict our very nature to find perfect happiness. Human life itself is fragmented and we have only a precarious hold on ourselves. We are temporal creatures whose nature is to look beyond the present to the future, to the good we do not yet possess, to the person we have not yet become. Human beings in time are always seeking a further good. Aquinas is absolutely insistent on this point. The temporal goods we seek are necessarily insufficient and necessarily unstable. We have an infinite and therefore insatiable desire to have more and to know more, and we know that everything we do lay hold of will eventually pass. Aquinas has no conception of what it might be like for human beings to achieve their perfection in this life. A perfectly happy human being could bear no resemblance to the human beings that we know. Temporal human perfection is self-contradictory because it would mean that we had finally become all that we could be, which would be a kind of not-being-human. Aquinas believes that perfect human happiness is impossible in this life because it would mean the end and not the fulfilment of the human life that we know.

3. The possibility of perfect happiness in God

Perfect happiness, therefore, cannot be found in this life. Aquinas, as part of his broad theological project, gives *philosophical* reasons for this, as we have already noted. These reasons flow from a rationally argued account of human nature. By observing human life, by analysing the nature of intellect and will, Aquinas arrives at a philosophical impasse. We want to be perfectly happy, *and* we realise that we can never be perfectly happy in this life, so our existence is played out in this uncertain space between desire and frustration, between possibility and failure, between hope and despair. Aquinas, however, does not stop there, but goes on to state that despite the fact

that human beings cannot find perfect happiness in this life *it must still be possible for them to find perfect happiness*. This seems like a contradiction, and we now need to explore why for Aquinas it is not.

‘Happiness is the perfect good, which lulls the appetite altogether, else it would not be the last end, if something yet remained to be desired’.²⁶ We are characterised by our ability to understand all that is true and to desire all that is good. We are capable of an *infinite* good.²⁷ The universal good, however, which alone can satisfy our will, is not just a theoretical synthesis for Aquinas, it must also be a real possibility, and he argues from the nature of our desire for the universal good to the possibility of our finding it. In Aquinas’s understanding, it makes perfect sense to say that the existence of a desire or capacity is enough to establish that the desire or capacity *could in principle* be fulfilled (although it may in the circumstances not be fulfilled). Similarly, the existence of any potentiality is enough to establish that the potentiality *could in principle* be actualised (although it may in the circumstances not be actualised). Desire and potentiality are by definition aspects of a thing insofar as it relates to the fullness of being it could have. They signify a relationship with the perfection that is *due to, appropriate to, and possible for* this being.²⁸ This is the metaphysical background that allows Aquinas to state with great simplicity:

Happiness is called the attainment of the perfect good. Whoever, therefore, is capable of the perfect good can attain happiness. Now, that human beings are capable of the perfect good, is proved both because their intellect can apprehend the universal and perfect good, and because their will can desire it. And therefore human beings can attain happiness.²⁹

It is an Aristotelian philosophy of *nature* and not just a Judeo-Christian theology of *creation* that makes Aquinas think that *happiness must be possible for the simple reason that we are creatures who want to be happy*. To say that a desire cannot *in principle* be fulfilled is to say that it is not really a desire at all. Appetite (whether that of inanimate objects, plants, animals or rational creatures) is an orientation to what *can* fulfil, it is a movement towards a good that perfects. There is a necessary correlation between the subject who desires and the desired state of fulfilment. Without this correlation it makes no sense to say that the subject is *inclined to anything*.

²⁶ I-II.2:8c.

²⁷ I-II.2:8ad3.

²⁸ Cf. I-II.18:1c, where some things are said to lack the fullness of being ‘due to them’ (*eis debitam*).

²⁹ I-II.5:1c.

So there is no such thing as a natural desire which cannot in principle be fulfilled. This is why Aquinas can argue in I.12:1 that a created intellect must be able to see the divine essence, since otherwise ‘the natural desire [to know the first cause of things] would remain in vain [*remanebit inane*]’.³⁰ It is true that he first gives a *theological* reason for this, and states bluntly that it is ‘opposed to the faith’ to suppose that the created intellect cannot find happiness in the vision of God, or can find it in something else.³¹ Yet we should note that the argument from natural desire is explicitly given as an additional non-theological reason for thinking that the created intellect can see the essence of God.³²

Aquinas makes a similar argument in the body of I-II.3:8, this time *without* the appeal to faith. He writes that our curious intellects, which wonder incessantly about causes, cannot be satisfied with knowing *that* God exists as First Cause, since we want to know *what* he is and reach ‘the very essence of the first cause’.³³ Final and perfect happiness must therefore consist in nothing less than the vision of the Divine Essence.

Aquinas thus shows not only that we are *capable* of perfect happiness but that we can find this in God alone. Once again, I want to insist that there is a philosophical argument here which makes sense without the support of faith or religious revelation. Of course Aquinas never steps outside of the theological framework of the *Summa*, and he draws continually on biblical and theological resources. But he also recognises that a philosophical investigation into the nature of human longing would necessarily lead one to the idea of God. God is the universal good and the First Cause of all things who *must* exist if our infinite desire for happiness and for understanding are not to be in vain. Human desire necessarily points to God. Right at the beginning of the *Summa* Aquinas writes that we can be brought to an initial, imprecise conception of God by reflecting on the nature of human desire:

To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is the happiness of human beings. For we naturally desire happiness, and what is naturally desired by us must be naturally known to us. This, however, is not simply speaking to know that God exists [*non est simpliciter cognoscere Deum esse*], just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching; for many there are who imagine that our perfect good which is happiness,

³⁰ I.12:1c.

³¹ I.12:1c.

³² To argue otherwise ‘is also against reason’. I.12:1c.

³³ I-II.3:8c.

consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others in something else.³⁴

4. A natural desire for happiness which cannot naturally be fulfilled

The question of happiness has brought us to the brink of a philosophical theology, as we realise that human beings seek a fulfilment which can in principle never be found within this life. Aquinas suggests that perfect happiness can, nevertheless, be found, and it can be found only in God. Without entering too deeply into these theological aspects of Aquinas's anthropology, I simply want to make it clear that he is not sidestepping the very difficulties he has established. Aquinas continues to believe that perfect happiness with God is *impossible for us to achieve in this life* and is *impossible for us to achieve in our own natural state by our own natural powers*. The fundamental philosophical dilemma about human happiness remains for Aquinas even when God is present. Aquinas writes that the vision of the divine essence 'surpasses the nature not only of human beings, but also of every creature' and 'neither human beings, nor any creature, can attain final happiness by their natural powers'.³⁵ 'It is impossible that it be bestowed through the action of any creature: but by God's work alone is the human being made happy [*homo beatus fit solo Deo agente*], if we speak of perfect happiness.'³⁶

Aquinas states two conclusions with absolute clarity, and he is able to reach these conclusions without appealing to revelation (even though at various points he *also* draws on revelation): (A) Human beings, *by their very nature* as creatures of intellect and will, desire a perfect happiness which cannot be found in this life. This perfect happiness can only be found in union with God, since there is no end to our seeking in this life, and God alone is the universal good which can entirely satisfy our will.³⁷ (B) Union with God, the vision of God's essence, *surpasses the very nature* of every creature including the human being. All creaturely knowledge falls short of the vision of the divine essence, 'which infinitely surpasses all created substance. Consequently neither human beings, nor any creatures, can attain final happiness by their natural powers.'³⁸

These two conclusions create a paradox. The perfect and crowning good, to which we naturally tend, cannot be reached naturally. The

³⁴ I.2:1ad1.

³⁵ I-II.5:5c, referring to I.12:4.

³⁶ I-II.5:6c.

³⁷ Cf. I-II.2:8 and I-II.3:8.

³⁸ I-II.5:5c. Cf. I.12:4.

vision of the Divine Essence, which is absolutely necessary if we are to be happy, is beyond our natural powers. Put very simply: *we have a natural desire for God which cannot be naturally fulfilled.*

Denis Bradley gives a very helpful account of Aquinas's position in his book *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good*, drawing on texts beyond the few we have been looking at in I-II. Bradley writes that the thrust of Aquinas's philosophical thinking about 'the natural endlessness of human nature' leads to an *aporia*. As philosophy, it cannot rest satisfied with the idea that human nature can find some natural fulfilment in this life, yet *as philosophy* it cannot 'go forward to a theological affirmation of man's supernatural end'.³⁹ Bradley believes that in Aquinas's view *reason*, without the aid of faith and revelation, can come to two conclusions that seem to be at odds with each other: (A) that 'human nature is forever unsatisfied unless man attains the vision of God' and (B) that the 'attainment of this knowledge must be considered a supernatural achievement that is beyond any merely human activity'.⁴⁰

I will not go into all the questions generated by these paradoxical conclusions – they have been fiercely debated through the centuries.⁴¹ I just want to point out how tempting it is to dissolve the paradox in one of two ways. (A) One could insist that if we have a natural desire for God, *then it must be possible for it to be fulfilled naturally*. This would be a purely natural theology and it would do away with the need for God's 'supernatural' help.⁴² (B) Conversely, one could insist that if the fulfilment of our desire for God is beyond our natural powers, *then we cannot naturally desire it*. This second type of thinking could go in one of two directions. It could lead one to conclude that some human beings do not desire God (if they do not receive his supernatural help), or it could lead one to conclude that all human beings desire God (in which case this desire must be a 'supernatural' gift laid on top of their human nature).

Aquinas does not give in to these temptations. He holds fast to the fact that *we naturally desire what we cannot naturally attain*. He does, however, go a step further, and ask whether there may

³⁹ Denis J.M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), xiii.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 514.

⁴¹ Recent debate was provoked by the publication of Henri De Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études Historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946). For an excellent discussion of some contemporary views, see Benedict M. Ashley, "What Is the End of the Human Person? The Vision of God and Integral Human Fulfillment," in *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. Luke Gormally (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994).

⁴² In scholastic philosophy and theology 'supernatural' simply means what is above or beyond nature, what is beyond the unaided powers of any creature – it has nothing to do with spooks or spells (which, as created things, might be quite 'natural').

be another way of finding the happiness that we cannot achieve by nature, a way which is natural to us but which does not depend on our nature for its fulfilment. He goes beyond the paradox without dissolving it:

Just as nature does not fail human beings [referring to *homo*] in things that are necessary, although it has not provided them with weapons and clothing, as it provided other animals, because it gave them reason and hands, with which they are able to get these things for themselves; so neither did it fail human beings in things that are necessary, although it did not give them the means by which they could attain happiness [*quamvis non daret sibi aliquod principium quo posset beatitudinem consequi*]: since this is impossible. But it did give them freedom, with which they can turn to God, so that he may make them happy [*Sed dedit ei liberum arbitrium, quo possit converti ad Deum, qui eum faceret beatum*]. 'For what we are enabled to do by our friends, we ourselves, in a sense, are able to do', as it is said in *Ethics* 3.⁴³

So it is our part of our nature not only to seek happiness but also to have the ability to ask for what we cannot find through our own efforts. It is part of our nature not only to be frustrated but to find a way out of our frustration. The fact that the *achievement* of happiness can only be a supernatural gift from God does not mean that our *desire* or *request* for it needs some supernatural cause. We can ask God to allow us to share in this way of life, and perhaps he will grant it to us.

5. Conclusion: Human incompleteness

Human beings are not inert and self-contained. We are *ecstatic* creatures. Aquinas believes that we exist outside ourselves in the things we understand and ahead of ourselves in the things we desire. We are restless and *in via*. Our identity is never fully fixed because we always see beyond what we are to the person we could become. Our present holds many possibilities yet we have to bring about only one particular future. We seek different things, but within each particular desire there is a deeper more universal longing for completion and perfect fulfilment. We don't just want to travel, we also want to arrive. We are frustrated that our understanding is limited, our possessions insufficient, and our identity insecure. In other words, we want to be happy. So we chase after an ideal moment in the future when desire *as such* will be fulfilled and when we will finally become the person we wish to be. This moment never comes, because desire is infinite and 'self-coincidence' impossible. Even though we may find a certain

⁴³ I-II.5:5ad1, citing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 3:3, 1112b27.

stability and satisfaction along the way, we always see a future opening up before us. We have some transitory experiences of happiness, but perfect happiness eludes us and is in principle impossible to achieve in the life that we know.

We are fragmented persons, internally displaced, perpetually going beyond ourselves to a future fulfilment. This prospect both liberates and terrifies us. We can try to escape the dilemma by pretending that we are perfectly happy in the present, or by pretending that we will be perfectly happy in the future, or by pretending that we do not care about happiness at all. Yet the dilemma comes back to haunt us, since it is a constitutive part of our nature to seek a deeper happiness and to be aware that any happiness we do achieve in the future will soon slip through our fingers. The whole paradox can be expressed negatively (*'human beings can never be perfectly happy in this life'*) or positively (*'human beings can always seek a deeper happiness in this life'*). Either way, it begs the question of whether there is another kind of life possible for human beings, one in which happiness could be found. Perhaps it is possible to attain to some God-like kind of life beyond all the contradictions of temporal existence. Perhaps it is possible to have all desire satisfied, and still to act; to understand everything, and still to wonder; to have one's life completed, and still to live; to arrive, and still to keep moving. Perhaps it is possible to be happy and to be free.

This article has shown how in Aquinas's thinking the question of happiness leads to the question of God. One's thinking about the *possibility* of final human happiness is part of what will determine one's thinking about the existence of God. Despite the identity we continually create for ourselves, and the commitments we freely make, human life is necessarily insufficient. We are constituted by incompleteness since it is our nature to go beyond ourselves and beyond the present. Our desire always goes beyond anything in this life to an ideal of perfection which Aquinas associates with the divine. Aquinas is a theologian through and through, yet there are also enough philosophical arguments in the *Summa* to show that we cannot find happiness without God, and that we cannot reach him by our own unaided efforts.

Stephen Wang
Allen Hall
28 Beaufort Street
London SW3 5AA
Email: newblack@swjw2.sent.com