

ST. THOMAS AND ARISTOTLE ON HAPPINESS

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T. THOMAS has been much criticized for his sponsoring of Aristotle. He forsook the "celestial" Plato, beloved of St. Augustine and the Fathers, and adopted this very human philosopher who was held in esteem by the infidel Arabs. He even called his new friend the Philosopher; and what is more, he began to use this fellow's philosophy to explain and defend the holy truths of Revelation! Like Fulton, whose steamboat was scoffed at for its defiance of principle and hated for the doom it threatened for colorful sailing, the great theologian was rejected by thinkers and hated by the sentimental.

But St. Thomas had good reason for binding himself to answer for the Stagirite of Thrace. Aristotle's works, as corrupted by the Arabs, were hateful to Christian truth; but when seen as they came from his hand, they were desirable for explanation and defense of Christian doctrine. This is evident in his definition of happiness. The things he rejects as illusions were later to be condemned by the Church as obstacles to perfection. He insists on the necessity of virtue: "excellence in operation." He considers man's supreme activity to be in the intellect—quite congruous with the doctrine of the Beatific Vision. St. Thomas, like a general who has found an expert engineer, secured the services of this philosopher in his battle for the truth.

We shall confine this article to a typical section of Aristotle's works, the part of his *Ethics* which treats of the definition of happiness. For a man's concept of happiness contains much of his philosophy.

He rejects as illusions what the Church condemns as obstacles to perfection. Of the activity in which happiness consists, he says: "What then can this be? Not mere life, because that plainly is shared with him even by vegetables."¹ St. Thomas, commenting on this, says: "From this it can be understood that happiness consists neither in health, nor in beauty, nor in strength, nor in height of body.

¹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by D. P. Chase; London, 1937. p. 11.

All these are acquired by acts of the above-mentioned (vegetative) life."²

Of health Our Saviour said: "Be not solicitous, therefore, saying what shall we eat, or what shall we drink or wherewith shall we be clothed. . . . Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God and His justice and all these things shall be added to you."³ Of beauty the Divine Wisdom has said: "Favor is deceitful and beauty is vain: the woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised."⁴ In spite of his strength Goliath was brought to grief by the Lord; and of the vanity of stature the Truth said; "Which of you by taking thought can add to his stature one cubit?"⁵

Aristotle continues: "We must leave aside, then, the life of mere nourishment and growth; and next will come the life of sensation; but this again manifestly is common to horses, oxen and every animal."⁶ On this St. Thomas comments: "From this it can be understood that human happiness does not consist in any sensible knowledge or delight."⁷ The Lord had spoken of sensible knowledge and delight in these words: "If thy right eye scandalize thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee."⁸ And: "Do not become like the horse and the mule, who have no understanding."⁹ Like a sound physician exposing quacks, Aristotle rejected the illusions of his predecessors.

Continuing the pursuit, he places the supreme activity of man in the intellect. Seeking the nature of this activity, he says: "Now this object may be obtained when we have discovered what is the proper work of man. For as in the case of the flute player, sculptor or artisan of any kind, or, more generally, all who have any work or course of action, their Chief Good and Excellence is thought to reside in their proper work, so it would seem with man, if there is any work belonging especially to him. Are we then to suppose that while carpenter and cobbler have certain works and courses of action, Man as Man has none, but is left by Nature without a work? Or would not one rather hold that as eye, hand and foot, and generally each of his members has manifestly some special work, so too the whole man as distinct from all these, has some work of his own." Here he points

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *In Decem Libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nichomachum Expositio*. (Turin, 1934), Lib. 1, Lectio 10.

³ Matt. VI, 31 and 33.

⁴ Prov. XXXI, 30.

⁵ Matt. VI, 27.

⁶ *op. cit.*

⁷ *op. cit.*

⁸ Matt. V, 29.

⁹ Ps. XXXI, 9.

to the fact that man is different from other things in this world and has contempt for being like them as they are, like a conversationalist vivacious in the company of a crony, dull in the company of those not sharing his interests.

Seeking this special purpose for man, he rejects, as we have shown, the vegetative and sensitive life, for these are not peculiar to man. "We seek that which is proper." He is like an employer, who, annoyed by the prospective employee who says he "can do anything," seeks to find the special capabilities of the man.

"There remains then," continues Aristotle, "a kind of life in the Rational Nature, apt to act; and of this nature there are two parts denominated Rational, the one as being obedient to reason, the other as having and exerting it." At this mention of rational life and its two aspects, St. Thomas comments: "This life is proper to man. For man is constituted a species by his rationality. But rationality is twofold. In one sense it is participated, i.e., in those things which are persuaded and regulated by reason. In another sense it is essential, i.e., in that whose function it is to reason and understand."

Having distinguished between activities obedient to reason and the activity of reason itself, Aristotle points out that man's supreme activity, his happiness, consists more in the latter than in the former. "We must take that which is in the way of actual working because this is thought to be most properly entitled to the name." St. Thomas continues, "This latter part is more properly called rational. That which is such by nature (*per se*) is always more essentially thus than that which is such through another (*per aliud*). Since therefore happiness is the highest good of man, it consequently consists more in that which is essentially rational than in that which is rational by participation."

Here St. Thomas finds in his protege the perception of a great truth which God has taught the Saints. "From this fact it may be concluded that happiness consists more essentially in the contemplative than in the active life; and in the act of reason or understanding rather than in the act of the appetite regulated by reason."

Among the perfections that St. Thomas perceived in the philosophy of Aristotle, this must have been one of the greatest. For here human nature is presented as apt to have, and designed for, the enjoyment of the beatific vision. St. Thomas insists in the *Summa*, that beatitude consists principally in an act of the intellect—drawing this from the text: "Now this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God."¹⁰ For the supernatural does not destroy or

¹⁰ John XVII, 3.

change nature, but elevates its powers to a supernatural operation and nature's highest potency plays the principal part.

St. Thomas then chose the philosophy of Aristotle because he founded in it a concept of nature most fit to be the handmaid of the theological concept of supernature. He found it a system of thought through which we could most easily follow the admonition of St. Paul: to be able to give a reason for the faith that is in you. Behind it all is a profound grasp of the fact that man is a social animal and must learn from his fellow man, not only the things of his natural life, also the things of eternal life and happiness.