

Happiness: The Human Dilemma

Jeffrey Shott

THEO 103

July 16, 2022

The Dilemma

Given the choice to be happy or not, who would fail to pick happiness? Given the further choice between limited and unlimited happiness, would anyone fail to choose the latter? As human beings, we have an innate and infinite desire for happiness. Yet, our capacity for such happiness is limited by our finite nature and the frailty of our natural faculties. This is the human dilemma: we desire that which we cannot obtain on our own. Only an infinite Being can be infinitely happy. This is why our only hope of leading a good life, a happy life, rests in God—He who is infinite happiness itself.

The Happy God

There are probably few who would, if asked to define God, include the word “happy” in their definition. For most, words like “almighty,” “creator,” “holy,” and “love” more readily spring to mind when attempting to characterize God. However, the opening paragraph of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that God is “infinitely perfect and blessed in himself” and that, “in a plan of sheer goodness [he] freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life” (CCC, 1). In other words, God is happy and He wants us to be happy.

God is not only happy, He is infinite happiness. Within the Godhead, each Person of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, shares this infinite happiness with—and receives it from—each of the other Divine Persons. This eternal and inter-Trinitarian exchange of happiness is called “blessedness” or “beatitude.” God’s inner-beatitude is the highest good, and the source of all true happiness. The human desire for this happiness originates in God who, by creating us in His own image, invites us to share in His beatitude (see CCC, 1718). However, God also endows

human beings with freedom, which many use to their detriment, choosing to seek fulfillment on their own terms in rejection of God's gracious invitation.

The Sad Man

Man is constantly presented with various goods: food, sex, strong drink, family, health, power, honor, knowledge, etc. These goods are all created by God, and as such spring from and share in His goodness. They are true goods, but finite and created goods nonetheless. To the extent that they are good, they can contribute to our happiness; however, to the extent that they are finite, they leave us wanting.

One can conceive of goods as manifesting in a two-fold hierarchy: that of substance, and that of apparent accessibility. Certain goods are substantially better than others. God naturally takes his place at the top of the hierarchy of substantial goods, for He is goodness itself. However, in His infinite and transcendent majesty, God can often appear less accessible than the other, lower goods. A man cannot see God, but he can see a beautiful woman; he cannot feel God, but he tends to feel quite nicely after a stiff glass of bourbon.

In fact, while God rightfully sits atop the hierarchy of substantial goods, His position in the hierarchy of apparent accessibility is precisely inverted. As stated above, man is incapable in himself of attaining infinite perfection, of attaining divinity. This being the case, man resorts to seeking happiness in the lower yet more readily accessible goods in the world, and in doing so, finds himself unsatisfied. This disordered pursuit of lower goods is the basis of sin, as typified in the account of the original sin of our first parents found in Genesis chapter 3. As Mattison observes, the serpent in the garden offers humanity a clever solution to their happiness dilemma.¹

¹ See William C. Mattison III, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 239-241.

Since human beings cannot obtain God on their own power, the serpent offers them the opportunity to become god. By telling them that they “will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5), the serpent is offering them the ability to determine for themselves that which is good, to make goodness itself accessible to them. In short, he is offering them dominion over the two-fold hierarchy of goodness. However, in this attempt to solve their problem by becoming god, our first parents only managed to alienate themselves from God, thereby exacerbating the dilemma.

This initial sin brought about the fall of man, whereafter humanity spiraled into an increasingly confused attempt at living well. After the fall, man’s relationship with God was seriously damaged, and consequently human nature was wounded. With God now apparently less accessible than ever, man cemented himself in his sin, continuing to seek fulfillment in goods other than God. However, this path only managed to lead humanity into existential misery. Sin became habituated as vice, and vice built itself up into systematic injustice and exploitation. Man learned to hate his brother, and what’s more, to hate himself. Increasingly aware of his inability to be happy, man grew to despise his own weakness and insufficiency. In short, after the fall man found himself not only alienated from God, but estranged even from himself.

Christ, God and Man: The Solution

Having failed to become god, humanity’s only hope was that God would become man. In order to fulfill His plan of raising humanity to Himself, God lowered Himself to humanity. Through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God made Himself accessible to man by becoming man. In effect, Christ rectified the disparity between the hierarchy of substantial and accessible goods. In taking flesh, Christ reconciled the divine and human natures in His own Person, making the

inter-Trinitarian life of infinite beatitude available to His fellow men. Those who knew Jesus could truly see God, could hear and feel God. Knowing, however, that He would consummate His earthly ministry by returning to the Father in His triumphant Ascension, Christ desired to establish a means whereby future generations would still be able to access Him after His Ascension. This is why Christ founded the Church, upon whom He bestowed the authority to celebrate His life-giving sacraments.

In His Incarnation, Christ reconciled God and man; and, in His Death and Resurrection, He conquered sin and the forces of evil. Yet, the fruits of this victory still needed to be applied to those whom He gave His life to redeem. To this end, Christ instituted the sacraments. In doing so, He made the most easily accessible natural goods (water, bread, oil, wine) the means by which the supernatural life of the Most Holy Trinity could be conferred upon mankind. This supernatural life is called *grace*, and it both brings man back into communion with God by healing his fallen nature and facilitates and maintains his growth and perseverance in that communion until he can finally obtain his ultimate goal of beatitude in the next life.

In the waters of baptism, man is washed of sin, his nature is healed—he is reborn into communion with God. These vivifying waters pour the life of the blessed Trinity into the soul. Put another way, baptism infuses infinite happiness itself into the core of man's being. In the Eucharistic bread, man consumes the Living God, this being the sustenance of the soul reborn in baptism. In the garden, man sought to make himself god by consuming a creature, and his own nature was deformed. In the Eucharist, a creature consumes the God who made Himself man, and is thereby conformed to the nature of God.

Bread and water. What could be more readily accessible? This is how Jesus chose to rectify the two-fold hierarchy of goods, by choosing such simple and universally accessible

goods to be the means by which one can encounter Christ, who, because He is God, is the only perfectly happy man. If any man wishes to be happy, he must be united to Christ, and this by the way of the sacraments He instituted for precisely that purpose.

The Good Life

Now with access to the sacraments, man is able to live the good life; that is, the life of God. The grace man receives in the sacraments serves to cure man of the source of his sin and vice—his pride. *Pride* is man’s self-centered tendency to view all other goods as subject to himself. Ultimately, man is unhappy because he does not put first things first. In order to be happy, one must prioritize higher goods over lower goods. The better something is, the more happiness it brings. Naturally, this means that to be fully happy is to recognize God as God, the sovereign good, and to see all other goods, including ourselves, in relation to God as subject to Him. When God is in His rightful place in our lives, everything else falls into its rightful place. This is why, to cure us of our pride, God uses the sacraments to infuse our souls with charity.

Charity, or love, “is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake” (CCC, 1822), and it is the solution to our dilemma in that it is the counter-virtue to the fundamental vice of pride, the source of all our unhappiness. It is called *theological* because it comes from God and leads to God, and it is called a *virtue* because it constitutes a good habit (as opposed to a vice, which is a bad habit). Charity is the gift God infuses into our souls which enables us to consistently and constantly seek God, who alone can fulfill our desire for infinite happiness. Just as pride is, as it were, the *form* of vice in that it grounds and guides all sinful activity, charity is the form of virtue. When, by God’s grace, man has charity, he can live well, and in living well, be truly happy.

The Scriptures teach us that “God is love” (1 John 4:16). The *Catechism* expands on this, saying that “God’s very being is love . . . God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange” (CCC, 221). The infinite happiness which God shares in Himself is love, and by granting us the grace of charity He extends to us the opportunity to “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). To participate in divinity is not only to be happy, but to become happiness; and, this happiness is offered to us by God as a gift, one as accessible as bread and water. In fact, more accessible, for even to obtain natural bread and water one must be willing to foot the bill. Yet the very life of God is offered to us as an entirely free gift. To be happy is to accept this gift, to be miserable is to reject it. May it please God that all respond favorably to the invitation He extended to humanity through the prophet Isaiah:

“Ho, every one who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
 and he who has no money,
 come, buy and eat!
 Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
 Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in fatness.
 Incline your ear, and come to me;
 hear, that your soul may live. (Isaiah 55:1-3)

Conclusion

Every human action brings one closer to or further from that which he so desires, happiness. This desire to be happy was instilled in man by God so that man would be drawn to God, who alone is happiness. When man sought and failed to obtain happiness on his own power, God graciously stooped to help us, becoming man in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. In

His Death and Resurrection, Christ won for us the gift of true happiness, the life of God itself; and, He instituted the sacraments, making this gift radically available to every human person. Now, to be happy, only one action is left on our part: to accept this gift in humble thanksgiving. For, though happiness cannot be grasped by man, it can be given by God.

Bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020.

Mattison III, William C. *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues*. Grand Rapids, MI: BrazosPress, 2008.

The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version | Second Catholic Edition. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006.