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Happiness and Its Discontents

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE ONCE QUIPPED that the pursuit of happiness “is without any question the most fatuous which could possibly be undertaken,” adding that “this lamentable phrase—the pursuit of happiness—is responsible for a good part of the ills and miseries of the modern world.”¹ These forthright reflections well express one current in modern thought: the rejection of happiness as a worthy pursuit. At issue here is the relationship between the desire for happiness and the moral life. Immanuel Kant famously affirmed that “making a man happy is quite different from making him good.”² In Kant’s view, it is obvious that the morally good person often suffers during his fidelity to the good, while the immoral person is often content in his immorality. Moreover, Kant observes, “The more a cultivated reason concerns itself with the aim of enjoying life and happiness, the farther does man get away from true contentment.”³ Thus, from this perspective, pursuing happiness ultimately makes us neither happy nor good.

Modern discontent with the quest for happiness, therefore, has a twofold character. First, there is the claim that the happiness we desire is unattainable in this life. Second, there is the assertion that

the quest for happiness is essentially a self-regarding project that runs counter to the other-regarding requirements of morality. As we shall see, how one resolves the first issue (the nature of happiness and its attainability) influences how one considers the second (happiness's relationship to morality).

St. Augustine spoke for the classical tradition when he affirmed that "everyone desires to be happy."⁴ This fact was also taken for granted by most modern authors (even by Kant and the detractors of happiness) and remains a truism of contemporary psychology. Whether or not happiness is attainable, and whether or not it is morally good to pursue it, all people desire it. Before considering the classical tradition, however, we should note two influential features of the dominant modern view, features which may still influence our own ideas about happiness. First, many modern proponents of the quest for happiness reduce happiness to pleasure and portray it as a pleasantly satisfied state of well-feeling.⁵ John Locke, for example, concludes that "*Happiness* then in its full extent is the utmost Pleasure we are capable of," adding elsewhere that "happiness and misery seem to me wholly to consist in the pleasure and pain of the mind."⁶ Second, since the Enlightenment, the proponents of the quest for happiness have increasingly viewed happiness as a goal to be attained in this world. Indeed, as Darrin McMahon has noted, the seventeenth century saw the proliferation of books such as Robert Crofts's *The Way to Happiness on Earth*, the goal of which is unambiguously expressed in the title.⁷ For these authors, happiness is understood as a form of contentment to be sought in this life by our own efforts.

These views were carried forward by the Utilitarians, who following Bentham saw the goal of government as to promote the greatest earthly happiness of the greatest number, by which they meant the psychological satisfaction of as many citizens as possible. Among the popular works of our contemporaries the promises of earthly happiness have become even more extravagant. One recent work, for example, is modestly titled, "Authentic Happiness: Using

the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment.”⁸ Even when these authors include activities and practices in their analysis, the perspective remains entirely subjective. Indeed, what this new psychology boils down to is admirably summarized in another similar work when it promises to teach you “*how* to think and feel so that *what* you think and feel creates happiness and vibrancy in your life.”⁹ From this perspective, attitudes and emotions are the key to the earthly contentment called happiness. Although these modern and contemporary promoters of happiness differ in important ways among themselves, they generally share in common the view that happiness can be attained in this life and that it consists in a form of pleasurable contentment or satisfaction.

Although perhaps not at first apparent, the implications of this dominant view of happiness are far-reaching. First, by tending to reduce happiness to subjective satisfaction, the link between happiness and morality becomes tenuous. The reason for this is simple. If happiness is essentially a subjective experience, what makes one person happy doesn’t necessary make someone else happy. From this perspective, it would be impossible for happiness to provide a universal foundation for the objective requirements of morality.

John Locke saw this danger clearly, but believed that the promise of the afterlife enables us to avoid it. In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke reduces morality to a calculus between pleasure and pain. “Pleasure in us, is that we call *Good*, and what is apt to produce Pain in us, we call *Evil*.”¹⁰ Since, as we have seen, according to Locke happiness is the “utmost Pleasure we are capable of,” our highest moral perfection resides in “a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness.”¹¹ In other words, the highest moral perfection resides in the pursuit of the highest true pleasure. Locke believed that this pleasure principle was safeguarded from selfishness only because of the promised pleasures of heaven and the threatened pains of hell. Once we were instructed on the long-term consequences of our actions, Locke was convinced we would discover

that virtue is “by much the best bargain.”¹² “Open [people’s] eyes upon the endless unspeakable joys of another life and their hearts will find something solid and powerful to move them. The view of heaven and hell will cast a slight upon the short pleasures and pains of this present state, and give attractions and encouragements to virtue, which reason and interest, and the care of ourselves, cannot but allow and prefer.”¹³

Locke states frankly that this calculus of the pleasures and pains of the afterlife offers the sole foundation of his pleasure-based morality: “Upon this foundation, and upon this only, morality stands firm.”¹⁴ Locke unflinchingly draws out the consequences of this conclusion. If there is no afterlife, then there is no point in living the life of virtue that demands proximate pains and sacrifices. Instead, it would be entirely reasonable simply to pursue all that subjectively pleases us and avoid all that pains us. Some would find their happiness, to use Locke’s own examples, in “Study and Knowledge,” while others in “Hawking and Hunting,” some in debauchery, others in sobriety, but all would be pursuing their subjective happiness. Locke is fully aware that at issue here is the extent to which all humans are directed toward the same highest good.

Hence it was, I think, that the Philosophers of old did in vain enquire, whether *Summum bonum* consisted in Riches, or Bodily Delights, or virtue, or Contemplation: And they might have as reasonably disputed, whether the best Relish were to be found in Apples, Plumbs or Nuts; and have divided themselves into Sects upon it. For as pleasant Tastes depend not on the things themselves, but their agreeableness to this or that particular Palate, wherein there is great variety: So the greatest Happiness consists, in the having those things, which produce the greatest Pleasure; and in the absence of those, which cause any disturbance, any pain. Now these, to different Men, are very different things.¹⁵

Here again Locke is entirely consistent. If good and evil are reduced to the subjective experience of pleasure and pain, the enquiry into the highest good that constitutes universal human fulfillment becomes futile. Thus, for Locke, it is only by an external divine imposition of rewards and punishments that we are coaxed into pursuing certain actions as opposed to others.

Immanuel Kant recognized the instability of such a view of morality. Remove God from the picture, and the only thing left is hedonism. Kant recognized that the God of reason must have instilled in us a surer principle of morality. For Kant, this principle can have nothing to do with the desire for happiness because he shares with Locke the view that happiness is a form of subjective satisfaction, which Kant describes as “complete well-being and contentment with one’s state.”¹⁶ Kant recognizes that subjective contentment is inherently unstable. As we have seen, what satisfies one person does not satisfy another. Moreover, what satisfies that person now might not satisfy him later. This instability is unavoidable because, in Kant’s view, our desires and satisfactions flow from the vagaries of our psychological makeup, environment, and history. They are thus not something over which we have free and constant control. They belong to the realm of the empirical, which for Kant is a realm determined by forces other than ourselves.¹⁷ From this perspective, not even the prospect of pleasure or pain in heaven provides a free and universal ground for morality. The external threat of punishment offends our dignity, while our response to this threat remains essentially self-regarding (we do the good because we don’t want to suffer). Kant develops his complicated moral psychology, therefore, with its categorical imperative and the notion of the good will, in an effort to preserve the dignity (i.e., freedom) and universal impartiality of morality.

But is this the only option? Is a Kantian morality of duty the only way of avoiding the selfish and unstable pursuit of satisfaction? Or is there another way to view the quest for happiness and human fulfillment? If we turn to the classical tradition, we discover that the dis-

cussion of happiness arises from within the context of the objective requirements of the moral life. As Julia Annas has noted, the guiding question is “How ought I to live? or What should my life be like?”¹⁸ To answer this question requires a discussion of the goal of human life, for from the classical perspective we can only understand an activity in relation to its goal.¹⁹ For example, if I were to cut my hand, the series of activities that begin in my hand the moment I cut it becomes intelligible only in relation to the goal of healing the cut. So, too, the activities of human life become intelligible only in relation to the goal of human life. This goal is what the classical tradition variously described as human flourishing, fulfillment, or happiness.²⁰

Although there were always dissenting voices, the main schools of classical thought—those arising from Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics—all rejected external goods as well as bodily goods (including pleasure) as the essence of happiness. Although wealth, power, health, the pleasures of food, drink, and family life and sex, friendship and community, are all things we commonly associate with those who are happy, they are not the essence of happiness for the simple reason that one can have all of these things and not be happy. For these classical schools of thought, the essence of happiness is an activity. As one pagan disciple of Aristotle put it, happiness is activity in accord with virtue. “Happiness is activity (*energeia*) in accordance with virtue in actions that are preferred, as one would wish them. Bodily and external goods are called productive of happiness by contributing towards it when present; but those who think that they fulfill happiness do not know that happiness is life, and life is the fulfillment of action. No bodily or external good is in itself an action or in general an activity.”²¹

There are two things to notice here. First, by grounding happiness in virtue (the morally excellent act to be done here and now) and not in pleasure, the classical tradition transcends the dichotomy between personal fulfillment and the other regarding requirements of morality. A sensitive analysis of our desire for happiness leads us to discover that we become happy by being virtuous, and the vir-

tues lead us to concern and care for others. Thus, what may begin as a self-centered desire for personal fulfillment leads to the discovery that we find ultimate fulfillment in a self-forgetful concern for the common good of our community. All three of these classical traditions (the Platonic, the Aristotelian, and the Stoic) recognized the tension between self-love and concern for others, but sought—each in its own way—to overcome this tension by portraying the discipline of virtue as ordering and expanding self-love to reach out to others in our love for the truly good and beautiful deed—the *Kalos*—even to the point of dying (in the virtue of courage) for the common good of the community.²²

Nevertheless, and this is the second point, once happiness and human fulfillment have been described as activities in accord with virtue, the problem of happiness's relationship to the other (bodily and external) goods reappears. The example of one who dies defending the common good of the community is instructive. In what sense can he be said to be happy as he undergoes the destruction of his body? Even if we set aside this extreme case, the problem remains. Whether they viewed happiness as an inclusive good considered as an integral life of civic virtue or as a dominant good focused around the contemplation of divine truth, the classical schools of philosophy cannot escape the reality of misfortune and death.²³ What happens if we are sick, or unjustly deprived of our liberty, or left in hunger or without friends? Can we be happy? This question forces us to consider the consequences of the second feature of the modern conception of happiness introduced at the beginning of this article: the notion that happiness is attainable in this life.

Although Locke himself doubted whether the mass of humanity could achieve happiness in this life, he nonetheless held that our happiness or misery was in great part of our own making.²⁴ Locke articulated the practical consequences of this view for his own life in the following terms: "I will faithfully pursue that happiness I propose to myself. . . . All innocent diversions and delights, as far as they will contribute to my health, and consist with my improve-

ment, condition, and my other more solid pleasures of knowledge and reputation, I will enjoy.”²⁵ Locke’s writings encouraged others to do the same.²⁶ In this, Locke was part of a larger Enlightenment tendency to translate “the ultimate question ‘How can I be saved’ into the pragmatic ‘How can I be happy.’”²⁷ The disciples of Francis Hutcheson and the “moral sense” theorists articulated this transition to a more terrestrial morality by affirming that virtue was itself pleasurable.²⁸ In Britain and America, where puritan and republican ideals of virtue and prosperity mixed to form a strong new drink, the blending of virtue and pleasure provided an intoxicatingly attractive vision of earthly existence. As one commentator explains, “In effect [the moral sense] theorists said what enlightened men and women wanted to hear: Virtue was pleasurable; pleasure was virtuous; and human beings were naturally social. When raised in healthy environments (and when prejudice and superstition were removed), they would act toward one another with genuine kindness. The world, after all, was a happy place.”²⁹

This view has been popular among secularists as well as religious believers. For believers it is the view that God wants us to be prosperous and successful in this life and if we lead virtuous lives we will be. But is this really the case? Is the world a happy place and does God wish us to enjoy contented prosperity in this life? Is this God’s primary concern for us?

At the very height of the confident and satisfied Victorian era, voices of protest and doubt began to arise. Already in the early part of the nineteenth century, Romantics were setting a tone of melancholy and pessimism concerning earthly happiness, while Schopenhauer was giving this pessimism a philosophical justification.³⁰ Darwin and the wars of the century were also beginning to undermine people’s confidence in a provident God and the assurance of happiness. Poets and artists are often the first to articulate the anxieties of their own time. This was especially true at the end of the Victorian era. One surprising example of this is offered by the poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling. Although he is often viewed as merely the

voice of empire, his vision of human existence is nuanced. After a happy early childhood at the center of his loving family in India, Kipling was sent while still a boy to England to be tutored in the private home of a governess. So began five years of Dickensian misery, where he was regularly punished without provocation or warning for crimes he did not commit, and where he was deprived of affection and even of proper medical care.³¹ This instilled in Kipling a lasting obsession concerning the radical disconnection between the “God of Things as They Should Be” proclaimed by Victorian culture, and the “God of Things as They Are” that he discovered in his experiences throughout the world.³² Like Joseph Conrad, Kipling found the natural world to be both extraordinarily beautiful and heartbreakingly indifferent to the plight of human beings and their deeds of valor. In Kipling’s experience, good, dedicated, and self-sacrificing missionaries often do not prosper. Often they languish in poverty and die painfully from strange diseases, their deeds of valor unknown and apparently unrewarded.

Understandably, facts such as these have led many to question their belief in God, while still seeking to retain something of the beauty of Christian morality and the promise of happiness. One solution is ably articulated in the works of authors such as Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. In the face of beautiful nature’s cruel indifference to our plight, we can remain faithful to our moral code and die happily in an act of beautiful generosity, such as Rose-a-Sharon’s act of Roman charity that caps Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, or Robert Jordan’s self-sacrifice that enables his beloved Maria and her companions to escape in Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

These modern authors are echoing the ancient solution of the Stoics, some of whom famously argued that they were happy even while imprisoned and undergoing torture.³³ There is true nobility here. Indeed, the Stoics were intuiting a real truth: one can experience joy by living the virtues even in the midst of suffering. This is possible because of the unique character of joy as distinct from pleasure. Servais Pinckaers describes the difference succinctly.

“Pleasure is an agreeable sensation, a passion caused by contact with some *exterior* good. Joy, however, is something *interior*, like the act that causes it. Joy is the direct effect of an *excellent action*, like the savor of a long task finally accomplished. It is also the effect in us of truth understood and goodness loved.”³⁴

While pleasure is opposed to pain as its contrary, joy “is *born of trials*, of pains endured, of sufferings accepted with courage and with love.”³⁵ The Stoics were right, therefore, to affirm virtue’s power to bring us joy even in the midst of suffering. The Stoics, however, ultimately claim too much. When Seneca, for example, writes from exile that “I am happy under circumstances that usually make others wretched,” he is not merely affirming that he finds joy even in the midst of life’s sorrows; he is claiming that what others account as life’s sorrows touch him not at all.³⁶ Thus, he can even affirm that “I cannot even be made unhappy.”³⁷ This is so, Seneca explains elsewhere, because “the happy man is he who recognizes no good and evil other than a good and an evil mind.”³⁸ From this perspective, the sage can be happy even while in prison or being tortured because “he derives all of his joy from himself.”³⁹ Like some strands of Buddhist thought, Stoic happiness ultimately rests on the claim that our physical life is either an illusion or of little ultimate importance. We attain happiness through a disciplined mind that extinguishes both fear and desire and finds its joy in inner virtue:

The happy life is to have a mind that is free, lofty, fearless and steadfast—a mind that is placed beyond the reach of fear, beyond the reach of desire, that counts virtue the only good, baseness the only evil, and all else but a worthless mass of things, which come and go without increasing or diminishing the highest good, and neither subtract any part from the happy life nor add any part to it.⁴⁰

Once again, there is true insight here. An element of true happiness consists in judging the things of this world aright and in rightly ordering our desires with respect to them.

But is happiness reducible to psychological self-sufficiency—reducible merely to ordered thoughts and desires? Indeed, is it truly possible in this life to place the mind beyond the influence of fear and desire? Since fear and desire have among their objects both the goods of the body and the needs of others, a mind placed beyond such emotions is a mind that has no concern for either the physical plight of the body or of one's friends and family. Is such an existence ultimately attainable in this life? More importantly, even if such detachment be possible, can a state of mind that shows no concern for the life of the body and the welfare of others truly be human happiness? It is one thing to experience joy in the midst of suffering, quite another to claim that one can be fully happy in the midst of this suffering.

Thus, Augustine's response to the Stoics seems to retain its force: "They are not truly happy, but bravely unhappy."⁴¹ Sooner or later the sensitive person discovers that none of the goods of this life, not even the life of the mind or the good activity of virtue so vaunted by the classical tradition, constitutes our proper and perfect happiness. None of these goods constitute the essence of our happiness because none of them is permanent. We desire perfect and lasting happiness, a happiness that fulfills all our desires and cannot be lost, and we discover that no created thing or activity proper to this life can grant it to us.

This is not to deny the real joys and relative happiness attainable here on earth. Nor is it to deny that we are naturally inclined toward the earthly flourishing from which these joys flow: toward a life of contemplative love and generous service to others in the context of a community. It is only to recognize that this happiness is fleeting because ultimately these good things and good activities are taken from us in sickness, suffering, old age, and death. In other words, it is to recognize that there are many objectively good reasons for being unhappy in this life, and thus if happiness is possible it must be something we fully attain only in the next life.

Pagan thinkers were ultimately to recognize this. Aristotle, for

example, after outlining the requirements for happiness in book one of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, concluded in book ten that such a happiness would only be attainable by a god.⁴² Plotinus accepts this view, but affirms that through the mystic contemplation of the One, we ourselves become divine.⁴³ Although Plotinus seems at first sight to share the Stoic view that the sage can be happy even while physically wretched, upon closer scrutiny we discover that the Plotinian sage is happy only to the extent that his mind has already begun to transcend the physical world.⁴⁴ For Plotinus, happiness is ultimately attained only when, after having sloughed off the body in death, we return to our “fatherland” and achieve mystical union with the One.⁴⁵

Christians have often been favorably impressed by Plotinus’s portrayal of mystical ascent, seeing in it many affinities with the Christian conception of happiness as union with God. From the Christian perspective, however, the notion that union with God is our fulfillment and happiness only offers a first sketch of virtue’s relationship to happiness.⁴⁶ As Augustine explains, it is one thing to recognize the goal of human life, quite another to discover the way to that goal.⁴⁷ Although the pagans could discover that happiness consists in union with God, it is only in the light of Christian revelation that we discover Christ as the way to this union.⁴⁸ From the Christian perspective, the inevitable experience of sickness, suffering, and death points not only to the fact that perfect happiness belongs only to heaven, it also points to our need for salvation. Death alone will not bring happiness. We must be freed from sin and pass from death to life—to a new life in the Trinity that includes a resurrected and glorified body.⁴⁹ Thus, salvation and redemption in Christ are what make eternal happiness possible. Indeed, Christ’s salvific love even enables us to enjoy an inchoate participation of eternal happiness in this life. Even in the face of suffering we can experience not bodily pleasure but spiritual peace and even joy. As we have seen, the Stoics themselves had experienced something of this. They failed, however, to see it for what it was. Joy in suffering

is not fulfillment, but only a foretaste of fulfillment.⁵⁰ It is a promise of the future happiness made possible in Christ.

Already during the crisis of the Maccabees, when the Jewish people were forced to confront classical Greek culture, the biblical authors articulated aspects of this joy. For example, when portraying Eleazar's heroic death under torture, 2 Maccabees describes him as affirming, "I am not only enduring terrible pain in my body from this scourging, but also suffering it with joy in my soul because of my devotion to the Lord" (6:30). The biblical author subsequently affirms that by his death Eleazar offered "a model of courage and an unforgettable example of virtue" (6:31). From the biblical perspective, true virtue is the product of one's life of devotion to the Lord through fidelity to the covenant. It consists in right relationship with the Lord (*zedekah*). In the New Testament, we discover that this right relationship (*dikaioisune*/justice) is made possible only in Christ, through the grace of the Trinitarian life he has poured into our hearts. This is what enables St. Paul to say "I am overjoyed in all our afflictions" (2 Cor 7:4). Christ is our justice (see 1 Cor 1:30), in him "we become the justice of God" (2 Cor 5:21), and it is in him that we find lasting joy (see Jn 15:11 and 17:13).

The discovery of Christ as the way to fulfillment casts our natural desire for happiness in a new light. It also helps us resolve the tension existing between the desire for happiness and the demands of morality. Aquinas's account of happiness is instructive in this regard. Although Aquinas follows Augustine closely in affirming that perfect happiness consists in the vision of God in heaven, Aquinas also explicitly recognizes that a certain relative or imperfect happiness is possible in this life. Aquinas refers to imperfect happiness in two ways.⁵¹ First, there is the natural happiness that one can attain through living the acquired virtues. This is a life lived according to our natural inclinations and the principles of the natural law. We should avoid ascribing to Aquinas too tranquil a notion of this imperfect natural happiness. Indeed, Aquinas prefaces this distinction with a quotation from Job: "Man born of a woman lives but briefly

and is full of many miseries” (Job 14:1). He then describes the character of these miseries:

This present life is subject to many unavoidable evils: 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, as Augustine diligently describes in the *City of God* (14:4). Likewise neither can the desire for good be satiated in this life, because although we naturally desire the good that we have to be permanent, the goods of the present life pass away, since life itself passes away, which we naturally desire to have, and continually will to have permanently.⁵²

This natural happiness, therefore, has many of the traits of what most people would describe as unhappiness. It is plagued by ignorance, disordered affections, physical afflictions, and ultimately death. Without the aid of grace, the acquired virtues are even unable to give us the life of inner peace we so desire. This is so, Aquinas explains elsewhere, because it is only in the gift of grace that the passions become subject to reason, and the will is able to persevere in the good.⁵³ Thus, although with the acquired virtues we can direct our lives toward the happiness and human flourishing that come from knowing the truth and from promoting the common good of the earthly community, we cannot persevere unfailingly in these activities nor do them from a unified personality.⁵⁴ Moreover and most important for Aquinas, the acquired virtues do not empower us to attain the supernatural happiness that is the vision of God in heaven.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Aquinas recognizes with the ancients that the natural joys of life are true, even if imperfect and fleeting. Recognizing the existence of imperfect natural happiness not only enables us to sketch the happiness attainable by non-Christians, it also helps us understand something of the character of grace and supernatural happiness.⁵⁶ Since grace presupposes nature (which it heals, perfects, and elevates), the life of grace is understood in relation to and

by analogy with nature. Thus, in relation to happiness, grace both presupposes and elevates our natural desire to know and love God. Moreover, the New Law (with its infused virtues and gifts) presupposes the natural law (with its acquired virtues) in the very act of going beyond it.

This last fact leads us to the second way that Aquinas refers to imperfect happiness. There is the imperfect happiness made possible in this life through sanctifying grace and the virtues it imparts.⁵⁷ This is the happiness proper to those who live in hope.⁵⁸ There is first the spiritual joy that comes from living the infused virtues. Aquinas equates this joy with the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22–23), defining the fruits as “any virtuous deeds in which one delights.”⁵⁹ When these acts are perfect, however, Aquinas affirms that they attain the character of a beatitude.⁶⁰ In Aquinas’s view, the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12) refer not only to the blessings of heaven, but also to “a kind of imperfect inchoation of future happiness existing even in this life in those who are holy.”⁶¹ Aquinas defines the Beatitudes as perfect acts of the infused virtues and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁶²

Aquinas follows Augustine in seeing the Beatitudes as describing seven stages of spiritual perfection, with the eighth beatitude being the confirmation and summation of all the previous ones.⁶³ The Beatitudes mark the stages by which Christians reorient their desires from the good things of this world toward the eternal goods of heaven.⁶⁴ Although in this world we remain citizens of earth, as we grow in virtue we begin ever more fully to live as citizens of heaven. The first three beatitudes concern the process whereby we are weaned from false conceptions of happiness based on pleasure. The next two concern the perfection of our activities in relation to others, while the last two flow from the perfection of the contemplative life, which is most closely a foretaste of heaven.⁶⁵

That the summit of happiness is contemplation reveals the unique character of the activity proper to happiness. The contemplative act contains an element of passive receptivity within it. We are receptive before the real, before what we behold. Even the act

of loving what we see presupposes an element of receptive affinity for the loved object. From the Christian perspective, contemplation is always essentially a relationship of love, whereby we gaze upon the beloved or their works. As such, the priority rests with the beloved: with their initiative and action, with their self-revelation. This is why happiness is ultimately experienced as a gift, as something that is given to us and that elicits our gratitude.

The experience of happiness as a gift also helps us understand why the virtues proper to the active life are said to be ordered toward the contemplative life: the joy that comes from living these virtues leads us spontaneously, in the desire to express our gratitude, to the loving contemplation of God.⁶⁶ It is in this intimate encounter that we find the deepest juncture between nature and grace, gift and virtue. If it is true to say that we merit heaven through acts of virtue, this is only because our merits are themselves gifts from God.⁶⁷ Ultimately, therefore, the joy that comes from the life of virtue leads us to the loving contemplation of God whereby we express our gratitude for his many gifts.

Aquinas's three-part division of the seven beatitudes finds its ultimate source in the stages of charity's progress.⁶⁸ Charity reorients our priorities. While it respects our natural desires and relationships, it draws these desires and relationships toward a new locus: the community of heaven.⁶⁹ Thus, although charity respects the natural love of self, of family, and of friends, it reorients and expands these loves.⁷⁰ For example, although in charity we love our own spiritual good more than the spiritual good of our neighbor, we nonetheless are called to love our neighbor's spiritual good more than the physical good of our own bodies.⁷¹ Thus, we should in charity be prepared to die for the spiritual welfare of our neighbor. Moreover, charity causes our love to go out even to our enemies, which in the perfection of charity can require that we lay down our lives for them.⁷² This is the vocation of the martyr who not only follows Christ as the way to happiness and fulfillment, but is configured into the very image of Christ.⁷³

For Christians, therefore, the search for happiness leads us on a surprising journey with a paradoxical outcome. Christians find the way to happiness in the way of the Cross, a symbol of misery and misfortune. The Beatitudes proclaim this paradox vividly. On the one hand, they assert that our deepest desires will be fulfilled in Christ: mercy will be shown us, we shall be comforted and satisfied; we shall inherit the kingdom of heaven, becoming the Children of God and we shall see God. On the other hand, however, this will happen through a process that includes poverty, mourning, hunger, and thirst, culminating in ignominy and persecution, and ultimately in a form of martyrdom.⁷⁴ At issue here is nothing less than Christians' configuration to the sorrowful humanity of Christ so that we can participate fully in the joy of his divinity.

This result is counterintuitive. Like a distasteful medicine that at first repels us, the way of the Cross only becomes palatable because of our faith in the physician who recommends it. "Hence," as Aquinas explains, "in order that we might arrive at the perfect vision of heavenly happiness, we must first of all believe God, as an apprentice believes the master who is teaching him."⁷⁵ God has instilled in our hearts a desire for happiness, which is fulfilled only in him: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."⁷⁶ On our own, we would never find our way to this lasting happiness. We need therefore, to enter an apprenticeship with one who is an expert in humanity and a master—so to speak—of divinity. This is our apprenticeship with Christ, through the action of the Spirit, lived in the community of the Church.

Although finding our happiness through the Cross of Christ is a surprising outcome, we should not exaggerate the discontinuity between Christian happiness and natural happiness in this regard. Even to arrive at the natural happiness possible in this life without the aid of grace would require an apprenticeship in virtue. It is here that the essential relationship between happiness and morality becomes apparent. The primary precepts of the natural law and the inclinations that flow from them orient our lives toward the

virtues that both constitute natural human fulfillment (imperfect happiness) and promote the common good of the community. Even on the natural level, happiness comes from lives dedicated to the service of others and to the contemplative love of truth. Thus, even on the natural level the search for happiness remains something of a paradox. The desire for human happiness finds its natural fulfillment in a self-forgetful dedication to the common good. What the natural law requires in the concrete, however, is something we only discover within the context of a community and through a moral apprenticeship. This occurs either well or poorly. As Aquinas recognized, evil practices and immoral authorities (parents, teachers, public officials, etc.) can render the implications of the natural law opaque to a community and its members.⁷⁷

A culture, therefore, can develop a false conception of happiness and of the means to attaining it. Nevertheless, the desire for happiness and the inclinations of the natural law remain intact on the deepest level. Far from being a hindrance to morality, the desire for happiness offers the most powerful incentive for living a virtuous life. Through the hidden action of grace, the desire can also serve as a preparation for the Gospel. This desire and the corresponding principles of the natural law are the matter upon which the Holy Spirit acts when undertaking within us the pedagogy of the New Law.⁷⁸

It is here that the example of Malcolm Muggeridge becomes instructive. When Muggeridge condemned the pursuit of happiness as being fatuous and the cause of much of the evils of the modern world, he did so as one who had spent many years pursuing a happiness based on pleasure and contentment, or what he described as “the self-indulgence considered today to be synonymous with happiness.”⁷⁹ Gradually he came to see that not only was his conception of happiness false, but also his manner of pursuing it. Indeed, he discovered that the pursuit of happiness teaches us that on our own we cannot attain it. Every created thing that Muggeridge pursued in the hope of attaining happiness withered the moment he embraced it: “Happiness . . . is like a young deer, fleet and beautiful. Hunt him,

and he becomes a poor frantic quarry; after the kill, a piece of stinking flesh.”⁸⁰ Moreover, whenever Muggeridge did enjoy a glimpse of happiness, he always experienced it as a gift. What led Muggeridge to criticize the pursuit of happiness, therefore, were the presuppositions generally associated with this pursuit: that happiness is reducible to pleasurable contentment and that it is attainable on our own.

Nevertheless, it was the longing for happiness (and the sorrow that came from seeking it in the wrong places) that ultimately led Muggeridge to discover God, his gifts, and the true nature of beatitude. As he himself explains, throughout his years of pursuing pleasure and contentment, he also felt another deeper desire working within him: “From my earliest years there was something else going on inside me . . . something that led me to feel myself a stranger among strangers in a strange land, whose true habitat was elsewhere.”⁸¹ He describes this as a “spiritual hunger” that gradually led him to the mystery of Christ and his Cross.⁸² Blessed Mother Teresa, in a personal letter to Muggeridge several years before his conversion, described his plight as follows: “Your longing for God is so deep. . . . I know what you feel—terrible longing, with dark emptiness—and yet He is the one in love with you.”⁸³ Throughout his life, it was during moments of suffering and solitude—while wandering the streets of Moscow during Stalin’s reign of terror, while attempting suicide in Mozambique during his time as an agent for MI6, or while listening to the bombs falling around him during the London Blitz—that he felt Christ calling him and teaching him the way of the Cross as the way to happiness.⁸⁴

Thus, although Muggeridge condemned the pursuit of happiness, his own life reveals that it was precisely his restless longing for happiness and fulfillment that kept him from accepting the conformist mediocrity of his own cultural environment and moved him to reject the empty promises of bohemian pleasure or middle class material contentment.⁸⁵ Through the hidden and mysterious action of God’s grace, the longing for happiness led Muggeridge to re-

discover the person and mission of Christ. The encounter would require trust, because it would entail painful renunciations and sacrifices. It would mean dying to a false conception of happiness and even to certain legitimate earthly goods, in order to be configured to the person and mission of Christ.

From this perspective, the natural desire for happiness becomes a preparation for the Gospel, while the good things of this world acquire a referential and even sacramental character. Those who are faithful to the search for happiness begin to discover that the good things of this world point beyond themselves. They are delightful, but none of them fulfill the depth of our desire. These goods seem to say to us, as they did to Augustine, “We did not make ourselves, but he made us who abides forever.”⁸⁶ Far from being a fatuous undertaking, therefore, the pursuit of happiness can lead us to Christ. When undertaken faithfully and with the aid of God’s grace, we discover the happiness that comes from a life of heroic charity. Although we may undertake the search for happiness from selfish and self-centered reasons, we only attain happiness when we can say with Paul that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). It is then that Christ’s joy will be in us and this joy will be complete.

Notes

1. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (London: Collins, 1969), 146.
2. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated and analyzed by H. J. Paton (New York: Harper, 1964), [90, 442] 109–110. The two bracketed numbers refer to two different standard German editions: the first refers to the Second German edition, while the second number refers to the edition prepared by the Royal Prussian Academy in Berlin. See pages 9 and 10 of Paton’s preface.
3. *Ibid.*, [6.395] 63.
4. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 10.1 (PL 41:277). See also *De Trinitate*, 13.3 (PL 42:1018) and *De moribus eccl.* 1.3.4 (PL 32:1312).
5. See Deal W. Hudson’s summary of this popular conception in *Happiness and the Limits of Satisfaction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 3–18.

6. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 2.21.42, 258 and John Locke, *Journals* Bodleian Ms. Locke f. 1, 335–36 (cited by Edward A. Driscoll, “The Influence of Gassendi on Locke’s Hedonism,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 12 [1972]: 99).
7. Robert Crofts, *The Way to Happiness on Earth Concerning Riches, Honour, Conjugall Love, Eating, Drinking* (London: Printed for G. H., 1641). See also Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth, or, A Serious Discourse Touching a Well-Founded Assurance of Men’s Everlasting Happiness and Blessedness* (London: Printed for John Hancock, Senior and Junior, 1657), preface; and Richard Holdsworth, *The Peoples Happiness, A Sermon Preached in St. Maries in Cambridge, Upon Sunday the 27 of March, Being the Day of His Majesties Happy Inauguration* (Cambridge: Roger Daniel, 1642), 2, 5–6. Cited by Darrin M. McMahon, “From the happiness of virtue to the virtue of happiness: 400 b.c. – a.d. 1780,” *Daedalus* 133 (2004): 13.
8. Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2004).
9. Chris Prentiss, *Zen And the Art of Happiness* (New York: Power Press, 2006), back cover.
10. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.21.42, 259.
11. *Ibid.*, 2.21.51, 266; cited in Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 182.
12. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 288.29, 162; McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, 182.
13. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, 288.35–289.7, 163; McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, 183.
14. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, 289.7–8, 163; McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, 183.
15. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.21.55, 269; McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, 183–84.
16. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, [1.393] 61; Hudson, *Happiness and the Limits of Satisfaction*, 51–52.
17. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, [12.399] 67 and [46.418] 85.
18. Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27.
19. See *ibid.*, 34–42.
20. See *ibid.*, 27–46. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 63–98.
21. Arius Didymus, in Stobaeus, *Eclogae* (Selections) book II: 126.18–127.2, cited in Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 45.
22. Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 223–333.
23. For the distinction between dominant and inclusive conceptions of human fulfillment, see J. L. Ackrill, “Aristotle on Eudaimonia,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 15–34.

24. See Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, 160–161. “Locke doubted that virtue carried any guarantee of prosperity or happiness in this life” (John C. Higgins-Biddle, “Introduction,” in Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, cvii). “Men’s happiness or misery is most part of their own making” (John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996], 10); McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, 185.
25. John Lock, an unpublished manuscript (Bodleian Library, MSS. Locke, c. 28, ff. 143–4), cited by Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 123–24; see also Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: the Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York: Norton, 2000), 263–64.
26. McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, 185.
27. Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, 22; McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, 209.
28. See Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations upon the Moral Sense*, facsimile reproduction of the third edition, 1742 (Gainesville: Scholars Facsimile Reprints, 1969).
29. McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, 326.
30. See *ibid.*, 274–84, 295–311.
31. See Louis L. Cornell, “Introduction,” in Rudyard Kipling, *The Man Who Would Be King and Other Stories*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Louis L. Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), xix–xxii.
32. See Rudyard Kipling, “The Judgment of Durgara,” in *The Man Who Would Be King and Other Stories*, 122–30. Louis Cornell observes that “Kipling’s India is unmistakably situated in the larger intellectual world of the late nineteenth century, when alert and sensitive thinkers recognized that the God of Things as They Should Be—the personal God of the Christian centuries—had withdrawn in favour of the God of Things as They Are” (“Introduction,” xxii).
33. Cicero offers the classic presentation of this Stoic view (even though he criticizes it) in book three of *De finibus*. For the general Stoic view of happiness see Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 385–411, and T. H. Irwin, “Stoic and Aristotelian Conceptions of Happiness,” in *The Norms of Nature: Studies in Hellenistic Ethics*, ed. Malcolm Schofield and Gisela Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 205–44.
34. Servais Pinckaers, *Morality: the Catholic View* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 78.
35. *Ibid.*, 78.
36. Seneca, *De Consolatione ad Helviam* 4.2 in *Moral Essays* with an English translation by John W. Basore, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1932), vol. 2, 425.
37. Seneca, *De Consolatione ad Helviam*, 4.3, 425.
38. Seneca, *De Vita Beata* 4.2 in *Moral Essays* vol. 2, 109.
39. Seneca, *De Consolatione ad Helviam*, 5.1–2, 425.
40. Seneca, *De Vita Beata*, 4.3, 109–110.
41. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 13.7 (PL 42:1021): “non est beatus veraciter sed miser fortiter.”
42. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) 10.7 (1177b27–31); see also NE 1.10 (1101a21).

43. Plotinus, *Enneads: A New, Definitive Edition with Comparisons to other Translations on Hundreds of Key Passages*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992) I.2.2–7, 35–41; Dominic O’Meara, *An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 102–3.
44. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.8.1, 410; see John Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 230.
45. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.9.9–11. “Introduction,” in Plotinus, *Les écrits de Plotin: traité 9 (VI, 9)*, introduction, translation, commentary and notes by Pierre Hadot (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 47: “Death becomes the precondition for union with God, and mystical experience is seen to be a provisional and fragile foretaste and anticipation of the soul’s union with the Good, which will occur after death, because here below the unitive embrace is fragile and can quickly be extinguished.”
46. For example, Aquinas’s analysis of happiness in the first five questions of the moral part of *Summa theologiae* (ST) only sketches the general features of happiness. Aquinas’s apparent intention was to follow Aristotle’s method of offering a general analysis of happiness at the beginning of his work, and then later undertaking a more specific account (see NE 1098a20–22). In his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas approves of this method, stating: “A thing should first be studied according to its general characteristics, i.e., by a general description which is like it and in a way extrinsic to it. Then, with other matters clarified, we must take up what was previously sketched roughly and etch in the lines more sharply. For this reason [Aristotle] will take up in greater detail the treatise on happiness toward the end of this work” (*In Ethic.* 11.7.131). Aquinas began to etch the lines of his full account of happiness in his analysis of the Beatitudes (ST I–II 69.1–4), but died before he was able to cap the third and final part of the *Summa theologiae* with an analysis of heaven and the last things. That this was his intention can be gleaned from the structure of his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard.
47. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.20 (PL 32: 747) and 7.21 (PL 32: 748).
48. See Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 8.8 (41: 232–233) and 10.2 (41: 279–280).
49. See Romans chs. 5 and 6; Augustine, *De Trinitate* 13.10 (PL 42: 1024–1025) and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 161, 601, 1005, 1026, and 1721.
50. C. S. Lewis attempts to articulate this facet of joy when he describes joy itself as a form of desire: joy is “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction” (C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: the Shape of My Early Life* [New York: Harcourt, 1955], 17–18); “All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still ‘about to be’” (*ibid.*, 78). Although Aquinas holds that joy is always an attainment of some true good (ST I–II 32.1; ST II–II 28.1), he would grant with Lewis that earthly joy always points beyond itself to its consummation in heaven (ST II–II 28.3).
51. See Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 157.
52. ST I–II 5.3.

53. *ST I* 95.1; *ST I-II* 109.8.
54. *ST I-II* 65.2; *ST I-II* 109.2.
55. *ST I-II* 62.1 and 63.3.
56. *ST I-II* 69.4 ad 1; *De malo* 5.1 ad 5: "As created good is a reflection of the uncreated good, so the attainment of a created good is a reflected beatitude." See Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 16.
57. *ST I-II* 5.3 ad 1 and *ST I-II* 69.2; see Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 157. (As Angela McKay has noted, there are strong textual indications that the entire *Secunda secundae* is a treatment of infused virtue, even the questions concerning the cardinal virtues.) See Angela McKay, "The Infused and Acquired Virtues in Aquinas' Moral Philosophy" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004), 187–88.
58. *ST I-II* 69.1. See also "Catechism of the Catholic Church," nn. 1818 and 1820.
59. *ST I-II* 70.2. Aquinas employs the term "virtue" here in the general sense. He explains elsewhere that the fruits refer to "all the acts of the gifts and virtues" (*ST I-II* 70.3 ad 3). The crucial feature here is that the fruits of the Holy Spirit pertain to acts whose ultimate cause in us is the Holy Spirit; otherwise they would be "fruits of reason" (*ST I-II* 70.1).
60. *ST I-II* 70.2.
61. *ST I-II* 69.2.
62. *ST I-II* 70.2.
63. See Augustine *De Sermonibus in Monte* (PL 34:1229–1308). See also Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 145–67.
64. See "Catechism of the Catholic Church," nn. 1716–1729.
65. *ST I-II* 69.3.
66. See Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, 26. The experience of joy as a gift has led many to belief in God, as was the case with Dorothy Day, the foundress of the Catholic Worker movement. The joys of being a wife and mother instilled in her a deep desire to thank someone. She began to pray, not out of sorrow and desire for help (which her communist ideals had taught her to expect) but out of a need to express her gratitude for her happiness: "I was praying because I wanted to thank Him" (Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* [New York: Harper, 1953], 133).
67. Augustine, *Sermo* 298, 4–5 (PL 38: 1367): "Dona Ipsius sunt merita tua."
68. The first three beatitudes would thus correspond to the purgative way of the *incipientes*, the next two to the illuminative way of the *proficientes*, while the last two to the unitive way of the *perfecti*. See *ST II-II* 24.9.
69. *ST II-II* 25.12; 26.7 and 26.13.
70. *ST II-II* 25 and 26. See Stephen J. Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994).
71. *ST II-II* 26.4 and 5.
72. *ST II-II* 25.8 and 9.
73. *Super ad Hebraeos*, 6.1.

74. *ST II–II* 124.1 sc: “The reward of beatitude is . . . due to martyrdom, since it is written: ‘Blessed are they that suffer persecution for the sake of justice, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’” Since martyrdom is the act of bearing witness to Christian truth even unto death (*ST II–II* 124.4; “Catechism of the Catholic Church” n. 2473), every Christian who bears witness to Christ by the way he undergoes his natural death can also be said to be a martyr and to suffer martyrdom.
75. *ST II–II* 2.3.
76. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1 (PL 32: 661).
77. *ST I–II* 94.4 and 6.
78. See Michel Therrien, “Law, Liberty and Virtue: A Thomistic Defense for the Pedagogical Character of Law” (STD dissertation, University of Fribourg, Switzerland, 2007).
79. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Confessions of a Twentieth-Century Pilgrim*, originally published in Britain as *Conversion, a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 138.
80. *Ibid.*, 55.
81. *Ibid.*, 16.
82. *Ibid.*, 42.
83. Cited by *ibid.*, 139.
84. See *ibid.*, 82–85, 95–96, 104–106, 108–112.
85. Muggeridge was himself willing to speak of happiness in positive terms. For example, he asserts that as a young man he discovered “that abstemious ways make for happiness, and self-indulgence, especially sexual, for misery and remorse” (*ibid.*, 39). He even speaks of “true happiness,” asserting that it is found “in forgetfulness, not indulgence, of the self; in escape from carnal appetites, not in their satisfaction” (*ibid.*, 55). He portrays this happiness as akin to turning our attention upward. “To lift it upwards, becoming aware of the wide luminous universe outside—this alone is happiness. At the highest level such happiness is the ecstasy which mystics have tried to describe. At more humdrum levels, it is human love” (*ibid.*).
86. Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10 (PL 32:774).