

CHAPTER ONE



Finding a Path for Life

The Quest for Goodness and Happiness

We are made for happiness, fashioned for bliss.

This is an odd way to begin a book on the moral life, because we do not customarily associate the study of morality with learning about happiness. If a friend told you she was about to begin a course in ethics, you would not be likely to respond, "Good! After so many years of searching, you'll finally discover where real happiness can be found!" Wouldn't we more likely assume that in the weeks ahead our friend would be introduced to the world of moral principles, rules, and laws; to the language of rights and obligations; and to an array of ethical traditions and theories? Wouldn't we conclude that such a class would teach our friend what to do when confronted with difficult matters of conscience or how to make a decision when no trouble-free choice seems possible? Or wouldn't a good course in ethics—a really practical course—address some of the confounding ethical dilemmas of our day so that by the end of the semester our friend could tell us how best to think about abortion, gay marriage, euthanasia, cloning, war, or capital punishment? Besides, given the ever-expanding list of seemingly insurmountable problems facing the world, doesn't focusing on happiness trivialize the real work of ethics? And wouldn't it encourage precisely the self-centeredness and indifference that enflame so much of the suffering and misery that diminish life throughout the world?

Not necessarily. It all depends on what we take happiness to be, and a book on the Christian moral life might answer this in surprising ways. After all, Christians believe that the martyrs, despite the gruesome terrors they

suffered, were happy, because no tribulation could separate them from the God in whom they found joy. Even the threat of death did not rob them of happiness. On the contrary, confident that they had found the most exquisite happiness in loving God, they were empowered to face death with resilient hope, and even joy, rather than be conquered by sadness and despair. Generations of Christians have been schooled in stories of the saints precisely because they believe the lives of the saints display a wisdom about happiness, but one that often challenges what we ordinarily take happiness to be.¹

Investigating the nature of authentic happiness is a fitting subject for ethics because happiness is the one thing everyone seeks. Everyone wants to be happy. Nobody wants to be unhappy, unless in some twisted way they have made misery their joy. Human beings are naturally seekers of happiness; it is our most powerful innate desire. A hunger for happiness propels everything we do. It explains the relationships we seek, the jobs we desire, the hobbies we pursue, the clothes we wear, and even the food we eat. We don't need a Declaration of Independence to tell us to pursue happiness. We do it naturally, albeit sometimes misguidedly. The story of our lives can be read as one unfolding search for happiness because we relentlessly pursue whatever we think will be good for us, whatever we suspect will fulfill us, delight us, bring us peace, and deepen the meaning of our lives. It is the intention behind every intention, the key to unlocking all motivation. When we look back over our lives, even the mistakes we made and the wrong choices we embraced often came from misunderstanding where true happiness would be found. The greedy person covets money because he believes wealth is the answer to happiness. The unfaithful lover betrays because she thinks the excitement of a new affair will be delightful. The ambitious professor manipulates because he believes contentment lies in promoting self-interest over the well-being of his colleagues. Much of the harm we bring to others, as well as ourselves, stems from costly fantasies about what constitutes real joy. But happiness is the pursuit of a lifetime. No matter how much sadness we reap by not knowing where real happiness can be found, we never relinquish the search, because finding joy abides as the most passionate desire of our hearts.

Years ago the French philosopher Etienne Gilson said that the purpose of Christian morality was to teach men and women how they must live if the story of their lives was to have a happy ending. How must we shape our lives, what must we learn to desire and to seek, Gilson asked, if we are to bring our humanity "to the very peak of achievement"?² What must we learn to love and to cherish if we are to reach the greatest excellence possible to us as human beings? Or, more briefly if not more simply, what would it mean to live

a good life? What kind of life is truly worth living? Learning principles and rules, being conversant with a variety of traditions and theories, and being skilled in addressing controversial moral issues are all crucial elements of moral education. But they are not the heart and center of any exploration of the moral life, because they present a much too narrow and constricted view of the moral adventure. We need to go deeper. The scope of morality is much grander and more dramatic because its essential business is not the solving of problems but the transformation of persons in whatever goods will truly fulfill them. Helping us discover, and then achieve, the most promising possibilities for human beings is the primary business of ethics, because ultimately nothing less will content us. How must we plan our lives so they can be lived as well as possible?³ This is the question that drives the study of ethics and makes it both challenging and practical. The philosopher and theologian Herbert McCabe put it well when he suggested that one studies ethics in order to learn "how to be good at being human."⁴ And, as McCabe insisted, the business of ethics is not simply to teach people how "to *talk* about being good," but more importantly "to *make* people good as well."⁵

As any good novel shows, human life takes the form of a quest. Dealing with nettlesome moral dilemmas or debating complex moral questions may be episodes in this journey, and may even make the journey interesting; but they are not the heart of the adventure. What drives us on the quest is not a desire to master a theory, know a principle, or resolve a dilemma, but to discover the good for which we are made, the good or goods that can satisfy us, complete us, and still the turbulence of our restless hearts. There are days when we must wrestle with tough moral choices or suffer through anguished matters of conscience. But to reduce morality to these occasions, however momentous, does not do justice to the overall drama of our lives. What do we do on those multiple other days when there are no momentous decisions to be made and no dilemmas to resolve? We do what we always do: We search for a happiness that lasts, a happiness that endures despite adversity and hardship. We admire, are attracted to, and sometimes even envy people who are genuinely happy. We want to know what they know, we want to discover their secret. What brought them to happiness? What did they do to find joy? Did it come quickly or was it the work of a lifetime? We ask these questions because every human being shares one resounding ambition: we want a joy that abides.

Morality comes to life with the question of happiness because the real business of ethics is helping us discover in what happiness consists.⁶ If the story of every human life can be read as a never-ending quest for happiness, a good morality guides us on that journey. It helps us understand how we

must live and what we must learn to love if we are to find peace and satisfaction in our lives. If everything we do begins in an intention for happiness, then the critical first step in moral education is coming to understand what constitutes happiness for human beings. Indeed, the study of morality can best be understood as training in happiness, as an ongoing initiation into the desires, attitudes, habits, and practices that make for a happy and good life. For those accustomed to parsing morality through the grammar of laws, obligations, principles, and rules, this may seem mistaken. But there is a venerable tradition in Christian ethics that sees the heart of morality to be discovering, and entering into, a way of life that answers the deep human desire for happiness and goodness. We may have lost a rich sense of the good life, but a fundamental purpose of Christian ethics is to help us understand what such a life might be.

This was the approach of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, two of the most influential theologians in the history of Christianity, and their account of happiness will be our focus in this opening chapter. They understood the substance of Christian morality not principally through the language of law and obligation, but as the ongoing quest to discover, share in, and ultimately be perfected by whatever brings the most perfect and enduring happiness to our lives. They found this in God because they believed only in God is there the truth, the beauty, and the goodness in which women and men are ultimately fulfilled. We will be happy, they argued, in the measure that we grow in, and are transformed by, the goodness of God. It may take us a lifetime to discover this, and that life might be speckled with countless costly detours and endless wrong turns, but ultimately it is this quest that alone is worthy of us and that alone can answer our most pressing need.

Augustine and Aquinas are worthy guides as we begin our exploration of the Christian moral life. But they may challenge our customary understandings of happiness. First, both Augustine and Aquinas maintain that happiness is inextricably connected to goodness and inseparable from goodness. Happiness and goodness are one; therefore, in order to be happy we must become good.⁷ In this life we may never be perfectly happy, but we will advance in happiness to the degree that we advance in goodness. But not just any goodness. Christians believe happiness comes as we grow in the goodness of God. In more theological language, holiness brings happiness. This is a hard truth for us to swallow because we are more likely to connect holiness with squelching happiness than fulfilling it. Even more, we link happiness with the satisfaction of desires, not necessarily with goodness, including the goodness of God.

Second, through Augustine and Aquinas we will learn that we misunderstand happiness if we think of it primarily in terms of positive and uplifting feelings. Such feelings would be better described as pleasure than happiness. Pleasure and happiness may be connected, but they are not the same. Pleasures come and go in ways that happiness should not. Happiness is something deeper, something much more lasting and stable than pleasure, because happiness comes from excellence in goodness.⁸ Happiness has to be something more substantial than the pleasure that comes on those wonderful days where everything seems to go well. What really matters is knowing how to sustain happiness on those unfortunate days when nothing goes well or during those painful periods of life when we experience more defeats than successes, more adversity than good. Can we be happy amid trials and tribulations? Does suffering necessarily extinguish happiness? Augustine and Aquinas believed that happiness is not so much an emotional state, but a discernible and distinctive way of life that brought joy because it made one good. Goodness is the cause of joy, and the greatest possible joy is found in possessing the greatest possible good. Thus, Christian morality is not a set of theories and ideas, but an initiation into a way of life that itself constitutes happiness because it unites us to the most perfect and perfecting good.

In this chapter we'll explore what Augustine and Aquinas took that way of life to be. Along the way we'll explore what happiness is and what makes it possible, but also why we sometimes fear it and flee from it. We'll consider how easy it is to be confused about happiness, and thus why we need a mentor or guide as we make our way in search of something to complete us and bring us joy.

Augustine

One of the most important, complex, and, admittedly, controversial figures in the history of western Christianity is Augustine (354–430). A man of tremendous intellect and talent, Augustine was an amazingly prolific writer whose theological works became the cornerstone of much of subsequent western Christian theology. Augustine's writings address virtually every dimension of Christian theology, but he is perhaps best known for *The Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography that recounts the first thirty-three years of Augustine's life prior to his conversion to Christianity. One reason Augustine wrote *The Confessions* is that he believed the story of his life, for all its drama and uniqueness, was everyone's story. Like Augustine, each of our lives can be read as an ongoing search to discover in what human happiness and

peace consists. But also, like Augustine, we lose our way on that journey because despite our deep desire for love and peace and contentment, we stubbornly cling to things that can never bring us real joy. This is why in the narrative that is our life there may be more chapters of disillusionment and disappointment than fulfillment and delight.

Seekers Who Go Astray

No wonder the biblical figure with whom Augustine most compares himself in *The Confessions* is the prodigal son, the infamous figure whose story is told in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Convinced that he knows best where the path to happiness lies, the son asks his father for his share of the inheritance, breaks free of family and home, and sets forth on his quest. With wealth and freedom as provisions for the journey, the son has no reason not to expect happiness and good fortune to be his; after all, he sets out on his quest beholden to no one, responsible for nothing, and free of all restraints. With an open road and seemingly limitless horizons of opportunity before him, why wouldn't he succeed? But the choices he makes lead not to bliss and fulfillment but to destitution and disillusionment. As Jesus tells the story, the prodigal son's attempt to find happiness bottoms out in desperation and despair because the path he felt surely would fulfill him led not to pleasure and success, but to barely surviving as a servant whose job is to watch over pigs (Luke 15:15).

Augustine sees himself, and all of us, in that story. He opens *The Confessions* with his famous prayer to God, a prayer written to tell us something important about ourselves: "Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise. . . . And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you. . . . You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."⁹ Men and women, Augustine suggests, are made for God and will find happiness and peace only in God. Fashioned from God and for God, we are fulfilled in loving, praising, and worshiping God. God is our joy, God is our delight.

But, as Augustine's story poignantly reveals, we refuse to accept this truth. We reject the identity given to us by God and choose to find happiness on our own. The first thirty-three years of Augustine's life read as one long, and increasingly frustrating attempt, to find happiness apart from God. Augustine seeks happiness through sexual pleasure, through a series of love affairs, through fame and reputation as a teacher, through the wisdom of philosophy, through social status, and even by consulting astrologers about his horoscope. Early in *The Confessions*, Augustine says that as a young man what he wanted

more than anything was "loving and being loved,"¹⁰ but he had no idea what real love involved. He describes himself as "casting about for something to love,"¹¹ for something to which he could devote his life, but with every attempt ends up frustrated and confused. The longer he pursues happiness, the more miserable he becomes. Late in his adolescence, Augustine describes himself as an "unhappy beast,"¹² as "floundering in the mud,"¹³ and despite the apparent freedom and pleasure of his life, as little more than "a runaway slave."¹⁴

One of the key scenes in *The Confessions*, and a pivotal moment in Augustine's quest for happiness, involves Augustine's unexpected encounter with a drunken beggar. Now thirty-one years old, Augustine has already distinguished himself both as a teacher and an accomplished speaker. According to the expectations of his society, Augustine ought to be happy because he has attained all the things that are said to count for happiness: material well-being, social status and reputation, connections to people of influence. On this day, Augustine and some of his friends are walking through the streets of Milan. The emperor has died and Augustine, in recognition of his skills as a speaker, has been invited to offer a eulogy in his honor. It is clear from what he writes that Augustine didn't think much of the emperor, but he knows giving the eulogy will embellish his reputation and advance him in the eyes of people who matter. An ambitious man, Augustine admits he was willing to lie about the virtues of the emperor if in doing so he can win favor with others. It does not matter that he really does not believe what he is about to say as long as the speech profits him. "I was preparing to deliver a eulogy upon the emperor in which I would tell plenty of lies," Augustine writes, "with the object of winning favor with the well-informed by my lying."¹⁵

But on his way to give the eulogy, Augustine and his friends stumble across a drunken beggar and make an unsettling discovery. What confounds Augustine is that this disheveled mess of a man who has failed all of society's criteria for success, with only a few coins and a bottle of wine is much happier and content than Augustine and his sophisticated friends. They had worked so hard and devoted so many years to securing success and reputation—indeed, they had plotted their entire lives to achieve them—but remained dissatisfied and discontent. By contrast, before them sits this beggar who may have been overlooked, scorned, and dismissed by society, but who nonetheless seems far more carefree than Augustine. Augustine may not want to change places with the beggar, but admits that the man had achieved a happiness and freedom that continue to elude him. It is a moment of unnerving recognition.

Despite so many years of experimenting with different possibilities for happiness, Augustine, with all his education and opportunity, remains burdened with anxieties and fears. His friends and he had devoted all of their talents and all of their time toward achieving happiness, but “it appeared that this beggar had already beaten us to the goal.”¹⁶ Moreover, even if the beggar’s happiness was incomplete, he was at least doing some good in achieving it. As he begged for coins and drank his wine, he would “wish good-day to passers-by, while I was seeking a swollen reputation by lying.”¹⁷ The experience makes Augustine think about what he takes happiness to be. Are his ambitions worthy? Are the dreams he has been chasing truly promising? If he finally achieves everything he has been seeking, will he really be happy? And perhaps most unsettling, what has this beggar learned about happiness that Augustine still has not?

The Confessions resounds with the cry of the restless heart. Throughout his first thirty-three years, Augustine lives to find the answer to two questions: What will make me happy? What will bring me peace? His discontent grows not only because he makes wrong choices about happiness, but also, more strikingly, because he fears where his search may ultimately lead and what his discovery might ask of him. The older he grows, the more Augustine knows he is not happy. Still, the closer he comes to knowing real happiness the more he resists it. Augustine fears what he most claims to desire. He is *afraid of happiness* and therefore resists discovering it. He fears happiness because he knows embracing it will force him to change. He may be miserable, but his misery asks nothing of him. Happiness, however, will ask much of Augustine. It will ask him to change his heart and refashion his attachments. It will demand that he love new things, or at least love old things in new ways. Augustine senses it will be safer to stay with misery and discontent than risk happiness because happiness will require that he reorder his life.

And so every time Augustine comes near happiness, he retreats. Like a boy attempting his first dive off the high board, Augustine inches up to happiness then backs away. He wants the new life happiness will bring, but is afraid to relinquish his old life. He wants to be freed from his misery, but fears letting go of the very things that drag him down. He compares himself to the person who has been asleep for a long, long time and knows that “the hour for rising has come,” but begs for a few more minutes of sleep: “‘Just a minute,’ ‘One more minute,’ ‘Let me have a little longer.’”¹⁸ The prospect of happiness makes Augustine anxious because he knows it will demand surrendering to a way of life that will ultimately re-create him. A man with a divided heart, both wanting and not wanting peace, paralyzed by indecision and enslaved by fear, Augustine describes himself as “turning and twisting in my chain.”¹⁹

The climactic scene of *The Confessions* occurs in a garden. Exhausted by the tug-of-war taking place in his soul, Augustine sits alone in a garden and begins to weep. He speaks of the tears flowing from his eyes “like rivers”²⁰ and writes as if he is at the point of an emotional and psychological breakdown. He knows his life cannot continue as it is, but feels absolutely powerless to change it. Near despair, Augustine realizes he cannot give himself the peace and happiness he seeks. Then he hears the voice of a child “from a house nearby—perhaps a voice of some boy or girl, I do not know—singing over and over again, ‘Pick it up and read, pick it up and read.’”

Taking the child’s words as a sign from God, Augustine, who had been reading the New Testament, describes how he picked up the Bible, opened it, “and read in silence the passage on which my eyes first lighted.”²¹ It is from Paul’s letter to the Romans, a passage in which Paul summons the reader to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14).

Happiness—More a Gift Than an Achievement?

Augustine’s conversion occurs when he heeds the advice of a child. After thirty-three years of searching for happiness on his own, the bliss Augustine had been seeking comes not by his own efforts, but in a sudden, unexpected moment when he hears and responds to the counsel of a child. This suggests that the happiness we seek is more a gift than our own singular achievement, more the result of grace than the work of our own agency. In the Christian life, we are not the primary agents of our happiness, God is. We have to respond to and work with the grace of God in our lives, but a foundational truth of Christian morality is that the happiness we seek we already have and always have had. It is the love and grace of God that has been poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). Prior to his conversion, Augustine believed whatever meaning and peace he might have in life depended entirely on him. His happiness would result from his choices and his decisions, from how he took advantage of the opportunities before him. But that didn’t work. Trying to arrange his life so that everything contributed to what he thought best for him left him famished. He kept missing happiness and remained a stranger to peace because he failed to understand that happiness begins in the gift of God’s love—happiness is born from grace—and that he would be happy when he accepted, grew into, and conformed his life to the love from which he had been created. What stuns the reader about Augustine’s conversion is that after so many years of toil and disappointment, Augustine’s happiness happens so effortlessly. All it took was for him to recognize God speaking through the voice of a playful child. The educated, worldly-wise Augustine stumbles into happiness when he allows himself to be led by a child.

What does Augustine learn from his own life story? Augustine “puts on Christ” at Easter in the year 387 when he is baptized by Ambrose, bishop of Milan. A year later he writes a short theological work, *The Way of Life of the Catholic Church* (*De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae*). Augustine begins that work by noting, “Certainly, we all wish to live happily.”²² But he goes on to say that we will not be happy if we lack what we love, if we possess what we love but it is harmful, or if we have not learned to love what is best. This aptly describes Augustine’s own odyssey. He realized early that happiness is a matter of possessing what we love. But he also discovered that having what we love does not bring happiness if what we love is bad for us or even if what we love is good, but not sufficient to complete us. We are restless and dissatisfied either because we choose the wrong things to love or because we love good things with disproportionate devotion.

Augustine learned that happiness comes to the person who both loves and possesses what is best for human beings. The essence of happiness, as *The Confessions* so poignantly demonstrates, is not a matter of having what we want unless what we desire is truly the most excellent good for men and women. Human beings have a natural attraction to the good, it is what we cannot help loving and desiring.²³ But we will not be satisfied with anything less than perfect goodness because only perfect goodness can complete us. As the Swiss theologian Servais Pinckaers says, “We could therefore define the human person as a being aspiring to perfection and the plenitude of goodness.”²⁴ This is why the Christian moral life is best understood as an ongoing education into whatever is the most compelling, beautiful, and promising good for human beings. What Augustine learned from his own search for happiness was that happiness is not a matter of having my desires and preferences fulfilled regardless of what they may be. No, I *learn to be happy* by scrutinizing my desires and asking if what I have chosen to love possesses a goodness exquisite enough to complete me. Happiness is a *way of life* characterized by loving, possessing, and enjoying what is supremely good for us as human beings. Thus, for Augustine, anyone who fails to love and to live for what is best can never be genuinely happy.

As a Christian, Augustine finds that goodness in God. The happy life is to love God wholeheartedly and faithfully because God is the perfection of goodness, the supreme and most excellent good (*summum bonum*). There is no good greater than God, no good that surpasses God. The happy life, Augustine says, consists of seeking God through love in order to become one with him,²⁵ because we will know joy only insofar as we have intimacy and communion with what is best for us. What his own quest for happiness taught him is that the deepest and most relentless human aspiration is to find

and to possess whatever good can bring peace to our hearts. Anything truly good brings a degree of joy and contentment to our lives, but even the best of human goods and the deepest of human loves are never enough for creatures like ourselves, who will be satisfied with nothing less than perfect goodness and perfect love. Every human good and every human love points to a surpassing good and love. Even the richest moments of intimacy hint of a deeper and more resilient union that can never be broken, never be lost. Fashioned from the goodness and love of God, we are drawn to the goodness and love of God and cannot have peace, fulfillment, contentment, or joy apart from them. Our happiness resides in flourishing in the love that made us and gives us life. As Augustine’s journey taught him, apart from God the restlessness of our hearts can never be quieted.

What Does Augustine Teach Us about the Moral Life?

What lessons on happiness can we take from Augustine? First, the story of Augustine’s journey demonstrates that happiness is inseparable from goodness. In order to be happy we must become good. Moral education should focus on teaching us how to become enchanted with goodness because if we are ever to be happy and fulfilled, we must be attracted to goodness more than evil, virtue more than vice. If we are to flourish and excel as human beings, we must find goodness compelling and irresistible. We must, in more traditional language, contemplate the beauty of goodness in order to be captivated by its radiance. This is why contemplation has always been a central practice of the Christian life. The purpose of contemplation is to open oneself to the goodness and beauty of God in order to be transformed by it. To see and not turn away from the good is an essential first step in moral formation because our growth and development as human beings hinge not only on finding goodness beautiful, but on becoming resplendent in goodness ourselves.

Second, Augustine’s story suggests that the God who is our good wants our good. *God wants our good*. This fact should ground all consideration of the Christian moral life. Christian morality begins not with our initiatives and actions, but with the befriending activity of God. The God who befriends us in grace, Christ, and the Spirit, desires what is best for us and continually seeks to achieve it. The God who fashioned us *from* goodness and *for* goodness wants our happiness and works far better than we to accomplish it. The Christian moral life begins in God’s grace, grows from that grace, and is sustained by that grace. We are called to respond to God’s grace; to use our freedom, ingenuity, and intelligence to cooperate with it; and live according to it. But we are never solitary agents in the Christian moral life. We never “go

it alone,” because we always live and work in partnership with the gracious initiatives of God, and in partnership with others. The Christian moral life abides as a *response to grace*. It is our ongoing response, formed from gratitude, to the graced initiatives of God. We misconstrue the Christian moral life if we picture ourselves as autonomous, independent agents on whom everything depends. On the contrary, the language that best befits us is not the language of autonomy and independence, but of *receptivity* and *cooperation*. We thrive when we open ourselves to the grace, love, and goodness of God—when we allow God’s spirit to move freely within us—and when we use our intelligence and freedom to work in harmony with God’s grace, not against it or apart from it.

Thomas Aquinas

Our second guide on the subject of happiness is Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Aquinas could be the patron saint of every student who has ever felt his or her talents were overlooked or unappreciated. He is the perfect example of the student whose gifts were not immediately recognized. Quiet and shy by nature, Thomas was a boy who thought much but said little. And he was apparently a pretty big boy. One of his biographers described Aquinas as being “somewhat corpulent,” which is a nice way of saying he was at least a little hefty.²⁶ As often happens with those who are reticent and reserved, and of lumbering physique, people concluded that Aquinas was not very bright; in fact, his youthful peers nicknamed him the “Dumb Ox.” But Thomas’s genius soon became known. One day Thomas dropped a sheet of his class notes in the corridor outside his room. A fellow student saw the notes and took them to their teacher, the famous Albert the Great. Glancing at the notes, Albert was so impressed that he remarked, “We call him the Dumb Ox, but the bellowing of that ox will resound throughout the world.”²⁷

Albert’s prediction certainly was proven true, because the theology of this thirteenth-century saint and scholar has bellowed resoundingly for almost eight hundred years. Aquinas died before he reached fifty, but few have written more extensively and prolifically, or as astutely, as this man whose abiding desire was to help people understand the extent of God’s goodness to us and how we should respond to it. Of all Aquinas’s writings, the most important is his *magnum opus*, the massive *Summa Theologiae*, a stunning exploration of virtually every dimension of Christian theology, but a work Aquinas intended for “beginners.” In the preface to the *Summa*, Aquinas said his aim “was to present those things that pertain to the Christian religion in a manner befitting the education of beginners, to present the fundamentals of the-

ology briefly and clearly.”²⁸ No work has shaped and impacted Christian thinking more than this “beginners book,” and it is in its pages that Aquinas’s most trenchant analysis of happiness is found.

Wrong Turns on Happiness

Like Augustine, Aquinas puts the human desire for happiness at the heart of the moral life. He begins his investigation of the Christian moral life with the simple declaration that happiness is our true good—the one good every person naturally seeks—and that we will not be satisfied until we possess a happiness that “essentially remains and is forever.”²⁹ Seekers of happiness, we move through life in search of whatever we think will fulfill and complete us, something so exquisitely good that once we possess it there is nothing left for us to desire. Aquinas calls this consummate good our “ultimate end.” Everybody has one because all of us set our hearts on something we believe will quench all of our desires.

The desire for happiness is natural, but knowing what will bring happiness is not. Aquinas held that real happiness and real peace come from possessing whatever good can bring us to our fullest and most perfect development. We will be happy, Thomas thought, when we not only possess, but are also transformed by, whatever good is capable of bringing us to our utmost possible excellence as human beings—the good or goods that enable us to be who we are created to be. But we are easily misled about where such fulfilling goodness is found. We are often more mistaken than astute about happiness. The common thread in all of our actions is the desire for happiness, but we seek happiness in different places and in different ways. This may be inevitable, but it is also costly because, Aquinas saw, wrong choices about happiness result in sadness and diminishment.

Consider, for example, what our society teaches about happiness. In a capitalist economy and a culture of consumerism, are we not bombarded with messages promising happiness through wealth and possessions? Aren’t we every day indoctrinated by advertisements promising bliss through the clothes we wear, the cell phones we buy, and even the beer we drink? Or in our celebrity culture are we not taught to believe that fame and power, not service and commitment bring happiness? But if all these things really bring happiness, why are so many people depressed and discontent, angry and dissatisfied, and perhaps, amid all their comforts, slipping unknowingly into despair? Aquinas’s response to our society’s convictions about happiness would be that anyone who thinks wealth, fame, pleasure, or power can make us supremely happy is only imitating the “mass opinion of silly people” who are so misguided about happiness that we ought to pity them, not imitate them.³⁰

But Aquinas was a realist. He knew how people think. Thus, when he begins his study of happiness he does not leap to the conclusion that God must be our ultimate good. No, the first candidate for happiness he offers is not God but money because, Aquinas notes, many people live as if money is their ultimate joy. Whatever we allow to win our hearts and master our affections is what we think will make us happiest, and for many people this is money. As Aquinas wrote, "For since happiness is man's final end it must be looked for where his affections are held above all. And such is wealth, as Ecclesiastes remarks, 'All things obey money.'"³¹

He also looks at honor and fame, power and prestige, bodily health, and pleasure as possibilities for our "ultimate end" because he knows the way we live. We are inclined to look for satisfaction in fame and prestige, to think pleasure will content us, or conclude that nothing matters more than being healthy and fit. And there is some truth to all of these claims. Aquinas does not study these possibilities only in order to dismiss them; rather, he acknowledges that there is something good about each of them and something important that they contribute to life. A certain amount of money and material goods are essential for a good human life. Having a good reputation does add something to our happiness and well-being. No one who has ever enjoyed a gourmet meal, a fine martini, or Italian ice cream will deny that such pleasures enrich us (sometimes more than our waistlines can bear). And no one truly alive will deny how powerful the pleasures of touch can be. A God who made all things good made these things good too. Aquinas agreed. He did not deny their goodness; in fact, he agreed that they are elements to a good and happy life. But he was also convinced that their goodness could only take us so far. Each of these things is unquestionably good, but insufficiently good. They go a long way to making our lives pleasant and fulfilled, but still fall short because none has the goodness necessary for bringing us to our optimum excellence as human beings. We may have all earthly goods and pleasures, Aquinas said, but we will still be dissatisfied—or we *ought* to be dissatisfied—because even when we have them in abundance we "recognize how incomplete they are and how far short of our highest good."³²

For example, money cannot be our ultimate end any more than power, fame, health, or pleasure, because we will be brought to peace only by something whose goodness surpasses us, not by something less than us. Our happiness resides in something so superior in goodness that through desiring, loving, and possessing it we are brought to our highest possible excellence. The good that is our ultimate end, Aquinas reasons, is so perfectly good that it fulfills all desires.³³ Money and possessions cannot do this because no matter how much wealth we have or things we own we always want more. The

same is true with power and fame and pleasure. We can have them all in abundance but will still be restless, still sense something is missing. Whatever will make us happiest must be able to do great things for us. It must be a good that stretches us, a good that can consistently carry us beyond previous levels of achievement and growth. Thus, for Aquinas, the happy person is not necessarily the woman or man who has all she or he desires; rather, the happy person is the woman or man who possesses the greatest possible good in the deepest possible way.³⁴

Why Our Ultimate Happiness Is God

Such goodness is found only in God. Nothing other than God and nothing less than God can ultimately satisfy us because we are happy insofar as we possess the highest possible good, and that goodness is found in God alone, the source and perfection of all goodness. Human beings seek the unsurpassable good, "the good without reserve," Aquinas says, because we grow and flourish through goodness and are perfected and fulfilled through the highest goodness. Such unexcelled goodness cannot be found in any created thing, but only in God whose goodness is without defect and lacking in nothing.³⁵ For Aquinas, to be happy is to live in and from the most beautiful good, and to grow in the likeness of that good. "There is a drive within all things towards some likeness to God, who is their first beginning and their final end," Aquinas wrote. Thus, we cannot enjoy happiness unless we "become like God in goodness."³⁶ Throughout his analysis of happiness, Aquinas maintains that the ultimate end or supreme good of men and women is whatever brings us to our most proper and complete development as human beings. Union with God, sharing God's life intimately and continuously, is the true ultimate end for human beings because nothing less than God can appease our natural desire for the absolute good. Anything less than perfect communion with God will leave us dissatisfied and incomplete. Similarly, any account of happiness constituted by human goods alone will be both misleading and flawed.³⁷ Our aim, Aquinas insists, must be to "become like God in goodness."

But identifying our happiness in a life of friendship and fellowship with God creates a problem. How can we who are clearly other than God—finite, mortal, earthly, and sinful—possibly share in the life and goodness of God? How can we find happiness in a goodness that so infinitely surpasses us, a goodness that seems eternally out of reach? Like Augustine, Aquinas says such happiness must come through a gift. Left to ourselves we cannot possibly know intimacy with God, much less union with God, because God's goodness infinitely transcends us. The happiness we need is a happiness we

cannot, by our own resources, possibly reach. But we can receive it as a gift. Human beings are fulfilled through a life of love, friendship, and communion with God—what Aquinas calls a life of *caritas* or charity. And this way of life is within our reach not because of our own powers or capacities, but because of God's grace. The God who wants our good gifts us with the happiness we seek.³⁸

Aquinas's point is that we seek perfect happiness with God because from the beginning of our lives we, however imperfectly and incompletely, already know, share in, and live from that happiness. Aquinas says every human being begins life with a gift, namely, the gift of God's love and happiness poured into our hearts. God "communicates his beatitude" to us. What Aquinas means is that our lives originate in a grace, in the gift of God's very happiness infused into our hearts.³⁹ We cannot gain this happiness on our own, but we don't have to. It is the gift with which we begin our quest for happiness and the gift in which it is fulfilled. Like Augustine, Aquinas insists that the Christian moral life starts with a gift. It begins when God shares with us what we cannot possibly give ourselves, namely, the happiness and love that completes us. We cannot earn this gift, but we can open ourselves to receive it, and we can be increasingly conformed to it. In short, we seek the perfection of our happiness in God because the beatitude we anticipate we have, however dimly and imperfectly, already found.⁴⁰

Christ—Our Preeminent Teacher in the Way of Happiness

But it is a happiness we can easily lose. This is why we need to be guided along the way of happiness. We need mentors who can show us the way. We need communities whose members are wise in the habits of happiness. It is the same in the moral life as in any other area of our lives. Even the most gifted athletes need to be trained, guided, and disciplined by coaches. In music, child prodigies still need to be taught and nurtured by teachers who recognize their gifts and tutor them so that they can become virtuosos. And the most brilliant scientists recognize the debt they owe to teachers who helped them develop their gifts to their optimum potential. The same holds true for the Christian life. Having a natural desire for happiness is no guarantee we shall find it. We need to be tutored in the happy life. We need wise mentors and skilled guides to lead us on our quest so that, when it comes to happiness, we don't keep showing up at the wrong place at the wrong time. We cannot miscalculate forever about happiness without ending up with a life we ultimately regret. We all make mistakes about happiness, errors about where real peace and meaning are found; but we cannot afford to be mistaken all of

the time, year after year, decade after decade, if we want our life to be other than a colossal missed opportunity.

Augustine and Aquinas knew this. They recognized that if the heart of the Christian moral life is learning about happiness, then we begin the moral life not as experts in happiness but as apprentices. We are novices in the skills of happiness, not virtuosos, and novices need a teacher. In the Christian life our primary teacher in the way of happiness is Christ. He is our mentor; we are his disciples; and it is by observing him, listening to him, and learning from him, following his teachings and imitating his example, that we grow in happiness. Augustine taught that happiness is a way of life intrinsically connected to the life, teachings, and example of Christ. In Christ one sees the *path to happiness* and discovers the virtues and practices constitutive of happiness. This is why in the Christian moral life happiness comes not by having the freedom to pursue whatever we want; rather, for Christians, happiness requires being initiated into a way of life by which we gradually are conformed to the love, goodness, and beauty of God. Christian ethics is *training in happiness*, and in the Gospels we discover what that training involves. This initiation begins with baptism because in that sacrament Christians join their lives to Christ, promise to model their lives after Christ, and see themselves as lifelong disciples with Christ as their teacher. A life of discipleship is a training in happiness; and what disciples learn is that happiness comes as we learn to love our enemies, as we forgive rather than retaliate, and as we serve the least of all rather than lord it over them.

This goes against all our intuitions about happiness. We think we will feel better when we get even, not when we forgive. Seeking the good of our enemies seems the antithesis of happiness, not an essential ingredient of it. And we are taught to be the lucky people who are served, not the poor souls who do the serving. This is why so many, when introduced to the Christian life, turn away. We are reluctant to trust, much less commit ourselves to, a teacher who says an important first step to happiness is selling our possessions and giving what we have to the poor (Matt. 19:21). Most offensive of all is Jesus' promise that anyone who undertakes his path to happiness can count on daily crosses, certain tribulation, misunderstanding, and rejection. No wonder we are more likely to decline Jesus' invitation than accept it, and thus try our luck with happiness elsewhere.

Take the Beatitudes, the heart of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, where he sets out the way of life and the kind of community that will help bring about the reign of God (Matt. 5:1–12). For Augustine, the Beatitudes, as their name suggests, are the concrete practices by which Christians know happiness by being formed in the goodness of God.⁴¹ But the Beatitudes,

to say the least, present an unconventional understanding of happiness. Jesus promises happiness to those who are “poor in spirit,” to the lowly and the humble, to those who hunger for holiness more than for power or wealth, to those generous with mercy and hesitant to condemn, to peacemakers who will suffer violence rather than inflict it, and to those who are insulted and persecuted because they refuse to renounce Christ. Who wants to take this road to happiness? The Beatitudes outline Jesus’ path to happiness, and for generations Christian theologians and preachers have softened their blow by assuring discomfited believers that Jesus really didn’t mean for us to take the *Beatitudes seriously*. They are, the argument goes, “eschatological ideals” that represent what Jesus would like the world to be but knows it never can be. Or perhaps they describe a perfectionist ethic for a special elite, but not something that could possibly be asked of everyone.

But Augustine thought otherwise. In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Augustine suggests that Jesus’ teachings on mercy, peacemaking, forgiveness, and justice are not impossible ideals too unreasonable ever to practice, but precisely the attitudes and actions that constitute happiness, because by practicing and embodying them we become godly. Augustine believed “the Beatitudes give us Christ’s answer to the primary human question about happiness” because by living according to them we are conformed to the goodness of God and participate more completely in the life of God.⁴²

Aquinas agreed. Like Augustine, Aquinas linked happiness with a life of discipleship, a life of following, learning from, and imitating Jesus. Christ is the center of the Christian moral life because we grow in the goodness of God and, therefore, know happiness, only in the measure that we more deeply possess and practice the virtues of Christ. Furthermore, for Aquinas, a life of discipleship is mediated through the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas writes, “Baptism is required in order to begin the spiritual life; the Eucharist is necessary in order to bring it to its culmination.”⁴³ The Christian moral life starts with baptism because baptism marks not only the beginning of a Christian’s training in happiness, but also indicates what that training will involve. Baptism ritually expresses that happiness is learned *in community* as men and women apprentice themselves to Christ. But baptism also indicates that this training in happiness is never finished or complete. We never “finish our baptisms” because at no point do we achieve perfect conformity to the goodness of God. We strive for that goodness by claiming the Gospel as our rule of life, and we grow more deeply in that goodness as we follow the way of Christ, but we never equal or surpass it. Similarly, the Eucharist is an essential practice for the Christian moral life because it is the ritual through which our communal

training in happiness primarily occurs. As apprentices in the life of happiness, at the Eucharist we *together* listen to the words and teachings of Christ and learn how to better model our lives on his. At the Eucharist we *together* eat the body and drink the blood of Christ—we consume Christ entirely—so that his attitudes and virtues might become our own. The Eucharist is the true center of the Christian moral life because it is the indispensable context for learning about happiness and for becoming people capable of happiness.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In this opening chapter we have suggested that Christian ethics is best understood as an ongoing education or training in what constitutes authentic happiness for human beings. It would not be amiss to title a course on Christian ethics “How to Be Happy,” because it is the main business of ethics to teach us this.⁴⁵ If human beings are made for happiness and have an ineluctable desire for happiness, it is important that we discover the kind of life most conducive to happiness. Our societies present a variety of understandings of happiness, and we can often learn from what they teach. But human beings want a happiness that lasts—and a happiness that does not deceive—and Christians believe that ultimately that happiness is found only in the love and praise of God, in what Thomas Aquinas described as a life of friendship with God. Viewing the Christian moral life as training in happiness is a different way of envisioning the enterprise of Christian ethics. It emphasizes the primacy of God’s agency over human agency, of grace and gift over personal autonomy and achievement. It recognizes that the crucial truth from which the Christian moral life begins is that God wants our good and works for our good even if, as Augustine’s life vividly captures, we are experts at undermining what God desires. And this approach to the moral life argues that we begin the quest for happiness as apprentices in need of a mentor. Christians find that mentor in Christ and call that quest a life of discipleship.

But we cannot take up the quest alone. The pursuit of happiness through goodness requires the company of friends. We need companions to take up the journey with us, communities where we find others who will not only support and guide us along the way, but who will rejoice in the quest with us. If the Christian moral life is an ongoing training in happiness, it must be lived in communities and sustained in friendships. It requires people who care for one another, help one another, and look out for one another. That is what friends, and good communities, do, and their role in the moral life is what we will next consider.

Some Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Prior to reading this chapter, what did you think Christian morality primarily involved? Why?
2. Does it make sense to you to envision the Christian moral life as “training” in happiness? Why or why not?
3. Do you think you can be happy without being good? Would you agree that good people are happy?
4. Was there anything about Augustine’s story that connected with your own life’s story? Have you ever, like him, feared happiness?
5. Thomas Aquinas said that every person has an “ultimate end.” What do you see people choosing as their “ultimate end” today? How would you evaluate their choices?
6. Do you think happiness is something that has to be learned? And what in a Christian understanding of happiness do you find challenging? Agreeable or disagreeable?

Notes

1. Robert Ellsberg, *The Saints’ Guide to Happiness* (New York: North Point Press, 2003), xi–xvi.
2. Etienne Gilson, *Moral Values and The Moral Life: The System of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Leo Richard Ward (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1931), 19.
3. Edmund L. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 15.
4. Herbert McCabe, OP, *The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 9.
5. McCabe, *The Good Life*, 49.
6. Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William E. May (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 26. See also Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, OP (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 160.
7. Servais Pinckaers, OP, *Morality: The Catholic View*, trans. Michael Sherwin, OP (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2003), 75. As Pinckaers explains, “In the past, the good and happiness formed a single concept expressed by a single word: goodness, *bonum* in Latin. Happiness was the diffusion of the good, like the reverse side of a single quality.”
8. Pinckaers, *Morality: The Catholic View*, 78.
9. Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, OSB (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), I, i.
10. Augustine, *The Confessions*, II, ii.

11. Augustine, *The Confessions*, III, i.
12. Augustine, *The Confessions*, III, iv.
13. Augustine, *The Confessions*, III, xx.
14. Augustine, *The Confessions*, III, v.
15. Augustine, *The Confessions*, VI, ix.
16. Augustine, *The Confessions*, VI, ix.
17. Augustine, *The Confessions*, VI, x.
18. Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII, xii.
19. Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII, xxv.
20. Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII, xxviii.
21. Augustine, *The Confessions*, VIII, xxix.
22. Augustine, *The Way of Life of the Catholic Church*, trans. Donald A. Gallagher and Idella J. Gallagher (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1966), III, iv.
23. Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 409.
24. Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 412.
25. Augustine, *The Way of Life of the Catholic Church*, XI, xviii. Augustine writes: “To strive after God, then, is to desire happiness; to reach God is happiness itself.”
26. James A. Weisheipl, OP, *Friar Thomas D’Aquino: His Life, Thought and Works* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1974), 17.
27. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D’Aquino*, 45.
28. Cited in Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D’Aquino*, 218.
29. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Thomas Gilby, OP (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1969), I-II, 2,3. The edition of the *Summa Theologiae* used throughout this book is the Blackfriars’ edition.
30. Aquinas, ST, I-II, 2,1.
31. Aquinas, ST, I-II, 2,1.
32. Aquinas, ST, I-II, 2,1.
33. Aquinas, ST, I-II, 2,7.
34. For an extended analysis of these points see Paul J. Wadell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 44–62.
35. Aquinas, ST, I-II, 2,8.
36. Aquinas, ST, I-II, 2,4.
37. Pamela M. Hall, *Narrative and the Natural Law: An Interpretation of Thomistic Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 66–67. As Hall explains, “Union with God constitutes the human end because no created good, or set of goods, can satisfy fully the human appetite for the true and the good. . . . The achievement of our good in strictly natural terms leaves us, according to the structure of our powers of intellect and will, ‘metaphysically’ unsatisfied; beyond this, the happiness accessible to men and women in this life is itself flawed.”
38. Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 122–26.

39. Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 23,1.

40. Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 41.

41. For an earlier treatment of this point, as well as other points developed in chapter one, see Paul J. Wadell, "The Christian Moral Life: An Ongoing Education into the Nature of Authentic Happiness," *Anthropotes* 19, no. 2 (2003): 291–307.

42. Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 142.

43. Aquinas, *ST*, III, 73,3.

44. Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 152–54.

45. McCabe, *The Good Life*, x. In his introduction to *The Good Life*, Brian Davies, OP, notes that McCabe, while teaching at Oxford, entitled his introductory course in moral philosophy "How to Be Happy."

CHAPTER TWO



Not Going It Alone

Friendship and Community in the Christian Moral Life

High school reunions can make even the most self-assured a little apprehensive. A few years ago I attended my first high school reunion, roughly thirty-three years after my classmates and I grabbed our diplomas and walked away from one chapter of our lives, excited but uncertain about the future. Ours was not the typical high school experience. For four years we shared life together at a high school seminary, a boarding school in a tiny town about fifty miles west of St. Louis. We came from all across the country and for four years we navigated the perils of adolescence together in a community where we studied and prayed together, did our daily jobs together, played legendary practical jokes on one another, and talked as if we had all the time in the world. The world was just as turbulent and frightening and mystifying then as it is now, but in our communal life together we somehow managed to face it all with hope, even joy. The adventure came to an end with our graduation. The school closed that year, and our migration to new places and into new ways of life began.

That was the last most of us saw of each another until two former classmates decided we had waited far too long to gather together again. They went to work tracking everybody down, checking addresses, making phone calls, sending out e-mails. As word of the reunion spread, students in classes ahead of and behind us asked if they could come as well, so the "gates were thrown open" and "everyone was invited to the feast." Traveling to St. Louis in early October, it was as if all of us who had been scattered were being regathered, as if we who had been tossed apart were, if only for a weekend,