

Virtues and Happiness

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Boethius on the Supreme Good, or on the Life of the Philosopher

Since in every kind of being there is a supreme possible good, and since man too is a certain species or kind of being, there must be a supreme possible good for man, not a good which is supreme in the absolute sense, but one that is supreme for man. The goods which are accessible to man are limited and do not extend to infinity. By means of reason we will seek to determine what the supreme good is which is accessible to man.

The supreme good for man should be his in terms of his highest power, and not according to the vegetative soul, which is also found in plants, nor according to the sensitive soul, which is also found in animals and from which their sensual pleasures arise. But man's highest power is his reason and intellect. For this is the supreme director of human life both in the order of speculation and in the order of action. Therefore, the supreme good attainable by man must be his by means of his intellect. Therefore, men who are so weighed down by sense pleasures that they lose intellectual goods should grieve. For they never attain their supreme good. It is insofar as they are given to the senses that they do not seek that which is the good of the intellect itself. Against these the Philosopher protests, saying: "Woe to you men who are numbered among beasts and who do not attend to that which is divine within you!"¹ He calls the intellect that which is divine in man. For if there is anything divine in man, it is right for it to be the intellect. Just as that which is best among all beings is divine, so also that which is best in man we call divine.

Moreover, one power of the human intellect is speculative and the other is practical. This is clear from this fact, that man theorizes concerning certain objects of which he is not the active cause, e.g., eternal things, and about others he acts under the direction of the intellect in choosing some fitting means whenever any human act is in question. From this, then, we know that these two intellectual powers are present in man. But the supreme good accessible to man in terms of the power of his speculative intellect is knowledge of what is true and delight in the same. For knowledge of what is true gives delight. An intelligible object gives delight to the one who knows it. And the more wondrous and noble the intelligible

1 M. Grabmann, "Die Opuscula De Summo Bono sive De Vita Philosophi und De Sompniis des Boetius von Dacien," *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben*, II (1936), 200–24: 209, n. 18, notes that this statement cannot be found in the writings of Aristotle.

object and the greater the power of the apprehending intellect to perfectly comprehend, the greater the intellectual delight. One who has tasted such delight spurns every lesser pleasure, such as that of sense. The latter is, in truth, less, and is more base. And the man who chooses such pleasure is, because of that pleasure, more base than one who chooses the former.

It is because of this, because the object known gives delight to the one who knows, that the Philosopher [Aristotle] in Book XII of the *Metaphysics* maintains that the first intellect enjoys the most pleasurable life.² For since the first intellect is the most powerful in understanding and the object which it knows is the noblest, its essence itself – for what nobler object can the divine intellect have than the divine essence? – therefore, it has the life of greatest delight. No greater good can befall man in terms of his speculative intellect than knowledge of the universality of beings, which come from the first principle and, by means of this, knowledge of the first principle insofar as such is possible, and delight in it. Therefore, our conclusion above follows: that the supreme good accessible to man by means of his speculative intellect is knowledge of what is true in individual cases, and delight in the same.

Likewise, the supreme good accessible to man in terms of his practical intellect is the doing of good, and delight in the same. For what greater good can befall man in terms of his practical intellect than to choose the fitting means in human action and to delight therein?

For no man is just unless he takes delight in acts of justice. The same must be said of the acts of the other moral virtues. From what has been said one can evidently conclude that the supreme good open to man is to know the true, to do the good, and to delight in both.

And because the highest good possible for man is happiness, it follows that human happiness consists in knowing the true, doing the good, and taking delight in both. The military profession is prescribed in a state by the lawmaker for this reason, that when enemies have been expelled, citizens may devote themselves to intellectual virtues in contemplating the true, and to moral virtues in doing good, and thus live a happy life. For the happy life consists in these two. This then is a greater good, which man can receive from God and which God can give to man in this life. With reason does a man desire a long life who desires it for this, to become more perfect in this good. He who shares more perfectly in that happiness which reason tells us is possible for man in this life draws closer to that happiness which we expect in the life to come on the authority of faith. And since so great a good is possible for man, as has been said, it is right for all human action to be directed toward that good, so as to attain it. For just as all actions as regards a certain law are right and proper when they tend toward the end of the law, and better the more closely they approach the end of the law, while actions which are opposed to the end of the law or which are weak or indifferent without either being opposed to the end of the law or in accord with it, while all such actions sin against the law to a greater or lesser degree as is clear from what has been said, the same is true in man himself. All designs and deliberations, all actions and desires of man which tend to this supreme good which is accessible to man according to the above, these are right and proper. When man so acts, he acts in accord with nature. For he acts for the sake of the supreme good, to which he is ordered by nature. And when he so acts he is properly ordered. For then he is ordered to his best and his ultimate end. But all actions of man which are not ordered to this good, or which are not such as to render man stronger and better disposed for actions which are ordered to this good, all such actions in man are sin.

2 Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII, 1072b, 24.

Wherefore the happy man never does anything except works of happiness, or works by means of which he becomes stronger and better fitted for works of happiness. Therefore, whether the happy man eats or sleeps or is awake, he lives in happiness so long as he does those things by means of which he is rendered more capable of the works of happiness. Therefore, all acts of man which are not directed to this supreme good of man which has been described, whether they are opposed to it or whether they are indifferent, all such acts constitute sin in man to a greater or lesser degree, as is clear. The cause of all such acts is inordinate desire. It is also the cause of all moral evil. Moreover, inordinate desire in man is the cause which most greatly prevents him from attaining that which is desired naturally. For all men naturally desire to know. But only the smallest number of men, sad to say, devote themselves to the pursuit of wisdom. Inordinate desire bars the others from such a good. Thus we find certain men pursuing a life of laziness, others detestable sense pleasures, and others giving themselves to the desire for riches. So it is that all today are prevented by inordinate desire from attaining to their supreme good, with the exception of a very small number of men, men who should be honored.

I say they are to be honored because they despise sense desire and pursue the delight of reason and intellectual desire, striving to know truth. Again I say they are to be honored because they live in accord with nature. All lower powers found in man are for the sake of the highest power. Thus the nutritive power is there for the sake of the sensitive. For the sensitive power is a perfection of an animated body, and an animated body cannot live without food. But it is the nutritive power which changes and assimilates food. Therefore, it follows that the nutritive power exists in man for the sake of the sensitive. And the sensitive power is for the sake of the intellective since, in us, intelligibles are derived from things imagined. Wherefore, we understand with greater difficulty things which of themselves cannot be imagined by us. But imagination presupposes the senses. The proof of this is that one who imagines is also affected on the level of sense. Wherefore, according to the Philosopher, imagination or *fantasia* is a movement arising from an actual exercise of sense.³ [Just as all lower powers in man are for the sake of the higher,] so too all operations of man's lower powers are for the sake of the operations of his highest power, the intellect. And if, among the operations of the intellective power, there is one which is best and most perfect, all others naturally exist for its sake. When a man performs such an operation, he enjoys the highest state possible for man.

Such men are the philosophers, who spend their lives in the pursuit of wisdom. Wherefore, all powers found in the philosopher operate according to the natural order, the prior for the sake of the posterior, the lower for the sake of the higher and more perfect. But all other men, who live according to lower powers and choose their operations and the delights found in such operations, are not ordered in accord with nature. They sin against the natural order. For man to turn away from the natural order is sin in man. Because the philosopher does not turn away from this order, for this reason he does not sin against the natural order. Morally speaking, the philosopher is virtuous for three reasons. *First*, because he recognizes the baseness of action in which vice consists and the nobility of action in which virtue consists. Therefore, he can more easily choose the one and avoid the other and always act according to right reason. He who so acts never sins. But such is not true of the ignorant man. It is difficult for him to act rightly. *Secondly*, because he who has tasted a greater delight despises every lesser delight. But the philosopher has tasted intellectual delight in theoretical consideration

³ Cf. *De anima* III, 429a, 1.

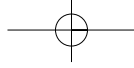
of the value of beings. This delight is greater than that of sense. Therefore, he despises sense pleasures. But many sins and vices consist in excessive sense pleasure. *Thirdly*, because there is no sin in understanding and theorizing. There is no possibility of excess and of sin in the order of supreme goods. But the action of the philosopher is such a contemplation of truth. Therefore, it is easier for the philosopher to be virtuous than for another. So it is that the philosopher lives as man was born to live, and according to the natural order.

Since in him the lower powers and their operations are for the sake of the higher powers and their operations, and all taken together for the highest power and that highest action, which is contemplation of truth and delight in the same, above all, the first truth, the desire to know will never be satisfied until the uncreated being is known. As the Commentator says, all men naturally desire to know about the divine intellect.

Desire for any knowable object is a kind of desire for the first knowable object. This is the proof. The closer beings are to the first knowable being, the more we desire to know them and the more we delight in thinking of them.

Therefore, by studying the caused beings which are in the world and their natures and relationships to one another, the philosopher is led to consider the highest causes of things. For a knowledge of effects leads to a knowledge of the cause. And in noting that higher causes and their natures are such that they must have another cause, he is led to a knowledge of the first cause. And because there is pleasure in speculative knowledge, and all the more so the nobler the object known, the philosopher leads a life of very great pleasure. The philosopher also knows and observes that it is necessary for this cause to be its own cause of being, that is to say, not to have another cause. For if there were nothing in the universe which was not caused by another, then there would be nothing at all. He also notes that this cause must be eternal and unchangeable, always remaining the same. For if it were not eternal then nothing whatsoever would be eternal. And again, since certain things in the world have begun to be, and since one being which begins to be cannot be a sufficient cause of another being which begins to be, as is evident, it clearly follows that all things in this world which begin to be must derive from an eternal cause. This cause is also unchangeable and always remains the same. For change is possible only in imperfect things. And if there is some most perfect being in the universe, it is right for this to be the first cause. The philosopher also notes that the entire being of the universe, with the exception of this first cause itself, must come from it and thus, that this first cause is the cause which produces beings and orders them to one another and maintains them in existence – certain ones in terms of their individual identity and without any kind of change (as the separated substances); certain ones according to their individual identity, but as subject to change (as the heavenly bodies); and certain ones in terms of their species alone (as those which are below the heavenly orbit, such as the lowest levels of beings). He also notes that just as all things derive from this first cause, so too, all things are ordered to it. For that being is the beginning of all things, the end of all things, and that through which all things are joined to their end, that being is the first being according to the philosophers and God the Blessed according to the holy men. Nevertheless, in this order there is great range. Those beings which are closest to the first principle are nobler and more perfect. Those which are farther removed from the first principle are lower and less perfect.

This first principle is to this world as the father of a family is to his household, as a commander to his army, and as the common good to the state. Just as the army is one because of the unity of its commander, and just as the good of the army is essentially in the commander and in others in terms of their relationship to him, so too, from the unity of this



first principle derives the unity of the world, and the good of this world is essentially in this first principle and in other beings of this world, insofar as they participate in the first principle and are ordered to it. So it is that there is no good in any being in this world which is not a participation in the first principle.

Considering all these things, the philosopher is moved to wonder at this first principle and to love it. For we love that from which our goods derive, and we love that to the greatest degree from which our greatest goods derive.

Therefore, the philosopher, noting that all goods come to him from this first principle and are preserved for him insofar as they are preserved by this first principle, is moved to the greatest love for this first principle. This is in accord with right reason of nature and right reason of intellect. And since everyone takes delight in that which he loves and maximum delight in that which he loves to the maximum degree, and since the philosopher has the greatest love for this first principle, as has been indicated, it follows that the philosopher takes maximum delight in this first principle and in contemplating its goodness, and that this alone is right pleasure. This is the life of the philosopher. Whoever does not lead such a life does not live rightly. However, I call "philosopher" any man who lives according to the right order of nature and who has acquired the best and ultimate end of human life. And the first principle of whom we have spoken is the glorious and most high God, who is blessed forever and ever. Amen.

