

THE FOUNDATIONS OF
WISDOM

VOLUME 4
ETHICS

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ETHICS

FR. SEBASTIAN WALSH, O. PRAEM.

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PREFACE

Hunting for Happiness

The discovery and development of philosophy are part of man's larger search for happiness. As man was hunting for happiness, he found philosophy. Most of human ingenuity and energy was originally directed toward removing the obstacles to happiness: for example, the arts of hunting and agriculture were developed to alleviate hunger; the art of housebuilding was developed to alleviate the suffering associated with excessive heat and cold; various martial arts and weapons were developed to protect against violence from animals and other men; and medicine was developed to cure illness. But once these arts had been developed, and man had time for leisure, it became apparent that there exists in man a more fundamental desire than food, clothing, and bodily health. It is a desire not merely to avoid evil but a desire for some positive good, and it is a desire for a positive good that is not merely instrumental to something else (such as practical knowledge) but a good desired for its own sake. Aristotle expressed this desire simply in the statement, "All men by nature desire to know."¹

It may seem strange that happiness should have much to do with knowledge. After all, very few men dedicate real effort and time to

¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. 1, Part I (hereinafter *Metaphysics*).

searching for knowledge. And what knowledge they do search for tends to be practical in nature—that is, it is for the sake of making or doing things. And yet, it is an indisputable fact of history that once the chief practical arts had been established and the needs of the body provided for, men naturally turned to philosophy in their leisure time. Aristotle recounts that “after all such arts had been developed, those sciences were pursued which are sought neither for the sake of pleasure nor necessity. This happened in places where men had leisure. Hence the mathematical arts originated in Egypt where the priestly class was permitted leisure.”² And again, “When nearly all the things necessary for life, leisure and learning were acquired, this kind of prudence began to be sought.”³ But, if this is so, how do we account for the fact that so few people consider knowledge to be essential for happiness?

This question is like the question: Why do so few children prefer a high-paying job or an excellent education to ice cream? First, since the goods of the body are better known than the goods of the soul, it is natural that men should seek to provide for the goods of the body first. Second, happiness is not found in the possession and exercise of just any knowledge but in the best knowledge. And this is very difficult to achieve. Just as it would be impossible for a child to perform well at a high paying job or receive an excellent education all at once, it would be impossible for someone to acquire and use the knowledge needed for happiness without first passing through years of experience and study. Finally, notice that Aristotle did not say all men by nature desire to *come to* know but rather that all men by nature desire to know. Samuel Johnson, after seeing a famous landmark in Ireland, famously quipped that

² *Metaphysics*, 981b22–24; independent confirmation of the leisure afforded the priestly class in Egypt is found in Genesis 47:22.

³ *Metaphysics*, 982b22–23.

it was “worth seeing . . . but not worth going to see.”⁴ There is a similar relationship between knowing and coming to know. Coming to know can be arduous and even painful. But if you asked the man on the street whether he would like to know some important truth if it took no effort, I suppose nearly everyone would say yes. But as it is, because many obstacles stand in the way of possessing knowledge, there are few who seek it.

So philosophy is near the end of man’s search for happiness. But even within philosophy itself, there is an order of discovery that naturally arises from the search for happiness. We want to know the supreme good of man. But to know that, we need to know what man is, and since man is a natural being, we need to know what nature is. So philosophers began to examine nature. But once these things had been worked out in outline, it became clear that the nature of man is difficult to know, that it is even difficult to know about the existence and nature of the soul, and that the highest perfection of the human soul, wisdom, is even more difficult to know. Therefore, it was necessary to develop one final art, logic, which assists us in coming to know difficult truths well. Plato’s Socrates seems to have been the first to acknowledge a need for an “art about arguments” in the *Phaedo*, precisely as he is searching to discover the existence and nature of the human soul.

The order of discovery in philosophy is almost inverse to the order in which philosophy should be learned. First, students should study logic, which is the art that treats of acquiring the good of speculative reason: truth. Therefore, since every science searches for truth, logic teaches how to proceed correctly in every science. Second, they should study mathematics, which among the sciences is the easiest in which to find certitude; there is

⁴ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1791).

much agreement in this part of philosophy. Third, they should study natural things (natural philosophy). Fourth, among natural things, they should focus their study on living things, especially man (the study of the soul). Fifth, once they know accurately the nature of man and the various powers and perfections of the soul, they should study the good for man (ethics). And since man's supreme good consists in knowing things better than himself, the philosopher should study the first causes of all being (wisdom or metaphysics) last.⁵ For the very exercise of knowing these things higher than man is the happiness that man desires. That is, natural happiness consists in contemplating the truths that are the conclusions of metaphysics.

Because this is only an introduction to philosophy, this text will not consider the last part of philosophy (metaphysics). Such a consideration belongs not to the beginning student but to an advanced student. Moreover, because the science of mathematics is widely taught and much easier than the other parts of philosophy, this text will not consider that part of philosophy either. Perhaps the best elementary treatment of mathematics, according to its proper method, can be found in Euclid's *Elements*.

Finally, this text will not proceed in a primarily historical method, as is typical in most introductions to philosophy. The order of history in philosophy is not necessarily a progression from ignorance to knowledge or error to truth. It is quite possible for an earlier philosopher to know more than a later one. Nor is the order of history necessarily the best order for the beginning student to follow if he is in search of truth. This text does not seek to inform the student about the positions taken by various philosophers

⁵ This order of study is laid out by St. Thomas Aquinas at the beginning of his *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* and at the beginning of his *Commentary on the Book of Causes*.

but rather to lay out the method best suited to human nature of coming to understand the order among the ultimate causes of reality. We study the Pythagorean Theorem not to know that Pythagoras thought, but because it is true and worth knowing. And it would be worthwhile to study the same theorem even if it was discovered by Frankie Watkins. In philosophy, we are not so much concerned with who discovered some truth as with the truth itself and the reasons why it can be known. So while much of what is found in this text will be truths discovered by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, they stand on their own and do not rely upon the authority of those who first discovered and presented them.

INTRODUCTION

The Art of Living Well

This fourth volume of *The Foundations of Wisdom* is dedicated to the study of ethics: the art of acting or living well. As we begin this last volume, it is good to look back upon what we have done so far and see how it has prepared us for the study of ethics. Recall that in the first volume (logic), we distinguished between practical and speculative knowledge. Practical knowledge is about an order that reason puts into things, while speculative knowledge is about an order that reason discovers in things. Recall, too, that the order reason puts into things depends upon the order reason discovers in things. For example, to put the form of a skyscraper into some material presupposes I have come to know the properties of some material capable of bearing such heavy weight (steel will do, but wood will not).

Two important truths follow from ethics being an art, i.e., a practical science. First, ethics is ordered to making or doing. The things we will study in ethics are not known simply for their own sake, any more than the recipes in a cookbook or the numbers in a phone book are to be known for their own sake. The knowledge you acquire from studying ethics must be used and applied to ordering your actions (specifically, your choices). Just knowing these truths will not make you good. Second, the order that reason puts into human acts depends upon an order that

reason discovers, namely the order discovered in human nature and especially in the soul. This is why we studied the human soul before studying ethics. And since the human soul is a natural, substantial form, we had to study natural philosophy before studying the soul. And since the common road to follow in any science is determined by logic, it was necessary to study logic first. (Imagine, for example, trying to define the soul without having studied the art of defining.) So, looking back, we can see why we had to study these subjects in the order we did.

We saw in natural philosophy that every agent acts for an end, for some goal. (Remember that an agent cause is a moving cause, and there is no such thing as motion in no direction, so every agent must act toward some goal or direction). Human agents are no exception. All of our actions are for the sake of some goal. This becomes obvious from induction as well. Why did I pick up my philosophy book before class? So I could read it in class. Why did I pick up a plate and a fork and a knife in the lunch line? So I would have something on which to put my food and something with which to eat it. So all of our actions are for the sake of some end. And an action is judged to be better or worse based on how well that action actually brings someone to that intended end. If my end is to hit a baseball, and my action involves holding the bat on the wrong end or with my teeth or standing with my back to the pitcher, then that action is not a very good way of achieving my end.

Now, since ethics is the art of acting or living well, it is not concerned with just any limited end but with the ultimate goal or end of human life: the purpose of life. Therefore, ethics first will be concerned about identifying the ultimate end or ends of human life and then about determining the best or right means to that end. When all is said and done, the aim of ethics is to make you

into a good man, not a good doctor, a good lawyer, or even a good philosopher, but a good man. So we can refine our definition of ethics as *the art of acting in such a way as to best achieve the ultimate purpose of human life*. With this in mind, let us begin.

The Meaning of Life

If someone were to ask you why are you doing what you are doing right now, what would you answer? (“Why,” for example, “are you sitting in a classroom reading a philosophy book?”) One student might say, “Because I like studying philosophy.” Another might answer, “Because I have to be here.” Still another might respond, “Because I want to get a good grade.” All of these are proximate reasons for making choices, but they are not the ultimate reason why you are doing what you are doing. Let us take the example of the student who wants to get a good grade.

Wise Teacher: Why do you want good grades?

Joe Student: Because I want to get into a good college.

Wise Teacher: And why do you want to get into a good college?

Joe Student: To get a good job.

Wise Teacher: And why do you want to get a good job?

Joe Student: To make lots of money.

Wise Teacher: And why do you want to make lots of money?

Joe Student: [Feeling a little frustrated and thinking to himself, *Isn't it obvious why I want to make a bunch of money?! Everyone wants a bunch of money!*] Why do I want a bunch of money?! Because it gives me the freedom to do whatever I want!

Wise Teacher: And why do you want to be able to do whatever you want?

Joe Student: Because I want to be happy, okay!

Wise Teacher: Finally, we have reached the ultimate reason: happiness. Everything you do, you do because you want to be happy. And if you found out that making lots of money would not make you happy but rather unhappy, would you still choose to make a lot of money?

Joe Student: I guess not . . . but it *will* make me happy!

Wise Teacher: That remains to be seen. To know whether that is true or not, you have to know what happiness is. So can you tell me: What is happiness?

Joe Student: Ummm . . . [crickets] . . .

Wise Teacher: So you're telling me that the whole purpose of your life is to be happy, but you have no idea what happiness is? Doesn't that seem like a bad thing to you? What if I told you I was going to Lockport, but I had no idea where it is and no map that showed me how to get there, and I simply got up, went to my car, and started driving. Don't you think that would be foolish?

Joe Student: I guess it would be pretty foolish. So if I want to know how to become happy, then I will have to find out what happiness is first.

Wise Teacher: That's right. And you can do that by trusting someone who already knows what happiness is and following his directions; or even better, you can discover for yourself what happiness is and then go there.

We can see from this dialogue that the first task of ethics is to define happiness, and not just with a nominal definition, so we know what the name means, but with a definition that corresponds to something in reality that can be the goal of our choices and actions. Like the definition of the soul, this will be a difficult task but one we can accomplish with some perseverance and careful thought. There is, perhaps, no more important and worthwhile definition you will ever find in your life than the definition of happiness, so it will be more than worth the effort!

As usual, it will be best to start with a nominal definition of happiness and move from there to an essential definition of happiness. Since it is human happiness we are looking for and not dog or fish happiness (if there are such things), the essential definition of happiness will be determined by the truth about what perfects and fulfills human nature. So we will have to make use not only of logic but also of the things we have learned in natural philosophy and the study of the soul.

A Nominal Definition of Happiness

One nominal definition of happiness that we can start with is “that good for the sake of which everything else is chosen.” Happiness is a good, and we choose every other good for its sake. So if we can find something that fits that description, we have found happiness. Another nominal definition of happiness is “the good that, by

itself, totally satisfies all our desires.”⁶ If something makes us happy, then we do not need anything else. So happiness must be a good that suffices to fulfill our desires by itself. Using these two descriptions as a starting point, we can better hunt for happiness.

Summary

- While there are many proximate reasons for our choices, there must be some ultimate reason, and we call this ultimate reason happiness.
- Since it is difficult or impossible to arrive at a destination without knowing where it is, and since happiness is the ultimate destination of our choices, it is most important in ethics that we discover a definition of happiness.
- There are many nominal definitions of happiness, including “that good for the sake of which everything else is chosen,” and “the good that, by itself, totally satisfies all our desires.”

⁶ Sometimes it helps to have many nominal definitions of a thing to better understand it. Something similar happens in the five proofs for God’s existence given by St. Thomas Aquinas, where five different nominal definitions of God are used, each one as the beginning of a demonstration.