

Chapter 1: The Human Quest for Happiness Or: Why do we do things?

Before we can talk about the virtues, and the means of acquiring them, we first need to answer the question “Why does it matter?” *Why* should always come before *what* and *how*. There’s no reason for you to read this book unless you have some motivation, some *why* for reading it. So in this chapter, we’re going to talk about *why* it’s beneficial to learn about the virtues. We’re going to start out by giving you a solid reason to go through this book.

Let’s start by looking at why people do things in general. What motivated you to open this book in the first place? Take some other examples: Did you call a friend today? Did you watch T.V.? Did you eat breakfast? Maybe you went to work? Why? What reasons did you have for doing these things? What reason does anybody have for doing anything?

Of course, that’s a complicated question. We human beings are complex creatures, and we have a lot of different longings we desire to satisfy. These longings are satisfied when we attain the object of our desire. So, for instance, a parched man has a very specific longing, namely thirst, and that longing is satisfied when he attains water, which is the object of thirst. Of course, the drinking of water is a real benefit for the thirsty man; we would say therefore that water was the *good* for which the thirsty man longed. A good is a reality which satisfies a human longing and benefits the person, and whenever we act, it is in order to attain such a good. It is for the attainment of goods that humans act.

So what are the different goods for which we long? (Other ways of asking the same question: What do we desire? What motivates us towards action? Why do we do the things we do?)

There are numerous potential goods for the human person, but it seems that all the goods can be grouped under seven basic goods.¹ These seven basic goods provide reasons for all human actions, in that they satisfy some essential human longing, and in so doing complete and fulfill the person who attains them. The seven goods are:

1. Goods Related to Physical Life.

These are those goods having to do with our human nature as *bodily*. So, as we have just seen, the quenching of thirst is a good in that it perfects the person through the water which is craved. Other obvious physical goods are nourishment, sexual activity, health, sleep, species propagation, preservation of life, and so forth. These goods are all appropriate to our human condition: they help our bodies thrive, and so contribute to personal perfection. Further, the attainment of these goods is normally accompanied by some physical pleasure.

Now, some people would say that these physical goods are the only goods out there; they think that if you get the pleasures that come from sex, food, sleep, health etc... you will be perfectly and totally happy. This would be true if we were simply sensual beings, without intelligence and freedom. There is no question that a baboon or a hermit crab or a bulldog would be completely content if it achieved everything under this

¹ What follows is intended as an adaptation of the work of Germain Grisez and his colleagues.

first heading; these are creatures without spiritual souls. Human beings, however, are animals *with* spiritual souls, and consequently have a great many longings which are foreign to the lower creatures. Happiness is not to be found in material goods alone.

2. Goods Related to Knowledge

As intelligent beings, we have an innate drive to comprehend, to find out, to discover, to understand. We want to know the answers, we want to know how it works, what it's all about. We try to intellectually grasp the foundations of being: this is metaphysics. We try to grasp the truths about God and his action: this is theology. We try to grasp the truth about the material world we inhabit: this is physical science. Or perhaps we just want to know our grandmother's maiden name. Why? Because it is good to know the truth about things, and we long to acquire that knowledge. Knowledge is not simply a means to other ends, (as so many today seem to think when acquiring their education); knowledge is an end in itself.

Probably a major reason you're reading these pages right now is because you're interested in learning more about virtue. Perhaps you've heard about the virtues, but never really understood them, and now you're trying to satisfy your curiosity by getting a good intellectual grasp of them. Regardless, many times throughout the day, we all try to learn new things, by reading a newspaper, browsing a blog online, or listening to talk radio. Knowledge is a natural human need, and we routinely strive to satisfy it.

3. Goods related to the Experience of Beauty

This is the category of goods involving artistic appreciation. Everyone longs to encounter beauty in life, to enjoy beautiful things. Obviously, activities like observing a painting by Titian, reading a poem by Whitman, or listening to one of Bach's fugues are all pursuits of beauty. Nor need all our tastes be so refined: going to a rock concert, listening to an oldies station in the car, watching a DVD rental, and reading a comic book are all forms of trying to attain to some form of artistic appreciation.

Note too that our desire for aesthetic experience also enters into our evaluation of physical beauty. Beautiful appearance is a concern exclusive to homo sapiens; male alligators do not seek particularly lovely female alligators with whom to mate. Only humans admire and praise the beauty of the body (some times to an inordinate degree!) The point is that the specific good of beauty is a feature that motivates a great many of our choices.

4. Goods related to Achievement

Still, we don't want to be *just* appreciators. We also want to be makers and doers. That is, we want to be good at something, to accomplish something, to make a contribution. Whether we practice playing the tuba or perfect the art of kicking field goals or try our best to solve our company's budget deficit, we are all trying to do something worthwhile. We want to be able to perform well, to produce great things. It is not enough for the human spirit to simply sit back and watch as life happens all around us. We want to be involved. There is a certain unique satisfaction that comes from a job well done, and we all long for that satisfaction.

5. Goods related to Self-Constitution

The inner life of every person is something which must be carefully cared for and cultivated. There are multiple goods we desire for the proper psychological and spiritual well-being. For example, we long for all our various emotional forces to be in harmony with each other and with our convictions; that is to say, we long for internal peace, to feel right about everything. The reason so many people go to psychiatrists, or do yoga, or acupuncture, is because they feel conflict within themselves. They need consistency in their lives, an integrity of movement within themselves.

We also desire a certain identity for ourselves: we long to recognize and live out our specific place in the world. We want to be able to organize all our thoughts, feelings, and actions into a coherent scheme that defines who we are. Many people lack this good; they do not know who they are, and they live uncertain, indeterminate lives, acting out different and conflicting roles. They have yet to discover, accept and work towards their unique, irreplaceable vocation. By contrast, how satisfying it is to understand and live the life for which you were intended!

6. Goods of Relationship with other Human Persons

It does not require much insight to see that we all long for healthy and loving relationships with other people. As soon as we are born, in order to thrive we must have a loving relationship with our parents and siblings. As we grow older, we discover the wondrous good of friendship, and experience the joy of mutually chosen company. When we grow older, it may be that we encounter that unique relationship between a man and a woman, which culminates in marital love, which in turn normally leads to the relationship with one's children.

We all know the sorrow of human relationship gone wrong, whether it be with a coworker, relative, or spouse. Even worse, we know the pain of loneliness, that is, the feeling that we lack close and meaningful human relationships altogether. As Aristotle noted, Man is a Social Animal, and he cannot be happy without human love and friendship. Hence relationships with other persons are an absolutely fundamental good of life.

7. Goods of Relationship with Supernatural Persons

Since the beginning of time, people have sensed the reality of powerful, hidden, personal forces at work in the universe. Whether these forces be conceived of as "gods," "spirits," "God," or "Trinity," the natural human response has always been an effort to get on good terms with the supernatural; to praise, to invoke, to placate, etc... This proper relationship with the divine is the good of Religion. Man longs for an encounter with the sacred, the holy, he longs to mystically ascend to some level of communion with deity, and there will always be some void in human life if religion is wholly absent.

Although there might be several plausible variations of this list, the categories just described seem for the most part to sum up the ultimate reasons for action. No matter what action you look at, if you keep asking "Why did I do that?" you'll most likely end up at one of these 7 groups. Of course, usually we don't tend to think about our motivations very explicitly, we don't tend to ask ourselves what we are pursuing. This list shows us the things we are out to get in life, it shows us what we want. And

why do we want these things? Because they are good for us, they are fitting to our nature, they satisfy our longings. Put simply, we want these things because they make us happy.

Unfortunately, sometimes our method of pursuing these different goods causes more harm than benefit. *We will at times seek to acquire one good by attacking another good, and the result is always damage to ourselves and to others.* This is where evil comes into the picture, with the result of human unhappiness.

1. For example, sometimes one pursues physical goods in an inappropriate way. Gluttony, for instance, is the pursuit of food until it damages health, and fornication is the pursuit of sexual gratification at the expense of the proper relationship between a man and a woman.

2. In the case of the good of knowledge, one sometimes willingly listens to gossip, or scandal. There is also today a widespread mania for knowing things which are degrading, or none of our business (e.g., the intimate and often sordid details of celebrities' personal lives). All of this idle curiosity is really a hindrance to the healthy development of other aspects of our lives.

3. With the good of beauty, we see many instances of inappropriate pursuit. Pornography seeks to promote physical beauty at the expense of personal beauty, as does immodesty in dress. Also, often we listen to music or watch movies with evil messages, foul images, or sacrilegious themes. This is a pursuit of aesthetic appreciation that involves an attack on truth, on personal relationships, or on religious piety.

4. It is not hard to recognize the person who strives after achievement in a disordered manner. This person steps on others who get in his way up the ladder, he dismisses beauty, friendships, knowledge, psychological well-being as mere distractions from his career. Such a one causes great unhappiness to himself and to others.

5. Some persons become so caught up in their own immanent world, that they refuse to do anything that "they don't feel like doing," or anything that's just "not them." They say ridiculously self-centered things like, "That's not what I'm all about," or "I can't change who I am," as an excuse for not pursuing all the goods they should be working towards. They forget that sometimes the person must change himself and do what is difficult in order to attain happiness.

6. Personal relationships can also become an obsession that leads to hurtful decisions. We will sometimes do anything-no matter how despicable-to "fit in" or to get someone to like us. Criticizing others, compromising conviction, using foul language, agreeing to impure acts, and other shameless striving for popularity are common occurrences.

7. Even pursuits of religion can directly attack other goods. For example, certain forms of Puritanism rejected many forms of art and beauty; some ancient religions demanded human sacrifice; some religions practice ritual sexual perversion; and some religions advocate hatred of those who don't belong to it. (However, it is important to note that in today's Western society, the problem isn't people who pursue religion at the detriment of other goods. On the contrary, the problem for most of us is that we don't really pursue the good of religion at all).

So let's summarize: everything we do, every decision we make, every course of action we pursue, anytime we do *anything* it is for the sake of some good. We strive after these goods because we know that they will make us happy. The attainment of any of these goods may be called "pleasure," but only the attainment of all the goods is happiness.

However, sometimes the *way* in which we pursue these goods is such as to actually hinder our own happiness and fulfillment. This is the cause of misery and degradation: a disordered pursuit of individual goods.

What we need, then, is a strategy for pursuing all of these goods in an integrated way, without causing any damage. That strategy is what this book is about; it presents a very ancient, very beautiful, very effective strategy for attaining all the goods and becoming perfectly happy. This strategy is the art of virtue.

P.S. What about Money and Power and Fame?

Why is it that when listing the basic motivators of action, no mention was made regarding Money and Power and Fame? Don't many people act with these ends in view? Why aren't they among the basic categories?

The answer is that none of these three is really sought after for its own sake, but rather for the sake of one of the basic goods already enumerated. Take money. You cannot eat money, cannot have a conversation with money, cannot ask money questions, or pray to money. Why then do people desire money? Because it is a *means* of either attaining or maintaining certain goods. People want money either to buy a house or as a security in keeping the house they already have. They want money because they think it will make people like them, or it will allow them to keep their friends. It is never desired for its own sake, but always for the sake of something further.

The same is true with power. Mere power is never desirable in itself. Power means a potential, a potential *for* something. If you have the power to fly, but you never actually fly, what good is the power? Men want power as a means of getting something else; perhaps flattery (relationships), or a sense of accomplishment (achievement), to feel important (self-identity), or, hopefully, so that they can bring about some real improvement in the world, but they do not desire it for its own sake.

Lastly, fame is sought as a form of self-constitution ("If everybody knows who I am, then I must be important!") or as a form of relationship ("If everybody knows who I am, then I must be well-liked!"), and so it is reducible to those two basic goods.