Aquinas on the Relationship between Vision and Delight in Perfect Happiness

The Traditional Reading

The Coimbra Commentators (late 16th-early 17th centuries): “the position of St. Thomas Aquinas” is that “the clear vision of God…alone is happiness (beatitudo).”¹

Georg Wieland (20th century): “happiness can only consist essentially in an act of reason [namely, the vision of God]. The activity of the will, which expresses itself in delight, is an immediate consequence of happiness.”²

Happiness consists only in the vision of God. Happiness does not partially consist in delight, but rather delight follows from happiness.

An Alternative Reading

Heavenly happiness consists in the vision of God and delight in God, but Aquinas unequivocally affirms that the vision is more important than the delight.

Some Background on Aquinas’s Discussion: Bonaventure and Albert the Great

Bonaventure:

Sentence Commentary, Book 4, Distinction 49, Question 5:

“Enjoyment [fruitio] includes those three [namely, vision, love, laying hold].”³

“To the one that objects that the vision is the whole reward (and this sort of thing), it ought to be said that these three acts [the vision, the love, the laying hold of God] are altogether conjoined and connected. Thus he who perfectly sees, perfectly loves and possesses. And, thus, in the words of the Saints, with a united front [per connexionem], that is, with respect to all of them, it [the reward] is attributed to one thing. However, it is attributed more to the vision on account of this: that, in the vision, the state of heaven [status patriae] is distinguished from the state of earth [status viae]. Not so in love because both involve love, but in heaven there is the vision, [though] not on earth, but belief in what is not seen.”⁴

³ Nam fruitio ista tria completeitur [visio, dilectio, comprehensio].
⁴ Ad illud quod obiicitur quod visio est tot amerces, et huiusmodi, dicendum quod isti tres actus sunt omnino coniuncti et connexi; unde qui perfecte videt perfecte amat et habet. Et ideo in Sanctorum verbis per connexionem, quod est omnium, attribuitur uni; magis autem visinoi attribuitur propter hoc, quod in visione distinguittur status patriae a statu viae; non sic in dilectione, quia utrobique dilectio, sed in patria est visio, non in via, sed credulitas de non viso.
“Eternal life is considered in two ways, namely, in accord with that which undergirds it (substat in ea), and is material-like, and in accord with that which informs it and is form-like. And certainly in the first way the vision is eternal life for the reason that was given above in the question on eternal life [Book 4, Distinction 46, Article 5]. However, in the second way delight following upon the love of divinity possessed is eternal life. Thus that which is the cause of eternal life is love feeding on or being pastured in the vision possessed.”

Unappreciated Textual Tension

The Main Textual Evidence in Favor of the Traditional Reading:

ST IaIIae q.2 a.6: “Neither is that delight which results from the perfect good the very essence of happiness, but something resulting therefrom, like a proper accident.”

ST IaIIae q.3 a.4 co: “I answer that, as stated above two things are needed for happiness: one, which is the essence of happiness; the other, that is, as it were, its proper accident, i.e. the delight connected with it. I say, then, that as to the very essence of happiness, it is impossible for it to consist in an act of the will. For it is evident from what has been said that happiness is the attainment of the last end. But the attainment of the end does not consist in the very act of the will. For the will is directed to the end, both absent, when it desires it; and present, when it is delighted by resting therein. Now it is evident that the desire itself of the end is not the attainment of the end, but is a movement towards the end: while delight comes to the will from the end being present; and not conversely, is a thing made present, by the fact that the will delights in it. Therefore, that the end be present to him who desires it, must be due to something else than an act of the will…

So, therefore, the essence of happiness consists in an act of the intellect; but the delight that results from happiness pertains to the will. In this sense Augustine says (Confess. x, 23) that happiness is "joy in truth," because, to wit, joy itself is the consummation of happiness.”
The Main Textual Evidence in Favor of the Alternative Reading

Sentence Commentary

1. “Delight is not the perfection of the activity from which the activity has a species, but rather [it’s a perfection] which adds to it in the mode of a secondary perfection, like health is related to man and not as the soul [is related to man].”

2. “[S]ince some activity is the best in the class of human goods – which is happiness – there will also be some delight following upon that. Those two [activity and delight] are not to be thought of as two goods, but as one good. For just as from a perfection and a perfectible thing is made one perfect thing, so too from one delight and one activity is made one perfect activity, which is happiness – since delight is the perfection of an activity, as is said in Ethics, Book 10.”

3. “[P]roperly speaking, some delight is not the best thing, but is something belonging to the best thing, namely, happiness. For happiness includes delight, as is clear from the Philosopher in Ethics, Book 10.”

Summa Theologiae

1. At ST IaIIae q.4 a.2, Aquinas asks the question: whether “the delight is more principal (principalius) in happiness than the vision.”

He says, “Delight consists in a certain rest of the will. Now, the will does not rest in something unless on account of that thing’s goodness in which it rests. Therefore, if the will rests in some activity, the rest of the will proceeds from the goodness of the activity. Neither does the will seek the good on account of rest, for if that were so the very act of will would be the end, which is contrary to what came before. But, therefore, it seeks rest in the activity because the activity is its good. Thus it is clear that the more principal good is the very activity in which the will rests [i.e., the vision] than the rest of the will in it.”

2. “Happiness does not principally consist in” enjoyment (or the delight of the will).
3. “One person can be happier than another because the more one enjoys this good [namely, God in the beatific vision] the happier one is.”

The Case For The Alternative

1. Reflecting on the Background of Aquinas’s Discussion.
2. On Resolving Textual Tensions involving Analogies.
3. Fits Better with Aquinas’s Account of the True Essence of Happiness.

Reflecting on the Background of Aquinas’s Discussion

1. Putting forward the claim that the vision was more important than the delight would itself be controversial.
2. The reason that Aquinas gives for thinking of the vision as the essence of happiness and delight as a per se accident is the same reason that Bonaventure gives as to why the saints emphasize the vision of God.

On Resolving Textual Tensions involving Analogies

(1) In general, if an implication of an analogy is inconsistent with a claim not involving an analogy, we ought to reject the implication of the analogy.

(2) An implication of Aquinas’s analogy is that happiness does not at all consist in delight, even though he seems to claim that happiness partially consists in delight.

(C) Therefore, we ought to reject the implication that happiness does not at all consist in delight.

One might wonder: Then why did Aquinas use the analogy, if it misleads in this way?
It gets the most right.

Tracing analogies:

1. Albert’s analogy: vision is like matter, delight is like form.

   Misleads (from Aquinas’s perspective):
   (a) treats delight as more important than the vision;
   (b) implies that delight is primarily responsible for making happiness what it is (in light of the role of form in putting a thing in its species);
   (c) implies that the vision in some way depends upon the delight (inasmuch as matter depends on form for its actuality).

2. Aquinas’s Sentences analogy: vision is like a substance, delight is like a perfecting accident.

   Fixes:
   (a) no longer implies that delight is primarily responsible for making happiness what it is.
   (b) no longer implies that the vision in some way depends upon the delight.

11 ST IaIIae q.5 a.2 co.
Misleads:
(a) Relationship between a substance and perfecting accident is not necessary – a substance can exist without a particular perfecting accident.
(b) Aquinas thinks goodness tracks accidental perfection more than substantial goodness, so the analogy leaves open thinking that, when it comes to the goodness of happiness, the delight is more important.

3. Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* analogy: vision is like an essence, delight like a per se accident.

Fixes:
(a) still doesn’t imply that delight is primarily responsible for making happiness what it is.
(b) still doesn’t imply that the vision in some way depends upon the delight.
(c) secures a necessary relationship between the vision and delight.
(d) given the complete dependence of a per se accident on the essence from which it issues, no doubt that the vision is more important than the delight.

Misleads: (On the alternative reading.)
(a) Implies that happiness does not consist at all in delight.

Aquinas on the True Essence of Happiness
ST IaIIae q.1 a.8: Distinguishes four senses of ‘ultimate end’
(1) complete actualization (the *in tu*),
(2) God (the objectual sense),
(3) possession of God: two varieties (the possession sense), or
(4) possession of God by knowing and loving God (*cognoscendo et amando Deum*) (the possession-plus sense).

Then says, “happiness is the attainment of the ultimate end.”

ST IaIIae q.3 a.1: Discusses what seems to be an importantly different “essence of happiness”

“If [happiness] is considered with respect to the very essence of happiness (*ipsam essentiam beatitudinis*), then [happiness] is something created.”

In the sense relevant to happiness, “the ultimate end of a human being is something created, existing in him, which is nothing other than the possession or enjoyment (*fruitio*) of the ultimate end [namely, God].”

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12 ST IaIIae q.3 a.1 co.
13 ST IaIIae q.3 a.1 co.