A Course in Thomistic Ethics

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Chapter One

Happiness—The Final End of Man

The Nature of Ends

The whole thrust of ethics is to attempt to answer the most profound and sweeping questions that we human beings are capable of asking: What is it all about? Is human life meaningful? What is man? Does he have a purpose? If so, what is it? It would be very difficult to sustain for any length of time the belief that human life is completely without purpose, and even those devoted cynics who tenaciously hold to a theory that life is purposeless nonetheless go about their daily affairs as if just the opposite were the case. They may preach purposelessness, but they act purposefully.[1] However, one can, on the other hand, firmly believe that human life is purposeful without being at all clear as to what that means. One can be of the opinion that man has a purpose, a basic reason for being, and yet only be able to specify what that purpose is in terms which are vague, confused, and generally unsatisfactory. As we saw in the Introduction, no ethical theory is going to be of much practical use to man unless it proceeds from a reliable understanding of man himself, and if people are hard put to come up with a coherent account of man's purpose it is because they have not antecedently arrived at an adequate understanding of man's nature.

What is man? Thanks to Aristotle, we all know that man is a rational animal. And what, exactly, are the implications of that definition? Man is a *rational* animal, and is therefore differentiated from the other

[1] One can maintain the position that life lacks an overriding purpose, but one belies that position by acting as if there were a purpose even in the least action that one performs. There is either purpose in the universe or there is not, and it cannot be consistently held that there is purpose in the parts while there is no purpose in the whole, for the purpose to be found in the parts can only be explained by the purpose that exists in the whole.

members of the animal kingdom because he consciously acts for a purpose. Man is, by definition, the purposeful animal, the end-oriented animal, the goal-directed animal. We do not simply act, haphazardly as it were, and then wait around to see what might be the outcome of our actions. We deliberately formulate beforehand an idea of what we want to accomplish, and then we choose and direct our actions in ways which are, we estimate, best calculated to realize that idea.

That we do not always accomplish what we set out to accomplish goes without saying, but that takes nothing away from the fact that we consciously guide our actions in order to bring about pre-conceived ends, and it is just that mode of operating which might be said to represent the heart of our rationality.

Animals clearly act for a purpose, but they do not consciously act for a purpose in the sense that they can recognize a purpose as a purpose or a series of acts as the adequate means of attaining that purpose. What precisely identifies human acts, and distinguishes them from the acts of other animals, is the fact that they are *willed* acts and that they proceed from deliberation. In the common parlance of Thomistic ethics, a "human act" serves somewhat as a technical term, and it is synonymous with another term, "voluntary act." We can say, further, that only human acts or voluntary acts qualify as moral acts in the strict sense, for those are the only acts for which we can be held morally responsible. Unless we are fully aware of what is at stake in any given situation, and then freely act upon that awareness, we are not really functioning as moral agents. Common sense is a sure guide here. If we observe that someone did something which had unfortunate consequences but which was not done deliberately, then we do not hold the person in question morally responsible for the act. We distinguish deliberate acts from acts done "by accident."

Human beings are acting as responsible moral agents, then, when their actions are under the direction of their will, and *human acts* in the strict sense are just those acts "which follow upon an act of the will which in turn was preceded by deliberation." (S.T., I-II, q. 1, a.1) The intellect and will are, we know, the two most important faculties, or powers, of the soul. One, the intellect, is defined in terms of truth; the other, the will, is defined in terms of the good. Speaking with reference to ends, we can say that the end, or purpose, of the intellect is truth. The truth is what the intellect is for. On the other hand, the end, or purpose, of the will is the good. We saw that, because we are rational creatures, everything we do is for a purpose, oriented toward the attainment of an end of one kind or another. But what is it about ends that prompts us to identify them just as such? That is, what is it that we see in certain things which leads us to act in such a way that we come into possession of them? It is the good. Absolutely everything that stirs us to action is seen by us *sub specie boni*, as something which is good. It is our perception of things as good that energizes us to go after them and make them our own, to conjoin ourselves with them, be they things of large consequence or small, be they things we can attain fairly effortlessly simply by reaching out a hand to them or things that can be attained only after years of assiduous and persevering labor.

Our lives are heavily freighted with a myriad of goods: a cup of coffee, a poem by Emily Dickinson, a college degree, the perfect spouse, financial security in old age, the priesthood. But we must ask, Is there *one* good which governs all other goods and gives them their meaning as goods? In other words, of all the various ends which we human beings pursue in all our multifaceted and complex activities, is there a single end which provides the fundamental rationale for human existence as such? Is there what we could call a final end of man? Some would say, in answering that question, that if by the question we are suggesting something which transcends the natural human condition as such, then, No, there is not such an end. They would say that if we want to talk at all about some kind of culminating human fulfillment it should be held to consist in the ongoing effort of trying to bring the human race to as high a degree of perfection as possible, which goal is identified and defined by human beings themselves. We would say, to the contrary, that man is most significantly defined by the fact that he has a final end. The essential meaning of man, individually and collectively, is that he is a creature who is oriented toward a supreme good which dominates all the particular goods that constitute his life, and the attainment of which is absolutely essential to his fulfillment as a human being. The Catechism set the question this way: "Why did God make me?" The answer: "God made me to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven." That is about as succinct and accurate a statement of man's purpose as we would want.

Man was created by God, and he was created for God. Therefore, his

ultimate happiness can consist only in complete and uninterrupted union with God, "in the vision of the divine essence." (S.T., I-II, q. 3, a. 8) Another way of putting the matter is to say that man has a supernatural destiny. Now, this is the proper starting point for ethics, for if this is in fact the truth about man, about who he really is and what he really is for, then this must be *the* governing consideration of any science that is dedicated to the study of man's proper behavior.

THE NATURE OF THE FINAL END

We can say, then, with complete confidence, that man's final end is, in a word, God. But we need to explore the nature of that end from a philosophical point of view, attempting to come to terms with it in light of the actual realities of human behavior in all its multiform manifestations. In the spirit of "pluralism" which seems to hold sway in so many quarters today, some might immediately object to the notion that there must be only a single final end for man. Why cannot there be many? Because it is contrary to nature that there be many. Nature is an organized whole, a coherent system, and as such it is all ordered toward one thing. Its unity is based upon the fact of its being ordered toward one thing and one thing only.

Another key characteristic of a final end is that it must be perfectly satisfying. Every end identified as such by us is then pursued by us because, as noted above, we recognize it as good. One of the psychological aspects of our successfully achieving a limited end is that we experience a sense of satisfaction in doing so. To attain a perceived good is to feel good; we feel that something has been contributed toward our completion, in however minor a way. But we also know that such experiences, pleasant though they be, are transitory. We long to posses X. We may convince ourselves that all our happiness depends upon our possessing X. We exert effort and in due course we in fact succeed in possessing X. For a while we are content, but gradually our contentment diminishes and eventually completely evaporates as we come to realize that X, our before-the-fact estimates to the contrary notwithstanding, has failed to satisfy us completely. Of little dramas such as this the life of every human being is replete. The true final end of man can be truly such only to the extent that it succeeds in quelling all man's deepest hopes and longings. "It must needs be, then, that the final end should fill all man's desires, so that, once attained, nothing beyond it is left to be desired." (S.T., I-II, q. 1, a. 5)

Everything which we desire is desired in terms of the final end, even though we may not be—and very probably are not—in each and every case fully aware of the fact. Every single good which we pursue, however trivial it might be, or even however distant it might be from what would truly contribute to our happiness, derives its character as a good from the fact that it is somehow related to the ultimate good which is the root motivating force behind all our actions. Putting this basic truth in theological terms, we say that we are seeking God in every end we pursue, whether we are explicitly conscious of the fact or not, and that is because in everything we do we are seeking happiness ("Man is incapable of not wanting to be happy." — S.T., I-II, q. 5, a. 4, ad 2), and God and God alone can make us completely and permanently happy. One does not always have to be consciously thinking about a final end in order to be under its influence.

Because there is but a single final end it follows that all men share that end in common. All men desire their own perfection, and are constantly working toward it. That statement might seem to be flagrantly false, for does it not fly in the face of the way most of us act most of the time? Let us take careful note of the claim the statement is actually making. It is not saying that all men are at all times assiduously pursuing sanctity. That quite obviously, and sadly, is not the case. The statement might better be reworded to say that all men desire to be happy; they desire, to use a term very much in vogue today, to be "fulfilled." The pursuit of happiness is one of the most basic facts of human nature. It is not something we choose to do; it is something we were designed to do. As St. Thomas expressed it, we cannot want not to want to be happy. So, what we all have in common as human beings is a desire to be happy. We all want happiness, but clearly we are not all looking for it in the same place, and that is because we do not all agree on what exactly it is we are looking for. There is unanimity concerning the fact that happiness is the goal, but there is anything but unanimity when it comes to identifying the nature of that goal. We are indeed all seeking perfection, but the reason for there being very little success in the achieving of perfection in any serious moral sense is because we are in more cases than not looking for perfection in the wrong places. Odd

though it may sound to say it, even those who act immorally are seeking happiness by pursuing what they perceive to be good. They are mistaking for a real good, one that would be truly perfective of them, what is only an apparent good, one which is in fact morally counter-productive and positively detrimental to them. Immoral behavior diverts us from the true pathway to our final end. "Those who sin by that very fact turn away from the only thing in which is to be found the principle of the ultimate end. For all that, however, their basic intention remains fixed on the final end, which they are mistakenly seeking where it cannot be found." (S.T., I-II, q. 1, a. 7)

Thusfar we have established that all human activity, because human beings are rational creatures, is end-oriented activity. Second, we have established that there is a single dominant end, a final end, which governs and gives meaning to all subordinate ends. Third, in answer to the question, What, specifically, is man's end? we have come up with two answers. We have said that man's final end is happiness, and we have said that man's final end is God. But as it turns out those two answers are in reality only one, for man's happiness is to be found in God alone.

WHAT HAPPINESS IS NOT

We noted above that while all men share the desire for happiness, there has been, and from time immemorial, much disagreement as to the precise nature of happiness. Over the erratic course of human history, man has shown himself to be doggedly stubborn in plodding down the wrong paths in the attempt to find true happiness. Those paths, as it happens, are relatively few in number, for man's imagination in this respect seems to be severely limited, but they are all well-trodden.

Men repeatedly succeed in convincing themselves that riches, material possessions, hold the key to human happiness. At the heart of this benighted conviction is a monumental mistaking of means for ends, not excluding the ultimate end. Even the basic necessities—food, clothing, and shelter—are not the purpose for living, but the means of living and living well. When we make an end of any one of them, as, for example, the glutton would do by making an end of food and drink, everything is distorted, including in more cases than not the physical contours of the glutton. A common practical draw-back of making an

end of riches, be they natural riches (like the basic necessities) or artificial ones (like money or luxurious possessions) is that we never seem to be able to get enough of them. The more we have the more we want, and we are never completely satisfied. "And it is just this which demonstrates the imperfection of riches, and proves that they do not qualify as the supreme good." (S.T., I-II, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3) It is the unique character of the supreme good, as we have seen, to completely satisfy; therefore, that which does not completely satisfy obviously cannot qualify as the supreme good or final end.

Honor might at first glance appear to be an appropriate candidate as a source of true and lasting happiness, for it is something spiritual. But, no, honor will not do the job. Even given the highly unlikely possibility that we could arrive at a point in our careers where we would be liberally honored by one and all, that would not make us happy. Considering a more realistic situation, someone could be in fact highly honored by a good number of people (friends, family, colleagues), be aware of the fact, and yet not necessarily be happy on that account. The plain truth of the matter is that being honored and being happy are not the same thing. Happiness may follow upon honor, but it is not coterminous with it. Happiness, if it is real, is something we are in possession of, and in a certain sense we are in control of it as well. But honor is something we are never in any serious sense in possession of. Honor is in the possession of those who choose either to bestow it upon us or withhold it from us. If in fact we are without honor, it is not necessarily because we do not do things which, objectively considered, are worthy of honor, but because people, for whatever reason, choose to withhold their honor from us—which is theirs and theirs alone to bestow—and we can do nothing at all about that. Aristotle was of the opinion that happiness could not be something which was completely beyond our control, and because honor was quite beyond our control, that precluded honor from being considered as an apt candidate for happiness.

How about fame or glory? Might they not bring us happiness? Here again, we have something which, although its bedazzling face might tempt us to think otherwise, will not bring us happiness. Fame, like honor, is a very fickle commodity, in that its controlling source, the opinion of others, is altogether too volatile and unpredictable. History is full of examples of situations where fame and moral rectitude do not

go hand in hand. There have been many famous scoundrels. "All that glitters is not gold" is an axiom that applies to morals as well as to mineralogy. Perhaps the most telling evidence we have that fame does not bring happiness are the many somber autobiographies and memoirs written by "famous" people. Behind the smiling public masks were hidden many a sad and tortured soul.

But at this point the no-nonsense "realist" enters the discussion to insist authoritatively that if someone wants to be happy in this life all he has to do is gain a firm grip on the reins of power and never let go of them. The happy are the powerful! But this will not do at all. As we have seen, happiness is inextricably bound up with the good. If we want to be truly happy we must have our eye focused upon the supreme good. But consider power. Does it necessarily have to do with, is it necessarily productive of, the good? No to both questions. In fact, just the opposite can be the case: power can be put fully to the service of evil. Whenever you have something, i.e., power, which can work either on behalf of good or evil, you are of necessity dealing with something which is not a sure source of happiness. Nor would it make any sense to consider power itself as happiness, for power is no more than the capacity to do something, and happiness is a state.

On the face of it the suggestion that happiness may lie in the possession of perfect bodily health does not seem outrageously wrong-headed. Sometimes you meet people who are quite indifferent toward material possessions, toward fame, honor, power, and who will say, "I am perfectly happy so long as I have my health." Is health, or relatedly, the possession of any remarkable physical skill—for example, the ability to run like the wind, or consistently to drive a golf ball over 300 yards—the key to true human happiness? To think so is to make man's end man himself, or, more precisely, man's body. While we would not want to minimize the importance of health, nor the obligation to maintain it, the meaning of physical health, and of the entire realm of the corporeal, must be understood in terms of the larger context of man's ultimate destiny. Man is a bodily creature, but the full picture of his reality is not summed up in that fact. Man is a composite creature, both material and immaterial. A human being is made up of both body and soul, and although he would not be truly human without his body, by far and away the more significant part of him, that which makes him what he is, is his soul. The body is subservient to the soul. We can

distinguish between goods of the body and goods of the soul. The first are comparatively less important than the second, and are ordered to the goods of the soul, "as to an end" (S.T., I-II, q. 2, a. 5), and just for that reason they cannot serve for us as the source of true happiness.

The hedonist now joins the conversation, languidly making the point that it is pleasure alone which will make man happy. Pleasure is perhaps the single most persuasive false proposal for human happiness that we have to contend with. Many regularly succumb to its seductive charms, and that is because it is so easy to do so. Pleasure does not argue, it lures, appealing to the most elemental forms of self-interest. In a way, the real strength of pleasure, as a persuader, lies in its utter superficiality, its narrowness of scope. But therein lies its weakness as well. Reflective familiarity with pleasure informs us that pleasure has the power only to bring us pleasure, and pleasure is not to be mistaken for happiness. Pleasure comes precariously close to being nothing at all. It does not enjoy independent, substantial existence. Pleasure always accompanies something else, something more important than itself and upon which it is dependent for its moral valuation. To put it in slightly more technical terms, pleasure is an accident, an appendage to happiness; it is not happiness itself. Pleasure is something which has to do with the body, whereas happiness, true happiness, is directly related to the soul. That in itself is enough to conclude to the superiority of happiness over pleasure. Someone who is truly happy may feel pleasure, but the pleasure is not the cause of the happiness. It is just the other way around: the happiness is the cause of the pleasure, and for that reason it is good pleasure. That pleasure itself cannot be the cause of happiness is borne home by the fact that pleasure can be the accompaniment of immoral behavior, and as such it can have nothing to do with the production of something, true happiness, whose very identity is found in its intimate association with the good.

One might seriously but nonetheless erroneously think that he has broken through to the true nature of human happiness because he gives all his attention to his "real" self, his spiritual identity, the soul. It is unquestionably right to give primary emphasis to the spiritual, but not in such a way that we distort the true nature of the spiritual. We would be doing just that if we were to devote ourselves to the soul's welfare in such a way that we eventually come to believe that man's soul is man's end. It is not. God is man's end, and man's soul will realize its

proper end, therefore, only in God. Our souls cannot be the source of our happiness because true happiness, as we have seen, is completely satisfying. We can be completely satisfied only by that which is capable of completely satisfying us, and that can only mean God. Only God can completely satisfy us because only God is complete, *actus purus*, pure act. We are incapable of satisfying ourselves, of making ourselves happy, because of our radical incompleteness. Far from being pure act, we are beings *in potentia*, on the way toward becoming what we ought to be. "Happiness is something which resides in the human soul, but the cause of happiness is something outside the soul." (S.T., I-II, q. 2, a. 7) And that "something," of course, is God.

Is there anything less than God, is there any created being whatsoever, that might legitimately be considered as a source of true human happiness? The answer is No. The proper end of the will is the good, the unlimited good, and it is only the unlimited good, which is to say, God, which is capable of making us happy. By definition, then, all limited good, i.e., all created things, are incapable of bringing us true happiness. "God alone is able to meet the imperatives of the human will." (S.T., I-II, q. 2, a. 8)

THE NATURE OF TRUE HAPPINESS

It is time for us now to turn from a negative approach to our subject and to proceed positively in an attempt to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of the nature of human happiness. Happiness, we say, is the final end of man. It is what he was made for. Anything identifiable as an end can be considered in two ways. An end can be considered, first, simply in itself. Second, it can be considered in terms of the use to which we put it, or, more generally, whatever way we may react to it; in the case of happiness, this would consist chiefly in our enjoyment of it. We can overlay this distinction with another one. To say that man's final end is happiness is simply an alternate way of saying that man's final end is God, and this allows us to distinguish between man's final end as uncreated and as created. Man's final end considered in itself is simply God, and here quite obviously we are talking about something uncreated. But man's final end as the eternal vision of God, and the surpassing enjoyment which will necessarily accompany that vision, is something created. St. Thomas put the matter thus: "If we consider man's happiness in terms of its cause or object [i.e., God], as such it is something uncreated. But if we consider it from the point of view of the very essence of happiness [i.e., the state of being happy], in this respect it is something created." (S.T., I-II, q. 3, a. 1)

Another basic distinction we would want to make with respect to happiness is between what St. Thomas calls *beatitudo completa* and *beatitudo incompleta*, complete happiness and incomplete happiness. Complete happiness is attained only with the vision of the divine essence, the beatific vision. It is possible for us to attain happiness here on this earth, but in this case it is always incomplete happiness which is in question, a fact everywhere confirmed by experience. The complete happiness which is the "possession of our final end," and which is the reason for our being, "consists in a knowledge of God, and is therefore an act of the intellect." (S.T., I-II, q. 3, a. 4) This is just another way of saying that our perfect happiness will consist in heavenly contemplation.

Given the fact that our complete happiness will have centrally to do with knowledge—the speculative intellect's eternal absorption in the inexhaustible reality of God—we might be too hastily led to conclude that the happiness we are able to attain in this life will be realized merely in the exercise of the speculative intellect, whatever its object. While it is true that a certain degree of happiness is to be had in the contemplation of created things, in the final analysis that kind of contemplation, even though the creatures we may be contemplating are angels, is not in itself going to put us on the road to that true happiness which is our final end. In other words, it is not enough that we devote ourselves to the pursuit of truth, we must ultimately be concerned with *the* Truth, with God Himself. "God alone is the very essence of truth, in the contemplation of whom our perfect happiness will be realized." (S.T., I-II, q. 3, a. 7) Even on this earth, where it is not possible to attain complete happiness, the focus of our contemplation must nonetheless be upon that object which will one day be the cause of our complete happiness.

THE REQUISITES FOR HAPPINESS

We saw above that although pleasure is not to be confused with happiness, it nonetheless can be regarded as a natural accompaniment

of happiness. "So, just as happiness is nothing else than the possession of the supreme good, it is not possible to have such happiness without an accompanying pleasure." (S.T., I-II, q. 4, a. 1) But once again it is the happiness, or more precisely the *visio*, or intellectual apprehension, which causes the happiness that is the determining factor with respect to the pleasure. If we were to examine more closely the exact nature of the pleasure that we are talking about here we would discover that it manifests itself in a certain quieting of the will. The good is the proper object of the will. Once we are in possession of the good which the will desires, then the will is content, is calmly at rest, quietly without desire, and therein lies the pleasure.

We speak of the possession of the good as the direct cause of happiness. And the peculiar kind of possession which is in question here is an intellectual possession, for it is through our knowledge of the good that we possess the good. From this we can conclude that happiness must involve a certain comprehension of that which is the source of happiness. What is comprehension, or comprehensive knowledge? It is a knowledge which totally embraces, as it were, the object toward which it is directed, and which allows nothing about that object to escape its notice. Now, it must be immediately obvious that we can never have that kind of comprehensive knowledge of God, who is infinite, for, by definition, it is impossible for a finite mind to comprehend an infinite object. What we mean, then, when we say that our knowledge of the supreme good is comprehensive is that we must have some kind of grasp of the essential nature of the object before us. The *visio divinae essentiae*, the beatific vision, is truly of the essence of God; one can have a true grasp of the essence of an object without exhausting that essence. We do it every day. I can have a certain knowledge that the insect now buzzing before me is a honey bee without having the entomologist's thorough knowledge of the nature of honey bees.

True happiness is not an accident; it is not the result of chance. We have to will to be happy. St. Teresa of Jesus expressed this principle quite succinctly when, as a little girl, she declared, "I want to see God." Those who ultimately come into possession of the supreme good are just those whose wills have been properly directed toward the attainment of that goal.

The incomplete happiness which we enjoy in this life necessarily involves our bodies. Earthly happiness is never purely spiritual in

nature, although it may at times have principally to do with the spiritual. The deeper reason for this fact has to do with the essential link between happiness and knowing. Happiness follows upon knowing, but in this life we cannot know except through the instrumental aid of our bodies; whatever happiness we enjoy on this earth, then, necessarily involves corporality. But how does it stand with those human beings who have died, are therefore bodiless, and are now enjoying the beatific vision? Are we to conclude that, because they lack bodies, they are not truly happy? Not at all. The fact is that we do not need bodies to see the divine essence, which is the source of heavenly beatitude. "The soul is quite capable of being happy without the body." (S.T., I-II, q. 4, a. 5) Nevertheless, to be in a bodiless state is not for man a natural state, and this being the case we might suggest that the separated souls experience a kind of vague longing once again to be united with their bodies. "So long as God is being enjoyed in a bodiless state, the will is at peace in what it possesses, yet for all that there is a certain desire that the body will one day share in the soul's possession." (S.T., I-II, q. 4, a. 5, ad 4) St. Thomas makes a very interesting comment on what will happen once a blessed soul is reunited with its body. At that point, he says, "there will be an increase in happiness, not intensively but extensively." (S.T., I-II, q. 4, a. 5, ad 5) The soul is already in possession of God through the beatific vision, so it would be impossible that in comparison to that object the possession of any other object, least of all a human body, could add to the depth of the soul's happiness. But that deepest of happiness will now be extended because it will be shared with the body. So, we can conclude that the resurrection of the body is necessary in order to bring about a natural completion of human happiness.

But having said all that it is important to reiterate the basic point that God and God alone is sufficient for our ultimate happiness. We need nothing besides Him. St. Thomas raises the question whether we would need the company of other souls in order to insure our true happiness, and he responds in the negative, reminding us that the "unqualified completion of man's perfection is to be found in God." (S.T., I-II, q. 4, a. 8) Then he makes this arresting remark: "If there were only one soul who enjoyed the beatific vision, with no neighbor to love, that soul would be perfectly happy." (S.T., I-II, q. 4, a. 8, ad 3) But just as the body, though not necessary to the enjoyment of the

vision of the divine essence, will nevertheless be a happy addition to that enjoyment, so too will the friendship of other human beings.

THE POSSESSION OF HAPPINESS

Man's happiness consists in the ultimate possession of God. That is a lofty goal—indeed, the loftiest of all goals. Is it actually possible to attain? In other words, is it possible for man ever to be truly happy? Yes, it is, because in creating us God has given us the ability to do what we must do in order to achieve our final end. Having given us the capacity to be perfectly happy, He also provided us with the means to achieve perfect happiness. But to say that we are able to achieve our final end is not to say that it is an easy thing to do. It requires much effort, an entire lifetime of effort.

Whatever happiness we might experience over the course of that lifetime is of a necessarily incomplete kind, as already observed. "Perfect and true happiness," St. Thomas soberly reminds us, "is simply not to be had in this life." (S.T., I-II, q. 5, a. 3) Again, this is something the truth of which is readily apparent to us, but if we look at the matter more closely we can come to see just why it is true. There are two basic reasons why we are never completely happy in this life. The first is that, no matter how generally good our situation might be, we always have to deal with evil. Secondly, our desires, of whatever sort, are never completely fulfilled in this life. If there is anything that clearly characterizes earthly goods it is their transitory nature. On this earth we are in constant pursuit of the ephemeral, and so desires are no sooner assuaged than what assuaged them is no longer in our possession, so new desires rush in to fill the vacuum and the madcap race goes on.

One prominent feature of earthly happiness, then, is that it can be lost. Could that be true of heavenly happiness as well? It could not. True happiness is the possession of the supreme good, but it must be eternal happiness if it is to be true happiness, for it would not be true happiness if there were a lurking fear in the minds of those who possess it that it might one day be lost. To attain our final end we must avail ourselves of the means to do so which God has incorporated into our very natures. But we certainly cannot attain our final end completely on our own. "To arrive at the vision of God in His essence is not only beyond the natural

abilities of man, but beyond those of any created being." (S.T., I-II, q. 5, a. 5) To put the matter in explicitly theological terms, man absolutely needs the assistance of grace in order to attain his final end, but he must respond to that grace; he must freely cooperate with it. And that is where our free will comes in, for it is by its exercise that the soul is able to turn to God. Angels and saints can be, according to God's providential ordering of things, assisting agents for us in the grand project of attaining our final end, but in this God is always the primary agent. In the final analysis, "man is made happy through the agency of God alone, if it is perfect happiness we are talking about." (S.T., I-II, q. 5, a. 6) But God will not make man happy against his will. Our ultimate happiness very much depends upon our own actions. We must do our part. After quoting Aristotle to the effect that happiness is the reward for virtuous actions, St. Thomas, speaking of the necessity of human cooperation in the attainment of the final end, remarks that "men eventually achieve beatitude through the instrumentality of many meritorious actions." (S.T., I-II, q. 5, a. 7)

There is no man who does not want to be happy. We are all marked by a deep irrepressible desire for happiness, and it is that desire that drives everything we do. On occasion, perhaps even often at times, it drives us in the wrong direction. But that is because of mistakes made on our part; the supreme good that we long for is precisely that, the supreme good, but on account of our impaired vision we do not always seek it in the right places. The Buddha claimed that desire is the source of all man's woes. It is only so if it leads us to pursue ends which are unbefitting of man's true nature and destiny. The secret is not to try to suppress desire, for that puts the emphasis where it does not belong. In any event, it is impossible for us to suppress desire, for even if we were to reach what we supposed was a desireless state we would then naturally desire to remain in that state. The secret is to direct desire toward what is truly desirable. It is in fact man's destiny to reach a state where he is completely without desire, but this is something that he can never bring about on his own. Man will be completely without desire only when he is in complete possession of the one thing which is capable of perfectly fulfilling his desire, the vision of God.

QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

1. Is it possible to have a universe without ends?

2. Consider: some of the current opinions as to what constitutes human happiness.

3. Consider: an observation of St. Thomas Aquinas, to the effect that a concern for one's honor is incompatible with moral perfection.

4. Consider: the widely different kinds of pleasure, and what this implies.

5. What problems could result from concentrating all one's attention on happiness (as it is commonly understood) so that happiness, as such, is made into a kind of absolute?

6. Why is it futile for human beings to suppose that their fulfillment could lie in anything else than union with God?

Chapter Two

Act and Circumstances

THE NATURE OF THE VOLUNTARY ACT

Ethics is about human acts, not in the sense that it is about what human beings do in general, but rather in the sense that it is about what human beings do in a peculiar sort of way—voluntarily. It was noted earlier that the term "human act" bears a special connotation in the language of ethics, and that it is synonymous with the term "voluntary act." The reason for the primacy of place that ethics gives to the voluntary act quickly becomes evident when we realize that a voluntary act is a free act, the only kind of act to which moral responsibility can be attached, and therefore the only kind of act that can be analyzed in terms of its being either morally good or morally bad. So, then, if "human act" is synonymous with "voluntary act," a third term synonymous with both is "moral act." Given the key nature of the voluntary act for ethics, it is important that we develop a very precise understanding of just what it is that makes an act voluntary. What is the nature of voluntariness?

Happiness is the final end of man, as we have seen, but happiness does not just happen to us. It is something we achieve by what we do, by our acts, specifically our moral acts. When we talk about acts we naturally think of something external and public, such as buying a newspaper or helping a blind person to cross the street. An external act is most certainly an act, but external acts do not exhaust the category of acts. There are internal acts as well, and what first has to be noted about a voluntary act is that the factors that finally determine it as such are internal rather than external. It is the disposition of the faculties of intellect and will which determines whether any one of our acts is or is not voluntary. To put the matter plainly, two basic criteria have to be met before an act qualifies as being voluntary: first, with respect to our