



On True Happiness

Boethius

‘Since you now have seen what is the form of the imperfect good, and what the form of the perfect also, I think I should next show in what manner this perfection of felicity is built up. And here I conceive it proper to inquire, first, whether any excellence, such as you have lately defined, can exist in the nature of things, lest we be deceived by an empty fiction of thought to which no true reality answers. But it cannot be denied that such does exist, and is, as it were, the source of all things good. For everything which is called imperfect is spoken of as imperfect by reason of the privation of some perfection; so it comes to pass that, whenever imperfection is found in any particular, there must necessarily be a perfection in respect of that particular also. For were there no such perfection, it is utterly inconceivable how that so-called imperfection should come into existence. Nature does not make a beginning with things mutilated and imperfect; she starts with what is whole and perfect, and falls away later to these feeble and inferior productions. So if there is, as we showed before, a happiness of a frail and imperfect kind, it cannot be doubted but there is also a happiness substantial and perfect.’

‘Most true is thy conclusion, and most sure,’ said I.

‘Next to consider where the dwelling-place of this happiness may be. The common belief of all mankind agrees that God, the supreme of all things, is good. For since nothing can be imagined better than God, how can we doubt Him to be good than whom there is nothing better? Now, reason shows God to be good in such wise as to prove that in Him is perfect good. For were it not so, He would not be supreme of all things; for there would be something else more excellent, possessed of perfect good, which would seem to have the advantage in priority and dignity, since it has clearly appeared that all perfect things are prior to those less complete. Wherefore, lest we fall into an infinite regression, we must acknowledge the supreme God to be full of supreme and perfect good. But we have determined that true happiness is the perfect good; therefore true happiness must dwell in the supreme Deity.’

‘I accept your reasonings,’ said I; ‘they cannot in any wise be disputed.’

‘But, come, see how strictly and incontrovertibly you may prove this our assertion that the supreme Godhead hath fullest possession of the highest good.’

‘In what way, please?’ said I.

‘Do not rashly suppose that He who is the Father of all things hath received that highest good of which He is said to be possessed either from some external source, or hath it as a natural endowment in such sort that you might consider the essence of the happiness possessed, and of the God who possesses it, distinct and different. For if you deem it received from without, you may esteem that which gives more excellent than that which has received. But Him we most worthily acknowledge to be the most supremely excellent of all things. If, however, it is in Him by nature, yet is logically distinct, the thought is inconceivable, since we are speaking of God, who is supreme of all things. Who was there to join these distinct essences? Finally, when one thing is different from another, the things

so conceived as distinct cannot be identical. Therefore that which of its own nature is distinct from the highest good is not itself the highest good—an impious thought of Him than whom, it is plain, nothing can be more excellent. For universally nothing can be better in nature than the source from which it has come; therefore on most true grounds of reason would I conclude that which is the source of all things to be in its own essence the highest good.’

‘And most justly,’ said I.

‘But the highest good has been admitted to be happiness.’

‘Yes.’

‘Then,’ said she, ‘it is necessary to acknowledge that God is very happiness.’

‘Yes,’ said I; ‘I cannot deny my former admissions, and I see clearly that this is a necessary inference that follows.’

‘Reflect, also,’ said she, ‘whether the same conclusion is not further confirmed by considering that there cannot be two supreme goods distinct one from the other. For the goods which are different clearly cannot be severally each what the other is: wherefore neither of the two can be perfect, since to either the other is wanting; but since it is not perfect, it cannot manifestly be the supreme good. By no means, then, can goods which are supreme be different one from the other. But we have concluded that both happiness and God are the supreme good; wherefore that which is highest Divinity must also itself necessarily be supreme happiness.’

‘No conclusion,’ said I, ‘could be truer to fact, nor more soundly reasoned out, nor more worthy of God.’

‘Then, further,’ said she, ‘just as geometricians are wont to draw inferences from their demonstrations to which they give the name “deductions,” so will I add here a sort of corollary. For since men become happy by the acquisition of happiness, while happiness is very Godship, it is manifest that they become happy by the acquisition of Godship. But as by the acquisition of justice men become just, and wise by the acquisition of wisdom, so by parity of reasoning by acquiring Godship they must of necessity become gods. So every man who is happy is a god; and though in nature God is One only, yet there is nothing to hinder that very many should be gods by participation in that nature.’

‘A fair conclusion, and a precious,’ said I, ‘deduction or corollary, by whichever name you will call it.’

‘And yet,’ said she, ‘not one whit fairer than this which reason persuades us to add.’

‘Why, what?’ said I.

‘Why, seeing happiness has many particulars included under it, should all these be regarded as forming one body of happiness, as it were, made up of various parts, or is there some one of them which forms the full essence of happiness, while all the rest are relative to this?’

‘I would ask you to unfold the whole matter to me at large.’

‘We judge happiness to be good, do we not?’

‘Yes, the supreme good.’

‘And this superlative applies to all; for this same happiness is adjudged to be the completest independence, the highest power, reverence, renown, and pleasure.’

‘What then?’

‘Are all these goods—independence, power, and the rest—to be deemed members of happiness, as it were, or are they all relative to good as to their summit and crown?’

‘I understand the problem, but I desire to hear how you would solve it.’

‘Well, then, listen to the determination of the matter. Were all these members composing happiness, they would differ severally one from the other. For this is the nature of parts—that by their difference they compose one body. All these, however, have been proved to be

the same; therefore they cannot possibly be members, otherwise happiness will seem to be built up out of one member, which cannot be.'

'There can be no doubt as to that,' said I; 'but I am impatient to hear what remains.'

'Why, it is manifest that all the others are relative to the good. For the very reason why independence is sought is that it is judged good, and so power also, because it is believed to be good. The same, too, may be supposed of reverence, of renown, and of pleasant delight. Good, then, is the sum and source of all desirable things. That which has not in itself any good, either in reality or in semblance, can in no wise be desired. Contrariwise, even things which by nature are not good are desired as if they were truly good, if they seem to be so. Whereby it comes to pass that goodness is rightly believed to be the sum and hinge and cause of all things desirable. Now, that for the sake of which anything is desired itself seems to be most wished for. For instance, if anyone wishes to ride for the sake of health, he does not so much wish for the exercise of riding as the benefit of his health. Since, then, all things are sought for the sake of the good, it is not these so much as good itself that is sought by all. But that on account of which all other things are wished for was, we agreed, happiness; wherefore thus also it appears that it is happiness alone which is sought. From all which it is transparently clear that the essence of absolute good and of happiness is one and the same.'

'I cannot see how anyone can dissent from these conclusions.'

'But we have also proved that God and true happiness are one and the same.'

'Yes,' said I.

'Then we can safely conclude, also, that God's essence is seated in absolute good, and nowhere else.'

Boethius. *Consolation of Philosophy*. III.10. Trans. H.R. James. London: Elliot Stock, 1897.

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