

In What Straits They Suffered: St. Thomas's Use of Aristotle to Transform Augustine's Critique of Earthly Happiness

MICHAEL SHERWIN, OP
University of Fribourg
Fribourg, Switzerland

Aristotle in the Service of Augustine

IN AN ESSAY on St. Thomas's appropriation of pagan virtue, Brian Shanley affirms that "Aquinas admits Aristotelian virtue, but within Augustinian limitations." Shanley remarks that "In the end, Aquinas's analysis of pagan virtue represents a creative appropriation of Aristotelian and Augustinian elements into his own theological synthesis."¹ Shanley's insight also well describes Aquinas's theology of happiness. Aquinas admits Aristotelian happiness, but within an Augustinian recognition of the limitations of earthly happiness. At the same time, however, he uses Aristotelian insights to strengthen and refine Augustine's critique of earthly happiness. In this way, Aquinas's theology of happiness is truly a "creative appropriation of Aristotelian and Augustinian elements" that integrates these elements into Aquinas's Christian theology of happiness.² In the pages that follow, we shall investigate one facet of this work of integration. We shall investigate how Aquinas integrates Aristotle's analysis of happiness into Augustine's pointed critique of pagan conceptions of happiness.

¹ Brian Shanley, "Aquinas on Pagan Virtue," *Thomist* 63 (1999): 554.

² Kevin Staley offers a similar argument. He asserts "that Aquinas borrows the crucial premise of his main argument in *ST* I-II, qq. 1–3 from Augustine and that Aquinas's account of happiness in the *Summa theologiae* should therefore be characterized as an at-bottom Augustinian tract that incorporates but does not proceed from Aristotle's philosophical insights" (Kevin M. Staley, "Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas on the Good and the Human Good: A note on *Summa theologiae* I-II, QQ. 1–3," *Modern Schoolman* 72 [1995]: 313).

The thesis of this article is that Aquinas adopts a core Augustinian critique of the pagan view of happiness, but refines this critique by structuring it according to Aristotle's own analysis of happiness and its limitations.

St. Augustine's Critique of Pagan Happiness

Augustine admires many pagan insights concerning happiness. In his mature thought, however, there are two things he vigorously attacks: the notion that happiness is attainable in this life, and the notion that it is attainable by unaided human effort.³ For the mature Augustine, true happiness is the loving contemplation of God attained only in the next life, in the beatific vision.⁴ Happiness is essentially a gift from God granted through the grace of Christ with which we must cooperate by living lives of true virtue.⁵ During our earthly pilgrimage the most we

³ See *De civitate Dei* 19.4. See Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 199: "Thus two principles of philosophical enquiry are rejected: the principle that the good sought, and thus happiness, is to be found in our temporal, earthly existence, and the belief that happiness, and so virtue, can be found by unaided human effort."

⁴ *De civitate Dei* 22.30: "quanta erit illa felicitas, ubi nullum erit malum, nullum latebit bonum, vacabitur Dei laudibus, qui erit omnia in omnibus. . . sic enim et illud recte intellegitur, quod ait apostolus: 'ut sit Deus omnia in omnibus.' Ipse finis erit desideriorum nostrorum, qui sine fine videbitur, sine fastidio amabitur, sine fatigatione laudabitur." *De Trinitate* 1.18: "hoc est enim 'plenum gaudium' nostrum quo 'amplius non est,' frui trinitate deo 'ad' cuius 'imaginem facti' sumus." Augustine's theology of happiness developed considerably over time. John Rist offers a concise summary of this development: "After his conversion, as the opening lines of *The Happy Life* make clear, Augustine thought of the event in terms of reaching port after a storm. Christ is the way to reach the port; the Christian who professes faith in Christ and becomes a member of the Christian community is more or less in the port already. He can now work on perfecting his soul, and happiness can be attained in this life. It was a view which during the 390's Augustine came to repudiate; no one can be happy, only on the road (*iter*) to happiness in this life (*On Human Responsibility* 2.16.41). Augustine now professed the strikingly unclassical notion that there are no sages among us. . . the Stoic sage—even for the Stoics as rare as the phoenix—has disappeared. Jesus (and perhaps Mary) alone have achieved perfection in this life, and only because he was the man 'predestined' to do so. As for the rest of us, Augustine goes out of his way in the *Reconsiderations* to correct those passages of his early writings which state or imply the possible early perfection of the soul" (John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient thought Baptized* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994] 169–70). See Ragnar Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse: Saint Augustin et le problème de la fin de l'homme dans la philosophie ancienne* (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1962).

⁵ *De Trinitate* 13.12: "quanto est credibililius natura filios hominis gratia dei 'fieri dei filios' et habitare in deo in quo solo et de quo solo esse possint beati particeps immortalitatis eius effecti, propter quod persuadendum 'dei filius' particeps

can expect is to enjoy a certain foretaste of happiness through the virtue of hope.⁶ As St. Paul says, we are saved in hope.⁷

Peter Brown, in describing the general method Augustine pursues in the *City of God*, offers an account that well describes Augustine's way of critiquing pagan happiness. Brown states that Augustine's procedure is to present a Christian solution to a question against "an elaborately constructed background of pagan answers to the same question."⁸ By juxtaposing the Christian answer to the question of happiness with various pagan answers to this question, Augustine both reveals the inadequacy of the pagan answers and shows how the Christian answer better fulfills the requirements implicit in the pagans' own understanding of the problem of happiness. By

nostrae mortalitatis effectus est?" *De civitate Dei* 4.3: "quapropter si verus Deus colatur eique sacris veracibus et bonis moribus serviatur, utile est ut boni longe lateque diu regnent; neque hoc tam ipsis quam illis utile est, quibus regnant. nam quantum ad ipsos pertinet, pietas et probitas eorum, quae magna Dei dona sunt, sufficit eis ad veram felicitatem, qua et ista vita bene agatur et postea percipiatur aeterna." *De civitate Dei* 6.12: "nam cui nisi uni felicitati propter aeternam vitam consecrandi homines essent, si dea felicitas esset? quia vero non dea, sed munus est Dei: cui deo nisi Datori felicitatis consecrandi sumus, qui aeternam vitam, ubi vera est et plena felicitas, pia caritate diligimus? . . . vitam igitur aeternam, id est sine ullo fine felicem, solus ille dat, qui dat veram felicitatem."

⁶ *De Trinitate* 1.17: "neque enim quaeremus aliud cum ad illius contemplationem pervenerimus, quae nunc non est quamdiu gaudium nostrum 'in spe' est. 'spes autem quae videtur non est spes. quod enim videt quis, quid et sperat? si autem quod non videmus speramus, per patientiam exspectamus quoadusque rex in recubitu suo est.'" *De Trinitate* 13.10: "nam multi per transitoria mala ad permansura bona fortiter tetenderunt. qui profecto spe beati sunt etiam cum sunt in transitoriis malis per quae ad bona non transitura perveniunt. sed qui spe beatus est nondum beatus est. exspectat namque per patientiam beatitudinem quam nondum tenet." *De civitate Dei* 19.20: "quis est qui illam vitam vel beatissimam neget vel in eius comparatione istam, quae hic agitur, quantislibet animi et corporis externarumque rerum bonis plena sit, non miserrimam iudicet? quam tamen quicumque sic habet, ut eius usum referat ad illius finem, quam diligit ardentissime ac fidelissime sperat, non absurde dici etiam nunc beatus potest, spe illa potius quam re ista."

⁷ *De civitate Dei* 19.4: "sed ut vita humana, quae tot et tantis huius saeculi malis esse cogitur misera, spe futuri saeculi sit beata, sicut et salua. quo modo enim beata est, quae nondum salua est? unde et apostolus Paulus non de hominibus imprudentibus impatientibus, intemperantibus et iniquis, sed de his, qui secundum veram pietatem viverent et ideo virtutes, quas habent, veras haberent, ait: 'spe enim salui facti sumus. spes autem quae videtur non est spes. quod enim videt quis, quid et sperat? si autem quod non videmus speramus, per patientiam exspectamus.' sicut ergo spe salui, ita spe beati facti sumus, et sicut salutem, ita beatitudinem non iam tenemus praesentem, sed exspectamus futuram, et hoc 'per patientiam.'"

⁸ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 306.

drawing on principles that the pagans themselves accept, Augustine reveals the painful inadequacy of the happiness attainable by unaided human effort.

Augustine's basic argument is straightforward. All people desire happiness, although they do not all agree on what constitutes happiness.⁹ Nevertheless, if you analyze this desire, Augustine believes, you discover the following.

—All who desire happiness want to be free from evils such as ignorance, sickness, and death. In short, they want their happiness to be lasting.

—Our life on earth, however, can never be entirely free from the evils of this world: We all suffer from ignorance, sickness, and eventually we all die. We are unable to prevent this.

—Therefore, happiness is not possible in this life, nor are we able to attain it by our own efforts.¹⁰

Augustine believes that this conclusion is inescapable. He takes it for granted that all of his pagan interlocutors agree that happiness consists in having what you desire (as long as you desire rightly).¹¹ From this shared premise, Augustine believes he can show that happiness must be lasting and not subject to suffering, and thus that it cannot be attained in this life. The only way to escape this conclusion is by trying to deny that this life contains suffering. Augustine argues that this is, in fact, what the bulk of pagan philosophers have attempted to do.

These philosophers . . . attempt to fabricate for themselves a happiness in this life, based upon a virtue that is as deceitful as it is proud.¹²

⁹ *De Trinitate* 13.6-7: "at si [mimus] dixisset: 'omnes beati esse vultis; miseri esse non vultis,' dixisset aliquid quod nullus in sua non agnosceret voluntate. quidquid enim aliud quisquam latenter velit, ab hac voluntate quae omnibus et in omnibus satis nota est non recedit. mirum est autem cum capessendae atque retinendae beatitudinis voluntas una sit omnium, unde tanta existat de ipsa beatitudine rursus varietas et diversitas voluntatum, non quod aliquis eam nolit, sed quod non omnes eam norint. si enim omnes eam nossent, non ab aliis putaretur esse in virtute animi, aliis in corporis voluptate, aliis in utraque, et aliis atque aliis, alibi atque alibi. ut enim eos quaeque res maxime delectavit ita in ea constituerunt vitam beatam."

¹⁰ See the extended arguments that Augustine offers in *De civitate Dei* 19.4; *De Trinitate* 13.6-12, 24-26; and *De Trinitate* 14.23-26.

¹¹ *De Trinitate* 13.8: "omnes autem beati habent quod volunt, quamvis non omnes qui habent quod volunt continuo sint beati; continuo autem miseri qui vel non habent quod volunt vel id habent quod non recte volunt. beatus igitur non est nisi qui et habet omnia que vult et nihil vult male."

¹² *De civitate Dei* 19.4: "quam beatitudinem isti philosophi . . . hic sibi conantur falsissimam fabricare, quanto superbiore, tanto medaciore virtute." James Wetzel

They attempt this because they have despaired of eternal life.

As long as they despair of immortality, without which true happiness is impossible, they will look for, or rather make up, any kind of thing that may be called, rather than really be, happiness in this life.¹³

Augustine recognizes that some philosophers acknowledge the immortality of the soul and place happiness in the next life when the soul will be freed from the body. Yet, even these fail to discern the true nature of happiness, because they believe that their unaided powers of contemplation can bring them to this beatitude. Moreover, their belief in the transmigration of souls means that for them too what they call happiness is only a temporary reality.¹⁴ From this perspective, the plight of the pagan philosophers is that they are unable to discover a lasting happiness.

People have tried to work these things out by human reasoning, but it is the immortality of the soul alone that they have succeeded in getting to some notion of, and then only a few of them, and with difficulty, and only if they have had plenty of brains and plenty of leisure and plenty of education in abstruse learning. Even so, they never discovered a lasting, which is to say a true, life of happiness for this soul.¹⁵

The pagan philosopher, therefore, is left in distress. He desires lasting happiness but is unable to attain it. The pagan sage, Augustine informs us, "is not truly happy, but is bravely unhappy."¹⁶

has noted that in holding that all pagan philosophers essentially agreed concerning the essential features of happiness, Augustine was eliding the views of various different schools of philosophy. "When Augustine applied this syncretic view of beatitude to pagan philosophy, he was under the impression that nothing of importance distinguished the ethics of Stoics from those of Peripatetics or Platonists" (James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 48).

¹³ *De Trinitate* 13.11: "sed qualiscumque beatitudo quae potius vocetur quam sit in hac vita quaeritur, immo vero fingitur, dum immortalitas desperatur sine qua vera beatitudo esse non potest."

¹⁴ *De Trinitate* 13.12: "ad miserias eam quippe vitae huius etiam post beatitudinem redire dixerunt. et qui eorum de hac erubuerunt sententia et animam purgatam in sempiterna beatitudine sine corpore conlocandam putarunt talia de mundi retrorsus aeternitate sentiunt ut hanc de anima sententiam suam ipsi redarguant." See note 25 on page 366–67 of the Edmund Hill, OP, translation of *De Trinitate* (St. Augustine, *The Trinity* [Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991]).

¹⁵ *De Trinitate* 13.12: "humanis quippe argumentationibus haec invenire conantes vix pauci magno praediti ingenio abundantes otio doctrinisque subtilissimis eruditi ad indagandam solius animae immortalitatem pervenire potuerunt. cui tamen animae beatam vitam non invenerunt stabilem, id est veram."

¹⁶ *De Trinitate* 13.10: "non est beatus veraciter sed miser fortiter."

Augustine explains that what the philosophers lack is a mediator who can give them faith in eternal life—faith in resurrected life—and lead them to this resurrected life through the empowering gift of his grace. The philosophers' inquiry into truth "is not enough for the unhappy, that is for all mortals who have reason alone without any faith in the mediator."¹⁷ "All will to be happy, but not all have the faith which must purify the heart if happiness is to be reached."¹⁸ What they lack is Christ, who is the only way to the true life of happiness. "Although he is our native country, he made himself also the way to that country."¹⁹ "Thus, he says, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life;' that is, you are to come through me, to arrive at me, and to remain in me."²⁰ Augustine explains that the grace of Christ empowers us with efficacious virtue and enables us to attain lasting happiness.

And thus it is written, "the just one lives by faith," for we do not as yet see our good, and must therefore live by faith; neither have we in ourselves power to live rightly, but can do so only if he who has given us faith to believe in his help does help us when we believe and pray.²¹

In essence, therefore, Augustine presents Christ as the answer to the pagan question of happiness. More accurately, Augustine argues that the vision of God made possible through Christ is the answer to the human person's natural desire for happiness. "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."²²

In advancing this argument Augustine sharply distinguishes both Christian virtue from pagan virtue and Christian happiness from pagan happiness. In fact, Augustine contrasts them so sharply that he ends up denying that the pagans have virtues or that they in any way enjoy happi-

¹⁷ *De Trinitate* 14.26: "sed iste cursus qui constituitur in amore atque investigatione veritatis non sufficit miseris, id est omnibus cum ista sola ratione mortalibus sine fide mediatoris."

¹⁸ *De Trinitate* 13.25: "beatos esse se velle omnium hominum est, nec tamen omnium est fides qua cor mundante ad beatitudinem pervenitur."

¹⁹ *De doctrina Christiana* 1.11: "cum ergo ipsa sit patria, viam se quoque nobis fecit ad patriam."

²⁰ *De doctrina Christiana* 1.38: "sic enim ait: 'ego sum via et veritas et vita,' hoc est 'per me venit, ad me pervenit, in me permanet.'"

²¹ *De civitate Dei* 19.4: "propter quod scriptum est: 'iustus ex fide vivit,' quoniam neque bonum nostrum iam videmus, unde oportet ut credendo quaeramus, neque ipsum recte vivere nobis ex nobis est, nisi credentes adiuvet et orantes qui et ipsam fidem dedit, qua nos ab illo adiuandos esse credamus."

²² *Confessiones* 1.1: "fecisti nos, domine, ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te."

ness.²³ In Augustine's view, what is commonly called happiness in this life is "a false happiness and a profound misery."²⁴ In Augustine's terms pagan happiness is false, because it is not lasting, and pagan virtue is false, because it cannot lead us to lasting happiness. Christian virtue, on the other hand, is true virtue because it empowers us to attain true, that is, lasting, happiness.

It is at this juncture that the power of Augustine's rhetoric begins to draw the contours of his larger argument out of focus. Just as an eye by focusing sharply on a point in the foreground blurs the background, so too Augustine by focusing so sharply on the inadequacy of pagan happiness and virtue blurs his background insight that the grace of Christ fulfills the aspirations of the human heart. As we have seen, Augustine's intention is to underscore that pagan virtue is not meritorious toward eternal happiness and that pagan happiness does not fulfill the requirements of happiness. Yet, by denying that pagan happiness and virtue are in any way a true, albeit imperfect, happiness and virtue, Augustine begins to undercut the foundation of his argument. As is well known, Augustine maintains that the actions that the philosophers style as virtues only become true virtues and only lead to true happiness when they are motivated from true piety (*pietas*): from a faith enlivened by charity and directed toward God as our end.²⁵ What this terminology fails to convey,

²³ *De civitate Dei* 19.25: "virtutes, quas habere sibi videtur, per quas imperat corpori et vitiis, ad quodlibet adipiscendum vel tenendum rettulerit nisi ad Deum, etiam ipsae vitia sunt potius quam virtutes. Nam licet a quibusdam tunc verae atque honestae putentur esse virtutes, cum referuntur ad se ipsas nec propter aliud expetuntur: etiam tunc inflatae ac superbae sunt, ideo non virtutes, sed vitia iudicanda sunt. sicut enim non est a carne sed super carnem, quod carnem facit vivere: sic non est ab homine sed super hominem, quod hominem facit beate vivere."

²⁴ *De civitate Dei* 19.20: "illa beatitudo falsa et magna miseria est."

²⁵ *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 15.25: "quod si virtus ad beatam vitam nos ducit, nihil omnino esse virtutem affirmaverim, nisi summum amorem Dei. namque illud quod quadripartita dicitur virtus, ex ipsius amoris vario quodam affectu, quantum intelligo, dicitur. itaque illas quatuor virtutes . . . definire etiam sic licet, ut temperantiam dicamus esse, amorem Deo sese integrum incorruptumque servantem: fortitudinem, amorem omnia propter Deum facile perferentem: justitiam, amorem Deo tantum servientem, et ob hoc bene imperantem ceteris, quae homini subjecta sunt: prudentiam, amorem bene discernentem ea quibus adjuveretur in Deum, ab iis quibus impediri potest." *De civitate Dei* 5.19: "dum illud constet inter omnes veraciter pios, neminem sine vera pietate, id est veri Dei vero cultu, veram posse habere virtutem, nec eam veram esse, quando gloriae servit humanae." *De civitate Dei* 19.10: "sed tunc est vera virtus, quando et omnia bona, quibus bene utitur, et quidquid in bono usu bonorum et malorum facit, et se ipsam ad eum finem refert, ubi nobis talis et tanta pax erit, qua melior et maior esse non possit."

however, is that whether or not these actions are informed by charity and rightly ordered to God, they retain their natural goodness and thus afford the agent some measure of natural happiness. This is important because unless the natural act of contemplation generates some natural happiness, it is difficult to see how the eternal contemplation of the divine essence can be regarded as fulfilling a natural desire for happiness. Unless there is at least some continuity between natural and supernatural happiness, how is it possible for grace to be intelligibly understood as a perfection and elevation of human nature? Elsewhere in his works Augustine demonstrates that he recognizes this continuity, but his rhetorical division between true and false happiness obscures this fact. John Rist well describes this tension in Augustine's thought.

Towards the end of the *City of God* (19.25), Augustine says that the "virtues" of pagans may seem to be true and beautiful, but that they are vices *rather* than virtues, just as a Stoic might speak of the "good" deeds of the non-sage. In fact, Augustine does not go quite as far as the Stoics who would insist that the "virtues" are really vices. He seems to wish to assert that, if a choice must be made, such acts must be classed as vices rather than virtues, but to recoil from condemning them outright as vicious. The virtues of pagans are "sterile" (i.e. ineffective, like Donatist sacraments), hence not good, but not explicitly bad either (*Against Julian* 4.3.33). Pagan virtues are significantly different from pagan vices and will therefore be punished less severely by God (4.3.25, etc.). The Romans, says Augustine, have a "certain uprightness of their own" (*Letter* 138.3.17). Assuming—as is reasonable—that *Sermon* 349 is genuine, Augustine is even prepared to say in about 412 that pagan virtues exhibit a certain "human love" (*caritas humana*).²⁶

In other words, on the deepest level Augustine recognizes that what is at work in pagan virtue and happiness is the wrong use of something good, and not merely the use of something evil. Yet, by calling pagan virtue and happiness "false" and "deceitful," he obscures this fact. Augustine, therefore, leaves future generations a mixed inheritance. On the one hand, he offers a powerful way to understand the relationship between the Gospel and the natural desires of the human heart. The grace of Christ leads us to the happiness for which we all long but cannot of ourselves attain. On the other hand, Augustine's manner of describing the limitations inherent to human virtue and happiness undercuts his own best understanding of the relationship between grace and our natural desire for happiness.

²⁶ John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 171–72.

St. Thomas, Aristotle, and Augustine's Critique

When we read St. Thomas's theology of happiness in light of his mixed Augustinian inheritance, we discover similarities as well as differences. First, the similarities. Like Augustine, Aquinas affirms that all people desire happiness.²⁷ Like Augustine, Aquinas also maintains that only the unending vision of God fulfills this universal desire, and that this vision is only attainable in the next life.²⁸ So, too, Aquinas shares with Augustine the Christian recognition that happiness is essentially a gift of God's grace with which we must cooperate.²⁹ For our present purposes, however, the most interesting similarities concern their way of portraying the relationship between Christian and pagan conceptions of happiness. Augustine and Aquinas both regard the happiness attainable in Christ as the fulfillment of pagan philosophy's search for happiness. Likewise, they both appeal to the principles of the philosophers themselves to reveal the inadequacy of the happiness attainable by philosophy on its own.

This last similarity, however, also points to their primary divergence: While Augustine employs the philosophers' principles in order to reveal what he regards as the perfidy of the philosophers' own conclusions, Aquinas employs Aristotle's conclusions as well as his principles to reveal the limits of philosophy. Aquinas regards Aristotle as one who himself recognized the inadequacy of the happiness attainable by unaided human

²⁷ *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 5, a. 8: "appetere beatitudinem nihil aliud est quam appetere ut voluntas satiatur. quod quilibet vult." *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 25, 14: "ultimus autem finis hominis, et cuiuslibet intellectualis substantiae, felicitas sive beatitudo nominatur: hoc enim est quod omnis substantia intellectualis desiderat tanquam ultimum finem, et propter se tantum."

²⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8: "ultima et perfecta beatitudo non potest esse nisi in visione divinae essentiae." *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 3: "habet. bona autem praesentis vitae transitoria sunt, cum et ipsa vita transeat, quam naturaliter desideramus, et eam perpetuo permanere vellemus, quia naturaliter homo refugit mortem. unde impossibile est quod in hac vita vera beatitudo habeatur." In this second passage, Aquinas explicitly cites *De civitate Dei* 19.4 to support his claim that perfect happiness is not attainable in this life.

²⁹ *ST* I, q. 12, a. 4: "impossibile est quod aliquis intellectus creatus per sua naturalia essentiam dei videat." *ST* I, q. 12, a. 5: "cum autem aliquis intellectus creatus videt deum per essentiam, ipsa essentia dei fit forma intelligibilis intellectus. unde oportet quod aliqua dispositio supernaturalis ei superaddatur, ad hoc quod eleve-tur in tantam sublimitatem. cum igitur virtus naturalis intellectus creati non sufficiat ad dei essentiam videndam, ut ostensum est, oportet quod ex divina gratia superacrescat ei virtus intelligendi." *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 5: "vita autem aeterna est finis excedens proportionem naturae humanae, ut ex supradictis patet. et ideo homo per sua naturalia non potest producere opera meritoria proportionata vitae aeternae, sed ad hoc exigitur altior virtus, quae est virtus gratiae. et ideo sine gratia homo non potest mereri vitam aeternam."

effort. Although Aquinas acknowledges that Aristotle only describes “happiness as it is attainable in this life,” he does not begrudge Aristotle this practice because “happiness in a future life is entirely beyond the investigation of reason.”³⁰ As a pagan living without explicit knowledge of revelation, Aristotle cannot be expected to investigate a happiness he knows nothing about. Indeed, from Aquinas’s perspective, part of the power of Aristotle’s account is that he both identifies the requirements for complete happiness—identifies what happiness must be if it is to quiet the natural desires of the human heart—and recognizes that this type of happiness is “something divine” and beyond the strength of humans, *as human*, to attain.³¹ Thus, in his commentary on Book One of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, recognizing the discrepancy between Aristotle’s description of the requirements for human happiness and his description of the happiness that is in fact attainable by us, Aquinas offers the following observation.

But since these things seem not to fulfill entirely the conditions required for happiness described above, [Aristotle] adds that we call these people happy “as men,” who in this mutable life are not able to attain perfect happiness.³²

The philosophers, Aquinas elsewhere explains, are not able to attain perfect happiness because they are not able to satiate the deepest desire of the human heart: They are not able to satiate their desire to know.³³ Drawing

³⁰ *In Ethic.* 1.9 (113): “loquitur enim in hoc libro philosophus de felicitate, qualis in hac vita potest haberi. nam felicitas alterius vitae omnem investigationem rationis excedit.”

³¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7 (1177b27-31): “But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue. If intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life.”

³² *In Ethic.* 1.16 (202): “sed quia ista videntur non usquequaque attingere ad conditiones supra de felicitate positas, subdit quod tales dicimus beatos sicut homines, qui in hac vita mutabilitati subiecta non possunt perfectam beatitudinem habere. et quia non est inane naturae.” See *SCG* III 48.9: “unde nec felicitas, secundum suam perfectam rationem, potest hominibus adesse: sed aliquid ipsius participant, etiam in hac vita. et haec videtur fuisse sententia aristotelis de felicitate. unde in i ethicorum, ubi inquit utrum infortunia tollant felicitatem, ostenso quod felicitas sit in operibus virtutis, quae maxime permanentes in hac vita *esse* videntur, concludit illos quibus talis perfectio in hac vita adest, *esse* beatos ut homines, quasi non simpliciter ad felicitatem pertinentes, sed modo humano.”

³³ *SCG* III, 39, 6: “voluntas cum consecuta fuerit ultimum finem, quietatur eius desiderium. ultimus autem finis omnis cognitionis humanae est felicitas. illa

on the Aristotelian principle that knowledge of an effect arouses in the mind a desire to know its cause, a desire that does not come to rest until it knows the cause's essence, Aquinas asserts that the human desire to know only comes to rest in union with the divine essence in the vision of God.

When a person knows an effect, and knows that it has a cause, there naturally remains in him the desire to know about that cause, *what it is*. And this desire is one of wonder, and causes inquiry, as is stated in the beginning of the *Metaphysics*. . . . Hence, if the human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, knows no more of God than *that he is*, the perfection of that intellect does not yet reach simply the first cause, but there remains in it the natural desire to seek the cause. Wherefore it is not yet perfectly happy. Consequently, for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very essence of the first cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object in which alone human happiness consists.³⁴

The result of this inquiry is what Jan Aertsen has called "the 'distress' of philosophy."³⁵ The summit of philosophical inquiry is the discovery that philosophy cannot fully attain the end it seeks. Aquinas unequivocally proclaims that "every intellect naturally desires the vision of the divine essence."³⁶ It naturally desires this, but it cannot on its own know what

igitur cognitio dei essentialiter est ipsa felicitas, qua habita non restabit alicuius scibilis desideranda cognitio. talis autem non est cognitio quam philosophi per demonstrationes de deo habere potuerunt: quia adhuc, illa cognitione habita, alia desideramus scire, quae per hanc cognitionem nondum sciuntur. non est igitur in tali cognitione dei felicitas."

³⁴ ST I-II, q. 3, a. 8: "si ergo intellectus aliquis cognoscat essentiam alicuius effectus, per quam non possit cognosci essentia causae, ut scilicet sciatur de causa quid est; non dicitur intellectus attingere ad causam simpliciter, quamvis per effectum cognoscere possit de causa an sit. et ideo remanet naturaliter homini desiderium, cum cognoscit effectum, et scit eum habere causam, ut etiam sciat de causa quid est. et illud desiderium est admirationis, et causat inquisitionem, ut dicitur in principio metaphys . . . causae. si igitur intellectus humanus, cognoscens essentiam alicuius effectus creati, non cognoscat de deo nisi an est; nondum perfectio eius attingit simpliciter ad causam primam, sed remanet ei adhuc naturale desiderium inquirendi causam. unde nondum est perfecte beatus. ad perfectam igitur beatitudinem requiritur quod intellectus pertingat ad ipsam essentiam primae causae. et sic perfectionem suam habebit per unionem ad deum sicut ad obiectum, in quo solo beatitudo hominis consistit." See Jan Aertsen, *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas's Way of Thought* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 42–53.

³⁵ Aertsen, *Nature and Creature*, 213.

³⁶ SCG III, 57, 4: "omnis intellectus naturaliter desiderat divinae substantiae visionem."

this is, or know that it is attainable or how it is attainable.³⁷ Philosophy culminates in what Thomas Hibbs, borrowing from von Balthasar, has called the “*aporia* of finitude.”³⁸

Hibbs argues that Aristotle’s great merit is that he is faithful to philosophy’s limits. He is faithful to the disjuncture existing between what we desire and what we can attain. Unlike some Platonists or even some of his own Arab commentators, Aristotle does not appeal to myth or unwarranted speculation to overcome philosophy’s distress. Instead, he leaves us with a faithful account of the “straits” into which unaided reason falls without the gift of revelation. Far from criticizing “the Philosopher,” Aquinas, in one of his most poignant passages, sympathizes with Aristotle’s plight.

Since Aristotle saw that there is no other knowledge for humans in this life than through the speculative sciences, he maintained that humans do not achieve perfect happiness, but only their mode of happiness. From which it is sufficiently clear how even the brilliant minds of these men suffered from the narrowness of their perspective.³⁹

Perhaps a better translation of this final phrase is “in what straits these brilliant minds suffered” (*quantam angustiam patiebantur hinc inde eorum praeclara ingenia*). As Hibbs notes, these straits, or “narrowness of perspective,” offer an opening to the message of the Gospel.⁴⁰ The discovery that we have a desire for something that nothing in this life can fulfill renders an aspect of the Gospel message intelligible: In Christ, God’s grace empowers us to attain the happiness we all desire but only vaguely understand and cannot on our own attain.

We shall be freed from these straits if we hold . . . that man is to reach perfect happiness after this life, when man’s soul is existing immortally.

³⁷ Kevin Staley, “Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas on the Good and the Human Good,” 312, n. 4: “the philosopher can show *that* the human good requires an immediate relationship with an infinite and transcendent Good without being able to say much about what such happiness would be like, how it is to be achieved, or Who the Supreme Good is.”

³⁸ Thomas S. Hibbs, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas: An Interpretation of the Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 115.

³⁹ SCG III, 48, 14–15: “quia vero aristoteles vidit quod non est alia cognitio hominis in hac vita quam per scientias speculativas, posuit hominem non consequi felicitatem perfectam, sed suo modo. in quo satis apparet quantam angustiam patiebantur hinc inde eorum praeclara ingenia.”

⁴⁰ Hibbs, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas*, 28.

... For which reason our Lord promises us "a reward in heaven" and says that the saints "shall be as the angels ... who always see God in heaven."⁴¹

The flowering of philosophy leads us to the sad recognition of our own inability to fulfill our deepest desires. By doing so, however, it also renders the Lord's promises intelligible. What we cannot attain on our own, we can attain through the grace of Christ that leads to the promised glory of heaven.

Aristotle at the Service of Augustine

In Aquinas's view, therefore, when philosophy is true to itself, far from attacking the Gospel, it points to why the Gospel is necessary. In which case, philosophy becomes truly the maidservant of theology. From this perspective, Aquinas is able to describe Aristotle's happiness as a participation of ultimate beatitude. It does not fulfill the full notion of happiness. It remains a painfully imperfect happiness. (It is not lasting, stable, nor free from evils.) Nevertheless, it is a true participation of heavenly beatitude. By recognizing this fact, Aquinas is able to show, more successfully than Augustine, how the Gospel fulfills the deepest longings of the heart. Aquinas can say to Aristotle: the joy you receive from contemplating the truth is a foretaste of what the Lord is offering you in the grace of Christ. Aquinas, therefore, uses Aristotle's own recognition of philosophy's limitations to proclaim, but also refine, Augustine's insight that only in heaven and only by God's grace can our desire for happiness be fulfilled. In short, Aquinas draws on Aristotle's insights to render more intelligible Augustine's Christian proclamation that "you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."⁴² **N&V**

⁴¹ SCG III, 48, 15: "a quibus angustiis liberabimur si ponamus, . . . hominem ad veram felicitatem post hanc vitam pervenire posse, anima hominis immortalis existente. . . . propter quod, math. 5–12, dominus mercedem nobis in caelis promittit; et math. 22–30, dicit quod sancti erunt sicut angeli, qui vident semper deum in caelis."

⁴² This article is scheduled to appear in *Aquinas' Sources: The Notre Dame Symposium*, Timothy L. Smith, ed. (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press).

